

Current State of US Russia Diplomatic Relations

The United States and Russia have in many ways defined themselves in opposition to the other. The two nation's long-standing adversarial history has arguably affected nearly every corner of the globe. This work will examine the current state of diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Russia, provide some context for the reader, and consider a strategy for future relations.

Shortly after the end of World War II in 1945, until the collapse of Soviet Russia in 1991, there had inarguably been two distinct powers operating around the globe. The defining characteristic of these "Superpowers" lay in the vast nuclear armaments each nation controls, weapons, which to this day remain poised, albeit in smaller numbers, to strike at each other with globally catastrophic results.

The world may be seeing the beginning of a new cold war; tension between Russia and the Western nations are high. The annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine give many an impression of a Russia eager to reestablish itself as a dominant global force once again. The collapse of the Soviet Union left a vacuum in the East, not only of power, but also of responsibility for the stability of the many states suddenly freed of its hegemony. The world that followed then appeared to have only one superpower. The United States saw the end of the Cold War as a hard-won victory over a terrible enemy, and perhaps as confirmation that the nation's Manifest Destiny did not end at the Pacific Ocean.

Solutions to the current U.S.-Russian conflict will be difficult to outline and much harder to implement; there are years of mistrust, misrepresentation and posturing, as well as mountains of seemingly incompatible interests to be traversed in search of resolution, fault and/or blame to be accepted. Diplomatic relations are based on the delicate negotiations of shared and opposing interests, compromise, and perspectives whose aims hopefully rise above mere self-interest.

Unfortunately after the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States indelicately chose to exploit the newly formed, weak Russian government.

Former head of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev mistakenly believed that there had been a working agreement with the West that, following the fall of the Berlin wall, NATO would not expand its boundaries. While there had been conversations between Gorbachev and U.S. Secretary of State James Baker and with German Chancellor Hans-Dietrich Genscher regarding limits of the “jurisdiction of NATO’s collective-defense provision”¹ these were never officially documented, and later proved not representative of the will of Washington.

President George H.W. Bush remarked, when discussing how Russian interests should be addressed in regards to German reunification and the future of Europe; “We prevailed, they didn’t.”² President Bush’s disregard for Russian interests set the tone of foreign affairs for the U.S., Russia, Germany, Europe at large, and dozens of other stakeholder nations around the globe in the decades since.

The objectives of the West were achieved. Germany was reunified, with purchased Russian acquiescence. NATO expanded throughout Germany, and later throughout several of the former Soviet states. As Soviet leadership announced the end of the Soviet Union, Washington celebrated the victory of a war never fought.

Former Secretary of State James Baker, quoted by Mary Elise Sarotte in a *Foreign Affairs* article from 2014, wrote, “Almost every achievement contains within its success the seeds of a future problem.”³ Baker was not wrong. To quote Sarotte’s article further:

¹ Mary Elise Sarotte, *A Broken Promise*, *Foreign Affairs*, Sept/Oct 2014

² Sarotte

³ Sarotte

By design Russia was left on the periphery of a post-Cold war Europe. A young KGB officer serving in East Germany in 1989 offered his own recollection of the era in an interview a decade later, in which he remembered returning to Moscow full of bitterness at how “the Soviet union had lost its position in Europe.” His name was Vladimir Putin, and he would one day have the power to act on that bitterness.⁴

After the fall of the Soviet Union, and the dark period which immediately followed, a new Russian state emerged; one not entirely democratic, nor entirely capitalist, but one which encouraged hope in the West (here referring to the United States, and its allies in Europe). There was a belief that this new Russia was one that the West could understand, work with, and trust, while other areas of the globe were becoming increasingly unstable.

In the 1990’s Russia suffered severe economic, social, and security crises, while under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin as the government transitioned from Communism to Democracy. In large portions of the country, wages went unpaid and civil processes were ignored. The confusion which plagued the majority of the now Russian citizenry was taken advantage of by unscrupulous “entrepreneurs.” Many Russians who profited from the former Soviet grey and black markets were now free to operate openly and leverage any small advantages they had to fleece the common Russians of what little they still had.

The U.S. attempted to force-feed Russia capitalism and democracy, wrapped in McDonalds and washed down with Coca-Cola, with a free-market implementation model they called “Shock Therapy.” This time, which many of the Russian people look back on with fear and remorse, is a fresh wound upon a country with a long memory. Who do the Russians blame

⁴ Sarotte

for the decline of the Russian state, its economy, and individual safety and security? It was the blowback of this American interference in the affairs of Russia that planted the seed of the renewed nationalist political will that characterizes Russian President Vladimir Putin's increasingly autocratic regime.

