

## **EMPIRE ENVY: RUSSIA-US RELATIONS POST-9/11**

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### **Introduction**

*Has the Russia-US relationship changed since September 11, 2001? There is a wide variety of opinion about the state of this relationship in the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States and the subsequent global war on terrorism these attacks provoked. And since this unexpected assault on the world's remaining superpower, scholars and practitioners alike have been grappling with a bevy of issues concerning if and how the world has changed, what the nature of American power is in this changed world and how America's relations with the rest of the world should be characterized. And for Russia scholars, these questions have been far more perplexing, since we were just beginning to get our minds around the *sources* of Russian foreign policy making toward the United States, when we abruptly had to change course and consider *how* the Russia-US relationship had changed after 9/11.*

Observably, relations between Russia and the United States have been in constant flux since 1991. Lingering Cold War attitudes in both capitals have lent themselves to an environment of restrained cooperation visible in the tentative nature of each country's relations with the other. After 9/11, however, relations between Moscow and Washington appeared to improve considerably. Many scholars and politicians heralded a new era of friendship between the two former enemies and there was optimism about the direction this new relationship would take; Presidents George Bush

and Vladimir Putin seemed to have been able to forge a congenial relationship between Russian and American Presidents where their predecessors had failed.<sup>1</sup>

President Putin was the first world leader to telephone President George W. Bush with words of support after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington and shortly afterward, Putin quickly mobilized a five point plan to support the American war on terrorism. This plan promised: intelligence sharing with their American counterparts; an opening of Russian airspace for flights providing humanitarian assistance; cooperation with Russia's Central Asian allies to provide similar kinds of airspace access to American flights; participation in international search and rescue efforts; and, an increase in direct humanitarian and military assistance to the Northern Alliance and the Rabbani government in Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> Naturally, Russia's willingness to allow American access to airspace in Central Asia was a major reversal of Russian foreign policy and was viewed as such; it was said to be a symbol of just how significantly the Russian position on America had changed. The Russian promise to support the Americans in their hunt for terrorists, wherever they may be found, underscored this confidence in the new relationship.

But this enthusiasm was short-lived. It became increasingly evident that the new direction this relationship seemed to be taking was less one of unconditional alliance between Presidents Putin and Bush and more a friendship of convenience for President

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1 President Bush is reputed to refer to his counterpart in the Kremlin as "Pootie-Poot." See Paul Reynolds, "Bush and Putin on Nickname Terms," BBC News (May 23, 2002). Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/2000197.stm>. (Retrieved December 16, 2003).

2 Michael McFaul, "US-Russia Relations After September 11th," Testimony Before the House Committee on International Relations, October 24, 2001. Available at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace website: <http://www.ceip.org/files/Publications/McFaul102401Testimony.asp?p=42&from=pubdate>. (Retrieved December 15, 2003).

Putin; he was able to draw certain connections, though tenuous, between the Al Qaeda terrorist network and secessionist Chechen rebels with whom the Russian Army had been fighting a highly publicized war at home.<sup>3</sup> It soon became clear that President Putin's support for the war on terrorism had its roots in the Russian domestic political arena. Prior to its hunt for allies in its "war on terror," the Bush Administration had been vocally critical of Putin's campaign in Chechnya, however the tide turned abruptly in light of this new cooperation; Bush's words took on a tone of sympathy for President Putin and his people, themselves victims of terrorism. Many saw this change in White House rhetoric as a sign of a new relationship, but those quick to proclaim a new era in Russia-US relations were quickly silenced, as evidence of an unconditional alliance between the two countries became increasingly elusive when disagreements over Iraq began to surface.

What exists between the two states currently is neither partnership nor hostility. Instead, Presidents Putin and Bush have a relationship of convenience and this, arguably, is the most positive relationship one can reasonably expect from the two leaders given the realities of the post-Cold War era and the growing concern in Moscow (which seems to be shared in other world capitals as well), that American dominance and unilateral action in the international system are potentially destabilizing. Naturally, a

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<sup>3</sup> This connection between Al Qaeda and Chechen rebels is debated and was the subject of a panel discussion at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University (BCSIA) in November 2002. Among the suggested connections between Al Qaeda and Chechnya are reports from Jessica Stein that Mohammed Atta had planned to go to Chechnya and that Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's lieutenant, was arrested in Dagestan on his way to Chechnya. See Miriam Lansky, Jessica Stern, and Monica Toft, "Russia's Struggle with Chechnya: Implications for the War on International Terrorism," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs (November 26, 2002). Available at: <http://www.ciaonet.org/wps/lam02/>. (Retrieved on December 16, 2003).

