

Collision Avoidance: U.S.-Russian Bilateral Relations and Former Soviet States

by Eugene B. Rumer

Key Points

Relations between the United States and Russia are entering a delicate phase. American involvement on the Russian periphery is reaching unprecedented proportions even as a consensus has emerged in Russia that these areas constitute its exclusive sphere of influence.

U.S. efforts in the former Soviet states are simply an extension of the global war on terrorism and are intended to provide security and stability to countries still struggling with independence.

But to many Russians, the U.S. military presence in Central Asia and security assistance to many former Soviet states seem to be deliberate attempts at encirclement. This perception creates an atmosphere ripe for miscalculation and even confrontation.

To avoid a collision, Washington and Moscow should initiate a dialogue on their respective activities in former Soviet lands to develop tacit rules in pursuing their interests. This effort should eschew any inclination to divide former Soviet lands into spheres of influence. Rather, both governments should give each other ample warning of their activities and seek solutions to their differences.

Russian support for or noninterference with American endeavors in former Soviet states would enhance their chances for success. But Moscow can also undermine these efforts, a turn of events that could seriously damage bilateral relations.

The year 2003 was a difficult one in U.S.-Russian relations, and 2004 promises to be even more challenging. Disagreements between Washington and Moscow over Iraq were the most visible in a series of events that also included American concerns about Chechnya, the authoritarian tilt in Russian domestic politics, Russia's fading media freedom, selective prosecution of independent-minded businessmen, and meddling in the internal affairs of its neighbors. Together, these events add up to a trend that spells trouble for the ambitious U.S.-Russian strategic framework inaugurated by President George W. Bush and President Vladimir Putin in 2002. Yet rarely if ever has the need for greater cooperation between the two countries been more urgent than it will be in 2004 and the years to come.

The need for cooperation is dictated by two converging trends. The first is the unprecedented American involvement in countries and regions on the Russian periphery, which many Russians have come to view as their country's sphere of influence. The second is the emergence of a powerful consensus among Russian politicians of all parties about the need to consolidate Russia's neighborhood into its exclusive sphere of influence. Each of these trends is a pillar of the two countries' respective national security strategies. Unless the United States and Russia make a deliberate and determined effort to work with each other, collision appears unavoidable. Cooperation is the only option, for an all-out competition for influence in the former Soviet lands between the two nations would hurt the interests of both and—most importantly—undermine the fragile gains the region has made since independence.

Compete or Cooperate?

Geographically, the agenda of U.S.-Russian relations is limited largely to the Russian periphery. Moscow's current reach rarely exceeds its borderlands—an area of growing U.S. military presence and concern. American presence has been expanding throughout these lands since the day the Soviet Union collapsed, and U.S. recognition of former Soviet lands as sovereign independent states nearly 12 years ago set in motion a series of policies that are still in effect.

From the time of the Soviet breakup and all through the 1990s, American engagement focused on immediate U.S. concerns, such as securing the Soviet nuclear legacy, and on helping new states consolidate their independence and sovereignty by linking humanitarian relief assistance with economic and political reform. As former Soviet states cleared the first hurdles of independence, the United States added a new dimension to its ties with them through security. This has meant first and foremost integration into the transatlantic security framework through participation since the early 1990s in regular security dialogues with countries in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), as well as practical military and political-military cooperation in the context of the NATO Partnership for Peace program.

Yet despite their apparent consistency and complementarity, American efforts in former Soviet lands have been marked by one major internal contradiction: the duality of the U.S. relationship with Russia. On the one hand, American policies on the Russian periphery

were not intended to encircle the country or undermine security. To the contrary, these efforts were aimed to include Russia in cooperative activities that the United States undertook bilaterally and multilaterally with its neighbors.

