

Reevaluating Russia's Role in the World

ROUNDTABLE WITH
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The *Yale Journal of International Affairs* recently asked three Russia experts to consider Russia's international role since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ongoing democratic transitions in Eastern Europe. Alexander Vershbow is U.S. Ambassador to Russia. He has also served as U.S. Ambassador to NATO, Special Assistant to the President of the United States, and Senior Director for European Affairs at the National Security Council. Lieutenant General William Odom, U.S. Army (ret.), is Adjunct Professor of Political Science at Yale University. General Odom was Director of the National Security Agency and is a former military assistant to the U.S. national security advisor. Vitaly Kozyrev is Visiting Professor of International Relations at Yale University and Assistant Professor at the Institute of Asian and African Studies at Moscow State University.

■ **How do the United States and the European Union differ in their policies toward Russia? What are the main reasons for the differences?**

Ambassador Vershbow: *Shared values, but some disagreements on specific issues*

The United States and the European Union, by and large, are in agreement when it comes to Russia. We share the goal of promoting

Russia's integration with the Euro-Atlantic community on the basis of democracy, free-market economics, and cooperation in meeting the challenges of the twenty-first century. President Bush consulted with his European allies regarding Russia when visiting Europe in February 2005, and both sides expressed concern about developments related to democracy, the rule of law, and the creation of civil society. President Bush called on Europe to put democratic reform at the heart of its dialogue with Russia, and he conveyed U.S. and European concerns about trends in Russia's democracy when he met with President Putin in Bratislava, Slovakia, later that month.

Both the United States and the EU note the enormous distance Russia has come since the days of the Soviet Union. The United States further recognizes that the world faces a host of new threats and challenges that have sparked a new level of international cooperation, such as the global war on terrorism and initiatives related to non-proliferation, global energy security, and environmental and health issues. These are all issues we work on with our European and Russian allies and partners on a regular basis.

Although the United States and Europe have healthy disagreements over specific issues, we are allies and share common values when it comes to the promotion of freedom, democracy, free markets, and the rule of law. The increasing centralization of power in the Kremlin, greater control of the media, and political pressure on the judiciary all have worrisome implications for the future of freedom and democracy in Russia. The Russian government's recent dismantlement of the oil company Yukos further calls into question its commitment to free-market principles, the rule of law, and transparency of judicial processes. The United States and Europe agree that these trends need to be monitored, but isolating Russia is not in the interests of the international community. Rather, we will work to encourage Russia to recommit itself to democratic principles in deed as well as in word. This is the best formula for Russia's own development and serves as the only reliable basis for a long-term strategic partnership with the West.

Professor Kozyrev: *Hobbesian and Kantian worldviews shape differences*

The United States and the EU have much in common regarding the political and ideological aspects of their policy toward Russia. They both appear suspicious of President Putin's attempts to centralize

power, which they misperceive as autocratic. The myths of Russian imperialism and of the rejuvenation of an all-powerful state help promote the revival of Western solidarity against Russia. Both European and American leaders are uncomfortable with the idea of a strong and ambitious Russia. Nonetheless, they clearly understand that they will not benefit from a weak or unstable Russia with substantial stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction.

The U.S. and EU policies toward Russia will differ as long as there is a divergence of interests across the Atlantic. Robert Kagan once aptly pointed out that the estrangement between the two Atlantic shores is rooted in American Hobbesian power and the European Kantian weakness. These differences may result in the Europeans' disapproval of American unilateral military, political, and economic actions in Eurasia. Such actions do not take into account the preferences and the aspirations of major European partners. The dispute over the NATO mission in the post-Soviet sphere is a good example of this. Unlike the EU, the United States is still likely to overlook the anti-liberal shift in Russia's domestic affairs in order to neutralize Russia's power or to get its support for American global initiatives.

