**U.S.-Russian Relations and the Rise of China**

* **By**
* [**Anatol Lieven**](http://newamerica.net/user/90)**,**
* **New America Foundation**

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[](http://newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/articles/images/US-Russia_START.jpg)  
President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev sign documents on nuclear arms reduction before a news conference at the Kremlin in Moscow on July 6, 2009. (Photo/White House - Chuck Kennedy)

Since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, U.S. policies towards Russia have been characterized by a level of hostility which is not justified by Russian threats to U.S. interests. These U.S. attitudes towards Russia have both encouraged and been encouraged by a strategy of the expansion of U.S. influence and U.S.-led alliance systems at Russia's expense. This has led the U.S. into strategic commitments in regions which past generations of U.S. policymakers would have regarded as almost surreally distant from real U.S. concerns. Not surprisingly, this U.S. strategy has converted what in the early 1990s was an almost exaggerated level of respect for the U.S. among educated Russians into feelings of distrust and hostility which extend from the security elites into much of the population.  
  
In the 1990s and early 2000s, this did not seem to matter much because Russia was so weak and because NATO enlargement was confined to Central European countries whose national traditions inclined them towards the West and whose nationalisms were strongly anti-Russian. When the U.S. began to press for NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine, however, the dangers of U.S. strategy became more and more apparent – as the Russia-Georgia war of 2008 and the increasing domestic difficulties of Ukraine demonstrated.  
  
Moreover, in recent years the U.S. has found itself in a very different geopolitical world from that of the 1990s and with vastly fewer resources at its disposal than appeared to be the case in the 1990s. Economic recession has rendered the Clintonesque language of the 1990s about America's "Goldilocks economy" painfully ludicrous. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 have led to a U.S. obsession with threats from the Muslim world and led the Bush administration into wars in Iraq and Afghanistan which have wasted immense resources and shown the limitations of U.S. military power. The Arab revolutions of 2011 risk overthrowing key U.S. allies in the Middle East. Turkey, formerly the most important ally of all in the region, is now at best semi-detached, at worst actively hostile.  
  
**Amid China's Rise**Perhaps most importantly of all, the future relationship between the U.S. and Russia will take shape in the context of perhaps the greatest shift in global power of the past 500 years: the rise of China to become the biggest economy in the world. The argument that throughout much of history China was the largest economy misses the point. That was the case in a highly regionalized world. The new China is becoming top dog in a globalized world economy. Unless there is a radical change in Chinese or U.S. growth rates, this will come to pass in between 10 and 20 years. It is possible that some political upheaval or economic crisis will derail China's growth; but China has now successfully weathered Tiananmen, the Asian Financial Crisis of the late 1990s, and now the global economic recession – the last of which, by contrast, caused severe damage to the U.S. economy.1  
  
Ethnic protest in Xinjiang and Tibet is an ever-present threat, and could, in the future, lead to very damaging terrorism within China. However, the indigenous populations of these areas are rapidly being reduced to minorities by Han Chinese migration and in China as a whole the Han are so overwhelmingly dominant that it seems highly unlikely that China will ever face a serious danger of disintegration along ethnic lines.  
  
There is no necessity that the rise of China will lead to increased tension or conflict between the U.S. and China. China has gone from being one of the Western system's greatest victims in the 19th Century to being one of the greatest beneficiaries of the global market system created by the British Empire and the United States. The destruction of that system through economic conflict or war would deal a shattering blow to the Chinese economy, and thereby to the stability of the Chinese political system and the rule of the Communist Party.  
  
Moreover, even if China becomes the world's largest economy this will by no means automatically equate to an ability to rival the U.S. as a global superpower. The yuan has a very long way to go before it even begins to rival the pound or the yen as a global currency, let alone the dollar or the euro. In terms of military power, the Chinese may well be approaching the point where they can drive the U.S. navy away from China's coasts and prevent the U.S. from effectively defending Taiwan; but by reducing any possibility of a Taiwanese declaration of independence at the same time, China makes a conflict over Taiwan much less likely.2  
  
When it comes to global power projection China suffers from two huge drawbacks and is likely to do so for a long time to come. The first is its lack of aircraft carriers. Beijing is now devoting great effort to developing these, but as the Soviet Union discovered during the Cold War, this is one of the most complex of all military-industrial undertakings, and the Chinese are only at the very early stages.3 Secondly, compared to the U.S., China lacks stable and extensive alliance systems. Neither the Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO) nor the loose economic consultative grouping of BRICS resemble military alliances.  
  