On the other hand, Russia has never abandoned its great power aspirations in these lands. Soon after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Moscow sought explicit recognition of its special status in former Soviet states from the international community. No other major power—not China, Iran, or Turkey, and certainly not any European country—has laid claim to the strategic independence and sovereignty of former Soviet states to the same degree that Russia has; its ties to those states were obviously much stronger than those of China or Turkey. But as a result, U.S. support for independence and sovereignty of these states became U.S. support for their independence from Russia. U.S. policy toward the former Soviet Union—including Russia—had to reconcile the need for a cooperative U.S.-Russian relationship with growing American ties to Russia's neighbors, seeking U.S. support for their independence from Russia.

The result was ambiguity in U.S.-Russian relations, in American policy toward former Soviet states, and in Russia's role as a partner in or an obstacle to American efforts to provide for the security and stability of the states. The United States was pursuing its policies not quite against Russia, but certainly not with Russia's support and endorsement.

All the while, Russia's bark often exceeded its bite. Its great power ambitions did not match its vastly diminished capabilities to act on those ambitions. By virtue of its size, historical and economic ties, and geographic position, it retained considerable influence in the lands surrounding it. But it had neither the finances, nor the military might, nor the political will and strategic vision to take on the task of security manager in former Soviet states, many of which were threatened by widespread poverty, underdevelopment, and the specter of state failure.

Throughout the 1990s, the United States was reluctant and Russia was unable to assume the full burden of being the security manager in the region that ranges from Southeast Europe to Central Asia. The prospect of stepped-up U.S. involvement in the security affairs of former

Soviet states always risked antagonizing Russia, which kept a jealous eye on what the sole remaining superpower was up to in its strategic backyard. In the absence of a compelling reason to pursue a more vigorous security policy around Russia's periphery, the United States took Russian sensitivities into account.

New Agenda and Hopes

All of this changed on September 11, 2001. Ambiguity was no longer an option for the United States, which was handed compelling reasons for a significantly heightened security presence in Russia's soft underbelly—from Eastern Europe to Central Asia. The requirements of the U.S. military campaign in

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Afghanistan called for continuous access to and presence in Central Asia. The requirements of the war on terrorism more broadly called for increased U.S. involvement in the former Soviet lands, which could not manage their own security and whose security could no longer be overlooked or left for others (including Russia) to manage. This meant an unprecedented expansion of U.S. and U.S.-led security assistance efforts in the former Soviet Union from Ukraine to Uzbekistan.

In essence, U.S. efforts in former Soviet states were the same as before September 11: support for their declared aspirations to establish themselves as sovereign, independent states. After September 11, terrorism, state failure, and Islamic militancy—not Russian encroachment—emerged as the main challenges to their goals, as well as key threats to their and others' security. Defeating these threats became a far more important concern for the United States than countering Russian influence or catering to Russian sensitivities. In response to the new challenge, the United States expanded its presence in the former Soviet lands not as a counterweight to, but regardless of, Russia.

The war on terrorism remains an open-ended proposition. U.S. military presence and security assistance programs in former Soviet states are proceeding accordingly. Furthermore, U.S. plans—as yet unpublished—for a new and fundamentally revamped global military presence have generated widespread expectations in former Soviet states, including Russia, of new U.S. military deployments in the Caucasus, as well as elsewhere on the periphery of Russia.

In the aftermath of September 11, Russian acquiescence to U.S. military deployments in Central Asia, security assistance to Georgia, and a stepped-up security relationship with Ukraine made it easier for the United States to pursue all these undertakings. But President Vladimir Putin's endorsement of American actions overshadowed the fact that the Russian political establishment has not come to terms with the notion of long-term U.S. and NATO military presence in countries and regions long considered by Moscow to be its exclusive sphere of influence.

The difference between President Putin's position and that of the Russian political elite became obvious immediately after the September 11 attacks, when virtually all of Putin's advisers rejected the idea of Russian support for or endorsement of U.S. military presence in the former Soviet lands. Subsequently, Putin overruled his advisers and reacted calmly to the heightened U.S. security assistance program to Georgia and personally set the positive tone for NATO-Russian relations, thereby acquiescing to the NATO invitation to the three Baltic states to join the alliance.