Putin was initially regarded as a progressive leader, one who wanted to take the steps necessary to bring Russia into the global community. The West did not realize that President Putin's version of that inclusion was not to be in deference to any other nation, but as equals with the U.S., the E.U., United Nations, and NATO.

Angus Roxburgh, a journalist and author with extensive background in Russia, particularly regarding politics inside the Kremlin, wrote *The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia*, which presents a deeper view of President Vladimir Putin, both how he came to power and how he maintains it. Roxburgh's work relied heavily on "hundreds of hours of top-level interviews" and first-hand experience by the author during his time working in Moscow. *The Strongman* begins with a very important, self-reflective, comment by the author, stating that any attempts by Westerners to comprehend and criticize "that baffling country" is "presumptuousness"⁵.

After Putin gained the presidency he quickly gained the support of the people of his nation. The speed at which Putin rose to power and popularity may have been due less to his own merits than to those lacking in previous Russian President Boris Yeltsin. Memories of the economic turmoil, lawlessness, and failures to stabilize the splintering nation which characterized Russia under the perpetually inebriated Yeltsin during the 1990s still loomed

⁵ Roxburgh

largely in the mind of many Russians. The young, sober, Putin gave many Russians an immediate sense of renewed hope and pride.

A topic that can be difficult to understand from a Western viewpoint, the rise and the persistence of the power and popularity of Russian President Vladimir Putin, was undertaken by Oxford-trained journalist Ben Judah in his book *Fragile Empire: How Russia Fell In and Out of Love With Vladimir Putin*. *Fragile Empire* explains how “the seeds of slow disintegration” (That is to say, the probable decline of the Russian President’s power and popularity) are inherent in the manner which Putin’s power was achieved and perpetuated.⁶ Ultimately Judah asks how a president with such ambition, who gained almost unassailable authority, who portrayed himself as a reformist, has led the Russian nation backwards from serious attempts at democracy into corrupt authoritarianism and the current Tsar-like, ineffective consolidation of power.

Putin’s power comes largely from popular support. This support has grown as the economic state of the nation has improved. With wages rising, pensions being paid, and standards of living increasing, Putin did appear the hero to many Russians. The primary factors in driving this economic growth are the vast Russian oil fields and the rising international demand for energy: here Putin and the nation gamble dangerously. The idea of the resource curse is not unknown in Russia, and the State has very little sway in the international valuation of fuel, which drives the lion’s share of the Russian economy.⁷ *Fragile Empire* includes many examples of Putin’s manipulation of power to discredit or remove obstacles to his consolidation and appearance of supreme authority. Several times throughout the work, Judah refers to Putin as operating in a manner not unlike that of a Tsar.⁸

⁶ Benjamin Judah, *Fragile Empire: How Russia Fell In and Out of Love With Vladimir Putin*. 2.

⁷ Judah, 263.

Judah's work describes a nation state whose people are acclimating to modernization far more quickly than the leadership of the nation, and a government more concerned with loyalty to power than to any ability or effectiveness in establishing order, safety, or democratic process. Russia exists in a dichotomous state in which protests organized via social media are as common as tribute payments more associated with the feudal eras of history.⁹

Walter LaFeber, writer and teacher of American history, authored seminal text *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-2006*. LaFeber's deep analysis of the direct and indirect actions which eventually established the oppositional relationship and statures of the Soviet Union and the United States of America, does not omit the fears and failings of U.S. leadership nor portray the Soviets as entirely villainous. The focus of LaFeber's work includes periods shortly before, throughout, and following those years known as the "Cold War." LaFeber explains how it came to be that these two nations of vastly differing ideologies dominated world affairs through economics, manipulation of "satellite" nations, military force, and the underlying fear of atomic war, and how in many ways they still do.

Throughout LaFeber's text there are several strong recurring themes. Nationalism is capable of motivating the masses. Economics, and access to expanding markets, drives the upper classes and capitalists. The egos and drives of powerful and persuasive individuals set the courses of their respective countries. The power and effect of these motivating factors and forces are no less than they were post WWII, in Cuba in 1962, or in Ukraine today.

The U.N.'s Table

⁸ Judah, 227.

⁹ Judah 213, 269.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), is a military defense alliance which includes the U.S. and many European nations: this is a sore spot in Russian politics as it appears the alliance's growth is in direct confrontation to Russia and its interests.

