

Does the United States Need a New Russia Policy?

BY *Stephen E. Hanson*

Since Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency of the Russian Federation, U.S.-Russian relations have entered troubled and turbulent waters. Russia's support for Syrian strongman Bashar al-Assad has exasperated U.S. policymakers. Putin's crackdown on domestic opposition has inspired bipartisan support for the Magnitsky bill, which would deny U.S. visas and bank accounts to Russian officials suspected of involvement in corruption and human rights abuses. The new U.S. ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul, has been subjected to an unprecedented campaign of harassment and vilification by the Kremlin-affiliated news media. Meanwhile, long-standing disputes with Russia over Iran's nuclear program, European missile defense, and the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states continue to fester.

Given this accumulation of tensions, is it time for the United States to give up on the "reset" of relations with Russia? Such a policy shift appears tempting, until one examines the leading alternatives—neocontainment and unconditional engagement. Either would likely produce far worse results for U.S. national security.

NEOCONTAINMENT IS A STEP BACKWARDS

A strategy of containing Putin's Russia is implied by those who see Russia primarily as a geopolitical adversary—in essence, a weaker, even more corrupt version of the Soviet Union. This view suggests that there is no longer any meaningful reason to engage Russia in a cooperative international framework. Such a policy of neocontainment would naturally enable unconstrained U.S. criticism of the Putin regime's

authoritarianism, anti-Americanism, and support for dictatorships abroad. However, it would also jeopardize a number of hard-won recent achievements in U.S.-Russian relations.

For example, Russian support for NATO efforts in Afghanistan—including the establishment of a NATO transit hub in Lenin's birthplace, Ulyanovsk—might encounter greater internal resistance. The "New START" treaty, already unpopular among many in Congress, might be shelved, eliminating the sole mechanism for verifying the Russian nuclear arsenal. U.S. businesses would lose new opportunities opened up by Russia's formal accession to the WTO this summer, and if Congress were to refuse to graduate Russia from the Jackson-Vanik Amendment blocking Permanent Normal Trade Relations, retaliatory measures on the Russian side would be likely. A U.S. stance of neocontainment would also be portrayed by the Kremlin-controlled Russian media as proof of America's deep-seated animosity toward the Russian people. Given the high levels of suspicion about U.S. policy among Russians today, this message would find a receptive audience.

In short, neocontainment of Putin's Russia would generate a state of zero-sum hostility that would only exacerbate existing tensions in U.S.-Russian relations.

UNCONDITIONAL ENGAGEMENT IS NOT REALISTIC

Given the negative implications of a policy of neocontainment, analysts more friendly to Putin's regime have promoted a rather different alternative to the reset policy: full-scale, unconditional engagement with Russia. Supporters of this position argue that whatever Putin's failings from a democratic perspective, he still provides relatively consistent leadership for a country that shares many important interests with the United States—especially compared to figures in the opposition who have flirted with Russian ethnic nationalism or visions of Soviet restoration. Should the United States simply drop its

overt criticisms of Russia's human rights record, waive the Jackson-Vanik Amendment without conditions, and welcome Russia into the WTO?

Unfortunately, a policy of unconditional engagement is unlikely to be successful either, for the simple reason that Putin's conspiratorial worldview has generated a Russian foreign policy that clashes with deeply held American values and objectives. If Washington were to stop all public criticism of the Putin regime's restrictions on democracy and freedom of the press or make the terrible mistake of recalling Ambassador McFaul in favor of someone more to the Kremlin's liking, Moscow would interpret this as a sign of serious American weakness. Current Russian efforts to present an image of relative moderation to world audiences might be replaced by an open embrace of dictatorship—particularly given the current existential crisis in the democratic European Union.

Nor would unconditional engagement with Russia do anything to ameliorate its endemic corruption, weak judiciary, and highly uncertain property rights, which are the real obstacles to greater FDI in Russia and the full integration of the country into the global market. Unconditional engagement with Putin's regime would also closely align the United States with an autocrat whose legitimacy within Russian society is at an all-time low, disheartening democratic forces within the Russian opposition and empowering its anti-American elements.

CONDITIONAL ENGAGEMENT IS THE ONLY OPTION

The reset policy toward Putin's Russia can be described in much the same terms as Winston Churchill's view of democracy: it is the worst possible approach to the bilateral relationship, except for all the others. The candidate elected to the U.S. presidency in November will need to continue to pursue common interests with Russia in crucial areas of national

security and at the same time uphold American values and interests in Eurasia. Since neither neocontainment nor unconditional engagement with Putin's Russia is advisable, U.S. policy toward Russia should continue to be based on conditional engagement: working with Putin's state in areas where mutual interests are realizable, but standing firm where U.S. values are nonnegotiable.

Put in practical terms, this means that Russia should certainly be graduated from the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, as our WTO obligations require. However, such a move should be accompanied by increased efforts to support human rights organizations in the Russian Federation (something the Magnitsky bill alone would not accomplish). Similarly, Russian-NATO cooperation in Eurasia should be strengthened in advance of the planned withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in 2014, but not at the expense of abandoning the U.S. commitment to Georgian sovereignty. Overall, the United States should treat Russia with the respect due to a great power without certifying the current occupant of the Kremlin as the sole representative of Russia's diverse, sophisticated population.

Such a balancing act may be less emotionally satisfying than simply identifying Russia as the enemy or, conversely, wholeheartedly embracing Putin as "a man we can do business with." But it is likely to produce better long-term results for both U.S. interests and values in this crucially important bilateral relationship. ♦

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