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THE US – RUSSIAN PARADOX.

RUSSIAN – AMERICAN RELATIONS IN THE ERA OF PUTIN AND TRUMP¹

The US and Russia are natural geopolitical partners and yet, through circumstance, this partnership has not emerged. Current obstacles to a Russian-US *rapprochement* are four in number: 1) the *European Union* – Germany – which desires an economically and militarily weak Russia, 2) China, with its designs on becoming the pre-eminent Asian power in the mold of Imperial Japan's Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere of the 1930s; 3) US domestic political forces – the Democrat Party – have inflated Russian danger as an international bogeyman against President Donald Trump, and 4) Russia herself, with its authoritarian mechanistic foreign policy that is founded on suspicion and bombast that belong to an earlier age. Meanwhile, US domestic political forces – the Democrat Party – have leveraged Russia as an international bogeyman against President Donald Trump. In this way, the potential for international *rapprochement* has been sacrificed on the altar of domestic political expedience. International brinksmanship has always played a role in the Great Game of Nations, and we can expect this to continue. If we understand the links between domestic politics and international impacts, perhaps we can work to ameliorate some of the more damaging repercussions of extremist sentiment. This paper and presentation strives for just such an understanding rooted at least partially in Russian history.

Keywords: Soviet Union, Trump, Putin, US-Russian Relations, European Union, China.

Introduction

This is a speculative paper and presentation, not a work of scholarship. Here I raise questions; I point out forgotten realities. It is a time to step back. Let's step back from the histrionics and hyperbole as exemplified, for example, in an ailing, incapacitated, and now deceased U.S. Senator John McCain. The ongoing and self-serving hot rhetoric of McCain and many others in the American congress have done a disservice to both our countries.

This has led to a paradox. And that is the topic of my talk.

I speak with you about what I call – the US- Russian Paradox. Russian-American Relations in the Era of Putin and Trump. This is a complex issue, at several levels, and with many actors.

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This presentation strives for just such an understanding. I offer a perspective that may help to clarify and crystallize at least some of the issues. This is a speculative paper to serve as the basis for a lecture at the Second Annual International Scientific Conference “Russia and the West.” It is not a work of scholarship, merely one person's exploratory effort to raise questions, to point out forgotten realities, to step back from the histrionics and hyperbole of the anti-Russian factions in the United States. A perspective leavened by long experience over time in dealing with Russia on multiple levels – both institutional and highly personal.

But before I deliver that view, let me issue a caveat. Let me share with you a major truth, a major truth that I have learned from my many visits to Russia since 1988. *A Glavnaya Pravda*.

That truth is this: The *one political thing* that infuriates Russians more than anything else is to be lectured to by the West, particularly by the United States. To be lectured implies teacher and pupil, superior and subordinate. It implies lack of respect. It is irritating. And it is human nature, I think, to question and to reject such lectures. The US tends to lecture to Russia rather than to discuss, and this posture has plagued our relations for decades. It is a pervasive dynamic that has subtly poisoned US-Russia relations since the Soviet Union reinvented itself as Russia.

So what I offer today is not just another lecture. It is a perspective, and I hope that it is a nuanced and sophisticated perspective that is not tainted with partisan politics. My perspective is that our relations are plagued by a Paradox.

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The Paradox of Unfortunate Circumstances

Here is the paradox: Relations between Russia and the United States – political, economic, military – are at the lowest point since the end of the Cold War. And yet it isn't clear why this should be. These poor relations result from a concatenation of Unfortunate Circumstances.

American domestic political considerations have led to a fracture of momentous scale between Russia and the United States, two countries that, by all accounts, should be partners in the coming decades to meet the threat of terror as exemplified by rogue regimes and radical non-state actors, as well as the rising military and economic threat of China.

