

# Is Russia Really an Ally?

## PONARS Policy Memo No. 275

*Renée de Nevers*

*University of Oklahoma*

*October 2002*

U.S.-Russian relations have been strengthened considerably over the last year. Two developments led to this improvement: Russian president Vladimir Putin's support for the United States in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, and U.S. president George W. Bush's decision to establish friendly working relations with Putin in order to secure Russian acquiescence to the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. One result has been a greater tendency to describe the relationship as an alliance. Igor Ivanov, Russia's foreign minister, noted that cooperation between the two countries in combating terrorism "has made Russia and the United States allies again—for the first time since World War II." U.S. ambassador to Russia, Alexander Vershbow, suggested that the "new strategic relationship" established by Presidents Bush and Putin in May 2002 is "the beginning of a long-term security partnership—perhaps an alliance—between our two countries based on common interests."

But what is the nature of this nascent alliance, and whose interests does it serve? In particular, how do Russians view the U.S.-Russian alliance? This memo will examine Russian views of improved U.S.-Russian relations, describing three distinct schools in the Russian political elite. These are identified as the *using Russia, who's using who?*, and the *losing Russia* views.

The memo will then discuss how U.S. military action against Iraq might be viewed by different groups in Russia, and how the current U.S.-Russian relationship fits with the Bush administration's alliance policies.

### **Using Russia**

The first school in the Russian policy elite believes that the United States' interest in ties with Russia is purely tactical. To the degree that Russia can help advance U.S. national interests, the United States supports the relationship, but it has no interest in exploring cooperation on a broader range of issues. Recent cooperation between the United States and Russia in the campaign against the Taliban and Al Qaeda represents an area where Russia has something to offer the United States, hence the closer ties. Future collaboration is likely only when Russia has diplomatic or strategic assets that the United States values, such as closer links to the "axis of evil." But Russia has little to offer the United States beyond this.

This attitude is reinforced by the succession of foreign policy decisions made by the United States in the 1990s that went against Russia's interests. Among the most visible of these have been the decision to expand NATO—not once, but twice—over Russian objections, and the U.S.

decision to withdraw from the ABM Treaty. This decision was made shortly after Russia had given full support to the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan, which included accepting U.S. overflight of Russian territory and basing in Central Asia, Russia's traditional sphere of influence.

This viewpoint is also bolstered by the sense that there is a pattern of intervention in U.S. foreign policy that extends back virtually to the end of the Cold War and the Soviet Union's collapse. Thus U.S. policy did not change after September 11. Instead, the attack on Afghanistan and current calls for military action against Iraq are only the latest in a series of U.S. interventions, including Bosnia, Somalia, and Kosovo, that are designed to sustain U.S. military superiority around the globe. The recently released U.S. national security strategy is seen as a means by which the United States can make unilateralism look more acceptable, but the underlying message taken from it is that the United States plans to do whatever it wants to defend its global position.

## **Who's Using Who?**

A second perspective on the U.S.-Russian alliance is more pragmatic. The recent increase in cooperation with the United States, in this view, has been good for Russia, and should be supported. There are three arguments supporting this view. First, some have argued that the U.S. military campaign against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan benefited Russian interests as much, if not more, as they benefited U.S. interests. Russia has long been concerned about the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia and beyond, and Russian cooperation with the United States played an important role in the U.S. campaign. Secretary of State Colin Powell, for example, noted that "Russia has made invaluable contributions to the global antiterrorism coalition. This has included military assistance, and intelligence sharing, and law enforcement cooperation." The U.S. campaign in Afghanistan was far more effective at reducing this potential threat to Russian stability than Russian efforts have been. The Taliban has been removed from power, and Islamic extremist groups operating in Central Asia have lost bases across the border in Afghanistan. Both of these remove sources of instability for Russia.

Second, some in the policy elite have argued that recent Russian cooperation with the United States represents an unsentimental acceptance of Russia's options. Russia's military and economic capabilities mean that it cannot aspire to an equal relationship with the United States in the foreseeable future. Instead, they view Putin's cooperation with the United States as an effort to bring Russia's ambitions in line with its capabilities and resources. Irina Khakamada, for example, has argued that Russia must accept that it will have essentially junior partner status in its ties with the United States, and it should strive to "get what it can" out of these ties.

Some in this group take this argument one step further. Sergei Karaganov, for example, views cooperation with the United States as "opening up vast horizons for both our countries." Cooperation with the United States is seen as too valuable to Russia for it to risk alienating the United States. They argue that Russia must accept that it needs the alliance with the United States more than the United States needs the alliance with Russia. In this view, Russia should at a minimum remain neutral with regard to Iraq, in order to ensure that Russia's economic interests are taken into account. Russia's need for trade with and investment from the West far outweigh other considerations.

## **Losing Russia?**

Some in Russia believe that the improvement in U.S.-Russian ties that has developed since September 11 has come at the expense of Russian democracy. Because Russia could give the United States vital support in its campaign in Afghanistan and in the ongoing activities against terrorism, the U.S. government has limited or dropped its criticism of the antidemocratic tendencies of the Putin government. This has led some in Russia to conclude that the United States is not interested in real democracy in Russia; rather, it is more interested in ensuring that Russia's leadership will support U.S. goals. This is seen as part of a pattern in U.S. behavior, whereby it has been more concerned with having friendly allies than democratic allies. To this end, the United States has toned down its criticism of the Russian military campaign in Chechnya, and has shown less willingness to push the Russian government on human rights violations, freedom of the press, and a range of related issues.