In 1998, when Thomas Friedman interviewed George Kennan, former U.S. Ambassador to Moscow, who started as a member of the state department in 1926, the ninety-four year old statesman had a very clear view of the future of Russian-American relations. In Kennan's view NATO's expansion, which had been approved by the U.S. Senate, would lead Russia to react negatively, but understandably and predictably so, in keeping with historical precedent. "It shows so little understanding of Russian history and Soviet history. Of course there is going to be a bad reaction from Russia, and then [the NATO expanders] will say that we always told you that is how the Russians are -- but this is just wrong." In 1999 NATO added three former Soviet states into its membership; in 2004 seven more. In 2008 NATO suggested the inclusion of two more major Russian border-states, Georgia and Ukraine. In his interview, while discussing the first three NATO additions-Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland- Kennan offered this grave warning:

"I think it is the beginning of a new cold war," said Mr. Kennan from his Princeton home.

"I think the Russians will gradually react quite adversely and it will affect their policies. I think it is a tragic mistake. There was no reason for this whatsoever. No one was threatening anybody else. This expansion would make the Founding Fathers of this country turn over in their graves. We have signed up to protect a whole series of countries, even though we have neither the resources nor the intention to do so in any serious way." ¹⁰

It may have been shortsightedness on the part of the U.S. Senate of the late 90's to advocate for the expansion of NATO, but now seventeen years later, can we afford to ignore the parallels between Kennan's assessment and the development of the current state of relations between Russia and the West? When Mankoff writes "Russian President Vladimir Putin's newfound willingness to ratchet up his confrontation with a West that Russian elites increasingly see as hypocritical and antagonistic to their interests,"¹¹ can Washington see its own hypocrisy?

UNSTABLE

Russian leadership is repeatedly characterized as unstable or unhealthy psychologically. Other foreign affairs experts disagree, believing that the fundamental trouble with Russia is not illness but an incompatibility of national interests between Russia and the United States.

“Although Putin has autocratic tendencies, no evidence supports the charge that he is mentally unbalanced. On the contrary: he is a first-class strategist who should be feared and respected by anyone challenging him on foreign policy.”¹²

How should the U.S. strategically and diplomatically handle relations with Russia? Give the “angry bear” nothing to swing at, and do not back it into a corner!

Much of the animosity between the two emerging “superpowers” developed at the end of the Second World War. American foreign policy became largely dominated by two mandates: the Marshal Plan (which would attempt to stabilize and rebuild the weakened Western European economies) and the Truman Doctrine. Both of these were enacted, *prima facie*, to stop the spread of Communism.¹³

¹⁰ Thomas L. Friedman, “Foreign Affairs; Now a Word From X” *New York Times*, 2 May 1998.

¹¹ Mankoff. “Russia’s Latest Land Grab”, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2014.

¹² John J. Mearsheimer. “Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West’s Fault”, *Foreign Affairs*, Sept/Oct 2014.

While Americans were warned of the “Domino Theory” of spreading Communism, the Soviets were wary of “capitalist encirclement”.¹⁴ There became two factions in the world: those on one side of the “Iron Curtain” or those on the other. Germany, in its divided state, exemplified and enhanced this schism.

The Cold War was cold in name only. Though there were almost no direct military actions between the United States and the Soviet Union, there were very few military operations performed by either country that were not aimed in opposition to the other. The race for both nations to arm themselves by development and deployment of nuclear arsenals led to a boiling point in Cuba in 1962. Nikita Khrushchev himself used the phrase “burning flames of thermonuclear war” in talking about how close the two nations had come to open war. Where cool heads may have eventually prevailed in the Cuban Missile Crisis, the war was far from cold.

Walter LaFeber’s text is in its tenth edition. Throughout the many editions of the book, the world has continued to undergo massive changes, and yet those themes which pervade the text have not changed. Policies, perhaps particularly foreign policy, are largely directed by economic concerns and ideological fears. These policies are advocated to the masses under nationalist pretenses and voiced by the leaders of the premier nations of world.

Roxburgh asserts that in both the United States and Russia there are still many voices not willing to let go of the painful long-standing past between the nations.¹⁵ The author considers the 2000’s to be, in effect, a new cold-war era where the U.S. response to a revitalized Russian state was primarily to increase security measures. At a time when diplomacy and dialogue could have

¹³ Walter LaFeber *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, 57, 66.

¹⁴ LaFeber, 30

¹⁵ Angus Roxburgh, *The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia*. 89.

soothed a genuine Russian need for establishing their new place among the primary nations of the world, the U.S., E.U., and NATO pushed their influence and interests into former Soviet Union territories in the name of global defense.