fair question might be whether or not Russia would promote multilateralism to the extent it does had the situation been reversed and the Soviets emerged victorious from the Cold War. Valid concerns about US unilateralism notwithstanding, it is the assertion of this author that Russia's opposition to American foreign policy initiatives in the 1990's may be attributed, in part, to an acute case of "empire envy." The United States' more aggressive foreign policy, post-9/11, embodied in the Bush Doctrine,<sup>4</sup> has sparked "balancing behaviour" in Russia.<sup>5</sup> And Thomas Ambrosio notes that this balancing behaviour is really more of a defensive, rather than offensive, reaction to American power. Even Boris Yeltsin once warned of the dangers of the absence of an alternate pole to American power.<sup>6</sup>

This paper argues that certain aspects of Russian foreign policy under President Putin can be viewed as a *reaction* to the perception of American imperialism in the global context. Such reactionary foreign policy is a result of a "crisis of identity" in Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Without a collective national identity to serve as a compass for defining both the national interest and post-Soviet Russia's foreign policy priorities, there has been a tendency to rely on known quantities – to establish Russia's international role within a Cold War context in which Russia and the United States, though certainly no longer enemies, still balance power in the international system. Within this context, Russia reacts to its clear inability to serve in this capacity to the degree its predecessor once did; it reacts unfavourably to what it

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4 The Bush Doctrine asserts that the United States reserves the right to attack pre-emptively any unfriendly state that supports terrorism or that pursues the development of weapons of mass destruction.

5 Thomas Ambrosio discusses Russia's response to recent trends in US foreign policy in "Russia's Quest for Multipolarity: A Response to US Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War Era," *European Security* 10:1 (Spring 2001): 45-67.

6 *Ibid.*, 47.

worryingly perceives as American global hegemony. Such concerns are becoming increasingly evident in the tone President Putin takes when discussing America's foreign engagements, such as the war in Iraq; when asked in a Russian radio call-in show whether a parallel could be drawn between the war in Iraq and the United States' quagmire in Vietnam, President Putin replied by saying that "great powers and empires often develop 'feelings of invincibility, greatness and infallibility.'"<sup>7</sup>

This paper identifies Russia's reactionary tendencies through a study of President Putin's *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* of 2000, a document that arguably reflects a desire to undermine unilateralism and to promote multilateral efforts within the global context, and through an examination of Russia's response to the expansion of NATO into East-Central Europe and the US-led war in Iraq. Upon review of each, it becomes evident that Russian foreign policy toward the US has not really changed in a positive way post-9/11 and nor has the Russia-US relationship; rather, Russian fears of American unilateralism were present prior to the terrorist attacks and the subsequent "war on terror," and the Russian *perception* of US hegemony has actually *intensified* as a result of the Bush Doctrine, which could potentially strain relations between the two in the near future. While it seemed the two leaders were able to find some common ground in their respective battles with terrorism, this connection is of a pragmatic nature and has not signified a united global agenda, nor a sense of common purpose that transcends the shared battle with terrorism and that can be applied to other areas of foreign policy. If President Bush's failure to provide a "courtesy call" to his "friend Vladimir" to announce the arrest of

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7 Putin quoted by Dmitri Litvinovich in "Russia: Unimpressed," Transitions Online (22 December 2003).

Saddam Hussein in December 2003 is any indication, to expect an unconditional friendship between the two countries indefinitely is unwise. Before delving into Russia's *Foreign Policy Concept* and reaction to the expansion of NATO and the invasion of Iraq, this paper first examines the nature of "empire envy," linked inextricably to the crisis of national identity post-Soviet Russia has endured for over a decade, and which is reflected in Putin's *Foreign Policy Concept*.

## **Sidelined Superpower?**

### **Post-Soviet Russia's Identity Crisis and the United States**

This reversal of the hopeful trend toward partnership is not without precedent in Russia-US relations in the post-Cold War era. For twelve years the state of relations between the two has fluctuated. What began under Gorbachev and then continued under Yeltsin as unconditional cooperation with the Americans, often referred to as the "honeymoon period" in the relationship, later came to be characterized by Russian resentment over its diminished role in European and international security. This change in Russia's western orientation is due to a number of reasons, not the least of which is the lack of consensus among the Russian political elite about Russia's role in the world and how it should orient itself toward the United States as its former enemy and the basis for its military and geo-strategic fortification for so many decades during the Cold War. So much was at stake for Russians at the end of the Cold War. Among the transformational changes taking place politically, economically and socially, there is a regrettable loss of international prestige, made more severe as Russia struggles to

ground itself domestically, a process that could well take decades. As Russia struggles to define itself, one thing is certain – the empire is lost and the Russians suffered defeat at the hands of America and its allies; the notion of Russian greatness had been humbled.<sup>8</sup>

