Rethinking US Grand Strategy and Foreign Policy
Seminar Series
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The Future of Russia and the US-Russian Relationship.

Note: Below are informal notes taken by a JHU/APL staff member at the Seminar.

In his introduction Dr. Kuchins explained how he became a Soviet/Russian scholar as a form of rebellion against his father who was half Polish. As such, his father believed that all Russians were evil, and Dr. Kuchins wanted to prove his father wrong. After 30 years of studying the Soviets and the Russians Dr. Kuchins said he now believes that the Russians are not evil – just Russian, and that is a subtle difference.

The last couple of weeks have been big ones in US-Russian relations
- Signing of an arms treaty
- Washington Nuclear Security Conference
People often say that it must be an interesting time to be studying Russia, but it is always an interesting time since the Russian are so unpredictable

The Obama Administration came into office with intentions of improving relations with Russia
- Four previous administrations have tried to some extent to do so since end of Cold War
  - Each worked hard at it but relations always got worse rather than better
- Result: Obama began with a period of deep acrimony
  - Point of potential war in Georgia
  - Worse atmosphere since the days of Gorbachev
- Russia had been busy changing itself all these years
  - Triple transformation going on – politics, economics, military
  - It needed strategic patience as it dropped from SuperPower status
- Obama Administration is working on bettering relations
  - Should keep its goals modest – less likely to be disappointed

Key issues behind the problems in US-Russian relations:
1. Iran and its nuclear capabilities
2. Afghanistan as it becomes a higher priority for the US
3. Nuclear security as part of returning to more traditional arms control

US should expect that Russia’s views would be different on all these issues
- Russia feels burned by the bad relations they had with the Bush Administration
- There has been some recent success
  - Better relations with some near neighbors
  - 16 new working groups established within the State Department
Avoided another Georgian war in 2009 (something that involved a lot of US diplomatic time and effort)

**Current US-Russian Relations**

- New START Treaty is a positive sign
  - It reverses the trajectory of US-Russian relations
  - Obama Administration should be commended for this but there are constraints
- Problems come from somewhat different strategic outlooks and threat assessments on big issues
  - Europe as a threat to Russia
  - China as a threat to Russia
  - Climate change issues
  - Terrorism issues
- Russian security policy is burdened by old ways of thinking
  - It expects all of its problems to come from the US and the West in general
  - Such thinking clogs new ways of handling these problems
- Russia will continue to have problems until it changes this outlook

Scene setting for the big Russian-US relations “Reset Button” effort

- Lowest point of post-Cold War relations was at the end of the Bush Administration
  - There had been a honeymoon of sorts in the relations after 9/11 but then many disagreements developed
  - Communication largely ceased after war in Georgia issues
  - Bush met with Putin about 27 times and only met with Tony Blair more often
- A perfect storm of situations in late 2008
  - 2008 Economic Crisis exacerbated any existing problems
  - Obama took office with the biggest set of problems since FDR
  - Russia worried about another version of its 1997-98default situation
  - US busy with two wars
- Putin put forward the view that the era of the uni-polar world was over
  - Many in the US agreed
- Issues behind the war in Georgia caused difficulties
  - Seen as a failure of US diplomatic efforts
  - Regime transformation was not likely to happen soon or would not go far enough
- US Right said that Russia was too weak or unwilling to go along with Obama’s views
  - Russia’s neighbors were worried about what they might lose in the next round
  - Hart-Hagel Commission saw compromises of basic US values
- Missing the point: Russia is really a status quo power in the world but a revolutionary power in its own area
  - If Russia cannot bring those two concepts together, it will not make progress

Root of the problem: Moscow still sees the US / NATO / the West in general as its major threat

- Russia does not have a very realistic threat assessment
- Until Russia gets over its fixation on the “US/NATO/West threat,” relations cannot improve in a multipolar world
The Demise of the Soviets/Russians

- Have been declining for 30 years
- First time since the 13th-14th Centuries that Russia is surrounded by countries who are now more dynamic – especially China
  - India is sprinting past Russia in its efforts to match China
  - Rise of Muslim populations show how deep the clefts are within the Russia
  - Most important – West still holds more attraction for Russia’s neighbors than it does
- Russia had happily documented US declines but it is falling behind even more
- Unlike during the Cold War, Russia’s decline is not in the be best interests of the West
  - Russia does not understand this
  - Russia still sees the growth of NATO as its greatest threat
  - Strategic Framework from February 2010 still set up to reflect this view
- Bottomline: Russia’s strategic view is completely outdated
  - We cannot allow the US-Russian relationship to continue on this basis

The US-Russian bi-lateral relationship is still the most relevant

- The US-Russian economic relationship should be just as strong as the security relationship
- But it is nowhere near at that level