China is working on what has been called its "string of pearls" strategy to develop ports around the Indian Ocean, but so far these are for commercial use; and with the possible exception of Pakistan, it is not likely that the host countries would wish to infuriate and frighten India by turning them into Chinese military bases. India is after all a great deal closer to them than China is. Indeed, it is a rather striking comment on China's international strategic weakness that apart from North Korea, China's only true ally in the world is Pakistan – and North Korea is more a ghastly liability than an ally, and Pakistan could become the same.  
  
Finally, there is the question of whether China will wish to emulate the U.S. in terms of global power or learn from U.S. mistakes. A significant role in America's decline has been played by its strategic over-extension, and embroilment in local wars which in the end had little to do with real U.S. interests. This was arguably true of the Korean and Afghan Wars, and certainly of the wars in Vietnam and Iraq. In fact, the whole greater Middle East looks like an area that any sensible great power will in future try to avoid, not to dominate. In Africa, China may be able to make a better contribution to the continent's development than the West has done, but it will also run into the same immense barriers to development that African states have faced up to now. In addition, Chinese managers and workers are already facing increased local hostility in some areas, due both to harsh managerial practices and the commercial competition of Chinese workers and traders.  
  
At the same time, it would be very unwise to be complacent about the future of U.S.-Chinese relations and their consequence on global stability. The grounds for concern lie not in traditional realist areas of great power ambition and fear, but rather in two areas that realism has traditionally neglected. The first of these is what is called in German *primat der innenpolitik*, the primacy of internal politics. This term was coined for the analysis of the roots of the First World War in the domestic political calculations, fears, and needs of the European elites, especially in Germany.4  
  
There, but also to a considerable degree across Europe, landed and industrial elites endangered by the rise of socialism turned to nationalism as a means of rallying a degree of mass support and creating mass political parties. This meant that these elites were also on occasions trapped into foreign policy positions that wiser heads among them would sooner have avoided. Starting in Britain, from the 1850s on, mass circulation newspapers (the new media of the day) began to exert an important influence on governments. This contributed to forcing the British government into the Crimean War, a conflict that the then Prime Minister, Lord Aberdeen, deeply disliked.  
  
It is not difficult to see possible parallels with China's position today. With Maoist ideology effectively dead, nationalism remains by far the strongest ideological support of the Chinese communist regime, and one with deep roots in Chinese society.5 New media in the form of the internet and "blogosphere" have given ordinary Chinese a certain ability to express their views outside the bounds of the state-controlled media, as long as they do not launch open attacks on the existing system. As the Chinese internet response to a number of international incidents has shown, the views expressed are often nationalist and even chauvinist ones, and are frequently deeply hostile to the United States, as well as to some of China's neighbors (especially Japan, for reasons both of history and contemporary territorial disputes).6  
  
Far from diminishing this nationalist tendency, any steps towards democratization in China could make it considerably worse. As convincingly argued by Jack Snyder and Edward Mansfield, the early growth of democracy is highly likely to be accompanied by strong nationalist tendencies. In the case of China, exploiting cases of international tension to stir up nationalism would be an obvious way for future opposition politicians to gain mass support against the top government officials of the day without stepping completely outside the Communist system.7  
  
On the U.S. side, the adjustment of the U.S. public and political elites to the loss of U.S. primacy will be extremely difficult psychologically, especially if combined with a long period of economic difficulties created in part by China's rise. Whether China's rise is the cause or it simply coincides with the historic decline of the white middle classes may not matter, China may still take the blame. Remember that another element in the growth of mass chauvinist nationalism in late 19th Century Europe was the "Great Depression" which lasted from the mid-1870s to the mid-1890s, and involved persistently high levels of unemployment in some areas, and a wrenching dislocation of previous economic and social patterns among the traditional lower-middle classes in particular. It is possible that the same dynamics are in place in the United States today. It is true that U.S. popular culture has always involved strong elements of isolationism, but it has also contained equally strong tendencies to a violent response if the U.S. is seen as threatened or insulted. There could be many occasions of perceived insult between the U.S. and China in the decades to come.  
  
