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The New Cold War and US-Russian Relations

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Contrary to established opinion, the gravest threats to America's national security are still in Russia. They derive from an unprecedented development that most US policy-makers have recklessly disregarded, as evidenced by the undeclared cold war Washington has waged, under both parties, against post-Communist Russia during the past fifteen years.

As a result of the Soviet breakup in 1991, Russia, a state bearing every nuclear and other device of mass destruction, virtually collapsed. During the 1990s its essential infrastructures--political, economic and social--disintegrated. Moscow's hold on its vast territories was weakened by separatism, official corruption and Mafia-like crime. The worst peacetime depression in modern history brought economic losses more than twice those suffered in World War II. GDP plummeted by nearly half and capital investment by 80 percent. Most Russians were thrown into poverty. Death rates soared and the population shrank. And in August 1998, the financial system imploded.



After the Soviet Union

No one in authority anywhere had ever foreseen that one of the twentieth century's two superpowers would plunge, along with its arsenals of destruction, into such catastrophic circumstances. Even today, we cannot be sure what Russia's collapse might mean for the rest of the world.

Outwardly, the nation may now seem to have recovered. Its economy has grown on average by 6 to 7 percent annually since 1999, its stock-market index increased last year by 83 percent and its gold and foreign currency reserves are the world's fifth largest. Moscow is booming with new construction, frenzied consumption of Western luxury goods and fifty-six large casinos. Some of this wealth has trickled down to the provinces and middle and lower classes, whose income has been rising. But these advances, loudly touted by the Russian

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government and Western investment-fund promoters, are due largely to high world prices for the country's oil and gas and stand out only in comparison with the
wasteland of 1998.

More fundamental realities indicate that Russia remains in an unprecedented state of peacetime demodernization and depopulation. Investment in the economy and other basic infrastructures remains barely a third of the 1990 level. Some two-thirds of Russians still live below or very near the poverty line, including 80 percent of families with two or more children, 60 percent of rural citizens and large segments of the educated and professional classes, among them teachers, doctors and military officers. The gap between the poor and the rich, Russian experts tell us, is becoming "explosive."

Most tragic and telling, the nation continues to suffer wartime death and birth rates, its population declining by 700,000 or more every year. Male life expectancy is barely 59 years and, at the other end of the life cycle, 2 to 3 million children are homeless. Old and new diseases, from tuberculosis to HIV infections, have grown into epidemics. Nationalists may exaggerate in charging that "the Motherland is dying," but even the head of Moscow's most pro-Western university warns that Russia remains in
"extremely deep crisis."

The stability of the political regime atop this bleak post-Soviet landscape rests heavily, if not entirely, on the personal popularity and authority of one man, President Vladimir Putin, who admits the state "is not yet completely stable." While Putin's ratings are an extraordinary 70 to 75 percent positive, political institutions and would-be leaders below him have almost no public support.

The top business and administrative elites, having rapaciously "privatized" the Soviet state's richest assets in the 1990s, are particularly despised. Indeed, their possession of that property, because it lacks popular legitimacy, remains a time bomb embedded in the political and economic system. The huge military is equally unstable, its ranks torn by a lack of funds, abuses of authority and discontent.

No wonder serious analysts worry that one or more sudden developments--a sharp fall in world oil prices, more major episodes of ethnic violence or terrorism, or Putin's disappearance--might plunge Russia into an even worse crisis. Pointing to the disorder spreading from Chechnya through the country's southern rim, for example, the eminent scholar Peter Reddaway even asks "whether Russia is stable enough to hold together."

As long as catastrophic possibilities exist in that nation, so do the unprecedented threats to US and international security. Experts differ as to which danger is the gravest--proliferation of Russia's enormous stockpile of nuclear, chemical and biological materials; ill-maintained nuclear reactors on land and on decommissioned submarines; an impaired early-warning system controlling missiles on hair-trigger alert; or the first-ever civil war in a shattered superpower, the terror-ridden Chechen conflict. But no one should doubt that together they constitute a much greater constant threat than any the United States faced during the Soviet era.

Nor is a catastrophe involving weapons of mass destruction the only danger in what remains the world's largest territorial country. Nearly a quarter of the planet's people live on Russia's borders, among them conflicting ethnic and religious groups. Any instability in Russia could easily spread to a crucial and exceedingly volatile part of the world.