Iran is the most divisive issue in US-Russian relations

- Both sides do push Iran about its nuclear capabilities but Russia and China with less effort
- Russia should see that the less threat that Iran poses, then the US/West need for missile defense would also decline
  - In September 2009 the Obama Administration announced changes to missile defense plans for Europe
  - Iran’s greater development of mid- rather than long-range missiles made the need for stationing missile defenses in Europe less necessary than expected under Bush plans
- Russia was at first quite pleased with this change since they had been so concerned about missile defenses in Europe
  - Look back at Putin’s Munich speech in Feb 2007, where he “took the gloves off” about Russia’s unhappiness with US foreign policy
  - Last straw had been the Jan 2007 realization that the US European Missile Defense system plan looked like it would actually happen
- Russia not quite as enthusiastic as at first about changes to the missile defense plan
  - Russia is also concerned about Iran’s recently divulged nuclear facilities in Qom
  - Worse part was that the Russians did not know about the facilities until told they were there by the US/West/press
- Bush might have overestimated what the Russians could actually do with Iran
  - Obama might expect only help at the UN from Russia

Russia does not see nuclear weapons in Iran as an existential threat as US/West does

- However, they would not be happy about them, either
- Moscow does not believe that Iran would target them
  - Really only wishful thinking
- Russia should be more concerned about those near Iran who might want to develop nuclear weapons in response to what Iran is doing
Russia is much more vulnerable to these groups who are related to their own disgruntled Islamic populations
Acts of catastrophic terror could more easily happen in Russia than in US or Europe
- Russia has been willing to work to some extent with international organizations to control Iran through sanctions to some degree
  - Still maintains relations with Iran
  - May not work quite so well this time

What about China?
- China is happy to hide behind Russia’s views even if it is not particularly happy about Iran developing nuclear weapons
- Iran is the litmus test for the US-Russian “Reset Button”
- Iran is not the litmus test for Chinese-US relations

Afghanistan
- This is the most promising area for Russian-US relationship developments
- Also, biggest area of US interest
  - Obama making his biggest bets in Afghanistan
- CENTCOM is developing a northern distribution network which needs extensive support from Russia and its neighbors
  - Troop presence expected to grow 3-fold so interest in Central Asia grows accordingly
  - Long routes will bring goods in through Riga, across Russia and its near neighbors
  - Russia has also agreed to the use of the Trans-Siberian Railroad for some efforts
  - Has been a successful effort so far since it makes money for Russia
  - Russia has even allowed lethal goods to fly over its territory
  - Russians talk about this success both publicly and privately
- Russia less happy about situation with Kirgizstan and the US air base there
  - Kirgizstan was hit hardest in the economic crisis
  - The loan package Kirgizstan needed from Moscow was tied to the closing of the base
    - Demanded three times the previous rent
    - Basically, Moscow wanted the US thrown out of its base – opposite of other situation
- There are dueling sets of interests
  - Russia does want some degree of stability in Afghanistan
    - Russia worries about the flow of drugs from Afghanistan to Russia
  - On the other hand, Russia wants to maintain a degree of control over near neighbors
- Bottomline: Russia’s continued focus on the US as its biggest threat distorts its view of its own interests in Central Asia
  - Russia should be more concerned with what China is doing in the region
  - Should take note of the gas supplies that China is tying up from that area
    - In 2009 opened a new gas line to China from Turkmenistan
    - Russia had wanted to keep a monopoly on Turkmen gas but they lost it
- Russia’s interests in the region are being eroded more by Chinese economic efforts than by US missile defense efforts
Nuclear Security / Non-proliferation
There was an expectation that some progress would be made in this area when the new Obama Administration took office
- What looked like low-hanging fruit turned out to be more difficult than expected
- Nuclear weapons are of more use to the Russians than to the US
  - All of their other forces are in deep declines
  - Situation is the opposite for the US
    - Advances are being made in many other areas
    - US developing dramatic strategic advantages over the Russians
- Russians are concerned about efforts to further cut offensive weapons
  - Not that their systems are compromised yet but cuts could get them there someday
  - Russians want to stop the slide in that direction
  - Bottomline: a round of deeper cuts is not likely

Potential strategic game-changer: a dramatic improvement in US-Russian relations
- Some joint data exchange efforts have been going on for 10 years – in discussions only
- If US agreed to put its missile defense radar in Azerbaijan rather than the Czech Republic would also create a major change of attitude
- NATO-Russian discussions about missile defense are still on-going
- A breakthrough in any of these areas would be a great help
- This topic is likely to come up again in the next Rethinking Seminar with Dan Goure
  - Russia is / should be most concerned about the rise of China along their long border
  - Russia is not happy with the lack of transparency about China’s nuclear forces
  - On the other hand, it is unrealistic to believe that agreements over deep cuts in nuclear forces would entice the Chinese to join in
    - Why would China want to lock itself into an underdog position?