One paradox of the Cold War was the de facto condominium established between the Soviet Union and the United States. The phrase “spheres of influence” entered the international lexicon. Two great systems with differing views of political economy and the arc of history vied for influence in largely peaceful competition, recognizing the dangers of direct confrontation. It is significant that the major confrontation of the Cold War – the Cuban Missile Crisis – was the result of misperception, bureaucratic politics, and ignorance.

Partnership Deferred

Let me issue the proviso that I come here not as a critic of US foreign or domestic policy as expressed by the United States government. I fully support president Trump's domestic and foreign policy. That said, I offer these causes of the Unfortunate Circumstances that plague our relationship.

The US and Russia are natural geopolitical partners and yet, through Unfortunate Circumstance, this partnership has not emerged. I see 4 obstacles to a Russian-US *rapprochement*.

1) the *European Union* – Germany – which desires an economically and militarily weak Russia, 2) China, with its designs on becoming the pre-eminent Asian power in the mold of Imperial Japan's Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere of the 1930s; 3) US domestic political forces – the Democrat Party – have inflated Russian danger as an international bogeyman against President Donald Trump, and 4) Russia herself, with its authoritarian mechanistic foreign policy that is founded on suspicion, distrust of the west, and a petty tit-for-tat action-response dynamic with the US.

From the US side, the potential for international *rapprochement* has been sacrificed on the altar of domestic political expedience by the Democrat Party. From the Russian side, foolish national pride leads to a foreign military and economic policy that benefits no one.

This puts the US president in a difficult position of embracing bad foreign policy in not wishing to appear “pro-Russian.” It puts the Russian president in the unenviable position as a piece in the American domestic political game while striving to show strength internationally and at the same time deal with severe domestic economic problems exacerbated by – one can assert – unwarranted sanctions.

So how did we get here? Let's look back first at the salient characteristics of the Soviet-American relationship and then address our relationship today.

The Soviet-American Relationship

One characteristic of the Cold War was the de facto condominium established between the Soviet Union and the United States. The phrase “spheres of influence” entered the international political lexicon, and brinksmanship between Russia and the U.S. was pursued energetically. International brinksmanship has always played a role in the Great Game of Nations, and we can expect this to continue. Two powerful systems with differing views of political economy and the arc of history vied for influence in largely peaceful competition. Both countries recognized the dangers of direct confrontation. It is significant that the major confrontation of the Cold War – the Cuban Missile Crisis – was a mistake. It was the result of misperception, bureaucratic politics, and ignorance.

In the days of US-Soviet competition, “meddling” was a routine characteristic of the relationship. *Dezinformatsiya* was a game the Soviets played well. Soviet sponsorship of left-wing political causes in the United States and in Europe, was *de rigueur*. This was well-known in US intelligence circles. It was so blatant at times as to be hard to ignore and dismiss. Our own left-wing apologists for Soviet “meddling” during the Cold War were prevalent in the US press and political circles.

The United States, too, attempted to influence Soviet policy through Voice of America and Radio Liberty broadcasts into the Soviet bloc of countries. If we understand the links between domestic politics and

international impacts, perhaps we can work to ameliorate some of the more damaging repercussions of extremist sentiment currently on display. One of those links, today, is the notion of “meddling.”

The presidency of Donald Trump has introduced this new word into the international political lexicon, at least as it is used in the United States. That word is “meddling,” and its power is directly related to its vagueness – its very lack of precision provides U.S. domestic political interests with a strong lever against its duly elected government. “Meddling” has become a word that embodies all things anti-Russian and all things Anti-Trump.

Why engage in this kind of rhetoric? Why verbally attack Russia at every turn? Attacks on Russia have become a proxy for attacking President Trump. It’s easy to do. It makes Democrats look strong and patriotic. Democrats can appear tough on Russia and anti-Trump simultaneously. It carries no personal cost for the politicians. And it makes normal relations impossible.

It also arises from fear and ignorance of Russia and Russians. People in the West tend to be ignorant of Russian history and culture, and that ignorance plays out in public rhetoric meant for a U.S. audience.

What About This Russia?