There is another, perhaps more likely, possibility. Petrodollars may bring Russia long-

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term stability, but on the basis of growing authoritarianism and xenophobic nationalism. Those ominous factors derive primarily not from Russia's lost superpower status (or Putin's KGB background), as the US press regularly misinforms readers, but from so many lost and damaged lives at home since 1991. Often called the "Weimar scenario," this outcome probably would not be truly fascist, but it would be a Russia possessing weapons of mass destruction and large proportions of the world's oil and natural gas, even more hostile to the West than was its Soviet predecessor.

How has the US government responded to these unprecedented perils? It doesn't require a degree in international relations or media punditry to understand that the first principle of policy toward post-Communist Russia must follow the Hippocratic injunction: Do no harm! Do nothing to undermine its fragile stability, nothing to dissuade the Kremlin from giving first priority to repairing the nation's crumbling infrastructures, nothing to cause it to rely more heavily on its stockpiles of superpower weapons instead of reducing them, nothing to make Moscow uncooperative with the West in those joint pursuits. Everything else in that savaged country is of far less consequence.

Since the early 1990s Washington has simultaneously conducted, under Democrats and Republicans, two fundamentally different policies toward post-Soviet Russia--one decorative and outwardly reassuring, the other real and exceedingly reckless. The decorative policy, which has been taken at face value in the United States, at least until recently, professes to have replaced America's previous cold war intentions with a generous relationship of "strategic partnership and friendship." The public image of this approach has featured happy-talk meetings between American and Russian presidents, first "Bill and Boris" (Clinton and Yeltsin), then "George and Vladimir."

The real US policy has been very different--a relentless, winner-take-all exploitation of Russia's post-1991 weakness. Accompanied by broken American promises, condescending lectures and demands for unilateral concessions, it has been even more aggressive and uncompromising than was Washington's approach to Soviet Communist Russia. Consider its defining elements as they have unfolded--with fulsome support in both American political parties, influential newspapers and policy think tanks--since the early 1990s:

•A growing military encirclement of Russia, on and near its borders, by US and NATO bases, which are already ensconced or being planned in at least half the fourteen other former Soviet republics, from the Baltics and Ukraine to Georgia, Azerbaijan and the new states of Central Asia. The result is a US-built reverse iron curtain and the remilitarization of American-Russian relations.

•A tacit (and closely related) US denial that Russia has any legitimate national interests outside its own territory, even in ethnically akin or contiguous former republics such as Ukraine, Belarus and Georgia. How else to explain, to take a bellwether example, the thinking of Richard Holbrooke, Democratic would-be Secretary of State? While roundly condemning the Kremlin for promoting a pro-Moscow government in neighboring Ukraine, where Russia has centuries of shared linguistic, marital, religious, economic and security ties, Holbrooke declares that far-away Slav nation part of "our core zone of security."

•Even more, a presumption that Russia does not have full sovereignty within its own borders, as expressed by constant US interventions in Moscow's internal affairs since 1992. They have included an on-site crusade by swarms of American "advisers," particularly during the 1990s, to direct Russia's "transition" from Communism; endless missionary sermons

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from afar, often couched in threats, on how that nation should and should not organize its political and economic systems; and active support for Russian anti-Kremlin groups, some associated with hated Yeltsin-era oligarchs.

•That interventionary impulse has now grown even into suggestions that Putin be overthrown by the kind of US-backed "color revolutions" carried out since 2003 in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, and attempted this year in Belarus. Thus, while mainstream editorial pages increasingly call the Russian president "thug," "fascist" and "Saddam Hussein," one of the Carnegie Endowment's several Washington crusaders assures us of "Putin's weakness" and vulnerability to "regime change." (Do proponents of "democratic regime change" in Russia care that it might mean
destabilizing a nuclear state?)

•Underpinning these components of the real US policy are familiar cold war double standards condemning Moscow for doing what Washington does--such as seeking allies and military bases in former Soviet republics, using its assets (oil and gas in Russia's case) as aid to friendly governments and regulating foreign money in its political life.

