

Introduction

The two summits were a study in contrasts. In June 2010 Barack Obama invited Russian president Dmitry Medvedev to a favorite eatery, Ray's Hell Burgers, in Arlington Virginia, for a "cheeseburger summit." The two presidents rolled up their sleeves, dined on gourmet burgers, and exchanged jokes in a friendly atmosphere.¹ The summit highlighted the two young post-Cold War leaders, both trained as lawyers, and the new high-tech U.S.-Russian relationship. Obama's reset—his move to improve ties with Moscow—with its relaxed body language was on full display. After the two leaders announced a partnership for innovation, Medvedev flew on to Silicon Valley, where he met with young entrepreneurs, and proudly opened his first Twitter account.

Two years later it was a very different scene. In June 2012 Obama met Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Los Cabos, Mexico, their first meeting since Putin reclaimed the Kremlin.² In the words of Russia Today, a government-run TV network, the two leaders sat "poker-faced" as they eyed each other across the table, their body language signaling wariness.³ Obama said of the meeting, at which they sparred over missile defense and Syria, "We did have a candid, thoughtful and thorough conversation on a whole range of bilateral and international issues." Putin was more sparing. The conversation, he said, was "very substantive and concrete."⁴ The reset appeared to be on ice.

Then there was the summit that never was. Obama and Putin were scheduled to meet in Moscow in September 2013. But weeks before the meeting Edward Snowden, a disaffected 30 year-old contractor for the U.S. National Security Agency, landed in Moscow carrying a huge trove of classified information. The Russians took their time assessing the situation, but eventually granted him political asylum, despite repeated U.S. requests for his extradition. The White House then lost no

time in canceling the summit. Shortly thereafter, Putin said of his relationship with Obama, “We hear each other and understand the arguments. But we simply don’t agree. I don’t agree with his arguments and he doesn’t agree with mine.”⁵

But there was worse to follow. In March 2014, Russia annexed Crimea and launched a hybrid war in southeastern Ukraine. The United States imposed a series of economic sanctions on Russia and its leading officials. By the end of 2014, U.S.-Russian relations had deteriorated to their worst level since before Mikhail Gorbachev came to power.

These events highlight a basic fact of life since the Soviet Union disappeared on Christmas Day 1991. It has been a constant challenge for Washington to move forward on a constructive and productive agenda with Russia. Periods of dialogue, progress, and optimism have been followed by tense periods, standoffs, mutual criticism, and pessimism. Both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush began their administrations with high expectations about improving ties with Russia, only to acknowledge at the end of their terms that the relationship had seriously deteriorated. The Obama reset was over by the end of his first term. Moreover, Washington’s repeated cycles of high hopes followed by disappointments have been mirrored in Moscow.

In fact, U.S.-Russian relations since the Soviet collapse have gone through not one, but four resets. The first, albeit brief and partial, was during the last year of George H. W. Bush’s presidency when postcommunist Russia was reborn. The second was President Bill Clinton’s more ambitious attempt to refashion the entire relationship in the 1990s. The third reset was Vladimir Putin’s initiative when he was the first foreign leader to call George W. Bush after the 9/11 attacks and offer moral and material support for the antiterrorist campaign, with the expectation that Russia would become the United States’ full-fledged partner. The fourth reset was initiated by Obama, when he pledged to renew and improve relations with Russia after the 2008 Russia-Georgia War that had brought bilateral ties to a new low. Russia believes that the United States rebuffed its post-9/11 overtures during the Bush administration and views the Obama reset as a necessary American course correction, not a joint project.

This book seeks to answer basic questions about the relationship between these two nations: Why has it been so difficult to develop a

productive and more predictable post–Cold War U.S.–Russian partnership? What areas of this relationship have worked best? What have been most problematic? And why? Why are American and Russian priorities so often misaligned? What would it take to redesign this relationship and move it beyond what at best is a limited and selective partnership? These questions—and their answers—have far-reaching global implications.

Moscow's importance for Washington inevitably changed after the Soviet collapse. The United States had viewed the USSR as its major global rival and threat to its national interests. Both countries' missiles had targeted each other, creating a balance of terror and the possibility of nuclear Armageddon. All of that changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Its demise ushered in fifteen new independent states of which Russia was by far the largest and the obvious legatee of the USSR. Washington no longer saw Russia as either an ideological or a military rival. But this new reality was a bitter pill for the Russian leadership and the population. Many Russians equated respect with fear and found it hard to accept that the United States no longer regarded Russia as a rival. Since 1992, a central Russian objective has been to regain its status as a great power and be treated as an equal by the United States—a goal that was constantly frustrated. Russia has been indirectly important inasmuch as it is a player in theaters where the United States has vital interests. Even at its weakest in the 1990s, Russia—with its extensive stock of nuclear warheads and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) materials, its substantial albeit weakened military, and its remaining relationships with states that America considered unsavory—possessed the ability to thwart American interests. Every American administration since 1992 has recognized that a key interest in dealing with Russia has been to prevent it from acting as a spoiler in areas where the United States has vital interests—be they Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, or the Greater Middle East.