Lastly, there is the possibility of conflict over diminishing and vital global resources. Indeed, if present figures are projected mathematically into the future, such conflicts might well seem inevitable. Of course, to do this would be a mistake, given new sources of energy like North America's oil shale and the adaptability both of mankind in general and the capitalist system in particular. The Chinese state is also acutely aware of this danger in the area of oil and is seeking to change its energy system accordingly. Equally, however, this threat should not be ignored. The U.S. is already nailed to a strategic role in the Middle East in part because of its dependence on imported oil. China is clearly seeking to gain ownership of a range of vital raw materials in various parts of the world.  
  
This has already led it into a massive (though so far only potential) investment in copper mining in Afghanistan, a country that from every other point of view China might have been well-advised to avoid. In turn, this investment has strengthened the ability of Pakistani officials to argue to the Karzai regime in Kabul that it ought to look to China, not the U.S., as an international sponsor and broker of a peace settlement. This is out of the question at present, but it may not be following the withdrawal of U.S. ground troops. Elsewhere in the world – especially in Africa – it is not difficult to see how competition for raw materials could lead China and the U.S. to back opposing sides in civil wars, even if their own troops did not become involved on the ground. This could encourage the destabilization of great areas of the African continent, as occurred in the context of U.S.-Soviet rivalry from the 1960s to the 1980s.  
  
**U.S.-Russian Relations**How Russia will fit into a world shaped by the rise of China and some degree of U.S.-Chinese rivalry is not at all clear. What is clear is that Russia does not wish for an alliance with either country even if one were on offer. On the one hand, hostility to the U.S. has become deeply ingrained in the Russian mass psyche, and has also to a considerable extent been encouraged by the ruling system that has taken shape in Russia since Vladimir Putin's accession to power in 1999. Much of U.S. policy from the mid-1990s to the Obama presidency was seen in Russia as deeply hostile to Russian interests – and not always wrongly.8  
  
The expansion of NATO, the encouragement of revolutions against pro-Moscow regimes in the former Soviet Union, the construction of energy pipelines bypassing Russia and the sponsorship of anti-Russian regional groupings were all rightly seen in Moscow as inspired in whole or part by anti-Russian sentiments and calculations. The culmination of all this in Russian eyes was U.S. arming of Georgia and encouragement of Georgian hopes of NATO membership, widely believed in Russia to have given the Georgian government the green light to attack South Ossetia in August 2008, leading to the brief Georgian-Russian war and an explosion of mutual hostility in the U.S. and Russian media.9  
  
August 2008 was what seems likely to have been the high point of U.S. ambitions in the former Soviet Union and by the same token, the lowest point of U.S.-Russian relations in the post-Cold War period. The most important fact about the U.S. role in the Georgian-Russian war is that it did not in fact intervene to help Georgia, and in consequence stood by while Georgia was crushingly defeated. In view of what happened, it seems extremely unlikely that a future U.S. administration will resume real pressure for Georgia's membership of NATO, even if European NATO members would agree to this, which most assuredly won't.  
  
The U.S. strategy of subordinating and/or marginalizing Russia not just on the world stage (which was realistic enough and has to a considerable extent happened) but within Russia's own region came to an end in 2008-2010 with the Georgian war and the global economic crisis. These events finished off at least for a generation – and probably forever – the desire of European Union states for further eastward expansion. This knocked away the greatest real incentive for countries to join the West.  
  
Given the continued corruption of Romania and Bulgaria, the hostility of European populations to immigration, and perhaps most of all, deep opposition to Turkey's membership, it is in my view highly unlikely that full membership of the EU will ever again be on the table for Georgia, Ukraine and other states in the traditional Russian sphere of influence. Finally, the Ukrainian presidential elections of 2010 revealed yet again both the deep divisions in Ukrainian society and the fact that a large majority do not in fact want Ukraine to join NATO. Finally, the impossibility of Turkey joining the EU, and the growth of Turkish hostility to Israel and the U.S., has largely eliminated Turkey's historic role as a U.S. ally against Russia and indeed more generally.  
  
