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Bratislava Summit: “Losing Russia?” or “Losing America?”

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As U.S. President George W. Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin prepare to convene in Bratislava on February 23, the two leaders face a stark choice: allow U.S.-Russia relations to continue to worsen and veil differences behind the cloak of a united front against international terrorism or accept that both countries need to recalibrate their foreign policies toward each other with the ultimate goal of creating some form of strategic, if not limited, partnership.

Media and the world punditry will cover the presidential summit with a focus on specific policy issues. Will Bush “lecture” Putin’s “backtracking on democratic gains” of the 1990s? Will Bush question the level and quality of free expression in Russia’s media under Putin? Will Bush express displeasure that Russia has agreed to sell anti-aircraft missiles to Syria? Putin could have his own questions. Why is the U.S. “meddling” in the post-Soviet space? Why has Washington granted asylum to individuals known to have connections with Chechen terrorists? This list is long and no doubt these and other issues will be aired.

Media and pundits will also most probably focus on specific issues without addressing the general approach both the U.S. and Russia will take during the Bratislava encounter. The following explores how both countries have approached the bilateral relationship, what has gone wrong, what both have to offer, and what needs to be fixed to jump-start U.S.-Russia relations.

The making and current state of US- Russia relations

Since 9-11, the United States and Russia have all but ignored the majority of their mutual problems. Instead, focus has been given to traditional areas of security cooperation, nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and trade in energy resources (progress in the latter area has been very limited).

However, none of these issues combined has come close to cementing a strong bilateral strategic relationship. In fact, even with notable progress in some of these areas, elites in both countries have developed feelings of mutual disillusionment with each other, as well as the suspicion that the other side is secretly cultivating antagonistic agendas. It is not bilateral relations that are immediate problem, but how the U.S. and Russia encounter each other in different parts of the world, particularly the post-Soviet space.

This should not surprise anyone. During the presidencies of Bush and Putin, U.S. - Russia relations have been founded on close personal relations of the two leaders. Close personal bonds initially provided the hope that U.S.-Russia relations would quickly and meaningfully flourish. The exact opposite has happened - the presidents’ friendship has ceased to be a means for solving mutual problems and has actually become a means for veiling them and discredit the very idea of a strategic partnership. This personal relationship has not been institutionalized or accepted by political elites of either country.

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It is now clear that the U.S. political elite have not accepted Russia as meaningful partner. The Kremlin, in turn, has grounds for disappointment in Bush, widely seen as the most “pro-Russian” president in modern American history, continues to compete with Putin in Russia’s sphere of influence. Washington, for the Kremlin, is deemed to be trespassing on Moscow’s most immediate interests, especially in the countries of the former Soviet Union.

America’s worldview vs. perceptions of Russia

The Bush administration, for now, has given up on creating any thing close strategic relationship with Russia. The reason is not only problems involving Russia, but rather America’s general worldview to international relations. Actually, U.S. has ceased to rely on allies. Being the world’s most powerful military, political and economic country, the U.S. deems it does not need strategic support from other others. The U.S. will of course accept temporary or “flexible” coalitions to resolve specific issues, but beyond that even traditional allies cannot expect much more from the United States. The current reality is that the U.S.-Russia relationship now operates according to that principle.

There are also Russia-specific issues that make the U.S. reluctant to embrace Russia. For the past half century, the U.S. has come to the conclusion that meaningful strategic partnership can only come about in the basis of a common vision and a common system of values. The U.S. has convinced itself, on the back of very effective lobbying of special interest groups hostile to Russia and an equally hostile media, that the U.S. and Russia neither share the same vision, but also do not adhere to the same system of values.

The American political elite, particularly America’s very influential neo-conservatives, and media refuse to accept Vladimir Putin as a democrat in any conventional sense. With increasing claims of incipient authoritarianism in Russia, many in the U.S. political elite (though not necessarily with a strong hearing in the White House at present) believe it is only a matter of time before the Kremlin’s actions will come into conflict with the interests of America and its allies.

Russia’s retreat from accepted democratic norms, as it is claimed by many, represent a threat to the U.S. and its interests as current American foreign policy gives more priority to global democracy than to the war against terrorism - believing it to be the most effective way to counter terror. Bush is finding it difficult to ignore these opinions as he has proclaimed the “proliferation of freedom” to be his leitmotiv of his second term.

What does Russia want and what does it have?

The U.S. is very frustrated that Putin has never expounded upon a specific strategy for developing Russian-U.S. relations. This frustration has even made many in Washington pondering out loud whether the Kremlin is truly interested a strategic relationship.

This is where the U.S. has again misread the Kremlin. During Putin’s presidency, Russia foreign policy has experienced a renaissance of sorts. Five years ago, Russia was broke, in debt, and largely absent from the world stage. Today, Russia is relying on its recent macroeconomic performance to enter foreign markets and taking advantage of America’s recent unilateralist foreign policy approach. Russia has also, over the past five years, sought to improve relations with the European Union, China, India, Japan, as well as other international plays.

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What kind of relationship Putin would like to have with the U.S. is unclear. What is clear is that the Kremlin is very aware that he cannot have a strategic relationship with the U.S. based on a strict sense of parity. Not only is the U.S. not interested in this kind of relation, no other country in the world has the military power and economic wealth to come even close to parity with the U.S. However, it is most likely the case Putin is waiting for an offer from the United States based on the following assets:

- Russia possesses the largest nuclear arsenals outside America, it also the only other country in the world capable of calling into question America's existence.