The Empire Has No Clothes

Much of the credit for the collapse of the former Soviet Union belongs to the Russians themselves; in much the same way, Vladimir Putin is now sowing the seeds of the current regime's eventual collapse. The discontent of the Russian people, problematic resource-cursed economy, aging (and dying) demographics, and the spread of westernized lifestyle and upper middle-class travel will all factor into a diminishing Russian state. The U.S. and its allies could spend a great deal of time and effort in "Containment" of Russia, but this has been shown to be antagonistic to Russian self-interests and will only require more time and energy to act, counteract, and react. What would happen if the U.S. did *nothing*? If John J. Mearsheimer is correct in his assertions that perceived Russian aggression, after the fall of the Soviet Union, have only come about in response to "NATO enlargement, EU expansion, and democracy promotion," would ceasing those activities bring about the most desirable outcome for the West?¹⁶

Russia's Dmitri Trenin, Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, suggests that Russia is very eager to return to its former level of influence on the global stage. Unfortunately for Russia its dreams and realities do not seem closely aligned. According to Trenin, the 2008 global financial crisis was more damaging to Russia than to any other major nation. The primary export of the Russian nation and lifeblood of the Russian economy, oil, has to compete in a challenging

¹⁶ Mearsheimer.

and growing global marketplace. The loyalty of former Soviet states is subject to the soft power influences of many global nations, and in this arena Russia is no superpower. Trenin says it quite clearly “In the twenty-first century, the power of attraction trumps that of coercion.”¹⁷

Nicholas Eberstadt, of the American Enterprise Institute, gives readers a strong warning that Russia is facing an “unprecedented” and “highly anomalous” population crisis, put succinctly, “Post-Soviet Russia has become a net mortality society steadily registering more deaths than births....Or nearly three funerals for every two live deliveries for the past 20 years.” According to Eberstadt the majority of this birth/death ratio imbalance is related to “external causes” of death such as injury, suicide, homicide, and other violent accidents.¹⁸

Nikolay Petrov, while speaking at the Camden Conference, shared a very bleak outlook regarding future scenarios for Putin’s regime. One of Petrov’s assertions is that, after Putin’s power swap with President Medvedev, the legitimacy of his presidency can no longer be maintained by Democratic “window dressing” (elections which are more theater than substance.) “Putin made moves which are absolutely irreversible.... Putin is no more a subject who can make political decisions which can change the trajectory of the country’s development he’s, rather an object. Whatever [he] does now, he can’t change the trajectory which can be described and was shown in previous slide as a plane in tailspin.”¹⁹

Roxburgh suggests that Russia will need to deal with its own concerns like systemic corruption and the contradiction of attempting democracy while maintaining Soviet-era centralized state control over many of the aspects of economy, industry, and media.

¹⁷ Dmitri Trenin, “Russia Reborn,” *Foreign Affairs*, Nov, Dec 2009.

¹⁸ Nicholas Eberstadt, “The Dying Bear,” *Foreign Affairs*, Nov/Dec 2011.

¹⁹ Speaking at the Camden Conference.

Simultaneously, the West must live up to the standards which they hope to see from Russia; Roxburgh asks, “Why should they (Russia) take lessons from governments (U.S.) that themselves invade, torture and trample on human rights?”²⁰

While neither the U.S. nor Russia can ignore the other, each has its own house to keep in order; and considering the current condition of the two nations, Russia seems far more likely to destabilize and lose influence on the global stage.

The Russian economic and demographic outlook is bleak. The nation can persist a while longer on reserves of cash, fuel, and human capital, but this is not a long-term solution for Russia. Experts from the U.S. and from within Russia see the trajectory of that nation as in decline and with very little, if any, ability to change direction. It is a matter of how long the bear has left to live, rather than how will we fight the bear.

The U.S. should take a less active role in diplomatic and strategic role concerning Russia. The long-standing history of antagonism between the two nations renders attempts at diplomacy nearly ineffective. It is likely that the Russian government will never trust that Americans have the former Soviet nation’s best interests at heart, and they are not wrong. Putin seems a coarse yet pragmatic figure that recognizes, each nation’s interests lay with themselves first and foremost. If the U.S. focused on strengthening its own needs, particularly its economy, it would become much more effective in its use of soft power; a power that Russia absolutely cannot compete with. This is an historically proven strength of the U.S. that has been less utilized by recent presidents.

Putin has told a story of a lesson learned as a young man about trapping an animal in a corner, and the lengths the threatened animal will go to protect itself. This is a clear message to

²⁰ Roxburgh, 354.

those willing to listen. Will the United States, NATO, and the EU continue to back the wounded bear into a corner, and risk a rash and violent response, or will they give the bear room to make its own way through the woods?

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