It has been more than two decades since the Cold War ended, yet the legacy of that era still shapes the relationship well into the twenty-first century. Another legacy also weighs on bilateral ties—that of the 1990s, the first decade of the independent Russian Federation. Those years, to some degree, have shaped American perceptions that a weak Russia is amenable to acquiescing to a U.S. agenda. By contrast, they have created a visceral Russian determination not to be treated as the United

States' junior partner. Russia in the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first century is a very different country than the Russia of the 1990s. Since Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, its GDP has grown seven-fold. It holds \$500 billion of foreign reserves and earns \$350 billion a year from oil and gas exports. It still faces challenges in terms of economic growth, innovation, demography and diversification of its economy, and many parts of the countryside are far behind the cities. But, in contrast to the 1990s, there is little of a concrete nature that Russia needs from the United States. Some Americans remember the 1990s as a time of hope, pluralism and freedom of speech in Russia. For most Russians, however, the 1990s were a time of weakness, poverty and uncertainty, of *bezporiadok* (disorder)—a time to which Russians are determined not to return.

U.S. approaches toward Russia have sometimes been internally contradictory. Parts of the policy community and the private sector have stressed the opportunities that a market-oriented Russia offers. But much of the American security establishment continues to view Russia with suspicion through a traditional Cold War lens. The same is true for Russia, where the emerging middle class is eager to do business with West—and invest its money there—while much of the foreign policy and security establishment continues to nurture grievances against a country it still largely views as an antagonist out to minimize its significance. The Cold War may be over but its legacy weighs heavily on perceptions and policies. Senator Sam Nunn, co-author of path-breaking legislation to reduce the dangers of the post-Soviet nuclear legacy summarized it succinctly: “The United States and Russia remain on automatic Cold War pilot.”⁶

Although Russia no longer looms as large in American foreign policy considerations as did the Soviet Union, when it was a Cold War adversary, the relationship with Russia still represents a significant priority for the United States. Russia's geopolitical situation straddling Europe and Asia, its large nuclear arsenal, and its permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council give it enduring leverage. It can support or hinder the pursuit of key U.S. national security interests. Similarly, America can influence how successfully Russia can pursue its goal to restore its position as a global player. Russia and the United

States share significant interests ranging from counterterrorism and counterproliferation of WMD to working together to stabilize Central Asia and contain the spread of radical Islam, and dealing with challenges from new frontiers, such as the Arctic. Despite these common interests, however, the two countries subscribe to very different views about their respective roles in the world.

Moreover, the relationship is constrained by the two countries' divergent value systems, in particular their contrasting views of the purposes and means of acceptable state behavior at home and abroad. The ideological antagonism between international communism and capitalism has disappeared, but Russia today sees itself as a great power and the guardian of traditional principles of maintaining the international status quo, absolute sovereignty, and noninterference in the internal affairs of other countries. The United States, by contrast, supports the United Nations' principles of the responsibility to protect, humanitarian intervention, and, if necessary, regime change in cases of violent interstate conflicts or civil wars that threaten populations. It also remains rhetorically committed to global democracy promotion, an increasingly neuralgic issue for Russia.

These contrasting worldviews were a source of conflict during the Balkan wars of the 1990s and they have continued to strain bilateral ties since the beginning of the upheavals in the Arab world in 2010. President Obama's second inaugural speech committed his administration to pursuing these goals. "We will support democracy from Asia to Africa, from the Americas to the Middle East, because our interests and our conscience compel us to act on behalf of those who long for freedom."⁷

Much has changed in the decades since the implosion of the USSR. Russia has become a market economy, albeit with its own specific characteristics—"capitalism Russian-style"—and the Russian people enjoy such liberties as the freedom to travel, to use the Internet, and to express their opinions—up to a point. Yet elections are managed, political opposition discouraged, and the rule of law remains elusive. The Russian political system remains a hybrid, and the evolution away from Soviet society will be the work of many more decades than some in the West originally envisaged. Nevertheless, the United States and Russia, with their nuclear arsenals, no longer face each other as antagonists.

Expectations of and preparations for bilateral conflict that were central to the Cold War have disappeared. In their place has come what one former senior U.S. official describes as a “cranky” relationship, for which both sides bear responsibility. America and Russia no longer are antagonists but they remain antagonistic. Could it have been otherwise? How and why did it evolve like this?