People in the West generally tend to forget that Russia is not Switzerland or Belgium. Critics of Russia seem almost schizophrenic in that they warn of a resurgent nationalism and, perhaps, expansionist Russia that is diabolical in its scope, while on the other hand they dismiss Russia as economically and politically dysfunctional, based on GDP and unattractive demographic measures.

If we seek to capture the misalignment of Western perception of Russia, it can be captured in the simple phrase: Vladimir Putin is not the president of France – he has a job to do. An incredibly difficult job.

Back in 2000, President Putin inherited a welter of problems that, frankly, were either caused by or exacerbated by the West during the 1990s. I refer here to chronic non-payment to Russian workers, rampant 4,000 percent inflation that destroyed life savings, the confiscation by 20 oligarchs of Russia’s companies and natural resources that constituted the economic commanding heights, and threatening foreign policy moves by NATO’s expansion to Russia’s borders.

Meanwhile, politicians in the United States have used the “Russian Meddling” charge to mask the populist revolt in the United States against a Washington establishment that has become increasingly cosmopolitan at the expense of US national interest.

I think that we see both in Russia and in the United States a resurgent nationalism. This is manifested in a desire to seize control of the nation’s destiny rather than cede sovereignty to international bodies in far-off places that do not represent our national interests. The United States is becoming more nationalistic. Russia has become more nationalistic. Both countries look with skepticism on a world economic order that tilts in ways that disadvantage both countries.

Let’s look at Russia today ... from a foreigner’s perspective

First, Russian leadership. Russia’s leadership, I think most would agree, is authoritarian to a great extent. Russia cannot be characterized as a Western-style democracy by any stretch, managed democracy or otherwise. It is a multi-national empire whose russified national interests are aspirational. Russia is driven by a renewed sense of history and the desire for a place in the sun, a desire for respect as an equal in the mythical community of nations.

Russia is, however, more of a “democracy” than is, say, communist china. Regardless of the howl of U.S. critics. If we measure Russia by the standard of China, the press is freer, the universities are freer, the economy is freer, the political system itself demonstrates far more diversity than that found in China.

And Russia is understandable. Contrary to the wisdom of Winston Churchill, Russia is *not* a **riddle** wrapped in a **mystery** inside an **enigma**. Russia is understandable outside of ideology. Russia is understandable outside of ideologically driven behavior. Russia is understandable in the context of its own history. Russia is understandable on her own terms, for outsiders who have the patience and desire to discover it.

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Russian History as Perceived by a Foreigner

With that in mind, I venture a short trip into Russian history as an *explicans* for current Russian political behavior. The proviso, of course, is that this is only one foreigner's impressions of Russian history. This is my speculation on what impact that history exerts on the current situation that confronts us.

Back in 2005, I chatted with former prime minister Yegor Gaidar in Moscow about this very topic. It was the self-awareness of Yegor Gaidar who explicitly told me of this influence of Russian history. Prior to this, I knew of it only academically – the powerful influence of the nationalistic ideas of Nicholas I as articulated by Sergei Uvarov.

One need not search far to find evidence of the pervasive notion of the Uvarov troika of the *Ruskiya Ideya*, grounded in the autocracy, orthodoxy, and nationhood of Nicholas I. Perhaps even of Moscow as the Third Rome.

The concept of a state founded upon Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationhood sounds alien and even threatening to the Western ear. We in the West are steeped in the enlightenment values rooted in democracy, egalitarianism, and reason. It is for these very values that the West is viewed with suspicion and with disdain. This anti-Western strain in Russian history is widely expressed in the cultural and philosophical history of Russia, including its greatest works of literature. The novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Nikolai Gogol celebrate Russian uniqueness and the idea of Russia's special, almost mystical, path to development. Quite naturally, this path is set in opposition to Western ideals that emerged from the enlightenment.

