



With or Against the West: Russia's Debate Continues

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I made the first of my forty-six trips to Russia in 1989. I found a country where Americans were still a curiosity – prized guests for late night vodka-lubricated discussions on life in the West and Russia's future. For the next several years, the air surrounding the largely pro-Western optimists was pregnant with hope – hope for a better life, a "normal" life. These expectations, and the power of those who held them, peaked in the days following the failure of the 1991 coup.

But there was always another energy in the air. It was especially noticeable among elements of the military and security services, which resented the loss of the empire and Russia's position as a superpower. For these forces, the collapse of the Soviet Union was a low point – yet another humiliation to endure while their enemy, the West, gloated.

The ebb and flow of these two forces remains a central dynamic in Russian-American relations today.

The promise of close Russian-American ties that the optimists in Russia felt began to fade by the mid-1990s. Not enough had been accomplished, and in the last years of Boris Yeltsin's tenure, Russian relations with the U.S. worsened. Russia's unsuccessful opposition to the NATO bombing in Kosovo and the Alliance's planned expansion aided the rise of anti-Western elements in Russia's force ministries. Tensions over American plans to develop a national missile defense system fueled the fire.

The results of this anti-Western drift were profound: Russia's growing cooperation with Beijing, a reflection of the Russian desire to blunt American influence, grew rapidly, encompassing sales of Russian planes, ships and submarines to the PRC. In the eyes of Russia's hard-liners, increasing China's military capability reduced the chances that the U.S. would use force in Asia – especially in the event of a crisis over Taiwan. Russia and China also developed a common diplomatic front against hegemony (i.e., the United States), in support of Russia's actions in Chechnya, and against American deployment of a missile defense system.

The two countries found common ground on other issues as well. In the Middle East, for instance, support was given to American enemies such as Iraq and Iran. Of these, military and nuclear related sales to Iran began to be viewed as particularly troubling in Washington. Yet from the Russian point of view, anything that caused trouble for the United States reduced America's ability to act against Russian interests.

This policy, however, was not without its critics in Russia. They made three major points:

Radical Islam and possibly China, not the U.S., are Russia's main problem. At the time, Russians were rapidly becoming aware of the broadening reach of radical Islam in the Russian Federation. Foreign funding of domestic separatist and fundamentalist movements was becoming a major challenge to the territorial integrity of Russia and, as such, a serious policy concern for the Russian government. Concurrently, the flames of Islamic extremism were also being fanned in Central Asia, endangering Russian commercial and strategic interests. Worse still, the large numbers of extremists willing to die in pursuit of efforts to expand the boundaries of Islam virtually ensured that the problem would remain both serious and long-term.

Their country's deepening strategic relationship notwithstanding, China also posed a long-term problem. Off and on for over three hundred years, the border between Russia and China has been in dispute. As recently as 1969, Chinese and Russian forces clashed along the border and both sides thought a major war was possible. The current border settlement is, historically speaking, the most comprehensive. However, that treaty expires in twenty years, assuming the provision for a five-year extension is not exercised. Then, many Russians fear that China may again take up its claim to huge areas of Siberia and the Russian Far East. These fears are not allayed by the presence of Chinese tourists in the Far East, who make no secret that they have come to look at "their lands," nor by official PRC maps that indicate those territories were unfairly taken from China.

There was also another problem. China's population is rapidly expanding, while Russia is in demographic decline. One need only look along the part of the Amur River that divides the two countries to see the enormity of the disparity; on the Chinese side, the population density may be forty times as great as on the Russia side. And on the Chinese side, there is no more arable land, while on the Russian side huge tracts of prime farmland remain fallow. This unbalance could only fuel China's appetite for the contested land.

Perhaps, the Russian critics of their country's China policy contend, China will continue to respect its border with Russia and remain a good neighbor. But what if it does not? How will Russia's avowed policy of arms sales and strategic coordination appear then?

Russia alone is too weak to confront these challenges and must align with the U.S. and the West. Russia's place, the experts also contended, was with the West, for very practical reasons. Demographically, Russia's population stood at only 145 million people and is slowly declining. At best, it would be decades before its economy began to resemble that of the United States or Western Europe. Russia's conventional armed forces were in poor shape, and its still-formidable nuclear weapons were expensive to maintain. And although Russia's Muslim population was a distinct minority (merely 20 percent), the operations of Islamic extremism were increasingly viewed as global in nature. Alliance with the West, the experts reasoned, was necessary to contain, let alone defeat, the problem.

Russia would also need help should the government ruling China's 1.3 billion people become a problem. Moreover, the expected continuation of China's rapid economic and military growth means that any problem with China will likely become more serious with the passage of time.

To return to the world stage, Russia must develop a world-class economy – impossible to do without Western institutions and cooperation with the West. Economic history shows that rule of law and a Western-style banking system are prerequisites for any country hoping to achieve a Western standard of living. Further, they are a prerequisite for obtaining the level of investment needed to grow Russia's economy. Such investment can only come from the West and is more likely to come on a sustained basis if aligns itself with the West.

In this atmosphere, Vladimir Putin came to power and set about shoring up domestic support. He made and kept promises to each of Russia's major political factions – especially on minor matters (such as his promise to the Communist Party to restore the music – if not the lyrics — of the Soviet national anthem). This engagement strategy was savvy statesmanship; although most of the groups held incompatible primary goals, none risked opposing Putin as long as they garnered small victories and the Kremlin did not move decisively against their larger interests. The lack of opposition allowed Putin to consolidate his power. Yet prior to 11 September 2001, there was no clear indication that Putin had chosen either a pro-Western international course or the foreign policy approach favored by former foreign minister – and prime minister – Yevgeny Primakov.

Thus, Putin's foreign policy choices remained open when the United States was attacked on that day in September. When I arrived in Moscow three days later, Russia's decision makers were still debating their responses. Many, even those highly sympathetic to the West, argued for caution. Should the United States commit to anything less than the total destruction of the radicals responsible, they reasoned, it would prove costly – and Russia might suffer as the result of America's lack of nerve. Others worried about any American presence in Central Asia – a presence that could easily become permanent.

The president's decision, when it came, was unequivocally on the side of cooperation. Acquiescence to U.S. bases in Central Asia, briefings on Afghan tactics, and intelligence on cave and mine field locations impressed even Washington's most hardened cold warriors. Since then, Russia's cooperation has expanded to include a more relaxed Russian attitude on missile defense, NATO expansion and other topics.

But have those highly positive moves toward the West affected Russia's policy in other parts of the world? Not much. In the Middle East, Russia has continued to sell arms and nuclear technology to Iran, despite strenuous American objections. And in Asia, its relationship with China continues unabated.

In many ways, this dual approach to foreign policy is analogous to Putin's domestic strategy. In Moscow, the Russian president continues to maintain his relationship with the broadest possible political base, continuing to consolidate power while seeking to avoid fractious decisions. The same rationale is visible in his policy of simultaneously strengthening ties with the United States, Europe, Iran and China. The absence of enemies gives Russia time to grow stronger, and friendly ties preserve Russia's options should things go badly with either China or the West.

Neither long-term success nor long-term partnership, therefore, is a given. Despite the current positive direction in Russian-American relations (and a realistic hope of better things to come), Russia could still choose an alternative, and anti-Western course.

Within the boundaries of U.S. national interest, we must do everything possible to ensure that it does not. And only through partnership with Russia can the West optimally address the security threats that dominate the post-11 September world.