## **Russian Interests and Iraq**

How would proponents of these different perspectives within Russia view the prospect of military action against Iraq? First, those who believe that the U.S. is using Russia would argue that the U.S. actions in Iraq will serve only U.S. interests. The U.S. would be glad to acquire Russian intelligence information on Iraq, were it offered. But the United States, would not respect Russian economic interests in Iraq. This would not suit U.S. interests in securing Iraq's oil fields.

Second, those who see U.S.-Russian ties as beneficial to Russia would argue that Russia should exploit this opportunity to get a good deal for itself. Rather than obstructing U.S. intervention, Russia's substantial economic interests in Iraq give it an incentive to ensure that its interests will be taken into account both during and after any conflict in Iraq.

Third, those who see the United States as turning a blind eye to abuses of democracy in Russia would argue that Russian support for U.S. military intervention in Iraq would perpetuate this policy. Putin's willingness to back the United States would reinforce the policy of backing his rule in Russia, regardless of its impact on human rights or democratic freedoms in Russia.

## **How Does Russia Rate as an Ally?**

How do these views of the U.S.-Russian relationship fit with the way the United States views its allies? The United States has two kinds of allies: ideological/political allies, and strategic allies. Ideological allies are those with whom the United States shares common values, such as democracy and individual rights. These ties are best illustrated by U.S. links with the United Kingdom; the two countries share a wealth of common values and interests, and they cooperate closely in the international arena. U.S. NATO allies fall into this camp, as do Japan and Australia.

Strategic allies are those which can provide assistance in securing U.S. national interests around the globe. In contrast to ideological allies, their value to the United States is linked to factors of geography and other important military and economic assets; their proximity to countries or regions which the United States considers threatening gives these allies significance. The United States has a history of exhibiting less concern about the values held by the governments of these states and such governments' treatment of their populations. The U.S. relationship with the Shah of Iran was a strategic alliance, as is the current U.S. relationship with

Saudi Arabia. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the United States strengthened its ties with several states contiguous to Afghanistan because of their strategic value in the campaign against the Taliban and Al Qaeda. U.S. ties were strengthened with Pakistan and the Central Asian states, all of which have authoritarian regimes that repress opposition movements and independent media. In fact, certain Central Asian governments have taken advantage of the global war on terrorism to crack down on dissent at home.

Clearly, states may be both strategic and ideological allies. Western Europe and Japan fell into both categories for much of the Cold War.

The perspectives outlined above suggest that Russia is currently relegated to the second tier—it is a strategic ally. Russia’s political and military support for the United States after September 11 was greatly appreciated by the U.S. government and, to the degree that they pay attention, the American people. But the Bush administration’s rhetoric regarding Russian domestic politics—tacitly supporting Putin’s interpretation of Chechnya as part of the war on terrorism and muting criticism of increased constraints on the independent media and civil rights groups—reinforces the impression that Russia’s strategic importance to the United States outweighs concerns about the development and consolidation of democratic institutions in Russia.

This is not entirely surprising, given the attitudes of those responsible for foreign policy in the Bush administration. During the 2000 election campaign, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice stressed the importance of conducting relations with Russia on the basis of the two states’ national interests, rather than “meddling” in Russia’s domestic politics.

But is this where Russia wants to be? How will relegation to this second tier affect Russia’s long-term interests and U.S.-Russian relations? Moreover, how will it affect U.S. interests?

First, some might argue that this is too stark a picture of Russia’s position. The United States encouraged the creation of the new NATO-Russia Council, which establishes a forum where Russia can cooperate as one of twenty states to address common concerns. It supported Russia’s inclusion in the Group of Eight advanced industrialized countries, and supports Russian membership in the World Trade Organization, suggesting that the United States has interest in integrating Russia into major Western and international institutions.

At best, Russia’s inclusion in such organizations puts it in limbo somewhere between the two alliance categories discussed above. Moreover, it highlights the chicken-and-the-egg dilemma about the consolidation of democracy in Russia and elsewhere: does integration into Western economic, political, and military institutions strengthen democracy in Russia, or must democracy be well established in order for Russia to be substantially integrated in these institutions?

Second, the U.S. ambassador to Russia, Alexander Vershbow, has noted that Russia is the most important key to stability in Eurasia. If so, then even if U.S. interest in Russia is purely strategic, it is important to U.S. interests to determine whether Russia will be more stable if its democratic institutions are stronger.

Those in Russia who believe the current U.S.-Russian relationship is good for Russia and those who fear that it is damaging Russian democracy would not want to see Russia become a second tier ally permanently. The relationship’s long-term value to Russia, in these views, rests on strengthening economic and political ties, which would bolster democratic and market institutions rather than merely military and strategic links.

Those in Russia who reject the current alliance as one that benefits only the United States would also be dismayed at being relegated to second-tier status. To the degree that Russia is going to have ties with the United States, they want it to be taken more seriously and treated with the respect they believe it merits as a major international player.

Finally, Russia's centrality to stability in Eurasia means that it is not in U.S. interests for Russia to be a second-tier ally. This means that the United States must pay more attention to internal issues in Russia to ensure that Russia's domestic institutions progress toward integration with Western institutions and that Russia rise to the rank of a first-tier U.S. ally.

© 2002