Same Wine, New Bottle

However, recent trends in Russian domestic politics lead to serious doubts about Putin's willingness to buck the conventional wisdom of Moscow pundits, his advisers' prescriptions, and the opinion of the country's political elite at large. These trends have manifested themselves most clearly in the parliamentary election in December 2003.

The most significant news from the election to the Duma was the Russian people's support for the nationalist revanchist agenda. Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party doubled its share of the vote to 12 percent. Given Zhirinovskiy's eccentric personality, his victory could be dismissed as a quirk. But the showing, far better than expected, of the other political party with a serious revanchist agenda—the

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Motherland movement—suggests that this is an important political trend.

In terms of Russian domestic policy, the revanchist idea can be summarized as restoration of state control over key sectors of the economy, state supervision over them, and expansion of the redistributive functions of the state. In terms of foreign policy, revanchism means first and foremost restoration of Russian influence in former Soviet lands and establishment of an exclusive Russian sphere of interests in the territories of the former Soviet Union.

Unlike Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democrats with their leader's propensity for theatrics, the Motherland movement has the credibility that gives the revanchist idea in Russian politics an undeniable patina of respectability. Its roster of Duma deputies boasts solid experience in the upper echelons of government and advanced academic degrees. With Motherland's impressive showing in the December 2003 Duma election, Russian voters—lamenting the loss of the old superpower and yearning for its return, but repulsed by Zhirinovskiy's clown-like qualities—have finally been presented with the decent, respectable alternative: revanchism with a human face.

Neoimperialist Consensus

Long before 2008, the revanchist trend in domestic politics will pose problems for U.S. policy in former Soviet states and bilateral relations. The idea of an exclusive Russian sphere of interest throughout the territories of the former Soviet Union enjoys support across the entire political spectrum.

The very term *neoimperialist* is laden with negative connotations and may elicit puzzlement from a Russian reader who has been watching a steady progression of U.S. economic, political, and military power and influence pass by Russia's doors, deep into the heartland of Eurasia where no outside power, save Russia itself, had been allowed to set foot for well over a century. This advance has occurred against the backdrop of equally steady Russian retreat from regions and countries in Europe and Asia where for centuries Russian presence had been an essential element of political, economic, and military life. Thus, many Russians will most likely bridle at the term neoimperialist and wonder who is the real imperial power and who is calling the kettle black.

Nonetheless, the fact remains that a growing number of Russian political figures hope to

expand and consolidate influence over domestic and foreign policies of the many countries that once were part of the Russian empire—the same places where United States is currently building a network of political, military, and economic relationships. Thus, regardless of how one feels about Russian ambitions to rebuild the old empire, the term neoimperialist accurately describes the mindset of the Russian foreign policy establishment.

The most striking and unmistakable sign of this phenomenon came from Anatoliy Chubays, the prominent Russian reformer and a leader of the Union of Right Forces, who recently argued for the (re)establishment of the Russian empire in the former Soviet lands. In the midst of the Duma election campaign in October 2003, Chubays defined Russia's mission in the 21st century as the creation of a liberal empire in the territories of the former Soviet Union. That, he argued, would be the

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answer to the crisis of vision and ideology that Russia has been unable to resolve. This vision of a Russian liberal empire, according to Chubays, would help mobilize the Russian people and consolidate the nation.

Chubays' version of a liberal empire is designed to propagate virtue throughout the neighboring states and instill liberal values in their inhabitants, including support for democratic values and institutions. But Chubays' liberal imperialism is also intended to promote Russian business, protect its interests, spread Russian culture, and protect the rights of Russophone populations in the neighboring countries. Remarkably, in its essence, the liberal brand of imperialism articulated by the leader of Russian liberals is no different from the more explicit, muscular, and illiberal brand of neoimperialism embraced by Russian nationalist politicians of the Motherland wing.

What is a powerful message for Motherland presents a quandary for Putin, who undoubtedly has noticed the Motherland's appeal to Russian

voters. Challenging the revanchists on their message is not an attractive proposition, given the apparent popularity of the message with the voters. Nor is ignoring the message a good option, because the Kremlin probably is loath to let Motherland monopolize and exploit an important and politically attractive theme. But embracing or usurping Motherland's message could subject Putin to international criticism and tarnish his reputation as a world leader.