Attitudes toward the United States span a vast spectrum from anti-American sentiment to pro-American, liberal democratic ideas, and have been responsible, in large part, for Russia's changing relations with the United States. While there is a shared sense of loss among Russians with respect to their perceived defeat in the Cold War, there is no collective definition of what Russia has become – Russians are undergoing an "identity crisis," of sorts,<sup>9</sup> characterized by differing definitions of "Russian-ness." Vera Tolz identifies five competing conceptions of the Russian identity: Russians as Russian speakers; Russians as Eastern Slavs; Russians as imperialists; Russians as race, Russians as a civic nation.<sup>10</sup> And each of these conceptions of the national identity has implications for foreign policy, as each contributes to a unique sense of the national interest. For example, if Russians are defined as Russian speakers then this could have implications for the extent to which Russia actively promotes the interests of its diasporas littered throughout the former Soviet Union, especially in Latvia and Estonia where Russians comprise nearly thirty percent of the overall population, and where citizenship laws which actively promote the national language, are thought to be discriminatory against the Russian-speaking population.

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8 See John Lloyd, "A Superpower Humbled," *Transitions* 5:6 (June 1998).

9 This identity crisis is well documented. See Dmitry Shlapentokh, "The Russian Identity Crisis," *Contemporary Review* 273:1592 (September 1998); Ronald Grigor Suny, "Russia's Identity Crisis," in Archie Brown, ed., *Contemporary Russian Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2001); Vera Tolz, "Conflicting 'Homeland Myths' and Nation-State Building in Postcommunist Russia," *Slavic Review* 57:2 (Summer 1998): 267-294; Vera Tolz, "Russians' Identity Crisis," *Transitions* 5:6 (June 1998).

10 Vera Tolz, "Conflicting 'Homeland Myths.'"

Should “Russian-ness” be understood to reflect a traceable racial lineage, or the assertion of Russia as part of a greater pan-Slavic connection, then perhaps a logical path for Russian foreign policy might be to pursue closer relations, or perhaps even unification, with Ukraine and Belarus. Should Russians view themselves as imperialist, this could provoke an interest in some form of reunification of the former Soviet Union. And finally, though unlikely, should Russian identity come to be defined in terms of patriotic citizenship – to be Russian is to live in Russia and love Russia – then this may resemble the notion of identity and citizenship often shared in western liberal democracies and may reflect Russia’s adoption of western-style governance, which may influence a more western-oriented foreign policy agenda. There are so many competing definitions of the national identity, and consequently, of the national interest, that consensus on this subject has been elusive.

And in the absence of an united answer to the question “what is Russia,” it has become easier to identify what Russia is *not* – it was *not* the victor in the Cold War, it is *not* the great power it once was, it is *not* the great power it should be; its influence in the world does *not* match Russians’ perceptions of what its status should be. Russians have long been an imperial people and in many cases they still see themselves in this light. Thus, to suffer defeat at the hands of the enemy and then to see this former enemy reap the benefits of this defeat has been painful for many Russians and this has stirred up much resentment both toward America and toward democracy, commonly viewed as an American export. And for some, American power in the world today comes at the expense of the Russian defeat. Russia, through the Soviet Union, was the only country able to balance American power effectively, and many Russians still



envision this as their responsibility today;<sup>11</sup> Russia will be great again, as the notion of *derzhava* implies, and when it is, American hegemony will be challenged.<sup>12</sup>

In the meantime, those Russians who resent American power in the world today will simply have to be content with building road blocks in the path of the American foreign policy machine – a *reactionary* foreign policy. Indeed, much of Russian foreign policy in the post-Cold War era has been reactionary in nature, and what Russians are reacting to, arguably, is that they perceive the emergence of American hegemony at the expense of Russia. Shuffling off the Cold War mindset has been difficult for many Russians, especially since American power has confronted them at every turn, perhaps most importantly in Central and Eastern Europe as NATO extends its reach into areas of former Soviet influence. While news of the American Empire, or the “new imperialism,” has been the subject of much alarm and speculation in the period following 9/11, Russia has been reacting to what it perceives as the build-up of American power since the end of the Cold War itself. The events of September 11<sup>th</sup> represent a challenge to the post-Cold War Russia-US relationship.

And so instead of proclaiming a new era of optimism and warm relations after 9/11, it is suggested here that the Russia-US relationship is increasingly strained. There

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11 Former Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov underscored this idea during an interview when he hinted at the problem of American dominance: “First, during the transition from a bipolar to a multipolar world, Russia must play the role of counterbalance to the negative trends that are displaying themselves in international affairs. During this transition period, not all the power centres that make up this multipolarity have emerged yet. And some are trying to achieve dominance in this situation.” See Glenn Chafetz, “The Struggle for a National Identity in Post-Soviet Russia,” *Political Science Quarterly* 11:4 (Winter 1996/1997).

