

On Double Standards

Toward Strategic Liberalism in U.S. Russia Policy

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Stephen E. Hanson
University of Washington
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Over the past year, perhaps no single theme has become more prominent among Russian diplomats, officials, and journalists commenting on relations with the United States than the refrain that the United States applies “double standards” in its dealings with the postcommunist world. When Americans criticize Russia for the erosion of media freedom and state control over television under President Vladimir Putin, Russian commentators accuse the United States of jailing *New York Times* reporter Judith Miller and (as Putin himself argued at a summit meeting with President George W. Bush in February 2005) forcing Dan Rather to resign due to his critical reporting at CBS. When Americans call on the Putin administration to pursue a negotiated end to the war in Chechnya, Russian journalists argue that this is like asking the United States to negotiate a truce with Osama bin Laden. When U.S.-based nongovernmental organizations complain about rising authoritarian tendencies in Russia, highly-placed Russian officials (again, including Putin himself) retort that the United States is a country with electoral irregularities of its own, the very presidency of which was recently decided by the court. When U.S. analysts warn of a serious erosion of civic freedoms in Russia, Russians point to the U.S. government’s own apparent efforts to loosen legal restrictions on the torture of detainees at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. And when the United States declares its strong support for color revolutions against corrupt semi-

authoritarianism in countries like Georgia and Ukraine, Russian commentators point to U.S. alliances with authoritarian leaders such as Pervez Musharraf in Pakistan and, until May 2005, Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan, while noting the disturbing concentration of power in the hands of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili and the dysfunctional government of Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko. Such examples, taken together, are presented in the Russian media as proof that U.S. demands for further democratization in the region are simply a cover for efforts to weaken Russia's geopolitical influence.

Given that the United States still considers Russia an important strategic partner in the struggle against Islamist terrorism, this drumbeat of Russian official cynicism about American motives constitutes a troubling trend. Whatever one's opinion as to the merits of such charges, their endless repetition in Russian political discourse has had a deep effect on Russian public attitudes, damaging the moral credibility of even the most principled Western advocates of Russian democracy. Indeed, the list of grievances against the West cited by politically active Russians is by now a very long one: not only nationalist elites, but also many mainstream Russian politicians, insist that Gorbachev and Yeltsin were working in cahoots with foreign intelligence services to break up the USSR; that shock therapy reforms were designed to weaken Russia; that the bombing of Serbia in the 1999 crisis was a dry run for a future bombing of Russian territory; and that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's expansion is designed first to encircle Russia and then ultimately to break the country apart. What, if anything, can be done about this growing Russian suspicion about U.S. foreign policy goals?

The Realist Approach

One approach to the problem—we might call it the realist position—is to ignore it, on the grounds that the Russian (and American) cynics are right: in the end, only power counts in international relations, not debates about morality or ideology. From this perspective, the problem of double standards in U.S. foreign policy is an inevitable consequence of American indulgence in high-flown rhetoric about liberty in an international environment bound to thwart such idealistic aspirations. Instead of lecturing President Putin about Chechnya, democracy, and human rights, the realist argument continues, the United States should work with him pragmatically in areas of common interest, such as energy development and control over weapons of mass destruction.

Rarely, however, do realists specify with any precision how the United States might adopt realist rhetoric in its international diplomacy. Indeed, it is hard to imagine any U.S. administration responding to Russian criticisms about the United States' actual adherence to democratic principles by openly admitting that, in fact, American speeches about democracy have just been window dressing designed to cover up the

pursuit of *realpolitik*. To be sure, embracing such a response would eliminate the problem of perceived double standards in U.S. foreign policy, but only at the cost of also quickly eliminating what remains of the United States' international reputation as a defender of political and social freedoms. Those citizens of the former USSR who are still inspired by the United States' democratic example would be undercut and demoralized, and political constraints against declarations of open authoritarianism in the region would quickly erode. For these reasons, even under a U.S. administration oriented toward realism, ritualistic references to the desirability of democracy and human rights in U.S. foreign policy pronouncements will almost surely continue, as will the charges of double standards such pronouncements tend to provoke—except perhaps with greater justification.

