

In Search of Détente, Once Again

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When Barack Obama goes to Moscow, he will find a sulky former superpower that no longer wants to be part of Western clubs

IN 1988, when the Soviet era was drawing to a close, a Russian rock band, Nautilus Pompilius, recorded a “Farewell Letter” that captured Russia’s love affair with America:

Goodbye America, oh! where I have never been
Farewell forever...I’ve outgrown your sand-stoned jeans
They have taught us to love your forbidden fruits
Goodbye America, where I will never be.

As Russia was opening up to the world, it was bidding farewell to America as a dream and a Utopia.

Twenty years on, half of Russia’s people feel negative about America. They see it as the country’s second-biggest enemy after Georgia, which, since last August’s war, is also a proxy for the United States. The day after Barack Obama was elected president, Dmitry Medvedev, his Russian counterpart, accused America of using the conflict in Georgia as a pretext for moving NATO’s warships to the Black Sea and speeding up the imposition of its missile defence system in eastern Europe. America’s unilateralism, he said, was also to blame for the world’s economic woes. As a counter to America’s missile-defence plans, Mr. Medvedev threatened to place rockets in Kaliningrad, Russia’s enclave between Poland and Lithuania.

The country which Mr. Obama will visit on July 6th to “press the reset button”, as he puts it, no longer seeks integration with the West. Anti-Americanism now engulfs even the young and educated, who were untouched even by Soviet propaganda. Curiously, America the enemy is almost as abstract as America the dream. It is not so much a country as a force that pushed Russia to its knees in the 1990s and has since done all it can to stop it getting up again.

A new school textbook teaches Russian teenagers that the West has always been hostile to Russia; that Mikhail Gorbachev, the last president of the Soviet Union, was wrong to see Western partners as allies; and that NATO’s expansion into eastern Europe encouraged Western countries to meddle in Russian affairs. In Russia’s view, everything America does in the world is aimed against Russia and everything aimed against Russia is directed by America. Russia measures itself by its ability to stand up to America. But America is also a model of power that Russia wants to copy. Imitation and resentment go together.

Russia's sense of resurgence is mixed with a deeply rooted inferiority complex. A recent remark by Sergei Ivanov, the deputy prime minister and a former KGB general, illustrates the ambiguity. Commenting on the transit of military cargoes bound for Afghanistan, Mr. Ivanov said Russia wanted to control what was passing through its territory, because it was "not some banana republic".

The sense of defeat and humiliation which the Kremlin attributes to the early 1990s surfaced several years after the Soviet collapse. In late 1991, far from feeling defeated, most Russians (at least 57% of whom had voted for Boris Yeltsin a few months earlier) saw themselves as victors. And nearly 80% of Russians were positive about America. But the briefly outlawed Communist Party and the KGB felt betrayed and humiliated. A decade and a half later, they have managed to project their feelings on to the whole country.

Russia's current anti-Americanism, therefore, is less a reaction to America's actions than a reflection of its own state of mind. The question is to what extent America's actions have contributed to it.

An opportunity lost

The end of the cold war in 1989 brought a sense of relief and satisfaction to America. As Jack Matlock, America's ambassador in Moscow, described it in his memoirs, "The way we looked at it at the time, and the way Gorbachev looked at it, was that we all won the cold war. We ended it." When the Soviet Union crumbled two years later, America was caught unprepared and scrambling for a policy. Its biggest concern was removing nuclear rockets from former Soviet republics. Yegor Gaidar, Russia's former prime minister in charge of economic reform, says this was one of the most successful operations Russia and America have mounted together.

America's policy towards Russia was not triumphalist. But nor did the West offer Russia a Marshall Plan to stave off a catastrophic collapse in living standards. As Mr. Gaidar says, it was more concerned about recovering the Soviet debts which Russia had inherited than with stabilising its financial system. Poland's debt was written off, but Russia's was not. By 1993, when Bill Clinton took office and actively engaged with Boris Yeltsin, the crucial window of opportunity had closed. The funds Mr. Clinton managed to accumulate for Russia were too little, too late.

For most of the 1990s, the thrust of Russia's relationship with the West was about Russia's transition to a normal, civilised country. But that clashed with NATO enlargement, which presupposed that Russia was a threat. For the West, enlargement was about bolstering security in Europe. In Moscow it was seen as a sign of mistrust and neglect of Russia's aspirations. A new security structure could have been built to include a democratic Russia, but never was. Instead, NATO enlargement was coated in soothing language about Russia's co-operation with the alliance inside the Russia-NATO council.

Russia can wait

This rang hollow when NATO started to bomb the Serbs, Russia's allies, in 1999. The event was a turning-point in Russia's attitude to America. Suddenly, it felt that its hard-earned seat on the UN Security Council had been turned into a joke, and NATO's enlargement looked like encirclement. Russia's own brutal war in Chechnya made it particularly twitchy. The Russian media, not yet controlled by the Kremlin, went into nationalistic overdrive.