■ **How will the events surrounding the recent elections in Ukraine affect Russian policy toward other former Soviet republics?**

General Odom: *If anything, Russia has concluded it was not sufficiently Byzantine and ruthless*

One would think that the Ukrainian experience would make the Russian government realize that its capacity to manipulate other Eastern European countries is far less extensive than it previously thought. But I do not believe they have drawn that conclusion. Russia's request for the extradition of Ukrainian Prime Minister Yuliya Tymoshenko to face corruption charges for dealing with Russian oligarchs indicates that Russia has not absorbed this message. This action was intended to poke a finger in President Yushchenko's eye, and it obviously angered many Ukrainians. The extradition request further represents a policy that may undercut eastern Ukraine's positive sentiment for Russia. Russia does not appear to be embarrassed over having failed to influence the outcome of Ukrainian elections. More likely, the Russians have concluded they were not sufficiently Byzantine and ruthless in their activities.

Russia has taken a similar approach in its dealings with Georgia. Russian troops still have not withdrawn from Georgia, although they have been unwelcome since 1992. Even former Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze, who was well connected in the Kremlin, did not manage to secure their withdrawal despite repeated promises from Moscow. Current President Mikheil Saakashvili has regained authority in several regions of Georgia that were under the control of pro-Moscow Georgians and he has kept up pressure for the withdrawal of all Russian troops from Georgia.

The Russians have been so heavy handed in Armenia that they are tearing up the economy, and I would not be surprised to see the Armenian government react in a way so as to prove it is not Moscow's lap dog. Moscow is suspected of supporting an operation in the Armenian capital that involved a shooting in the parliament and the killing of several politicians inimical to Moscow's continuing control of Armenian foreign policy.

Russia's relationships in Central Asia are quite different. Both President Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan and President Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan have been able to keep Moscow at arm's length. Before his recent overthrow, President Askar Akaev in Kyrgyzstan tilted back toward Russia in a surprising way by allowing it to have a large military air base near Bishkek as a counterweight to the NATO air bases there. It is unlikely that Akaev's successor will be able to reverse this tilt anytime soon. President Saparmurat Niyazov, Turkmenistan's ruthless dictator, has a mixed relationship with Russia. I do not believe the Russians have much control over him, though they do have a monopoly on the export of his oil. Niyazov has not been able to develop outlets for oil sales through Iran, Afghanistan, or Pakistan. Across the board, Russian policy under President Putin is to reacquire hegemony over neighboring countries and to force them into a strongly subordinate position where Moscow can more or less dictate their protocols.

Ambassador Vershbow: *The West must work to persuade Russia it has nothing to fear*

Attempts to manipulate the outcome of the elections proved ineffective. Ultimately, through peaceful and democratic means, the Ukrainian people were able to make their sovereign choice of a new presi-

dent. Now that a peaceful transfer of power has occurred, Russia and Ukraine acknowledge that they share a unique relationship founded on strong historical, cultural, and commercial ties. We hope both countries will continue to work to repair the damage to the bilateral relationship that took place around the elections.

Both the Orange revolution in Ukraine and the Rose revolution in Georgia have been viewed warily by the Russian leadership. Russia is also working to preserve its connections with other former Soviet states through strong existing economic, cultural, and political ties, though it needs to become more adept at managing these relationships, while recognizing that as time passes the relationship becomes less one of patron and client and more of a partnership.

Russia's approach to former Soviet republics will likely remain a sensitive issue in U.S.-Russian relations in the coming years. The challenge for the United States and Europe is to change the perception in Moscow that the West is competing for influence in the region. We must convince the Kremlin that we are not trying to undermine its relations with its neighbors, but rather seeking to promote conditions that will benefit all the nations involved by strengthening national sovereignty, territorial integrity, democratic institutions, and market economies. The United States will continue to support democracy in the former Soviet republics, as well as in other areas of the world, as the best long-term guarantee of stability, security, and prosperity—and as the best antidote to extremism, terrorism and organized crime. As President Bush has made clear, advancing freedom and democracy is a critical goal affecting the security of all other countries. We believe it is in Russia's interest to have stable, democratic neighbors that do not export economic or political instability.