Faced with this new reality, the Obama administration very sensibly moved to diminish tensions with Russia through the so-called "reset" in relations. NATO expansion has been shelved (though not of course formally abandoned); plans for missile defense in Eastern Europe drastically reduced; a new START treaty on a formal basis of equality signed with Moscow; and rhetoric about democracy and human rights in Russia greatly diminished. Given not just the rise of China, but the war in Afghanistan, America's endless strategic entanglement in the Middle East, and indeed the growing problems of Mexico (a good deal closer to the U.S. than is Georgia or Afghanistan), reducing U.S. commitments elsewhere reflected a sober and sensible realist approach in the White House, State Department, and Pentagon.  
  
In return, Russia has become more helpful over Iran and Afghanistan and has not sought to stir up trouble in the Baltic States or exploit U.S. difficulties elsewhere in the world. The lack of attempts by Moscow to exploit ethnic tensions in the Baltic States is especially striking in view of the acute economic sufferings of Latvia and Lithuania as a result of the global economic recession, something that has made much of their populations doubt the benefits of NATO and EU membership.  
  
There is certainly no objective reason for the U.S. to return to a strategy of challenging Russia in the former Soviet Union. As Stephen Kotkin has pointed out, this U.S. strategy has only served the interests of China: "As Russia pursues the chimera of a multipolar world, the United States pursues the delusion of nearly limitless NATO expansion. And in the process, both unwittingly conspire to put Russia in China's pocket."10As far as the West is concerned, our truly vital interest in this region is to avoid conflicts which could indirectly destabilize areas where we really do have vital interests: Central and even Western Europe, and the Middle East. They are of course of much greater interest to Russia, but Russia's ambitions have also been far more limited than many in the West have assumed, largely because of a deep unwillingness to make the sacrifices and run the risks involved in bringing the other republics of the former Soviet Union into a much tighter alliance with Russia.11  
  
Moscow's conception of a sphere of influence on the territory of the former Soviet Union is more defensive than it is offensive. It is focused chiefly on the exclusion of rival sources of geopolitical influence and power, above all the United States. In Ukraine, the closeness and intermingling on the ground between Russians and Ukrainians suggests that if Russia does exert its influence in Ukraine in a restrained way, it seems quite possible that it may regain elements of a hegemonic position without setting off a massive reaction from within Ukraine, or triggering a strong response from the West. If Moscow uses its influence quietly to accumulate a dominant position for Russian firms in the Ukrainian economy, it would unlikely create a major public backlash – especially if the Russian financial-industrial groups are careful to seek alliances with Ukrainian magnates. Not even hard-line nationalists in Galicia are liable to be very agitated by this. The U.S. and EU should use their influence to encourage Russia to go on pursuing a restrained policy of extending soft influence, not a ruthless and illegitimate extension of hard power.  
  
**Russian-Chinese Relations**  
The Russian establishment's attitude to growing Chinese power has been profoundly ambivalent. Since the end of the Cold War, Beijing has been very careful not to bring any pressure to bear on Russia, in sharp contrast to Washington's strategy. Faced with attempts by the United States to eliminate Russia's influence over territories which had been Russian for centuries and which contain large Russian minorities, and to push NATO up to Russia's borders, it was inevitable that Russia would draw closer to China notwithstanding this ambivalence. The process of rapprochement began under Mikhail Gorbachev and was extended under Boris Yeltsin.12  
  
The most concrete expression of this has been the immense growth in Russian military sales to China, which constitute more than 90 per cent of China's imports of weapons. Other trade has also grown but more slowly.  
  
In 2010, Sino-Russian trade reached $57.1 billion, an increase of almost 50 per cent over the previous year. This was mostly due to the rise in the price of oil and other commodities, but also reflected a huge surge in Chinese exports of manufactured goods to Russia.13 However, this sum is still considerably less than Russian trade with Europe, which in 2010 stood at more than $200 billion. China has invested heavily in an oil pipeline from Siberia, thereby overcoming the commercial disadvantages of transporting oil by sea or by freight over land. This also gives China greater energy security and Russia increased energy leverage vis-à-vis Europe. Nonetheless, Europe remains by far Russia's biggest energy market, and the one towards which the vast majority of its export pipelines lead. Redirecting these towards China would be prohibitively expensive and not in Russia's strategic interest, unless there were a complete breakdown in relations with the EU.  
  