More broadly, when NATO expands to Russia's front and back doorsteps, gobbling up former Soviet-bloc members and republics, it is "fighting terrorism" and "protecting new states"; when Moscow protests, it is engaging in "cold war thinking." When Washington meddles in the politics of Georgia and Ukraine, it is "promoting democracy"; when the Kremlin does so, it is "neoimperialism." And not to forget the historical background: When in the 1990s the US-supported Yeltsin overthrew Russia's elected Parliament and Constitutional Court by force, gave its national wealth and television networks to Kremlin insiders, imposed a constitution without real constraints on executive power and rigged elections, it was "democratic reform"; when Putin continues that process, it is "authoritarianism."

•Finally, the United States is attempting, by exploiting Russia's weakness, to acquire the nuclear superiority it could not achieve during the Soviet era. That is the essential meaning of two major steps taken by the Bush Administration in 2002, both against Moscow's strong wishes. One was the Administration's unilateral withdrawal from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, freeing it to try to create a system capable of destroying incoming missiles and thereby the capacity to launch a nuclear first strike without fear of retaliation. The other was pressuring the Kremlin to sign an ultimately empty nuclear weapons reduction agreement requiring no actual destruction of weapons and indeed allowing development of new ones; providing for no verification; and permitting unilateral withdrawal before the specified reductions are required.

The extraordinarily anti-Russian nature of these policies casts serious doubt on two American official and media axioms: that the recent "chill" in US-Russian relations has been caused by Putin's behavior at home and abroad, and that the cold war ended fifteen years ago. The first axiom is false, the second only half true: The cold war ended in Moscow, but not in Washington, as is clear from a brief look back.

The last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, came to power in 1985 with heretical "New Thinking" that proposed not merely to ease but to actually abolish the decades-long cold war. His proposals triggered a fateful struggle in Washington (and Moscow) between policy-makers who wanted to seize the historic opportunity and those who did not. President Ronald Reagan decided to meet Gorbachev at least part of the way, as did his successor, the first President George Bush. As a result, in December 1989, at a historic summit meeting at Malta, Gorbachev and Bush declared the cold war over. (That extraordinary agreement evidently has been forgotten; thus we have the

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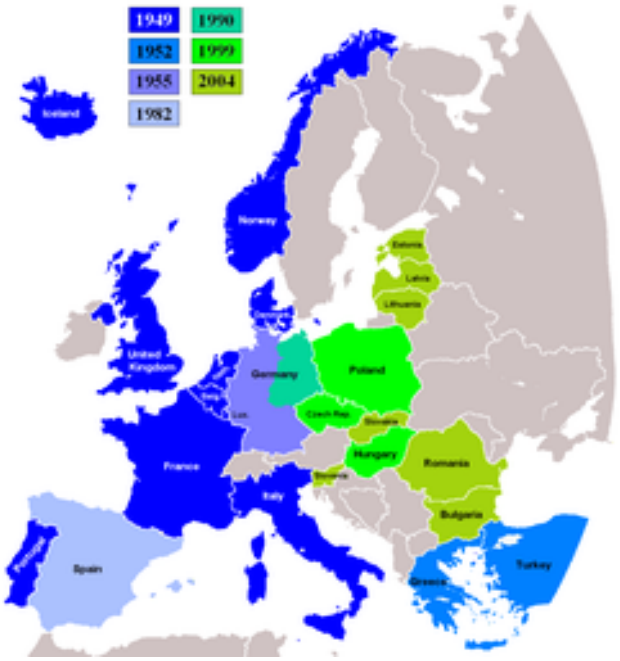
New York Times recently asserting that the US-Russian relationship today "is far better than it was 15 years ago.")



Reagan and Gorbachev

Declarations alone, however, could not terminate decades of warfare attitudes. Even when Bush was agreeing to end the cold war in 1989-91, many of his top advisers, like many members of the US political elite and media, strongly resisted. (I witnessed that rift on the eve of Malta, when I was asked to debate the issue in front of Bush and his divided foreign policy team.) Proof came with the Soviet breakup in December 1991: US officials and the media immediately presented the purported "end of the cold war" not as a mutual Soviet-American decision, which it certainly was, but as a great American victory and Russian defeat.