The new attitude towards America was captured in 2000 by a jingoistic film called "Brother 2". The young Russian hero travelled to America to settle a few scores. At the end, after shooting some Ukrainian gangsters, he headed for the airport with his girlfriend. There a customs officer told her that her visa had expired and she could never return to America. She gave the American the finger. The "Goodbye, America!" song rang defiantly over the titles.

George Bush junior took a similarly dismissive line. After the 1998 financial crisis, Russia seemed to be a failing state. Inside the State Department, Russia was demoted and rolled into the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs with 53 other countries. "America was not going to look at the region of the former Soviet Union through Moscow's eyes," says Thomas Graham, a former adviser to Mr. Bush.



Vladimir Putin, Russia's present prime minister and then its president, took this in his stride. In fact, he was much more accommodating to America in the first two years of his presidency than the Kremlin would now have Russians believe. He did not object to the second stage of NATO enlargement that took in the Baltic states, shut down Soviet-era military installations in Cuba and Vietnam, and "rolled with the punch" when America decided to withdraw from the anti-ballistic missile (ABM) treaty, the symbol of cold war détente. "They told us that if America did not need it, we didn't need it either. It was all based on the assumption that they had won the cold war and would build their own model of security," says Igor Ivanov, Russia's former foreign minister.

He quickly realised that protests would get him nowhere.

Andrei Illarionov, Mr. Putin's economic adviser until he resigned in protest against rising authoritarianism, says Mr. Putin was well aware that Russia faced threats from the south and the east, not from the west. Mr. Putin was the first world leader to call Mr. Bush after the terrorist attacks of 2001. "He saw September 11th as Russia's unique chance to get under the NATO umbrella," says Mr. Illarionov.

Mr. Putin volunteered Russian intelligence in Afghanistan, called off military exercises in the Pacific Ocean and helped America gain access to the Central Asian states. To side with America in such an obvious way, Mr. Putin had to overcome fierce resistance from Russia's own senior military men. That required political will. Helping America when it was feeling vulnerable not only made Russia look strong, but was also the best way of getting fully accepted into the Western club.



But Mr. Bush did not reciprocate. He famously looked into Mr. Putin's eyes, but felt he owed him no favours. America did not even bother lifting the Jackson-Vanik amendment, which penalises countries with non-market behaviour and restrictions on emigration. Mr. Bush was indifferent to Russia's legitimate concerns but soft on the Kremlin's abuses of power.

According to Alexander Vershbow, a former ambassador to NATO and to Russia, "Bush folks in the first couple of years had this attitude that Russia did not matter and that America should take advantage of any support they offered in Afghanistan and not give them

anything in return. They are doing whatever they are doing for their own interest." Unlike Mr. Yeltsin, whose friendship with Mr. Clinton was based on shared values, Mr. Putin believed in pragmatic interests and felt disappointed.

Out of the top fifteen

But the real breaking-point in Russia's relationship with America came after 2003. America's invasion of Iraq, and the Kremlin's attack on Yukos against the background of a rising oil price, coincided to change Russia's direction and subsequently its relationship with the West.

With his fondness for conspiracy theories, Mr. Putin decided America's goal was to weaken Russia at any cost. He blamed "outside forces" for a tragic school siege in Beslan, and also saw an American hand behind the Orange revolution in Ukraine in 2004. That looked to him like a dress rehearsal for a revolution in Russia. Meanwhile he saw the war in Iraq, Russia's long-time client state, as an intolerable encroachment on national interests, if not a declaration of war. Mr. Putin compared the West to a "strict uncle in a pith helmet" telling other people how to live. But Mr. Bush, preoccupied with Iraq, paid little attention.

"Ten American presidents from Truman to Clinton [made] Russia one of their top strategic issues," says Strobe Talbott, Mr. Clinton's top Russian adviser. "George W. Bush, if you had asked him what his ten to 15 top issues were—Russia would not be one of them until August 2008 [when Russia invaded Georgia]."

When Mr. Putin warned America and its allies against taking Georgia and Ukraine into NATO, the West saw this as posturing. In the end, it achieved the worst of both worlds. It pledged eventual membership to Georgia and Ukraine without offering them a way to achieve it, and it infuriated Russia without promising to defend Georgia. "We have combined strong rhetoric with policies of appeasement," says Joseph Wood, a senior adviser to Dick Cheney, America's former vice-president.