More fundamentally, in an era when the anti-Western worldview of Al Qaeda and its affiliates constitutes a major threat to global peace and stability, the realist denial of ideology's geopolitical importance is hard to sustain. Indeed, since cynical anti-Western intellectuals, and not impoverished ordinary citizens, are generally the initial converts to radical ideological movements, the Russian elite's skepticism of perceived U.S. double standards might eventually give rise to an extremist nationalism that could have serious international consequences. For this problem, realism provides no practical solutions.

The Liberal Universalist Approach

An alternative response to the problem of accusations of double standards in U.S. diplomacy toward Russia—what we might term the liberal universalist approach—is simply to defend pro-democratic arguments consistently in the face of Russian cynicism. After all, this argument runs, many of the most frequent Russian criticisms of U.S. policy are patently false: Judith Miller was jailed for protecting a source in the Bush administration, not for attacking the president, while Dan Rather's demotion resulted from his careless reliance on a questionable source. The fact that the 2000 presidential election was decided by the U.S. Supreme Court, whose 5-4 decision was quickly accepted as legally binding by both major parties, can be seen as a strength rather than a failure of the rule of law. Russian brutality in Chechnya really has exacerbated, rather than solved, the problem of terrorism in the North Caucasus and beyond, and it is not Russophobic to point this out; by way of contrast, the United States has supported reasonably free and fair elections in Afghanistan that have arguably weakened Taliban support. The stern U.S. criticism of President Karimov after the massacre in Andijon, ultimately resulting in the loss of the Karshi-Khanabad base, shows that the United States does not simply promote "our sons of bitches" regardless of the scale of their human rights violations—as the apocryphal quotation, widely cited by Russian pundits, famously puts it. And contrary to Russian conspiracy

theories, no one in the U.S. government would be happy to see the Russian Federation, with its huge stockpiles of poorly-guarded weapons of mass destruction, break apart. In fact, U.S. criticism of Russian backsliding on democracy and human rights is motivated only by reasoned analysis and a concern for Russia's future; thus, liberal universalists say, surely U.S. diplomacy can find ways to get these points across to the Russian public?

Unfortunately, further liberal universalist rhetoric is unlikely to be very convincing or effective at this stage in U.S.-Russian relations, for two main reasons. First, for many Russians, liberal democratic capitalism is associated with the institutional chaos and geopolitical decline of the Yeltsin era, while Putin's reassertion of the power of the state is associated with a significant and prolonged economic rebound. Indeed, a majority of Russians believe that U.S. economic advice to Yeltsin was explicitly designed to weaken Russia. Even if both the Russian decline of the 1990s and post-1990s growth in Russian GDP were in large part due to deeper structural factors unrelated to presidential policies, there is no way now to convince most Russians that U.S. advice about domestic institution-building is really worth listening to.

Second, while many Russian criticisms of U.S. double standards are faulty, others have considerable merit. Revelations about U.S. torture of detainees in the war on terrorism and the erosion of international legal protections for those designated "enemy combatants" truly do undercut U.S. efforts to encourage better Russian treatment of civilians in Chechnya. U.S. rhetoric about Russia's role as an important strategic partner rings hollow in the face of the continuing U.S. unwillingness—despite repeated high-level assurances—to graduate Russia from the Jackson-Vanik amendment of 1974, which was designed to ensure freedom of emigration from the USSR. An emphasis on democratization as the keystone of U.S. foreign policy is hard to square with the intense bipartisan efforts to speed up China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2000 when nearly fifteen years after the collapse of the USSR, Russia remains outside that organization. Such inconsistencies in the formal U.S. foreign policy stance on key strategic priorities will continue to fuel suspicion and cynicism in Russia and elsewhere as long as there is no effort to recalibrate the U.S. diplomatic message to account for them.

Toward Strategic Liberalism in U.S.-Russian Relations

If the analysis above is correct, neither realism nor universalist liberalism is likely to reverse the negative tendencies in U.S. public diplomacy toward Russia in the Putin era. A move toward greater realism is likely only to further downgrade Russia's importance for U.S. policymakers, while continuing universalism in U.S. foreign policy rhetoric about Russia can only intensify Russian skepticism. Indeed, for a significant sector of

the Russian elite and public, Russian cynicism about U.S. motives has by now gone far enough to eliminate the credibility of U.S. diplomacy *a priori*; the mere fact that U.S. officials express support for a policy is enough reason to look immediately for the underlying self-interested, anti-Russian motive prompting it. For such individuals, obviously, there is little point in trying to calibrate a more coherent U.S. diplomatic message.