That (now standard) triumphalist narrative is the primary reason the cold war was quickly revived--not in Moscow a decade later by Putin but in Washington in the early 1990s, when the Clinton Administration made two epically unwise decisions. One was to treat post-Communist Russia as a defeated nation that was expected to replicate America's domestic practices and bow to its foreign policies. It required, behind the facade of the Clinton-Yeltsin "partnership and friendship" (as Clinton's top "Russia hand," Strobe Talbott, later confirmed), telling Yeltsin "here's some more shit for your face" and Moscow's "submissiveness." From that triumphalism grew the still-ongoing interventions in Moscow's internal affairs and the abiding notion that Russia has no autonomous rights at home or abroad.



NATO Expansion

Clinton's other unwise decision was to break the Bush Administration's promise to Soviet Russia in 1990-91 not to expand NATO "one inch to the east" and instead begin its expansion to Russia's borders. From that profound act of bad faith, followed by others, came the dangerously provocative military encirclement of Russia and growing Russian suspicions of US intentions. Thus, while American journalists and even scholars insist that "the cold war has indeed vanished" and that concerns about a new one are "silly," Russians across the political spectrum now believe that in Washington "the cold war did

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not end" and, still more, that "the US is imposing a new cold war on Russia."

That ominous view is being greatly exacerbated by Washington's ever-growing "anti-Russian fatwa," as a former Reagan appointee terms it. This year it includes a torrent of official and media statements denouncing Russia's domestic and foreign policies, vowing to bring more of its neighbors into NATO and urging Bush to boycott the G-8 summit to be chaired by Putin in St. Petersburg in July; a call by would-be Republican presidential nominee Senator John McCain for "very harsh" measures against Moscow; Congress's pointed refusal to repeal a Soviet-era restriction on trade with Russia; the Pentagon's revival of old rumors that Russian intelligence gave Saddam Hussein information
endangering US troops; and comments by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, echoing the regime-changers, urging Russians, "if necessary, to change their government."

For its part, the White House deleted from its 2006 National Security Strategy the long-professed US-Russian partnership, backtracked on agreements to help Moscow join the World Trade Organization and adopted sanctions against Belarus, the Slav former republic most culturally akin to Russia and with whom the Kremlin is negotiating a new union state. Most significant, in May it dispatched Vice President Cheney to an anti-Russian conference in former Soviet Lithuania, now a NATO member, to denounce the Kremlin and make clear it is not "a strategic partner and a trusted friend," thereby ending fifteen years of official pretense.

More astonishing is a Council on Foreign Relations "task force report" on Russia, co-chaired by Democratic presidential aspirant John Edwards, issued in March. The "nonpartisan" council's reputed moderation and balance are nowhere in evidence. An unrelenting exercise in double standards, the report blames all the "disappointments" in US-Russian relations solely on "Russia's wrong direction" under Putin--from meddling in the former Soviet republics and backing Iran to conflicts over NATO, energy politics and the "rollback of Russian democracy."

Strongly implying that Bush has been too soft on Putin, the council report flatly rejects partnership with Moscow as "not a realistic prospect." It calls instead for "selective cooperation" and "selective opposition," depending on which suits US interests, and, in effect, Soviet-era containment. Urging more Western intervention in Moscow's political affairs, the report even reserves for Washington the right to reject Russia's future elections and leaders as "illegitimate." An article in the council's influential journal Foreign Affairs menacingly adds that the United States is quickly "attaining nuclear primacy" and the ability "to destroy the long-range nuclear arsenals of Russia or China with a first strike."

Every consequence of this bipartisan American cold war against post-Communist Russia has exacerbated the dangers inherent in the Soviet breakup mentioned above. The crusade to transform Russia during the 1990s, with its disastrous "shock therapy" economic measures and resulting antidemocratic acts, further destabilized the country, fostering an oligarchical system that plundered the state's wealth, deprived essential infrastructures of investment, impoverished the people and nurtured dangerous corruption. In the process, it discredited Western-style reform, generated mass
anti-Americanism where there had been almost none--only 5 percent of Russians surveyed in May thought the United States was a "friend"--and eviscerated the once-influential pro-American faction in Kremlin and electoral politics.

Military encirclement, the Bush

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Administration's striving for nuclear supremacy and today's renewed US intrusions into Russian politics are having even worse consequences. They have provoked the Kremlin into undertaking its own conventional and nuclear buildup, relying more rather than less on compromised mechanisms of control and maintenance, while continuing to invest miserly sums in the country's decaying economic base and human resources. The same American policies have also caused Moscow to cooperate less rather than more in existing US-funded programs to reduce the multiple risks represented by Russia's materials of mass destruction and to prevent accidental nuclear war. More generally, they have inspired a new Kremlin ideology of "emphasizing our sovereignty" that is increasingly nationalistic, intolerant of foreign-funded NGOs as "fifth columns" and reliant on anti-Western views of the "patriotic" Russian intelligentsia and the Orthodox Church.