Professor Kozyrev: *Russia will now pursue a more moderate course toward the former Soviet republics*

The Orange revolution in Ukraine has demonstrated the shortcomings of Moscow's policy in the post-Soviet sphere. Russia has lacked a comprehensive strategy for the region, and it has relied blindly on corrupt and inefficient ruling elites to serve its interests. There is also a deficit of transparency in trade and economic cooperation between Russia and the former Soviet republics.

In the past, Russia has pursued a set of ad hoc policies that were poorly justified and inadequately funded in order to maintain balanced relationships in its near abroad. The events in Ukraine made Moscow reassess its real role in the region and the efficacy of its integrative efforts. In this respect, many politicians in the region consider the Commonwealth of Independent States project to be a failure. I assume Russia will now pursue a more moderate course toward the former Soviet republics, trying to combine the methods of political bargaining, multilateral diplomacy, military assistance, and economic support.

■ **Could Russia have its own Orange uprising? Is there a political force within the country capable of instigating one?**

General Odom: *No, but I can imagine a movement opposing the government from another direction*

I would be surprised to see a political movement in Russia with the same political orientation, values, and aims as the Orange movement in Ukraine. However, I can imagine a movement opposing the government from quite another direction. Recently there was a massive organized demonstration of pensioners angered by the Putin administration's policy of ending previously free transportation and services for the elderly. I think the government was enormously surprised that such demonstrations could occur in Russia. These demonstrations do not denote the presence of a liberal movement. On the contrary, they represented a generation of people socialized in the Soviet period, many of whom remember Stalin. These protestors are not budding democrats like the youth in Ukraine.

It is a mistake to think Putin's government is as strong as some perceive. Putin's recent federal reforms that undercut the electoral systems in the regions and allowed him to appoint gubernatorial candidates are really a sign of weakness. Until this reform, regional protests and resistance movements against elected officials were not directed against Moscow. Now, however, citizens will protest directly against Putin's policies, creating an unstable situation for Putin. I think resistance is quite possible in Russia. We are seeing it, but I doubt its orientation will move in the same political direction as the Orange movement in Ukraine.

Professor Kozyrev: *Weak government creates an opportunity for regional insurgencies*

There are certainly opportunities to stir up insurgencies in many parts of Russia given the weakness of governmental structures and the authorities' inability to reach a compromise on key issues. But any major revolution in Russia will likely trigger violent purges by the government. To avoid such uprisings, the government has called for the strengthening of vertical power, extending central control over the regions and branches of government.

The government could safeguard stability through several measures. One would be to conduct an anti-corruption campaign similar to the one held in Georgia. Other strategies would include the initiation of dialogue with non-governmental organizations, the mobilization of popular support, and the encouragement of broad political participation. However, there is no political force capable of achieving such outcomes in contemporary Russia. Although opposition parties exist and may be able to instigate popular unrest, these parties are uninterested in radical reform. All political forces are tied to the bureaucratic machine: they benefit from socioeconomic uncertainty and are primarily motivated by corporate rather than national interests.

■ **How would you characterize Russia's role in the Middle East peace process?**

Ambassador Vershbow: *Russia has an effective role to play in the Middle East*

In April 2002, Russia joined the United States, the United Nations, and the European Union in creating the Quartet, a group formed to work toward peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Russia has been a valuable member of this group, encouraging the parties to implement the Road Map, a performance-based plan to realize the vision of two states living side by side in peace and security. President Mahmoud Abbas has taken concrete steps to end violence, and we are now closer to seeing the implementation of the Road Map than we have been in several years.

Russia has an effective role to play in the Middle East beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Russia has been broadly supportive of the political settlement in post-war Iraq, while vigorously pursuing the commercial interests of its firms in Iraq's reconstruction. We regard

Syria, a state sponsor of terrorism, as a key source of regional instability. Given Moscow's longstanding ties with Damascus, Russia is uniquely situated to influence the Syrian government to move in a positive direction. Russia joined the rest of the world in calling for Syria to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which called for the withdrawal of all remaining Syrian forces from Lebanon. We have also urged Moscow not to pursue sales of air defense systems to Damascus and have encouraged Russia to press the Syrian government to shut down Palestinian terrorist groups that are based in Syria. We have asked Russia to use its good relations with Iran to urge Tehran to cease its support for terrorism, but Moscow has been slow to take steps in this direction.