In addition to the strategic needs of using China to balance against the U.S., the accession to power of Vladimir Putin added a measure of ideological sympathy for Chinese authoritarianism and state-led economic development, especially on the part of former KGB officers in the Russian establishment. Deep hostility to U.S. support for the Russian opposition, and for "democratic" revolutions in neighboring states gave the Russian establishment under Putin a strong motive to side with Chinese opposition to U.S. interventionism and democratizing rhetoric. Russia and China have therefore found themselves on the same side when it came to many aspects of U.S. global strategy, from NATO's attack on Yugoslavia in 1999 through the Iraq War to the NATO campaign against Libya in 2011, where both Russia and China abstained but have expressed strong concern about the course of the operation. Russians intermittently worry about a global duopoly or "G2" composed of the U.S. and China, but do not take the threat very seriously given the differences between the countries.14  
  
However, the limits of Chinese support for Russia were shown after August 2008 when China refused to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia – not out of Chinese deference to the U.S. but in conformity with China's categorical opposition to secessionist movements. It is also possible that in the future Russia and China could find themselves at odds in Central Asia, though so far they have agreed on backing the maintenance of stability against revolutions, whether of the cultured or Islamist variety. Both countries have a very strong common motive in opposing Islamist extremism, which they see as threatening their hold on their own Muslim territories. It is true that China is rapidly undermining Russia's previous domination of the energy routes of the region; but since it is far more important for Russia to maintain a monopoly position vis-à-vis gas supplies to Europe than to prevent supplies going elsewhere, this is not seen in Moscow as a serious threat to Russian interests.  
  
Russian distrust of U.S. and NATO intentions remains intense, both at the popular and elite level. Though this has diminished since President Obama's reset, there is considerable concern about the behavior of a future Republican administration – understandably so, given the statements about Russia emanating from Republican presidential hopefuls like Mitt Romney, and Republican think-tanks like the Heritage Foundation (though in the end, enough Republican senators voted for the new START Treaty to allow it to pass the Senate).15 It is far more pleasant for Russian officials to visit Beijing, where they meet with some tough private bargaining but no public reproaches, rather than to be exposed to constant public hectoring in Washington.  
  
However, the fears of the United States have never eliminated deep fears of China among Russians, once again at both the popular and elite levels. These fears have multiple roots. From its ultimate origins in the 9th century AD, the Russian state was shaped by conflicts with the Asiatic nomadic peoples of the steppe. In particular, the Mongol-Tatar conquest and hegemony from the 13th to the 15th centuries left profound scars in the Russian historical psyche. When from the 16th century the tables were turned and Russia went on to conquer the vast Asiatic spaces of Siberia, Russians were nonetheless well aware that their settlements there were tiny in comparison to the immense Asian populations to the East and South.16  
  
These fears have grown once again in recent years due to the decline in Russia's population, especially in the lands east of Lake Baikal and adjacent to China. As of 2010, it was estimated that this immense territory of more than 2.5 million square miles had a population of less than seven million people, compared to some 110 million in the Chinese provinces of Manchuria. The extent of actual Chinese immigration into Russian territory seems to have been exaggerated in Russian minds, but it is hardly irrational given this disproportion and the fact that living standards in Russia are still appreciably higher than in most of China. Russian demographic fears of China were encouraged by the Soviet government in the 1960s and 70s, following the split between the two states and the growth of acute tension and rivalry between them which in the late 1960s led to border clashes and brought them to the edge of full war. Indeed, this period saw an explosion of anti-Chinese racism in the Soviet media, which has left a powerful residue in many Russians' minds.17  
  
The immediate cause of these clashes was competing claims to small islands in the Amur and Ussuri rivers, opposite the Russian city of Khabarovsk. These have now been resolved by a Russian-Chinese agreement of 2005 awarding most of these islands to China. However, underlying this issue is a far greater one, which has never been raised by the Chinese government, but is present in the minds of both the Russian and Chinese educated publics: This is the fact that the treaties of Argun and Peking in 1859 and 1860, which gave to Russia the far eastern territories where the cities of Khabarovsk and Vladivostok now stand, are the last of the 19th century "unequal treaties" between European powers and China that have been left standing. It should be noted by contrast that whatever the past U.S. threats to Russian power on the territory of the former Soviet Union beyond Russia's borders, the United States does not have and cannot have any possible claims on actual Russian territory.  
  