Colliding Trajectories

The neoimperialist renaissance in Russian politics comes at a vital moment in U.S. relations with Moscow's neighbors. At the NATO Istanbul Summit in June, the three Baltic states once occupied by Russia—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—will be present as full members of the Alliance. Meeting in Istanbul, the Allies will no doubt reaffirm their endorsement of Ukraine's aspirations for full NATO membership and reiterate the NATO "Open Door" policy. The Allies are also most likely to use the Istanbul Summit as an opportunity to address the desires of Georgia and Azerbaijan to join the Alliance. U.S. plans for global realignment of its military deployments hold out the strong probability of American military presence moving closer to Russia's western borders. And, last but not least, American military deployments in Central Asia and U.S. security assistance to the countries of Central Asia and South Caucasus show no signs of abating.

Indeed, looking beyond the Istanbul Summit, American and NATO military and security activities in the former Soviet lands are likely to intensify. This is a product of several factors:

- the desire of Russia's neighbors for integration in the Euro-Atlantic security structures
- the inability of Russia and other regional powers to fill the security vacuum in the former Soviet lands
- the U.S. interest in anchoring the ex-Soviet lands in the Euro-Atlantic security structures to promote independence and sovereignty and to combat a variety of pre- and post-9/11 threats, such as terrorism, smuggling, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and transnational crime.

All three of these are long-term trends. Russia's former colonies have sought a place under the U.S. and NATO security umbrella since the Soviet breakup. They have done so to protect themselves against Moscow's propensity to assert itself at the expense of its neighbors, to help fill the security vacuum in the region after

Russia pulled out, and to define their own place in the international system. They are unlikely to alter this course in the foreseeable future.

All the while—for well over a decade—Russia has not been able to reestablish itself as the security manager in former Soviet lands. Its own meager means, lack of power projection capabilities, and dearth of economic and military staying power have effectively kept in check its ability to act on its neoimperialist leanings or to serve as the pillar of stability and security in the region. Despite Russia's rebound from its internal troubles in recent years, its military is still struggling, while its economy has yet to generate sufficient income to address the most pressing domestic social needs. This situation is unlikely to change in the near term.

Against this background, the U.S. policy of extending the Euro-Atlantic security framework into the former Soviet lands is highly unlikely to change either. Support for the independence and sovereignty of the ex-Soviet states is a staple of the American post-Cold War vision for Europe and Eurasia. The war on terror and its attendant ills is the cornerstone of U.S. national security policy. Neither of these two appears even remotely likely to change in the foreseeable future. The extension of the Euro-Atlantic security framework into the former Soviet states meets both the U.S. commitment to them and the requirements of the global war on terror.

Thus, U.S. and Russian policies and interests are on a collision course. This need not derail the entire relationship, but the situation does call for a reassessment.

A (Non)Partnership

The idea of U.S.-Russian cooperation in securing and stabilizing the former Soviet lands has been embraced by several U.S. administrations since 1991, albeit with limited success. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, hopes for more productive U.S.-Russian cooperation were spurred by Putin's endorsement of U.S. military deployments to Central Asia, U.S. security assistance to Georgia, Russian cooperation with the United States in combating terrorism, renewed Russia-NATO cooperation, and the Kremlin's silence about Ukraine's decision to seek membership in NATO. From an American perspective, U.S.-Russian cooperation in the war on terror held out the possibility of a collaborative relationship to shore up the security and stability of the vast region around

Russia's periphery and root out and defeat terrorism there.

These hopes and prospects have not materialized. U.S.-Russian cooperation may proceed in the context of the global war on terrorism, including in former Soviet states, but U.S. and Russian visions for that part of the world are very different. The prevailing U.S. view is that the interests, security, and stability of these countries would be best served by their achieving full independence and sovereignty and integration in the Euro-Atlantic security structures. The prevailing Russian view is that Russia has a certain *droit de regard*, an inalienable right of oversight throughout its former colonies, which in effect

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provides Moscow with an exclusive sphere of influence throughout its neighborhood.