Moscow's responses abroad have also been the opposite of what Washington policy-makers should want. Interpreting US-backed "color revolutions" as a quest for military outposts on Russia's borders, the Kremlin now opposes pro-democracy movements in former Soviet republics more than ever, while supporting the most authoritarian regimes in the region, from Belarus to Uzbekistan. Meanwhile, Moscow is forming a political, economic and military "strategic partnership" with China, lending support to Iran and other anti-American governments in the Middle East and already putting surface-to-air missiles back in Belarus, in effect Russia's western border with NATO.

If American policy and Russia's predictable countermeasures continue to develop into a full-scale cold war, several new factors could make it even more dangerous than was its predecessor. Above all, the growing presence of Western bases and US-backed governments in the former Soviet republics has moved the "front lines" of the conflict, in the alarmed words of a Moscow newspaper, from Germany to Russia's "near abroad." As a "hostile ring tightens around the Motherland," in the view of former Prime Minister Evgeny Primakov, many different Russians see a mortal threat. Putin's chief political deputy, Vladislav Surkov, for example, sees the "enemy…at the gates," and the novelist and Soviet-era dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn sees the "complete encirclement of Russia and then the loss of its sovereignty." The risks of direct military conflict could therefore be greater than ever. Protesting overflights by NATO aircraft, a Russian general has already warned, "If they violate our borders, they should be shot down."

Worsening the geopolitical factor are radically different American and Russian self-perceptions. By the mid-1960s the US-Soviet cold war relationship had acquired a significant degree of stability because the two superpowers, perceiving a stalemate, began to settle for political and military "parity." Today, however, the United States, the self-proclaimed "only superpower," has a far more expansive view of its international entitlements and possibilities. Moscow, on the other hand, feels weaker and more
vulnerable than it did before 1991. And in that asymmetry lies the potential for a less predictable cold war relationship between the two still fully armed nuclear states.

There is also a new psychological factor. Because the unfolding cold war is undeclared, it is already laden with feelings of betrayal and mistrust on both sides. Having welcomed Putin as Yeltsin's chosen successor and offered him its conception of "partnership and friendship," Washington now feels deceived by Putin's policies. According to two characteristic commentaries in the Washington Post, Bush had a "well-intentioned Russian policy," but "a Russian autocrat…betrayed the American's faith." Putin's Kremlin, however, has been reacting largely to a decade of broken US promises and Yeltsin's boozy compliance. Thus

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Putin's declaration four years ago, paraphrased on Russian radio: "The era of Russian geopolitical concessions [is] coming to an end." (Looking back, he remarked bitterly that Russia has been "constantly deceived.")

Still worse, the emerging cold war lacks the substantive negotiations and cooperation, known as détente, that constrained the previous one. Behind the lingering facade, a well-informed Russian tells us, "dialogue is almost nonexistent." It is especially true in regard to nuclear weapons. The Bush Administration's abandonment of the ABM treaty and real reductions, its decision to build an antimissile shield, and talk of pre-emptive war and nuclear strikes have all but abolished long-established US-Soviet agreements that have kept the nuclear peace for nearly fifty years. Indeed, according to a report, Bush's National Security Council is contemptuous of arms control as "baggage from the cold war." In short, as dangers posed by nuclear weapons have grown and a new arms race unfolds, efforts to curtail or even discuss them have ended.

Finally, anti-cold war forces that once played an important role in the United States no longer exist. Cold war lobbies, old and new ones, therefore operate virtually unopposed, some of them funded by anti-Kremlin Russian oligarchs in exile. At high political levels, the new American cold war has been, and remains, fully bipartisan, from Clinton to Bush, Madeleine Albright to Rice, Edwards to McCain. At lower levels, once robust pro-détente public groups, particularly anti-arms-race movements, have been largely demobilized by official, media and academic myths that "the cold war is over" and we have been "liberated" from nuclear and other dangers in Russia.

