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Russia: Cold Shadows and Present Illusions

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'The Cold War is over – get real' is meant to brush criticism aside, usually in favour of calls for trust and engagement, mostly on the part of the West with regard to Russia. It often works as an argument-stopper, not least because it is content-free yet emotionally charged.

The Cold War was, in the first place, not a war but primarily a clash of values and ambitions between the USSR and the West, which took various forms over the decades that it endured. Neither the USSR nor the West now exists in its post-1948 archetypes, but their shades haunt us still, for reasons that are rooted in today's realities.

President Vladimir Putin has been clear since he first came to power as to the necessity of restoring Russia as a great power, and the 'threat', as he has put it, inherent in Russia 'slipping' into the second rank. Those who succeeded to power in Moscow in 1991–92 were not new men, but came from the ranks of those who held sway under the Soviet system. Russia was internationally recognized as the successor state to the USSR. For all the pressures for reform within it, Russia never saw itself after the collapse of the Bolshevik state as a new – let alone liberated – country. Some others from the Soviet sphere, especially the countries of the Warsaw Pact, were better able to reinvent themselves. Putin's insistence on Russia having special and overriding rights, and on the country's singular destiny, has only strengthened over the years.

Putin has consistently seen the United States as Russia's necessary counterpart. He may not be alone in that, but the force of the vision lies in its emotional power, not its inherent rationality. The result is to constrain Russia's options and to distort its policies. Examples are legion. Russia has no objective reason to justify the nature and extent of its defence spending, very much including the weight it gives to its nuclear forces, apart from its preoccupation with the United States. Only the assumption that the United States is subject to the same mores that Russia perceives in itself could interpret America's (now abandoned) plans to place interceptor missiles in Poland and Romania as essentially directed against Russia. Moscow's view of China's overriding importance in Asia fits into a wish to exclude the Americans. The regular cycle of unsettling and resetting relations between Russia and America comes, in significant part, from a disappointed search by Moscow for equality between the two countries.

There is also Putin's deep, permanent and apparently hardening suspicion of outside interference in Russia's internal affairs, in particular by the United States. It is perhaps only human for many Russians to suppose that the

outside world is both supremely cunning and malevolent. Blaming foreigners for your own failings is by no means confined to Russia. But to see foreign agencies at work to the extent proclaimed by Russia's present authorities is to signal fear, not to describe reality, or even potential reality. It is argued that the ruling group takes this line so as to buttress its regime. There may well be something in that, but not enough to explain its pitch. If there is an 'Orange' threat to the Kremlin, it is not orchestrated from abroad.

Western perceptions of Russian realities, in turn, reflect ideas coloured by Cold War lineage. One such reflection is a tendency to overestimate the extent of the changes of the past 25 years, leading many to believe in the inevitability of the Russian system evolving towards what the West would see as 'normality' as the generations change, and/or a strong middle class emerges. Many seem to believe it follows that the West should go easy on Russia in the meantime. The relationship between Russia's internal development and its interaction with the outside world is given less public attention now than was its equivalent in Soviet times. Perhaps that is one reason why Russian excesses are easily forgotten in the West, and why the assumption that the Russians like 'strong men' (for which read 'bad government') is so widespread outside that country. Certainly the idea persists that there is in some sense an East represented by Moscow and a West represented by the United States. So the general idea of a balance of interests is assumed to be part of the natural order of things.

These sorts of assumptions are not much tested as concern for or about Russia moves down Western priorities in North America and in varying degrees also in different parts of Europe. There is, however, still a marked reluctance to say or do anything that upsets Moscow. That is in part because Moscow's emotional agenda is felt to be to a degree understandable, and because Russia's perception of itself as the Soviet Union fallen unfairly on hard times is perceived to be reasonable too. There are those in Western Europe – not least persons confident of their superior understanding in comparison with those less subtle Americans and remembering the golden days of their youth when détente seemed to bear such fruit – who feel that they are right to pursue 'engagement' for its own unspecified sake. Russia is after all, it is felt, part of Europe, and can therefore be presumed to share a generalized European vocation. And the Russian catalogue of grievances in which unassuaged feelings are expressed carries weight with a number of Americans too. The perception that the Soviet bloc fell and the Soviet Union came to terms with the West thanks to President Ronald Reagan is more widespread in the United States than the European idea that it was due to the

success of *détente*. Russian analysts, more accurately, argue that the causes of the changes that took off in 1989 were in major part internal to the Soviet Union, while arguing, more speciously, that the West continues to owe them for it.

One can disagree about whether NATO allies should have intervened in Yugoslavia, or Libya; whether the enlargement of NATO stabilized Eastern Europe, threatened Russia or strengthened the military capabilities of the alliance; whether Western assistance to Russia in the early 1990s should have been greater; or whether Western links with Ukrainian NGOs was a major plot designed to bring about the 'Orange Revolution'. That is not, however, to accept the proposition that the dominant agenda was in such cases one of harming Russia when it was weak. None were directed by any such impulse. Western countries make mistakes, can be hypocritical or double-dealing and can forget that the law of unintended consequences applies to them as much as to anyone else. So of course can Moscow. It remains a distortion to see such matters primarily through an East–West Cold War inherited prism.