General Odom: *Russia will make trouble for the United States wherever and whenever possible*

Moscow has played a very minor role in the Middle East peace process, one that is indirect and seldom constructive. The recent case of Russian arms producers offering to sell advanced air defense missiles to Syria is an example. The Kremlin dismissed an avalanche of U.S. and European criticism when the deal became public, but in January of this year it appeared to back off its determination to supply the weapons. The Russian newspaper *Argumenty i Fakty* reported an anonymous foreign ministry official saying, "We told the Syrians that a new reality has emerged in the world that is very unpleasant for all of us: no country in the world can stop the United States. Therefore, we should be patient and wait until they themselves break their neck." Now, however, the Putin administration has reaffirmed its intent to proceed with the sale of those missiles. But the above quote is still instructive in that this unguarded candor pretty much sums up the Russian policy: cooperate when forced, but look for opportunities to make trouble for the United States wherever and whenever possible.

On the whole, I do not believe that Russia is capable of being a strategic partner or playing a constructive role in international affairs. Russia's psychological sense of loss after the collapse of the Soviet empire and the pressures on the Kremlin from all kinds of groups to engage in the pursuit of narrow and short-term interests doom it to be a fickle partner, whether working with the permanent members of the UN Security Council or in collaboration with the United States or other major powers. Over time this may change. Until then, how-

ever, the United States in particular and the West in general should expect Russia to alternate between cooperation and troublemaking, and they should design their relations with Moscow in ways that limit the damage while keeping the door open for greater cooperation in the future.

Russia has more in common with the weak states of the developing world than it does with the post-industrialized states of Europe, North America, and Northeast Asia. Russia has virtually no prospect of returning to great power status. In the near future, Russia will not be a major strategic problem for the West, but rather a nuisance while continuing to be a more serious threat to its immediate neighbors. Russia will become a bigger problem, however, if the European countries continue to allow Putin to play them off against one another.

■ **The president of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Jean Lemierre, warned that Russia might face mass re-nationalization and the resurgence of an all-powerful state. In your opinion, where is Russia headed?**

Ambassador Vershbow: *We worry that the pendulum has swung too far toward autocracy*

President Putin reaffirmed in Bratislava in February that Russia will not return to its totalitarian past. We understand that the consolidation of power now taking place in Russia reflects at least in part a desire to redress some of the disorder of the 1990s. However, we worry that the pendulum has swung too far and that there are insufficient checks and balances in terms of a viable political opposition, separation of powers, independent judiciary, or independent media. As the country moves forward, Russians will need to consider how much centralized control is appropriate and productive in building a modern economy and society in the twenty-first century. More must be done to restore confidence that Russia is a country where the rule of law is consistently applied and where business is conducted transparently, based on fair competition that is free from corruption. Russia's friends will naturally continue to monitor its course of democracy and will continue to register concern when called for, offer advice when necessary, and provide assistance where possible.

Professor Kozyrev: *Without fundamental structural and socio-political reforms, Russia will remain weak*

The character of today's regime in Russia is contradictory. Politically, the regime is a mix of devoted liberals and representatives of the conservative security agencies. Both groups are affiliated with powerful financial and industrial corporations. Despite its statist rhetoric, the Putin government represents, as Karl Marx once said, the "committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie." Large-scale de-privatization seems very unlikely in Russia, and the Yukos case seems to be an anomaly. The right of private ownership is guaranteed by Russia's constitution, and the international community serves as a very effective force of restraint against anti-democratic tendencies. The Russian state is undermined organizationally, politically, and morally. Without fundamental structural and socio-political reforms, the reemergence of an all-powerful state in Russia is impossible. ■