Also absent (or silent) are the kinds of American scholars who protested cold war excesses in the past. Meanwhile, a legion of new intellectual cold warriors has emerged, particularly in Washington, media favorites whose crusading anti-Putin zeal goes largely unchallenged. (Typically, one inveterate missionary constantly charges Moscow with "not delivering" on US interests, while another now calls for a surreal crusade, "backed by international donors," to correct young Russians' thinking about Stalin.) There are a few notable exceptions--also bipartisan, from former Reaganites to Nation contributors--but "anathematizing Russia," as Gorbachev recently put it, is so consensual that even an outspoken critic of US policy inexplicably ends an article, "Of course, Russia has been largely to blame."

Making these political factors worse has been the "pluralist" US mainstream media. In the past, opinion page editors and television producers regularly solicited voices to challenge cold war zealots, but today such dissenters, and thus the vigorous public debate of the past, are almost entirely missing. Instead, influential editorial pages are dominated by resurgent cold war orthodoxies, led by the Post, whose incessant demonization of Putin's "autocracy" and "crude neoimperialism" reads like a bygone Pravda on the Potomac. On the conservative New York Sun's front page, US-Russian relations today are presented as "a duel to the death--perhaps literally."

The Kremlin's strong preference "not to return to the cold war era," as Putin stated May 13 in response to Cheney's inflammatory charges, has been mainly responsible for preventing such fantasies from becoming reality. "Someone is still fighting the cold war," a British academic recently wrote, "but it isn't Russia." A fateful struggle over this issue, however, is now under way in Moscow, with the "pro-Western" Putin resisting demands for a "more hard line" course and, closely related, favoring larger FDR-style investments in the people (and the country's stability). Unless US

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policy, which is abetting the hard-liners in that struggle, changes fundamentally, the symbiotic axis between American and Russian cold warriors that drove the last conflict will re-emerge. If so, the Kremlin, whether under Putin or a successor, will fight the new one--with all the unprecedented dangers that would entail.

Given different principles and determined leadership, it is still not too late for a new US policy toward post-Soviet Russia. Its components would include full cooperation in securing Moscow's materials of mass destruction; radically reducing nuclear weapons on both sides while banning the development of new ones and taking all warheads off hair-trigger alert; dissuading other states from acquiring those weapons; countering terrorist activities and drug-trafficking near Russia; and augmenting energy supplies to the West.

None of those programs are possible without abandoning the warped priorities and fallacies that have shaped US policy since 1991. National security requires identifying and pursuing essential priorities, but US policy-makers have done neither consistently. The only truly vital American interest in Russia today is preventing its stockpiles of mass destruction from endangering the world, whether through Russia's destabilization or hostility to the West.

All of the dangerous fallacies underlying US policy are expressions of unbridled triumphalism. The decision to treat post-Soviet Russia as a vanquished nation, analogous to postwar Germany and Japan (but without the funding), squandered a historic opportunity for a real partnership and established the bipartisan premise that Moscow's "direction" at home and abroad should be determined by the United States. Applied to a country with Russia's size and long history as a world power, and that had not been militarily defeated, the premise was inherently self-defeating and certain to provoke a resentful backlash.

That folly produced two others. One was the assumption that the United States had the right, wisdom and power to remake post-Communist Russia into a political and economic replica of America. A conceit as vast as its ignorance of Russia's historical traditions and contemporary realities, it led to the counterproductive crusade of the 1990s, which continues in various ways today. The other was the presumption that Russia should be America's junior partner in foreign policy with no interests except those of the United States. By disregarding Russia's history, different geopolitical realities and vital interests, this presumption has also been senseless.

As a Eurasian state with 20-25 million Muslim citizens of its own and with Iran one of its few neighbors not being recruited by NATO, for example, Russia can ill afford to be drawn into Washington's expanding conflict with the Islamic world, whether in Iran or Iraq. Similarly, by demanding that Moscow vacate its traditional political and military positions in former Soviet republics so the United States and NATO can occupy them--and even subsidize Ukraine's defection with cheap gas--Washington is saying that Russia not only has no Monroe Doctrine-like rights in its own neighborhood but no legitimate security rights at all. Not surprisingly, such flagrant double standards have convinced the Kremlin that Washington has become more belligerent since Yeltsin's departure simply "because Russian policy has become more pro-Russian."