This stance clearly contradicts the prevailing American view of the situation not only because it runs counter to the strong U.S. commitment to former Soviet states, but also because Russia is seen as lacking the requisite means, vision, and capabilities to manage such a sphere of influence. Thus, the task for the United States and Russia is not to forge a broad partnership in the former Soviet states but to minimize and manage their differences, as well as to keep their disagreements from disrupting those efforts where cooperation is necessary and ongoing.

New Rules of the Road

The situation calls neither for another partnership nor an appeal to resuscitate the old one, but rather for reaching an understanding of each other's interests and priorities and for developing the rules of the game that will keep U.S. and Russian policies in former Soviet lands from colliding.

Such an understanding about the rules of the game is necessary because the alternative—increasing tensions between the United States and Russia, perhaps leading to a collision over the two countries' pursuits in former Soviet lands—is in neither of their interests. Russia,

despite its limited means and capabilities, wields considerable influence around its periphery for reasons of history, geography, culture, and politics. It controls the critical transportation routes in and out of landlocked Central Asia; it is an export market for the economies of Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Ukraine; it is the key destination for millions of migrants in search of work from these countries, as well as the source of vital remittances from migrant workers to their families. The Russian military may still be reeling from the impact of economic and political reforms of the 1990s and the social, economic, and geographic dislocations of that era, but it remains the most potent armed force in the region with substantial presence on the territory of the former Soviet Union. All these give Russia considerable capacity for mischief in its former colonies. While Russia does not have the means to bring stability and security to states of the former Soviet Union, its support for, or at the very least acquiescence to, the efforts of others to do so is the necessary precondition for success in such a difficult undertaking.

At the same time, Russia is hardly in a good position to escalate tensions with the United States over its involvement in former Soviet states. Despite widespread irritation at the American presence in Central Asia, as well as its assistance to Georgia, involvement in Ukraine, and criticism of Russian policies in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, few in Russia would advocate a course of overt confrontation with the United States over any of these issues. U.S. presence and policies in former Soviet states may be an irritant for many Russian politicians, but Russian foreign policy and national security analysts also understand that the United States helps fill the vacuum in a region where Russia has failed to do so for well over a decade. If the United States were to curtail its presence and activities on the periphery of Russia, Russian security would suffer.

For President Putin, an obvious escalation of tensions with the United States over Georgia, Moldova, or some other former Soviet state is not desirable. He has staked much of his reputation on the idea of a U.S.-Russian partnership and a positive personal relationship with President Bush. He has done so against the apparent advice of many in the Russian foreign policy establishment. A major setback in U.S.-Russian relations would most likely be seen in Russia as President Putin's personal failure.

Moreover, a return to U.S.-Russian tensions would fuel the fire being stoked by the newly resurgent revanchist wing in Russian politics. The Kremlin sponsored the Motherland movement as an antidote to the Communists in the 2003 Duma elections, but its emergence as an independent political force presents Moscow with a difficult challenge: what to do with its own unruly creation. So far, the Kremlin appears wary of the Motherland, having concentrated the decisionmaking power in the hands of the obedient pro-Kremlin United Russia. The upcoming presidential campaign, with the election scheduled for March, will offer President Putin an opportunity to promote his own moderate message and marginalize the revanchists. Hopefully, the Russian president and his political advisers will not want to make themselves hostages to the presidential ambitions of the Motherland movement leaders.

Dialogue and consultations appear the only feasible course for Russia and the United States to pursue as they move toward a new and unprecedented relationship focused on the territory of the former Soviet Union. This dialogue and—ideally—shared understanding about the rules of the road need not, and should not, be interpreted as an attempt by Russia and the United States to carve the former Soviet lands into spheres of influence. Rather it should be a process, a forum for consultations about each other's concerns, interests, and activities.