Just as the Chinese establishment has rigorously avoided any discussion of these treaties, the Russian administration under Putin has rigorously avoided any public expression of fears of China. Nonetheless, this fear has grown greatly in recent years as a result of China's tremendous economic growth. A very accurate perception exists that if China continues to grow while Russia stagnates, Russia will in future be reduced to no more than a provider of raw materials to the Chinese economy, a position that would inevitably entail a degree of geopolitical and even cultural dependency. Loathing of this prospect partly underlies the desire of the supporters of President Medvedev both for domestic reform and a closer relationship with the U.S. and Europe. However, fears of China's power are also widely shared among followers of Vladimir Putin – despite their admiration for China's authoritarian political and economic model.18  
  
The Russian administration under Putin has alternated the language of "Eurasianism" when describing Russia's national identity with that of Russia as the "third West," in other words a Western power alongside the United States and the European Union, different from both as they are different from each other, but still undeniably Western. Eurasianism retains an important role in the Russian national debate in part because it is a description of reality – Russia is after all a Eurasian state. This ideology also gives Russia the chance to develop a national identity that can embrace its various Asiatic peoples within the Russian state. In this sense however it is far more directed at Russia's Muslims than at relations with the Far East – and indeed, there is a distinctively Tatar Muslim version of Eurasianism, while in Kazakhstan yet another variant has become the official ideology of the state.19  
  
However, in the dominant Russian discourse, Eurasianism has always been associated with power in Asia, and with the notion that Russia can compensate for its second-class status in Europe by playing the role of an Asian great power. That is a totally different matter from becoming the Asian satellite of a Chinese superpower. Quite apart from the fact that such a fate is absolutely unacceptable to Russian great power nationalists, the exclusion from Europe that this would imply would be deeply wounding to Russia's pride and self-image, involving as it would a classification of Russia with backward Central Asian despotisms formerly subject to Russia. After all, the expansion of NATO and the EU up to Russia's borders was opposed by many Russian liberals as well as conservatives, precisely because they saw this as implying Russia's expulsion from Europe.  
  
Russia's goal of becoming, or remaining, one major pole of a multipolar world may well be hopeless (at least beyond the countries of the former Soviet Union), given the relative decline of Russia's economy and population. However, the determination that Russia should not become marginalized is very deeply and widely held. Hence the official insistence that Russia's foreign and security policy should be "multi-vector," seeking co-operation and good relations with a range of other countries, as long as these are in the interests of the Russian state. The Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO) and the BRIC grouping both reflect this approach, without resembling security alliances. Russia's attempts to give the SCO a stronger security role have so far been opposed by China – though it is possible that the SCO could come to play an important security role in Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrawal from that country, or in the search for an Afghan peace settlement.20  
  
The only Russian government strategy chiefly focused on Asia was that of Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov in the late 1990s, and that was dedicated to the (wholly fantastical) goal of an alliance between Russia, China and India against the U.S. – certainly not to a Russian-Chinese alliance with China as the dominant partner. On the other hand, since the end of the Soviet Union, there have been three major attempts by Russian administrations to reach out to the West, under Yeltsin in the early and mid-1990s, Putin after 9/11, and President Medvedev after the Georgian-Russian war of 2008, to discuss his ideas for a new European security architecture.  
  
In the eyes of the Russian establishment, the first two attempts foundered on the insatiable ambition of the United States and the ingrained hostility of the U.S. elites to Russia. Putin genuinely expected that 9/11 would lead to a U.S.-Russian rapprochement and the abandonment of U.S. plans for further NATO enlargement, and his bitter disappointment at what actually happened apparently continues to color his attitudes to the U.S. to this day. Medvedev's effort is still continuing and has been encouraged by the reset in relations with the Obama administration; but (due in part to the weakness and self-obsession of the European Union in the context of the economic recession), the Russian government is having no success in embedding relations in new institutions like those envisaged in Medvedev's proposed New European Security Architecture.21This effort reflects a lasting Russian desire to maintain good relations with the West so as to avoid falling under the sway of China.  
  