One school of thought in Washington, reflected also in some EU countries, argued at the height of 'reset' optimism that the right aim the (and according to some perhaps even now) would be to work for a 'strategic partnership' that would recognize Russia's claims to hegemony over its neighbours and ignore human rights violations within that country in the interests of wider cooperation. The EU would in some way be part of this schema. The argument was that, if the United States (and the EU should that prove necessary) adopted such a realist agenda, Russia would become less fearful and possibly more open to evolution in a liberal direction. The hopes placed on then President Dmitry Medvedev proved vain, but even had that not been the case the effect of this sort of approach would have been to try to perpetuate, in however benign a fashion, a system based on premises derived from an old and discredited template. A smaller Russian bloc would have been no more just or durable than its Soviet predecessor.

This raises the question of values. President Putin made much in his speech to the National Assembly in December 2012, of the importance of embedding particular Russian values in his country, and has repeatedly warned of the dangers of outside campaigns to instil others. He has not been specific about his meaning, but the general intent has been clear. Putin evidently does not share the view that values are of secondary importance. He is right. But the trouble for him is that what Russians need, and want, is not the archaic

nostrums that he has paraded, but what he cannot supply: honest judges, accountable government and laws that can be understood and consistently implemented.

The link between political and economic reform is well understood in Russia. A recent and widely acclaimed book by two history-minded US economists, Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, sets out the following conditions for a political structure that would support sustainable economic transformation:

- a sufficient degree of centralized order to prevent social movements challenging existing regimes from descending into lawlessness;
- pre-existing political institutions to enable broad coalitions to form and endure;
- civil society institutions able to coordinate sufficiently so as to allow popular demands to emerge without being crushed or turning into a vehicle for another group to use them as a means to take control of existing extractive institutions – often based on natural resources; and
- the media, which can play a transformative role in a process of social empowerment.¹

John Locke's dictum that 'wherever the law ends, tyranny begins' is no less true today than it was in England's troubled 17th century. The longer-term interest of the West lies in Russia's achieving prosperity and stability based, as it can only be based, on government subject to the rule of law and a society that evolves within an accepted and understood framework. This is surely what the Russian people aspire to as well, in their own way and in their own time. It has nothing to do with being a 'great power' or a rival analogue to the United States – or China, the EU or anyone else. No Western country has an interest in the disruption and downfall of Russia. Quite the contrary.

The trouble is, however, that Russia's current leadership and its president, in particular, are wedded to the idea that the West, and especially the United States, is hostile and purposive in its efforts to undermine Russia. This goes beyond what is politically convenient to the ruling group. And whatever the long-term interests of the West and Russia, these convictions clash with the shorter-term interest of Western countries in managing their relationships with

¹ Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (Crown Business, 2012).

Russia as it is, not what it ought to be. The risks of compromising wider ethical values – and these should not be denigrated by describing them as ‘Western’ – in the pursuit of immediate objectives and in competition between Western countries are clear. Outside companies must balance their search for profit and their hopes of working with their counterparts to improve Russian governance and effectiveness against the imperative not to be corrupted in the process. Western governments should not condone the idea that Russia has a right to control what sort of government and policies its neighbours should have. They should hold Russia to its commitments, including those on human rights, and not be deterred by bluster. They should look to the motes in their own eyes: Guantánamo, drones, dictates from Brussels that replace democratic accountability in EU countries, intervention in other countries or curbs on free speech in, for example, the name of abolishing ‘hate crimes’. There are arguments for such measures, and no country can ever be perfectly pure, but values and freely undertaken obligations should guide choices for Russia and for all other countries.

‘Strategic partnership’ with Russia is unachievable. It is also, if Russia’s grandiloquent words are to be taken seriously, undesirable at the present moment. The present Russian leadership’s deep rooted assumptions preclude the full engagement and mutual trust that would be compatible with such a project. The countries to Russia’s west are, in addition, too divided and too limited in their attention to make it possible. So grand schemes are out. But over time, Russia will change and so will its rulers. Western countries should beware in the meantime of becoming too associated with any particular Kremlin dispensation. They should, insofar as they can, build their hopes and expectations on the nature and prospects of Russia’s internal evolution. The West also needs to remember that its own behaviour and adherence to the values it proclaims will be judged among Russians by what it does. Russians have an attentive and educated ear for hypocrisy.

Western countries have a relationship to manage, and one that is unsuitable for the assumptions that they have in part retained from the Soviet past. The result may be inconsistent and messy, but accepting and internalizing the Kremlin’s current narrative would be worse. It may not be war but there is too much ‘cold’ in it. Russia is a big and important country with an uncertain future, but it does not have the ability or the right to reincarnate that archaic ambition of being a great power.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Wood is an Associate Fellow of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House and author of the Chatham House Report *Putin Again: Implications for Russia and the West* (with Philip Hanson, James Nixey and Lilia Shevtsova), *Change or Decay: Russia's Dilemma and the West's Response* (with Lilia Shevtsova) and a 2011 paper for Chatham House on Russia's Business Diplomacy. He is a consultant to a number of companies with an interest in Russia. He was British ambassador to Russia from 1995 to 2000.