Major Security Issues Involved in US-Russian Relations
- Russia’s vital interests are actually closer to those of the US than to those of China
  - They need to build a better understanding of this situation
  - They need a more accurate understanding of their whole security situation
- Basic goal: Russia / US should no longer be the central focus of each other’s security policies
  - For both the focus should be more on Asia
  - Russia’s view is still much more Europe-centric
  - Security paradigms are not in synch
  - Russia sees Europe/US as more threatening that the Chinese/Indian rise
- While Russian power has been declining for 30 years, US power may have peaked early in the Bush years
- Russia’s economic problems are really much worse than its security problems
  - Need to handle the long-term issues
  - Then must find a better relationship model
- Russia must build a better understanding of its economic future
  - Needs Europe and to a lesser extent the US much more for its economic future
  - Sees them too much as only a “security threat”
- NATO is not hostage to Russia’s view of it as a security threat
  - But it also cannot get past this view
  - Improved relations with Russia will be difficult until these changes in attitude occur
QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION

Afghanistan
US support for the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan was a contributing factor leading to the demise of the Soviet Union
- As a result, the Russians generally would like to see the US humiliated in Afghanistan as a form of pay back
  - At least by some factions, at some level
  - Hard to say exactly how prevalent this desire would be
- Uzbek leader made the startling claim that Iran’s interest in Afghanistan may be closer to those of the US than are those of Russia
  - Iran wants stability in Afghanistan much more than the Russians do
  - Russia wants an unstable Iran so that it has reason to keep large numbers of forces in the region
  - Afghanistan instability also limits the amount of economic traffic that comes up from the south, forcing more economic traffic to come through much of Russia
    - Russian economy is dependent on such economic stimulus
  - It is reasonable to assume that there has been some Russian intelligence activity to keep the pot boiling
- Russia is a price taker, not a price setter
  - If it looks like the US is making progress, Russia may be more helpful
  - If it looks like the US is losing, than can expect more Russian obstructions

Iran
- Keeping Iran in a rogue status works well for the Russians
  - Russia would be the only place Iran could buy its weapons
  - A stable Iran could be a competitor to Russia in the oil market
- Oil prices are important to Russia
  - It needs to keep oil prices high but it cannot set the price
- Russia wants to avoid making the hard decisions
- Russia wants to appear as though cooperation was going on in the UN and elsewhere
  - At the same time trying to keep things somewhat unstable in Iran

Russia’s Vital Interests
- There are competing versions about exactly what its vital interest are
- Military doctrine documents say one thing but seem messed up
  - Some officials say don’t worry about it
- Some elements of the military or military/industrial complex want to keep the West as the great threat – the only way to justify the continuing current economic situation
- Some may want more integration of views and force structure
- Different views from different generations of leadership
  - Medvedev generally appears more business-like
  - Putin generally appears to be more KGB-like
- There may not be much different from what each says but the body language is very different
  - Obama had a business-like meeting with Medvedev followed by a meeting with Putin at this country home
  - Putin reportedly lectured to Obama for an hour
Then Putin changed clothes to a more “Darth Vlad” black leather style and went to a meeting of “Night Wolves” motorcycle group
  - They were about to ride to Sebastopol in memory of the WWII battle
  - Definitely sending a message

Recent Russian Military Reforms
- A positive thing, one of the most positive since the collapse of the Soviet empire
- However, the Russian strategic documents still describe the main threat as coming from the US / NATO / the West
  - Why is Russia still so up in arms about NATO’s expansion?
  - They even fought a war in Georgia over it
- Russia should be asking why all of its near neighbors are still very much drawn to the West and not to Russia
  - Neighbors avoid Russia because it is a bully
- Russia complains that the US is stuck in old Cold War thinking without ever acknowledging that its neighbors want to join Western “clubs”
  - They refuse to recognize the fact that their neighbors feel threatened by Russia
  - The satirical publication The Onion offered a fake State Department warning for small countries surrounding Russia: they should move
- Russia’s efforts for improved relations with its near neighbors have been a failure
  - Relations are actually worse with nearly all of them
  - Russia’s actions are not being driven by a realistic view of the situation

Russian Economy
- Russia can only become a powerful country again if it fixes its economy
  - They won’t do it until they have to
- Need reforms for the petroleum industry in particular
- After the Georgia war all relations were broken with the US except for what was needed for the heavy lifts of supplies on the way to Afghanistan
  - Russia was making big money on that deal
- Russia really needs Europe much more for economic reasons than it does the US
- Europe and the US are just not sustainable as threats to Russia

START
- It was a win-win situation
- Russia was disappointed when the Bush Administration had moved away from traditional bilateral arms control approach
- Russia feared unconstrained US behavior the most
  - Wanted to have at least some constraints
- Actual numbers cuts are very small (100-150 or so)
- What was important was that they reached an agreement
- If the US had not reached this bi-lateral accord, then it would have had much less credibility in recent and upcoming non-proliferation work
- START is a modest treaty