Nor was American triumphalism a fleeting reaction to 1991. A decade later, the tragedy of September 11 gave Washington a second chance for a real partnership with Russia. At a meeting on June 16, 2001, President Bush sensed in Putin's "soul" a partner for America. And so it seemed after September 11, when Putin's Kremlin did more than any NATO

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government to assist the US war effort in Afghanistan, giving it valuable intelligence, a Moscow-trained Afghan combat force and easy access to crucial air bases in former Soviet Central Asia.

The Kremlin understandably believed that in return Washington would give it an equitable relationship. Instead, it got US withdrawal from the ABM treaty, Washington's claim to permanent bases in Central Asia (as well as Georgia) and independent access to Caspian oil and gas, a second round of NATO expansion taking in several former Soviet republics and bloc members, and a still-growing indictment of its domestic and foreign conduct. Astonishingly, not even September 11 was enough to end Washington's winner-take-all principles.

Why have Democratic and Republican administrations believed they could act in such relentlessly anti-Russian ways without endangering US national security? The answer is another fallacy--the belief that Russia, diminished and weakened by its loss of the Soviet Union, had no choice but to bend to America's will. Even apart from the continued presence of Soviet-era weapons in Russia, it was a grave misconception. Because of its extraordinary material and human attributes, Russia, as its intellectuals say, has always been "destined to be a great power." This was still true after 1991.

Even before world energy prices refilled its coffers, the Kremlin had ready alternatives to the humiliating role scripted by Washington. Above all, Russia could forge strategic alliances with eager anti-US and non-NATO governments in the East and elsewhere, becoming an arsenal of conventional weapons and nuclear knowledge for states from China and India to Iran and Venezuela. Moscow has already begun that turning away from the West, and it could move much further in that direction.

Still more, even today's diminished Russia can fight, perhaps win, a cold war on its new front lines across the vast former Soviet territories. It has the advantages of geographic proximity, essential
markets, energy pipelines and corporate ownership, along with kinship and language and common experiences. They give Moscow an array of soft and hard power to use, if it chooses, against neighboring governments considering a new patron in faraway Washington.

Economically, the Kremlin could cripple nearly destitute Georgia and Moldova by banning their products and otherwise unemployed migrant workers from Russia and by charging Georgia and Ukraine full "free-market" prices for essential energy. Politically, Moscow could truncate tiny Georgia and Moldova, and big Ukraine, by welcoming their large, pro-Russian territories into the Russian Federation or supporting their demands for independent statehood (as the West has been doing for Kosovo and Montenegro in Serbia). Militarily, Moscow could take further steps toward turning the Shanghai Cooperation Organization--now composed of Russia, China and four Central Asian states, with Iran and India possible members--into an anti-NATO defensive alliance, an "OPEC with nuclear weapons," a Western analyst warned.

That is not all. In the US-Russian struggle in Central Asia over Caspian oil and gas, Washington, as even the triumphalist Thomas Friedman admits, "is at a severe disadvantage." The United States has already lost its military base in Uzbekistan and may soon lose the only remaining one in the region, in Kyrgyzstan; the new pipeline it backed to bypass Russia runs through Georgia, whose stability depends considerably on Moscow; Washington's new friend in oil-rich Azerbaijan is an anachronistic dynastic ruler; and Kazakhstan, whose enormous energy reserves make it a particular US target, has its own large Russian population

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and is moving back toward Moscow.

Nor is the Kremlin powerless in direct dealings with the West. It can mount more than enough warheads to defeat any missile shield and illusion of "nuclear primacy." It can shut US businesses out of multibillion-dollar deals in Russia and, as it recently reminded the European Union, which gets 25 percent of its gas from Russia, "redirect supplies" to hungry markets in the East. And Moscow could deploy its resources, connections and UN Security Council veto against US interests involving, for instance, nuclear proliferation, Iran, Afghanistan and possibly even Iraq.

Contrary to exaggerated US accusations, the Kremlin has not yet resorted to such retaliatory measures in any significant way. But unless Washington stops abasing and encroaching on Russia, there is no "sovereign" reason why it should not do so. Certainly, nothing Moscow has gotten from Washington since 1992, a Western security specialist emphasizes, "compensates for the geopolitical harm the United States is doing to Russia."