12 The notion of *derzhava*, implying greatness, was reflected in much of Yeltsin’s approach to the West in the latter half of the 1990’s and has appeared to be more vigorously sought by President Putin since his assumption of the Presidency. Joseph S. Nye Jr. takes up the issue of Russia as a potential balance to American power in the future and concludes that given its current domestic political and economic situation, the best Russia can hope for is to cause problems for the Americans, but that they are unable to serve as a global challenger to American power alone. See Nye, *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World’s Only Superpower Can’t Go It Alone* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 25-28.

is a perception among many groups in Russia that US hegemony is problematic and even somewhat threatening for Russia.<sup>13</sup> In fact, Alexei Arbatov, Chairman of the Russian State Duma's Defence Committee, bitterly likens the US-Russia relationship to that of "rider and mule."<sup>14</sup> And the US has done little to change this perception in Russia – one need only point to its December 2001 abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, thought to have been the cornerstone of strategic stability between the two countries, and the decisions to proceed with a Ballistic Missile Defence Program and the extension of NATO into the former Soviet Union (FSU), despite Russia's serious reservations, as evidence of this. These challenges provide a foundation for concerns in Moscow about the need for Russia to pursue an independent foreign policy rather than banking on an equitable relationship with Washington. While Russia campaigned aggressively and successfully for membership in the Group of Eight (G8), and while it inherited the Soviet Union's permanent seat and veto in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), it does not enjoy the influence with the United States, or with certain institutions of global governance, that many members of the Russian elite feel Russia is entitled to. Even President Putin has requested the US "deal with us as a

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13 The intensity of the concern over American hegemony varies; however, numerous members of the Russian political elite view the United States' role as single superpower with trepidation and even alarm. Such thinking has been labelled Eurasianist, statist, neo-communist, nationalist, expansionist, anti-American extremist, etc. For a further discussion of these categories of foreign policy orientation see: Glenn Chafetz in "The Struggle for a National Identity in Post-Soviet Russia"; Michael McFaul, "Russia's Many Foreign Policies," *Demokratizatsiya* 7:3 (Summer 1999): 393-412; Alexander Sergounin, "Studies of Diplomacy in Post-Communist Russia: Changing Paradigms," paper prepared for the International Studies Association Annual Convention (March 1998); Andrei Tsygankov, "From International Institutionalism to Revolutionary Expansionism: The Foreign Policy Discourse of Contemporary Russia," *Mershon International Studies Review* 41 (1997): 247-268.

14 Arbatov quoted in Igor Torbakov, "Russia Worries that Afghan Success Will Prompt US Unilateralism," *Foreign Policy In Focus* (January 2, 2002). Available at: [http://www.fpiif.org/outside/commentary/2002/0201russia\\_body.html](http://www.fpiif.org/outside/commentary/2002/0201russia_body.html). (Retrieved on December 16, 2003).

partner,”<sup>15</sup> but this request repeatedly seems to fall on deaf ears. Nowhere was this more obvious than in the Balkans when Russia was effectively left out of the peace process – a process that rightfully should have included them. Snubbed, their response was to announce the arrival of Russian troops at the Slatina airport in Pristina as a wake-up call to the West that Russia expected a seat at the table when it came to European security.<sup>16</sup> And it is reasonable to suggest that the conflict in the Balkans influenced the writing of Putin’s 2000 *Foreign Policy Concept*.

### **2000 Foreign Policy Concept**

Russian concerns about the American Empire, or its global position of dominance, are visible in President Putin’s *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*. As Bobo Lo notes, “unable to reconcile itself to Washington’s global leadership, Moscow promoted the vision of ‘multipolarity,’” enshrined in the *Concept*.<sup>17</sup> Published in 2000, this document asserts Russia’s rejection of any unilateral, bilateral or multilateral military operations not sanctioned by the UNSC, as such actions would be in breach of international law and therefore would pose a threat to Russia’s national security.<sup>18</sup> Also contained within the document was a list of what Russia considered to be threats to its national security. Among these was “the danger of weakening Russia’s

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15 Putin cited in Igor Torbakov, “Russia Worries that Afghan Success Will Prompt US Unilateralism.”

16 For more on Russia’s response to the Balkan crises, see Mike Bowker, “The Wars in Yugoslavia: Russia and the International Community,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 50:7 (November 1998): 1245-1262.

17 Bobo Lo, *Russian Foreign Policy in the post-Soviet Era: Reality, Illusion, and Mythmaking*, (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 12.

18 *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, October 2000. This document was reprinted in *International Affairs: A Russian Journal* 5 (2000).

political, economic and military influence in the world.”<sup>19</sup> This statement may have a number of meanings and seems open to interpretation. Arguably, Russia’s diminishing status as a global power, given its inability to compete further in the nuclear realm with the United States and its perception of Western encroachment in its traditional sphere of influence, could jeopardize Russia’s “political and military influence in the world,” a value which might well be challenged by the expansion of NATO into the FSU and American unilateralism in areas of UNSC jurisdiction.