**The Implications for U.S.-Russian Relations**   
Viewed from an objective and realist perspective, free of the prejudices and priorities of the past (including the recent past), this should lead to a radical shift in U.S. policy towards Russia. To put it simply: When the U.S. establishment believed in the possibility of a unipolar world dominated by the USA, they drew the conclusion that this required a weak Russia, which would either occupy a very subordinate place in the U.S. international order or would be excluded and marginalized as far as possible by U.S. client states on its borders, grouped together in NATO. Faced with an increasingly powerful China, real U.S. needs become the diametrical opposite of previous perceived needs: a strong Russia in a multipolar world. This of course is also the aim of the Russian establishment. In principle, therefore, real U.S. and Russian needs for the future are very similar.  
  
Classical realist theory would suggest that faced with the rise of China, the U.S. and Russia should and indeed will engage in explicit strategic "balancing" against the new superpower. Something of the sort may well already be happening in East Asia, as China's neighbors become alarmed by its economic growth, its increased military spending, its territorial claims, and its increasingly strident popular nationalism. It is possible that Russia could have been drawn into such a security system in the early 1990s, when Russia was at its weakest and faith in the U.S. was still great; but for several years now, China has been far too strong for Russia to contemplate such an explicit alliance – even if it were ever to be offered by the U.S.  
  
As senior Russian officials have told me, in the event of a Sino-U.S. clash it would turn eastern Siberia into a geopolitical hostage, without the U.S. being either willing or able to help Russia defend itself. As for Russia's own diminished forces, in the event of a conventional war they would be simply swept away by the Chinese: "we would have to go nuclear immediately," in a Russian general's phrase. Incidentally, Russia's tacit reliance on nuclear superiority to deter China makes it even less likely that Russia would ever agree to reductions in U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons to minimal levels, let alone their abolition.  
  
Similarly, there is very little that Russia can do to help the U.S. against China in the short to medium term. Elsewhere in the world, Russia's ability to help the U.S. is also limited but not entirely inconsequential. Most important is backing for the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, including both supply routes and air bases in Central Asia which the U.S. can use to bring pressure to bear on the Taliban after most U.S. ground troops are withdrawn. Russia can also play a useful though limited role in seeking to contain Iran's nuclear ambitions. A full-scale military alliance between Iran and Russia would bring neither side very much compared to the dangers of increased Chinese hostility – even if a full-scale alliance would ever be accepted by the U.S. Senate or the U.S. Republican Party, let alone the Russian government. Rather, what the U.S. and Russia need to do is to reduce or eliminate points of tension between them in ways that will also free their attention and their resources for the real challenges facing them. In other words, they need to move from the present détente, not to alliance, but to entente.  
  
On the U.S. side, the first thing for this is a recognition that the bipartisan U.S. strategy towards Russia of 1992 to 2008 has indeed collapsed – and although this might seem completely obvious, it will be very difficult for many Americans to accept; as the briefest look at Congressional statements, briefings by the Heritage Foundation or AEI, speeches by leading Republicans (including Tea Party members), and even some Obama administration officials makes very clear.22  
  
One can see the reduction of U.S.-Russian tension as resembling the way in which the British Empire in the 20 years before 1914 drastically reduced its commitments in various parts of the world in order to concentrate its resources on the rising threat from Germany. In the British case this was often accompanied by moves to create new military alliances, which cannot be the case between the U.S. and Russia. Equally, the new British strategy was the product of a bipartisan realist consensus between liberals and conservatives in the British establishment. Is the U.S. establishment today capable of such a consensus? Or will a future Republican administration block moves towards further rapprochement or even tear up the agreements already made and resume a policy (even if only rhetorically) of hostility to Russia.  
  
This is what Russian officials often reply when asked by their U.S. counterparts for some greater concession to the U.S.: that due to the workings of U.S. democracy and the Republican foreign policy mind, U.S. policy towards Russia cannot be guaranteed after 2012, and therefore it makes no sense for Russia to make permanent sacrifices for the sake of temporary gains. If, however, Obama wins in 2012 and continues existing policies, things may look rather different. Eight years of an absence of U.S.-Russian crises and of rising Chinese power may create a bipartisan consensus in Washington of the need to retain good relations with Russia. Equally, eight years of greatly diminished U.S. pressure may convince even hard-line members of the Russian establishment that they no longer have much to fear from the U.S.  
  