Fortunately for the future of U.S.-Russian relations, however, anti-Americanism of this hardened sort is not deep-seated in Russian society. Large majorities in Russian public opinion polls continue to profess their admiration of Americans as a people, even as they express concern about the U.S. foreign policy threat to Russian security. Moreover, the sense that both Russia and the United States belong fundamentally to the civilized world, fighting the same extremist enemies, is widespread on both sides—as the immediate support of the United States by Russia after 9/11, and the similar embrace of Russia by the United States after the terrorist tragedy at Beslan demonstrate. At least for the time being, levels of distrust between Russia and the United States are not so great as to preclude more successful diplomacy designed to put the bilateral relationship on a firmer strategic footing.

For this to happen, however, U.S. policymakers must try to express U.S. strategy toward Russia in concrete and specific, rather than universalist, terms. At the core of this strategy, American principles of democracy, freedom, and human rights must remain paramount. However, simply proclaiming the laudable goal of furthering liberty and democratization everywhere will not persuade the understandably skeptical Russian public that their country can play any serious role in a democratized world order. Indeed, Russia confronts the unpleasant reality that since the collapse of the USSR, the pursuit of democratization has generated specific economic and security benefits from the West only for prospective new members of NATO and the European Union. Since nearly everyone admits that Russia is not a viable candidate for membership in either international organization, Western advice to Russia to democratize anyway rings hollow.

Yet the benefits for U.S. foreign policy interests of a genuinely consolidated Russian democracy would in fact be profound. Given that there is now abundant empirical evidence that consolidated democracies rarely if ever fight each other, such an outcome would allow, for the first time in human history, the prospect of building a united, secure, and peaceful northern hemisphere, spanning the entirety of the globe eastward from Alaska to the Russian Far East. Economic cooperation on such vital issues as free trade, energy security, global warming, and the management of emerging new Arctic waterways would attain new dynamism. Joint work among the United States, the EU, and Russia on problems of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (in particular, the guarding of WMD stockpiles in Russia itself) would

become far easier. Collective security in East Asia, and in particular the resolution of the North Korean nuclear crisis, might well be furthered. That such remarkably positive outcomes are so rarely discussed among U.S. foreign policy analysts and government officials can only be ascribed to an implicit U.S. skepticism that Russian democracy is really possible, a skepticism that generates the feeling among Russians that U.S. democratic universalism really does conceal a double standard toward their country.

A forceful and public articulation of how U.S. support for Russian democracy fits with general U.S. foreign policy goals constitutes one element of a new policy of strategic liberalism in U.S.-Russian relations. The other necessary element is realism in specifying the practical steps that will allow Russian and U.S. policymakers to realize this inspiring vision, as well as identifying dangerous trends that threaten it. Proclaiming that President Putin is a committed democrat with whom the West can cooperate while he clamps down on opposition parties, uses the Russian court system for selective prosecution of political enemies, cancels gubernatorial elections, and violates international law in Chechnya hardly advances the cause of Russian democratic consolidation. The erosion of democratic norms in Russia must be criticized, clearly and consistently. But simultaneously articulating the concrete and long-term goal of Russia's integration with other democratic northern states into a unified economic and security zone would serve to make U.S. criticisms of current Russian policy easier to understand, since Putin's moves toward greater authoritarianism could be then portrayed as practical steps that undermine a mutually-desirable long-term outcome rather than as evidence of Russia's failure to fulfill a moral duty as defined by the United States. Meanwhile, legitimate Russian criticism of U.S. missteps on the road to building a democratic northern hemisphere should also be pondered and, where appropriate, accepted.

A shift toward a strategic liberalism of this sort would not, of course, solve every outstanding problem in U.S.-Russian relations. But by emphasizing Russia's practical importance to the U.S. vision for long-term global security, strategic liberalism might provide a basis for responding to criticism of American double standards, restoring bilateral respect, and perhaps in time, rebuilding genuine Russian-American trust.