Implicit within the *Foreign Policy Concept* is Putin’s desire to reduce the influence of the United States as an autonomous actor in the international system. Even prior to the 2003 war in Iraq, President Putin remained committed to maintaining the integrity of the UN Security Council by respecting its processes, rather than supporting unconditionally a loose coalition of American allies in their mission to relieve Saddam Hussein of his alleged Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD).

Naturally, Russia emphasizes multilateral action within those organizations in which it possesses influence and power, such as the UNSC, and de-emphasizes organizations such as NATO in which important decisions are made by an elite club of wealthy and powerful states (and in which decisions are perceived to be made under US leadership). However one wonders if such a commitment to multilateralism under UN auspices would remain if Russia were a member of the Alliance, or if there is a point worth making here about the apparent hypocrisy of Russia’s contempt for the elite configuration of NATO, all the while treasuring its membership in the G8. It is suggested here that perhaps it is less the multilateral nature of the UNSC that appeals to Russian

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19 Noted in Baidya Bikash Basu, “Russian National Security Thinking,” *Strategic Analysis: A Monthly Journal of the IDSA* 24:7 (October 2000), 4.

policy makers than it is the permanent seat and veto that afford Russia a voice in matters of international security. And, if one considers the many occasions in the past decade in which Russia's voice has not been heard when it comes to important security issues, particularly those in which Russia perceives a challenge to its national interests, perhaps Russia's concerns about American power in the world today are well-founded.

### **Objects of Russia's Disaffection: The Expansion of NATO and the War in Iraq**

Among the most significant on the list of "irritants" in the Russia-US relationship are strategic issues, and throughout the 1990's, the issue of NATO expansion has easily represented the greatest test of the relationship. Yeltsin voiced as much opposition to NATO's enlargement as was possible, taking care not to jeopardize the East-West relationship irreparably. He was often critical of NATO military efforts, such as the involvement in the Balkans, in Bosnia in 1995 and later in Kosovo in 1999. Understandably, Russia is concerned about NATO's agenda in Eastern Europe and the FSU, as these represented the Soviet Union's sphere of influence throughout the Cold War. Now, many former Soviet republics and satellites are looking to NATO for their security as a means to counter any potential security threat from a resurgent Russia in the future.

For years, Russian leaders balked at the notion of the admission of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic into NATO, a reality they were forced to accept in 1999. To make matters worse, the three Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, and Bulgaria belong to the second round of new

members. Even newly elected Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili has expressed an interest in NATO membership and made a trip to the White House to meet President Bush just weeks after his inauguration in January 2004. NATO's borders continue to creep slowly into the FSU and closer to Russia. Not surprisingly, the legacy of the Cold War, in recent memory for many Russians, means that NATO is widely viewed as an arm of American foreign policy and its expansion has been likened to imperial growth; it is yet another symbol of rapidly expanding American power and influence. Yet despite the discomfort with which Russian policy makers have witnessed the inevitability of NATO's expansion, there is an awareness among the political elite - barring of course the extreme ultra-nationalist sentiments of the likes of Vladimir Zhirinovsky,<sup>20</sup> who demands a forceful reunification of the USSR and threatens the United States directly - that there is little Russia can do, practically, to stop the Alliance's expansion. The best they can hope for is to negotiate for themselves, in exchange for their acceptance, a more influential role with NATO and perhaps even a voice in potential operations under consideration in Brussels. And this is exactly what they got. In the aftermath of 9/11 and arguably as a result of Russia's support for the war in Afghanistan, a new NATO-Russia Council was created to allow Russia a voice - but not a veto - in NATO decisions. The Council will enable NATO-Russia joint-action in the areas of terrorism, arms control, and nuclear weapons proliferation.<sup>21</sup>

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20 Zhirinovsky heads the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), which has a right-wing ultra-nationalist agenda and is anything but liberal and democratic. He enjoyed a degree of popular support in the 1995 parliamentary elections, however his support has been on the decline since then, and his party received only 11.45 percent of the popular vote in the December 2003 parliamentary elections.

21 Carol Saivetz, "Russia's Dash Toward Kabul," RFE/RL Russian Political Weekly 2:1 (7 January 2002), 2. The text of the NATO-Russia Council Statement can be found on NATO's website at: <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2003/p030723be.htm> (Retrieved on December 19, 2003).