During the time period covered by this book, successive U.S. and Russian administrations have faced six major sets of issues that they have jointly sought to manage. As a result, there has been a great deal of continuity in the substance of U.S.-Russian relations, irrespective of who occupies the White House or the Kremlin. The first basket of issues is the nuclear legacy, involving arms control and missile defense. The second, related basket is nonproliferation of WMD, particularly the question of Iran’s nuclear program—as well as that of North Korea. The third relates to Russia’s neighborhood and the respective roles of Russia and the United States in what, for want of a better word, is called the post-Soviet space and the territories around it. The fourth involves European security, including the conflicts in the Balkans and Euro-Atlantic security architecture, as well as NATO expansion and the role of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The fifth, most recent set of issues, relates to Russian and U.S. policies toward the upheavals in the Arab world. The final constant has been Russia’s domestic situation, including the wars in Chechnya, instability in the north Caucasus, and the state of democracy and human rights.

This is indeed a long and challenging list of issues that both countries have had to confront. They continue to demand both sides’ attention more than two decades after the demise of the USSR. There have been some arms control agreements, but missile defense remains highly problematic. Cooperation on dealing with Iran’s nuclear program has improved, but the United States and Russia continue to disagree about the severity of the problem—and the way to resolve it. Russia’s neighborhood remains a major issue of contention since the Crimean annexation, and Washington and Moscow continue to subscribe to very different views of how the post-Soviet states should evolve and what their relationship with Russia should be. There has been little progress on the future of Euro-Atlantic security architecture, although further NATO

enlargement appears to be on indefinite hold. Russia's refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence, the suspension of its participation in the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe, and the West's reluctance to respond to Russian initiatives proposing a new European Security Treaty have highlighted a basic reality: the United States and its allies failed to devise a post-Cold War framework for including Russia in Euro-Atlantic structures, and thus Russia remains outside of the institutions that regulate European security, charting its own path. Cooperation in dealing with the upheavals in the Arab world remains elusive. And the Kremlin has increasingly rejected U.S. attempts to influence its domestic trajectory and support Russian civil society organizations devoted to improving the rule of law, human rights, and democratic practices.

This book examines both the U.S. and Russian perspectives on the relationship, informed by many discussions with former and current officials. Some of the challenges for U.S. Russia policy are intrinsic to the general problems of U.S. foreign policy, such as dealing with Congress and overcoming bureaucratic stove-piping within the executive branch. They also touch on broader determinants of U.S. foreign policy, such as definitions of the national interest and how to promote American values. Others are more specific to Russia and involve the tension between focusing on interests versus values and determining how much Russia's internal developments should affect U.S. foreign policy decisions and how far American actions in Russia's neighborhood should be calibrated to take into account Russian concerns. In order to tell the story, the book is chronological, except for the chapter on commercial and energy relations, since these are less affected by the policies of different administrations.

At the heart of this limited partnership is the difficult question of how far the United States should allow its policies to be shaped by an acknowledgment of Russia's unique post-Soviet preoccupations and continuing conviction that the United States disregards its interests. Russia does not loom as large in American foreign policy priorities as America does in Russian priorities. Russia is instrumentally important to the United States because of its ability to make it difficult—or easier—for Washington to achieve its goals on a range of international problems.

Its veto power on the United Nations Security Council provides it with a key lever to prevent the United States from taking actions where American and Russian interests diverge. This recognition of the reality that Russia is less important per se than indirectly is a continuing source of irritation to Russian officials. In this sense, the various American resets have represented attempts to engage Russia productively by persuading it to acknowledge and accept the asymmetries in the relationship and move forward on that basis. Putin's 2001 attempted reset, by contrast, was a bid to establish a strategic partnership of equals, acting as if these asymmetries did not exist.

The book is based on work I have done over several decades both as a scholar and as a practitioner. In addition to my years at Georgetown University as professor and director of its Center for Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies, I have served in the State Department's Office of Policy Planning in the Clinton and Bush administrations and as National Intelligence Officer for Russia and Eurasia at the National Intelligence Council. Teaching a course on U.S.-Russian relations at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) gave me insights into the attitudes of the younger, educated generation toward ties with the United States. My understanding of the views of the Russian leadership has been enhanced by my participation in the Valdai International Discussion Club for the last decade. This has provided a unique opportunity to assess the perceptions of key policymakers and opinion-leaders. In these annual conferences, we have met every year with President Putin for several hours. We have also met with other senior officials and have listened to a variety of views on Russia's domestic and foreign policy. The interpretation of the views of American and Russian officials is, of course, entirely my own.