In August 2008, Mr. Bush and Mr. Putin talked in Beijing about the worsening situation in the Caucasus. When Mr. Putin realised that Mr. Bush wouldn't or couldn't rein in Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgia's president, he decided to whack him himself. In invading Georgia, Mr. Putin felt he was merely mirroring NATO's actions against the Serbs and America's war in Iraq. But Russia also saw the war in Georgia as a proxy conflict with America and NATO. For a moment, the two countries were close to touching the electrified wire.

Cold-war mentalities

Mr. Obama is going to Moscow at a dangerous time. The risk of another war in Georgia is far from over, and the economic crisis has not made Russia any friendlier to the West. By way of a welcome for Mr. Obama, Russia has staged the biggest military exercise in the north Caucasus since the end of the cold war. It concludes on the day he arrives in Moscow.

The new American administration, which has mobilised some of the best experts on Russia, has few illusions about the nature of the Kremlin regime: institutionally weak, nationalistic, corrupt and dangerous both to its neighbours and to its own people. But they are also aware that lecturing the Kremlin about its behaviour at home or abroad is useless. "We don't have the ability or even will to use coercive power to change Russia's behaviour," says a senior administration official.

Instead Mr. Obama will be talking about America's national interests, in the hope that some of them may overlap with Russia's. The irony is that while Mr. Obama and Mr. Medvedev have pledged "to move beyond cold-war mentalities and chart a fresh start", the central (and safest) topic of talks is nuclear-arms control, just as it was in the 1980s. The two are aiming to bring their deployed arsenals down below the 1,700-2,000 by 2012 agreed in the 2002 Moscow treaty. An opinion poll this week shows that more than half of all Russians do not support the reductions. "Russia is encircled by American military bases, airports and naval units," cried Vyacheslav Nikonov, a hawkish commentator.

Yet the fact is that, in many ways, Russia needs a new treaty more than America. It cannot afford to start another arms race. "It is back to the future: in the dark days of the cold war, the only piece of real business that the United States and the Soviet Union could do together was not blowing up the world. It may not be the only game in town, but it is the only one that looks pretty clear win-win," says Mr. Talbott.

By engaging with Russia on nuclear questions and giving it the status it craves, of a quasi-superpower, America hopes to get traction on other issues, such as Iran and non-

proliferation. And if Russia has enough at stake in its relationship with America, it may even decide that the cost of fighting another war in Georgia or destabilising the Crimea is simply too high.

Moscow has registered the change of language. Sergei Prikhodko, the Kremlin's chief foreign-policy adviser, says the style has not become softer, but "we get the feeling that they don't just listen to us, they hear us as well." He says Moscow is also receptive to America's demand to limit any possible leaking of nuclear technologies and material out of Russia. And both Mr. Prikhodko and his American counterparts say Russia has been more co-operative on Iran than it appears. "They are certainly not doing certain negative things that they could have been doing there," a senior administration official says.

Much of Mr. Obama's policy rests on the assumption that Russia still wants to sit at the same table as America and be integrated into world structures. But this may no longer be the case. Russia does not consider the West as a model of governance or the rule of law, but as a provider of services, including financial ones, for the ruling elite. As Dmitri Trenin, head of the Carnegie Moscow Centre, has argued, Russia has left the West and is trying to build up its influence in the former Soviet space. Mr. Putin's decision to pull out of the World Trade Organisation entry negotiations, saying that Russia is prepared to go in only as part of a customs union with Belarus and Kazakhstan, illustrates that point. It came despite Mr. Obama's and Mr. Medvedev's pledge to jump-start Russia's entry.

But the most difficult issue will remain the fate of Georgia and Ukraine. Russia may not be trying to recreate an empire—it has neither the energy, human resources or ideology for that—but it is trying to prevent the West from entering its sphere of influence. Mr. Trenin says that what Russia wants is a buffer zone, with no American military bases or NATO presence. The first targets in Georgia last August were military installations built to NATO standards.

Russia wants a monopoly on the use of force in the former Soviet Union. It also wants to ensure that no conflict can be resolved without its involvement. In advocating a multipolar world, Russia sees itself as one of the poles, dominating its region. Mr. Obama's team will stress that America has no intention of giving up on Ukraine and Georgia. But it will not fight for Georgia militarily or force the issue of NATO membership, not least because neither country is ready. The danger, says Mr. Illarionov, is that Russia may interpret any wavering as a signal that America has abandoned Georgia and Ukraine, which might then lead to another military clash.

As one of his advisers puts it, Mr. Obama is not a sentimental guy. He will give the Russia relationship his best shot. But if his investment does not yield returns, there is a good chance that Russia will simply drop to the end of his long list of priorities. "We know this is a very serious window of opportunity and nobody should be in any doubt that we want to use it," says Mr. Prikhodko. "But we also have to get answers to the questions we have accumulated over the years. We can 'reset' the computer—but what are we going to do with the memories?"