Though this renewed willingness to cooperate is encouraging, one wonders if it is not a hasty arrangement in the wake of the attacks on America and in light of the subsequent war on terrorism. Though there was much celebration about the new levels of cooperation between Russia and the United States after 9/11, it was only months later that President Bush announced the US would dispose of the ABM Treaty. And while Russia mounted little opposition, aside from expressing its displeasure with Bush's decision, there is scarcely any doubt that such measures only serve to strengthen mistrust of American motives and American power domestically within Russia. As Igor Torbakov notes, "the Russian political class seethes over US withdrawal from the Treaty," and defence analysts believe the decision was a "slap in the face" for the Kremlin.<sup>22</sup>

Viktor Kremeniuk, Deputy Director of the USA and Canada Institute in Moscow, claims the unilateral decision to withdraw from the ABM Treaty undermined the Russia-US relationship. He attributes this decision to a sense of limitless power within the American foreign policy community. Sergei Rogov, Director of the same institute, links this decision to America's "sweeping military success in Afghanistan."<sup>23</sup> Yet despite the strong agreement within Russian domestic political circles about this regrettable decision, the official response from the Kremlin was to assure the United States and the world that "the decision taken by the President of the United States present[ed] no threat to the national security of the Russian Federation."<sup>24</sup> And this response was

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22 Igor Torbakov, "Russia Worries that Afghan Success Will Prompt US Unilateralism."

23 Ibid.

24 The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Response to Russian Statement on US ABM Treaty Withdrawal, December 13, 2001. Available at: [http://www.usembassy.it/file2001\\_12/alia/a1121302.htm](http://www.usembassy.it/file2001_12/alia/a1121302.htm). (Retrieved December 16, 2003).

similar to the Kremlin's response to the announcement that, despite Russia's objections, NATO expansion would proceed beyond the admittance of the Visegrad states, but would also include membership for three newly independent, former Soviet republics. For years, Russia has rejected NATO expansion, calling NATO a relic of the Cold War and warning that its expansion into former Soviet territory was potentially destabilizing and was threatening to Russia's national security. In a 2001 poll of Russian elites, when asked what they most feared, for 52% of respondents "NATO's eastward expansion to include the former Soviet Republics" was their response.<sup>25</sup>

For the bulk of Russians, NATO was and remains the enemy and its encroachment is a haunting reminder of what many perceive as Russia's crushing defeat in the Cold War. For NATO to position itself strategically in the territory of its former adversary serves as a daily reminder for Russians of this defeat and for the loss of great power status, previously a source of great national pride. NATO's presence in Central Europe and its presence in Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and the Baltics, slated to become members in 2004, will only serve to remind Russians further of the imposing nature of American power and the asymmetry that now exists in contrast to an international system in which power was relatively well balanced little more than a decade ago. In fact, Thomas Ambrosio cites one Russian commentator's assessment of the drive to expand NATO in claiming that "the resolve to expand NATO without answering Russian worries is perceived in Moscow, rightly or wrongly, as proof

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25 Poll originally reported in *Izvestia*, May 25, 2001 and reprinted in the CDPSP. See "Poll Charts Russian Elite's Foreign Policy Views," *Current Digest of the Post Soviet Press* 53:21 (2001): 6.



of the American desire to take advantage of Russia's present weakness and to complete what Americans see as their victory in the Cold War."<sup>26</sup>

In many cases the Russian response to NATO expansion has been shaped by external realities; short of aggressively rejecting NATO's objectives in Central and Eastern Europe, Russians have been forced to accept NATO's agenda, though they have been careful to voice their opposition, sometimes quite assertively. In the case of NATO's agenda, expressing their opposition was the most Russia was able to do. But this was not the case with the disagreement over what to do with Saddam Hussein and his weapons of mass destruction. The decision to go to war with Iraq to depose him, to relieve him of his WMD, and to free the Iraqi people from their authoritarian dictator was viewed with scepticism by many world leaders, including President Putin. And while Russia's opposition to the war concerned the failure to secure multilateral support for the war, its opposition was also due, in no small part, to the matter of an outstanding Iraqi debt of eight billion USD owed to the Russian Federation. Naturally, opposition to war had many voices and many origins, but for Russia, this was one American policy objective that could potentially be challenged.

In many ways the dispute over the war in Iraq illustrates well an apparent desire to assert Russian power in the post-Cold War era. The Bush Administration had classified Russia as a declining power and in 2001, newly appointed US National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, proclaimed, "I sincerely believe that Russia constitutes a threat for the West in general and our European allies in particular."<sup>27</sup> This

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26 Commentator Aleksei Pushkov cited by Thomas Ambrosio, "Russia's Quest for Multipolarity," 49.