In engaging in this dialogue with Russia, the United States can afford to be candid and transparent about its interests, underlying principles, and policies. To do otherwise would only lead to miscommunications and misperceptions—of which there is no shortage in any event—and complicate what is bound to be a sensitive process.

Avoiding Red Lines

The basic enduring principles of U.S. involvement in former Soviet states can be summarized as follows:

- The objectives should be stability, security, and continuity in the progress toward full independence, sovereignty, and integration in the international community.
- Cooperation with third parties in pursuit of aforementioned objectives is desirable but should not impinge on independence and sovereignty.
- No other nation should have oversight over its neighbors.

At the same time, the United States needs to recognize that Russia also has legitimate concerns and interests around its periphery—traditionally beginning with the fate of fellow ethnic Russians dispersed throughout the former Soviet lands. But increasingly, Russian businesses are looking to expand into the neighboring countries, as has been the case in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan. Russian business ventures have elicited concerns about strategic penetration of the neighboring states, especially where commercial transactions were conducted in a nontransparent manner and focused on major industrial or infrastructure projects. Such concerns may be well founded, but the primary responsibility for these deals rests with the host countries themselves. Unless there is evidence that Russia is exercising undue pressure in or on the host country, criticism of Russia is misdirected in such circumstances,

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especially when there were no competing bids from an American or other company.

Furthermore, the United States needs to recognize that Russia has legitimate security interests in the states surrounding it. For example, Russia does have a real concern about the security and stability of Georgia. As is often the case, U.S. and Russian prescriptions for how to achieve those are likely to differ, but dialogue and consultations are the only way to close the gap between U.S. and Russian perceptions.

Russia will have to come to terms with American interest in and commitment to

Georgian independence and, ultimately, territorial integrity and sovereignty. The United States will have to be creative about dealing with the extremely sensitive issue of the continuing Russian military presence in Georgia and strong Russian resistance to U.S. and other international pressures to withdraw its troops, a move that would be highly unpopular in Russia itself.

Creativity, persistence, and reliance on a variety of tools available to U.S. diplomacy will be essential for the United States and Russia to address such thorny problems as Russian military presence in Georgia and Moldova, where pressure and confrontation are likely to only aggravate the situation. The task of negotiating—again—Russian withdrawals from Georgia and Moldova warrants a close look at the experience of negotiating and implementing Russian military withdrawal from the Baltic states. Although most likely to be anathema to the Russians for fear of Georgia and others following the Baltic footsteps to NATO, that experience may offer a number of useful lessons.

One possibility is to offer Russia financial assistance for redeploying its troops from Georgia to bases in Russia. Another option to explore is to seek to internationalize Russian military presence and bases in Georgia and Moldova under the aegis of the NATO program of Partnership for Peace (PFP). By reflagging Russian bases as PFP training facilities, Russia would legitimize its military presence in the eyes of the international community; the United States and other Allies and partners would gain access to Russian facilities; a degree of international oversight over Russian presence and activities in Georgia and Moldova would be established; and Georgia and Moldova would gain assurances that the Russian military presence on its territory would not serve as a tool of occupation and subversion. In the end, such a scheme

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could lead to genuine multilateral cooperation on critical security issues—cooperation borne out of necessity.

In the long run, the NATO umbrella and the auspices of PFP and the NATO–Russia Council hold out the possibility of useful and constructive dialogue about future problems that might arise as the United States and Russia pursue their interests and activities in former Soviet states. This possibility underscores the

enduring value of the NATO–Russia Council and PFP, especially if the post-9/11 spirit of cooperation goes out of the relationship between Russia and the United States.

The course of action outlined here is based on no illusion about U.S.-Russian partnership. Rather, it rests on an assessment of U.S. and Russian interests, means available to both sides for achieving them, and areas where

such interests may overlap. The United States and Russia cannot afford to find themselves on the path of collision, while collusion remains out of the question. The answer then is patience; consultations and transparency about interests, motives, and policies; clarity about the “red lines”; and compromise where core interests are not at stake.

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Eugene B. Rumer

(No. 203, December 2003)

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Eugene B. Rumer

(No. 195, December 2002)

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