When it comes to a more deeply-rooted rapprochement between the U.S. and Russia, however, great problems remain. Russian-US economic ties are rather limited and it will be difficult to deepen them (outside certain limited areas like space exploration), given the structure of the two economies. Very much deeper ties exist between Russia and the European Union, and especially its largest economy, Germany. Here, however, the dysfunctional nature of both the EU and Russian systems form a major obstacle to closer ties.  
  
Russia's semi-authoritarianism, deep corruption, and perennially violent North Caucasus region are not in principle an obstacle to alliance with the U.S. – the U.S. has had and still has far more unsavory allies in the Middle East and elsewhere. However, as many other cases round the world demonstrate, these features of Russia will certainly be used by American political elements opposed to rapprochement with Russia, and to judge by the attitudes of the U.S. media, they may well continue to have considerable success in this regard. In addition, Russia's internal problems are a genuinely important obstacle to a deeper relationship with the EU, with its very high official and public standards – though it may be that over time, the examples of EU members like Italy, let alone Bulgaria, Romania and elsewhere will make preaching these standards somewhat absurd.  
  
There will remain the problem of the European Union's hopelessly tangled decision-making process, made much worse in the case of Russia by the ingrained hostility of Baltic States and Central Europeans towards Russia. Nonetheless, in Kotkin's words, "In the end, there can be no resetting of U.S.-Russian relations without a transcending of NATO and the establishment of a new security architecture in Europe. And without such a genuine reset, China will retain the upper hand, not only in its bilateral relationship with Russia but also in the strategic triangle comprising China, Russia, and the United States."23  
  
The U.S. can greatly help in the creation of closer ties between the EU and Russia simply by ceasing to obstruct them – which is what it has been doing to a great extent over most of the past 20 years. In particular, the U.S. can encourage its allies in Eastern Europe and Britain to drop their own hostility and forge greater ties with Russia. The U.S. can also take a giant step towards drawing Russia into security consultations by seriously engaging with Russian proposals for a European security council of which the U.S. would also be a member. Incidentally, membership of this council might also do something to limit growing Turkish hostility to the U.S., by recognizing Turkey's status as a European great power.  
  
In the short to medium term, only relatively small steps to entente between the U.S., the EU, and Russia can be taken. These steps are essential, however, not just to reduce the strain on a gravely overstretched America but so as to open the way for much deeper possible co-operation in the radically changed world of the future. The rise of China has been discussed as one immensely significant change; climate change could present another. A third is likely to be the vast growth of unassimilated Muslim populations in western Europe and parts of Russia – something which neither Russia nor Western states have any real idea of how to manage.  
  
From the way things are going, two provisional conclusions may be drawn. The first is that the geopoliticians of pre-1914 may have been right (in their analysis, not the strategy they derived from it) that the future belonged to great continental powers and blocs, with their huge territories, vast natural resources and immense populations. The second is that if the effects of climate change are only in the middle of the spectrum of possibilities set out by scientists, states in the future will need to display a great deal of resilience—and if there is one word that sums up both the Russian state and the Russian people, it is resilience. To talk in terms of Russia providing a haven for climate refugees from Western Europe, while providing the water resources that Europe will increasingly lack, may seem the stuff of fantasy today; so would the collapse of the USSR and the rise of China only 25 years ago.  
  
Geopolitically, in the future, the vital interest of the U.S. will be the same as the vital interest of Russia for the past twenty years: to see a multipolar world with those poles friendly to the U.S. as powerful as possible. Even without U.S.-participation, an EU-Russia bloc of the later 21st century would be a vastly more powerful and resilient entity than either of them on their own and would therefore be in the interests of the United States. U.S. leaders should craft their relations with Russia with this in mind.  
  
  
**Notes**  
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3 See the discussion of this issue at www.sinodefence.com.133.  
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19 See Marlene Laruelle, Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire (Johns Hopkins University Press 2008).  
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21 See Sergei Karaganov and Timofey Bordachev, "Towards a New European Security Architecture", Russia in Global Affairs", January/March 2011.  
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