American crusaders insist it is worth the risk in order to democratize Russia and other former Soviet republics. In reality, their campaigns since 1992 have only discredited that cause in Russia. Praising the despised Yeltsin and endorsing other unpopular figures as Russia's "democrats," while denouncing the popular Putin, has associated democracy with the social pain, chaos and humiliation of the 1990s. Ostracizing Belarus President Aleksandr Lukashenko while embracing tyrants in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan has related it to the thirst for oil. Linking "democratic revolutions" in Ukraine and Georgia to NATO membership has equated them with US expansionism. Focusing on the victimization of billionaire Mikhail Khodorkhovsky and not on Russian poverty or ongoing mass protests against social injustices has suggested democracy is only for oligarchs. And by insisting on their indispensable role, US crusaders have all but said (wrongly) that Russians are incapable of democracy or resisting abuses of power on their own.

The result is dark Russian suspicions of American intentions ignored by US policy-makers and media alike. They include the belief that Washington's real purpose is to take control of the country's energy
resources and nuclear weapons and use encircling NATO satellite states to "de-sovereignize" Russia, turning it into a "vassal of the West." More generally, US policy has fostered the belief that the American cold war was never really aimed at Soviet Communism but always at Russia, a suspicion given credence by Post and Times columnists who characterize Russia even after Communism as an inherently "autocratic state" with "brutish instincts."

To overcome those towering obstacles to a new relationship, Washingtonhas to abandon the triumphalist conceits primarily responsible for therevived cold war and its growing dangers. It means respecting Russia's sovereign right to determine its course at home (including disposal of its energy resources). As the record plainly shows, interfering in Moscow's internal affairs, whether on-site or from afar, only harms the chances for political liberties and economic prosperity that still exist in that tormented nation.

It also means acknowledging Russia's legitimate security interests, especially in its own "near abroad." In particular, the planned third expansion of NATO, intended to include Ukraine, must not take place. Extending NATO to Russia's doorsteps has already brought relations near the breaking point (without actually benefiting any nation's security); absorbing Ukraine, which Moscow regards as essential to its Slavic identity and its military defense, may be the point of no return, as even pro-US Russians anxiously warn. Nor would it

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be democratic, since nearly two-thirds of Ukrainians are opposed. The explosive possibilities were adumbrated in late May and early June when local citizens in ethnic Russian Crimea blockaded a port and roads where a US naval ship and contingent of Marines suddenly appeared, provoking resolutions declaring the region "anti-NATO territory" and threats of "a new Vietnam."

Time for a new US policy is running out, but there is no hint of one in official or unofficial circles. Denouncing the Kremlin in May, Cheney spoke "like a triumphant cold warrior," a Times correspondent reported. A top State Department official has already announced the "next great mission" in and around Russia. In the same unreconstructed spirit, Rice has demanded Russians "recognize that we have legitimate interests...in their neighborhood," without a word about Moscow's interests; and a former Clinton official has held the Kremlin "accountable for the ominous security threats...developing between NATO's eastern border and Russia." Meanwhile, the Bush Administration is playing Russian roulette with Moscow's control of its nuclear weapons. Its missile shield project having already provoked a destabilizing Russian buildup, the Administration now proposes to further confuse Moscow's early-warning system, risking an accidental launch, by putting conventional warheads on long-range missiles for the first time.

In a democracy we might expect alternative policy proposals from would-be leaders. But there are none in either party, only demands for a more anti-Russian course, or silence. We should not be surprised. Acquiescence in Bush's monstrous war in Iraq has amply demonstrated the political elite's limited capacity for introspection, independent thought and civic courage. (It prefers to falsely blame the American people, as the managing editor of Foreign Affairs recently did, for craving "ideological red meat.") It may also be intimidated by another revived cold war practice--personal defamation. The Post and The New Yorker have already labeled critics of their Russia policy "Putin apologists" and charged them with "appeasement" and "again taking the Russian side of the Cold War."

The vision and courage of heresy will therefore be needed to escape today's new cold war orthodoxies and dangers, but it is hard to imagine a US politician answering the call. There is, however, a not-too-distant precedent. Twenty years ago, when the world faced exceedingly grave cold war perils, Gorbachev unexpectedly emerged from the orthodox and repressive Soviet political class to offer a heretical way out. Is there an American leader today ready to retrieve that missed opportunity?

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