27 Rice quoted by Elaine Monaghan, "Spy Arrest Shows Cooler U.S.-Russian Relations," Reuters, 20 February 2001, in Johnson's Russia List #4107, 21 February 2001.

only fuelled the anti-American sentiment already present within the Russian political elite that sought a re-assertion of Russian power; these groups were able to capitalize on feelings of humiliation and disorientation at the collapse of the Russian empire. And, as Dmitri Simes aptly notes, the opposition within the Russian foreign policy community and beyond to war against Hussein “had less to do with a fondness for Iraqi President Saddam Hussein than with the Bush Administration’s clear demonstration of the limits of Russian power and influence.”<sup>28</sup> Just as Yeltsin had made clear in his dealings with Bill Clinton, he did not wish Russia to be viewed as weak or as needing American assistance; it was offensive to Russians to think that they needed the Americans more than the Americans needed them.<sup>29</sup> President Putin has expressed serious concern over Washington’s apparent adoption of the concept of limited sovereignty as the basis for the Bush Doctrine.<sup>30</sup> Bush’s willingness to circumvent state sovereignty and to subordinate this principle to his own ends in Iraq is just further grounds for concern about American imperialism and willingness to pursue their foreign policy objectives unilaterally, to the exclusion of their allies and friendly states.

It seemed for a time that, given the consensus among the Russian political elite that NATO expansion constituted a security challenge for Russia and that it should be actively resisted, and given NATO’s expression of its intention to proceed with enlargement, this issue would serve as the prime catalyst in an inevitable cooling of relations between Moscow and Washington, bringing about the era of “cold peace” that

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28 Dmitri K. Simes, “A View From Russia,” *Foreign Policy* 137 (July/August 2003): 36.

29 *Ibid.* In his memoirs, Strobe Talbot, Clinton’s advisor to President Clinton on Russia policy, noted that on a number of occasions Yeltsin balked at President Clinton’s inadvertent insinuation that Russia needed American assistance, rather than investment. See *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2002), 63.

30 Dmitri Simes, “A View From Russia,” 36.

Yeltsin had once warned about.<sup>31</sup> Yet this issue is one of several that have threatened to derail what many hoped would be an identifiable, permanent, and positive shift in the relationship. However the expansion of the alliance, the abrogation of the ABM Treaty, and the war in Iraq have all posed serious challenges to any Russia-US partnership.

The result has been that, of late, the relationship has been markedly less warm than it had become in the aftermath of 9/11. Nowhere is this more evident than in the very obvious omission of Russia in President Bush's State of the Union Address in January 2004. Though it is an election year for Bush and many domestic issues are necessarily higher on the priority list, the omission did not go unnoticed in Russia.<sup>32</sup> The speech took on a much different tone from his State of the Union Speech in 2002, when, in the fallout of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, Bush evoked images of Russia and the United States, as great partners and friends, standing together in the fight against terrorism.<sup>33</sup> In the short space of just two years, the American President's tone has changed noticeably. Prior to the war in Iraq, the language employed by White House officials speaking about Russia was warm; in the fallout of the war, and following disputes with Russia over Iraqi reconstruction contracts offered only to those countries that supported the war, the language used by Washington has changed somewhat. In a February 2004 visit to Moscow, attached to a visit to attend newly-elected Georgian President Saakashvili's inauguration in Tbilisi, US Secretary of State Colin Powell warned about important aspects of civil society such as free media and political party development that had "not sustained an independent presence" in Russia, and that

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31 Yeltsin warned of this new era of "cold peace" in a November 1994 speech in Budapest.

32 Sergei Borisov, "Russia Remembered At Last," Transitions Online (9 February 2004).

33 President George W. Bush, State of the Union Address, 29 January 2002. (Available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>).

political power in Russia was “not yet fully tethered to law.”<sup>34</sup> While his remarks were given in the context of a visit intended to reassure Moscow that the US had not forgotten them, his tone was frostier and prompted analysts to ponder a chill in the relationship.

However this chill in the relationship is not simply one-sided. Evidence of a cooling of relations is also found in President Putin’s comments in a phone-in television program on 18 December 2003, just following the capture of Saddam Hussein, that “there were no international terrorists in Iraq before the war,” and that “anything done without the [UN] Security Council’s sanction cannot be recognized as fair or justified.”<sup>35</sup> But while this change in tone is obvious and is of concern to some, Dmitri Trenin, Director of the Carnegie Moscow Centre, aptly notes that Putin’s attitude toward the United States is simply pragmatic, and not confrontational.<sup>36</sup> Putin is simply striking a balance between the widely held view in Russia of the United States as a challenge to Russian power, and an appreciation for the importance of friendly relations between the two nations.

While this may be so, there is even further evidence of Putin’s assertion of Russian power recently. President Putin has opted for strengthening Russia’s nuclear arsenal and “abandoning elements of arms control in favour of more freedom in force development and deployment.”<sup>37</sup> In February 2004, Russia began a series of strategic exercises, its largest since the Cold War. Entitled *Security 2004*, the stated purpose of

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34 Sergei Borisov, “Russia Remembered At Last.”