- Russia possesses enormous resources of radioactive materials for the production of nuclear weapons, as well as technologies, practical knowledge and specialists required for producing a wide range of WMDs.

- Without some kind of special relationship with Russia, the U.S. will never be able rest assured that WMD nonproliferation will have any meaning.

- Russia is a U.S. ally in the war against international terrorism. However, and more importantly, Russia remains a major power across the Eurasian landmass (particularly the Caucasus and Central Asia) and is in the same geographic neighborhood that is the current focus of much of America's current foreign policy concerns - Iraq, Iran, China, India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and North Korea.

- Russia is a member of the UN Security Council. While the U.S. is wary of long-term alliances, it continues to prefer to legitimate its foreign policy moves with approval from the Security Council.

- Russia is a world energy producer that cannot be ignored. With violence and social upheaval in the Middle East an on-going reality, Russia is poised to become an all-important alternative source of energy for the U.S.

Russia has valuable assets and will exploit them as efficiently as possible. If the past five years is any guide, Putin will leverage Russian assets for tangible results enhancing Russia's international interests and prestige. The U.S cannot afford to be indifferent to these assets (and possible threats?) considering its multifaceted and global foreign policy agenda.

The "Bratislava Accords" - Re-inventing the U.S.-Russia relationship

The main content of U.S.-Russian relations in recent years has been not bilateral difference or even serious concern over the Russian "assets" sighted above, but rather how both countries approach interests in third countries and individual regions, above all the Eurasia landmass. Mutual interests in the Eurasia landmass, particularly the post-Soviet space, are where both countries can establish a new foundation advancing U.S.-Russia relations (and Bush and Putin can still maintain their friendship).

Russia's foreign policy agenda and priorities concerning such countries and regions as Ukraine, the South Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East (Iran) have been erratic at best. Ukraine's recent political turmoil serves as the best example of this failure. Conflicts in the post-Soviet space more often occur not because of differences in countries' intentions or because they are reluctant or unable to recognize each other's interests in a given region, but because they have never seriously invested efforts to reconcile their interests and have never distinctly formulated them.

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High-level and institutionalized U.S.-Russia cooperation (i.e. beyond the Bush-Putin friendship) concerning the evolution of the post-Soviet space would help create a favorable atmosphere for both countries to aid each other in other trouble spots in the world. With mutual understanding on the change in the post-Soviet space, Russia could aid the U.S. in the Middle East and the U.S., in turn, could make its influence felt in the resolving the Chechen tragedy.

Instead of seeking the unrealistic goal of some form of global strategic parity, both Russia and the U.S. should seek regional parity in a number of places in the world, including the Middle East, the Eurasian landmass, and even Europe. The United States is unable to cope with many problems on its own, as its interests are truly global. These problems could be dealt with on the basis of partner relations with other countries. In Eurasia, Russia can and must become that partner. The mutual rebuilding of Iraq is also a meaningful and very possible setting to build bilateral confidence.

The U.S.-Russian economic relationship has been grossly undervalued. The U.S. has not been overly pleased with the Kremlin's hegemonic interest to control Russia's energy export sectors, particularly the Kremlin's handling of the "Yukos affair," but it is coming around to the reality that the Kremlin will be Russia's primary international energy entity to partner with. With the Kremlin's control of Russia's energy sectors all but settled, American companies can now, with reasonable confidence, engage the Kremlin with proposals of energy cooperation. In return, the U.S. will continue supporting Russia's early accession to the World Trade Organization.

Russia is very much in need of long-term agreements with countries such as the U.S. to forge a new framework seeking to achieve mutual security and build a new world order. Russia and the U.S. have never seriously considered negotiations of this kind, but such an approach could become a serious step in building a strategic partnership in the interests of the two countries.

In lieu of a conclusion: "Losing Russia?" or "Losing America?"

At present, there is a real risk of the U.S. "losing Russia" (again) and Russia "losing America" (forever). Neither country has an interest in "losing" the other.

The Bush administration should continue its long-standing, but critical stance, of a "wait-and-see" posture and watch developments in Russia, namely, following parliamentary and presidential elections and the expected transfer of power in 2008. The Bush administration has actually been very pragmatic. Public rebukes related to the Kremlin's "political reforms" would probably result in Putin only "tightening the screws" at home. This view accepts that the Putin administration is a political reality with which the world simply has to deal with, while U.S. interests in Russia require the development of a long-term strategy for relations with Moscow in the post-Putin period.

Russia needs to significantly shake-up its foreign policy doctrine and establishment – as well as retire its own Cold Warriors. More creative and openness to different ideas of about national security are necessary. The senseless U.S.-Russia confrontation over Ukraine's presidential elections should serve as a wake-up call that current Kremlin approaches toward the post-Soviet space are in need of an upgrade.

The Bratislava encounter will not be easy for either Bush or Putin, but it should be a forum to consider creating a new and different future. Past hopes and present disillusionment must be overtaken with different and innovative ideas. Both Bush and Putin have demonstrated that they can rise above the prejudices and doubts of political elites that surround them. They can, and must,



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continue to do the same – but this time they must institutionalize these common goals beyond personal friendship.

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