35 Dmitri Litvinovich, “Russia: Unimpressed,” Transitions Online (22 December 2003).

36 Dmitri Trenin, “New Tendencies in Russia’s Foreign Policy,” Address to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 25 February 2004. (Available at <http://www.ceip.org>).

37 Ibid.

these exercises was to provide naval anti-terrorism training and to demonstrate that Russia's mighty nuclear bombers and submarine launched ballistic missiles were immediately deployable; presumably this was intended to remind the world of the strength of Russian military power. One wonders if this message was intended for Washington audiences in particular, given the fact that the Bush Administration, seeking re-election, seems temporarily to have sidelined its relationship with Russia in the face of domestic criticism about its failure to maximize its new-found relationship with Moscow to push for an end to the war in Chechnya. President Bush's warm reception for Georgian President Saakashvili in January 2004 only raises further questions in Russia about American motives and trustworthiness, especially where US policy treads dangerously close to Russia's sphere of interests in the FSU.

## **Conclusion**

What becomes evident from a study of Russian-American relations, post-9/11 is that what seemed like an initial period of friendship has been redefined. Relations are not uncomfortable, but they are also not unconditionally friendly. Quite reasonably, the relationship between Russia and the United States continues to revolve around important strategic considerations, few of which have been eradicated in light of the cooperation in the fight against terrorism. This paper has argued that the east-west relationship really has not changed significantly since 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001. Instead, it is as it has always been in the post-Cold War era: the two nations are not friends, but

they are not enemies either, and both nations struggle to strike an appropriate and workable balance between their security interests.

Though there has been great and intense debate over the Russian identity and the national interest, post-Soviet Russia's collective worldview has undoubtedly been predominantly "America-centric."<sup>38</sup> And Bobo Lo articulates well the dilemma for Russian policy makers: the country is torn between "anxiousness about the new imbalance in Russia-USA relations and Washington's global ascendancy; on the other hand, a sense of hope regarding the possibilities for increased political and economic interdependency on terms advantageous to Russia."<sup>39</sup> While Putin understands that engagement with the United States is practical, and in fact logical in some instances, as the two great nations share a number of similar challenges and threats, there remains a desire to work actively, but not antagonistically, to prevent the absolute consolidation of America's power and hegemonic position in the international system – a goal clearly identified to be in Russia's national interest. Whether or not American power in today's international system can truly be likened to "empire," the perception of its influence and reach, within Russian circles, is seen as destabilizing and even potentially threatening and directly influences the manner in which Russia views itself, and the way it responds to American initiatives. President Putin, in response to the perception of American empire building in the post-Cold War, and post-9/11 international environment, has taken a pragmatic stance toward his American counterpart.

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38 Bobo Lo, *Russian Foreign Policy in the post-Soviet Era*, 24.

39 *Ibid.*, 25.

At Camp David in September 2003, the ninth summit in only three years between Presidents Putin and Bush, both leaders cemented their commitment to compromising on matters of shared importance; however, neither leader wavered in his pledge to pursue his country's national interests, even when these interests diverge. Labelled as "decorative" by observers, the Camp David summit revealed a desire for dialogue, yet a clear difference of opinion remained on a number of critical issues.<sup>40</sup> Russia and the United States are very different countries and perhaps leaders on both sides expected far too much too soon. While common ground may be found on a number of issues, as Mike Bowker contends, "there is little reason to expect a long-term partnership between the two countries. Cooperation can only be expected when interests coincide."<sup>41</sup> And of late, it seems as though the convergence of interests is impossible, when the path taken by the Bush Administration to promote what they have identified to be in the US national interest, directly threatens what Russian policy makers have determined to be in theirs. As the US consolidates its hegemony in the international system, Russia becomes that much more determined to resist it. This exacerbates what is already a rather shaky foundation for Russia-US relations in the post-Cold War era and beyond.

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40 Stephen Cohen quoted in "Bush, Putin Press Iran, North Korea," CBS News.com 26 September 2003. (Available at: <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/09/26/politics/main575258.shtml>). Emerging from the 2003 Camp David summit were: a joint desire to dissuade both North Korea and Iran from pursuing nuclear weapons programs (though there was disagreement over how precisely to deal with these states); a joint pledge to work together on reconstructing Iraq (though President Putin stressed the importance of the UN's leadership in any coalition effort to rebuild the war-torn nation); and President Putin's announcement, much to the chagrin of the Bush Administration, that Russia will proceed with its plan to sell Iran an \$800 million nuclear power plant, despite evidence from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), that Iran is enriching uranium.

41 Mike Bowker, *Russian Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War*, 223.