For Dostoevsky ... turning towards "Russia" became his defining credo. ... Dostoevsky took delight in this "Russian Faith," this strange capacity to believe in miracles. It was the root of his nationalism and his messianic vision of the "Russian soul" as the spiritual saviour of the rationalistic West, which ultimately led him, in the 1870s, to write in the nationalist press about the "holy mission" of "our great Russia" to build a Christian empire on the continent.²

This perspective, of course, exemplifies nationalism and national sovereignty. Nationalism is not necessarily a bad thing. It *is* perceived as a bad thing by globalists, of course, because it butts against their agenda – the homogenizing of nation-states. The cession of sovereignty to faceless bureaucrats in faraway places. Places like Brussels.

Set against this weighty Russian history we have the aspirations of the Russian Westernizers. Russian intellectuals who look West and dream of a European-Style regime for Russia. I think of people like chess champion Garry Kasparov, a favorite of Westerners. He doesn't even live in Russia. *I am more Russian than Garry Kasparov.*

The westernizers in Russia have a hard task, and I do not envy them. Take, for instance, one of the early Westernizers – Yegor Gaidar. Gaidar was the architect of the ill-fated plan of economic "shock therapy" in 1993 which led to the infamous prediction that Russia's full transition to a market economy would take no longer than six months. When I talked with Gaidar in 2005 he was chastened in retrospect. He recognized that you could not import alien institutions into Russia. *More* would be necessary to transform Russia into something new and vibrant for the 21st Century. Here is what he told me:

My position is that, of course, history matters. And Russia has her own history. Economic models of course are connected with the particular historical circumstances and institutions of individual states. With regard to the importation of Western models, you cannot import the 500 years of British parliamentary history upon which the British economy is based. You cannot hope that things will work the same way. [1]

What is this impact of history on current Russia's foreign policy and its relation with the US? Who can say what that impact might be, let alone measure it? I have offered here a partial explanation of Russian behavior, as understood by one westerner. Let me end this excursion into a highly selective view of Russian history with a reference to Nikolai Gogol.

Gogol's divine vision was inspired by his champions, the Slavophiles, whose fantasy of Russia as a holy union of Christian souls was naturally attractive to a writer disturbed by the rampant individualism of modern society. [2, p. 312, 313]. The famous conclusion of Gogol's novel *Dead Souls* captures the spirit of Slavophilism and articulates well his view of Russian uniqueness. Russian exceptionalism means that Russia must chart her own course, and for Gogol the image of Russia as a wildly rocketing troika captures this sentiment:

², 312, 313.

And you, Russia – aren't you racing headlong like the fastest troika imaginable? The road smokes under you, bridges rattle, and everything falls behind. ... And where do you fly to, Russia? Answer me! ... She doesn't answer. The carriage bells break into an enchanted tinkling, the air is torn to shreds and turns into wind; everything on earth flashes past, and, casting worried, sidelong glances, other nations and countries step out of her way. [3]

And thus I end this excursion into a highly selective view of Russian history that offers a partial explanation of Russian behavior, as understood by one westerner.

Russian communism was stamped with the indelible marker of Russian history and nationalism, its love affair with authority and predictability. A love affair with instrumentality and a desire to understand and see cause-and-effect. A rejection of the Friedrich Hayekian notion of spontaneous order, the notion that a system can be self-organizing to yield optimal results. There *must* be an arbiter. There *must* be a monarch, a Tsar.

What I See Today

When I look at Russia, I do not see a rogue state led by a megalomaniac. I see a state in transformation with leadership that desires the good life for its people. To attribute purely evil motives to the Russian President is an even bigger mistake than to avert one's gaze from the authoritarian excesses of that president. It is simply false and destructive.

President Vladimir Putin is concerned with Russian domestic infrastructure, pensioners, employment, funding the social welfare bureaucracy, rooting out economic/political corruption at every level of government, reform of the tax system. Does he seek to preserve his power, the power of the vertical? Of course, but analyses that focus *only* on power consolidation to the exclusion of all else reveal nothing *but* power consolidation.

President Boris Yeltsin himself in 1996 said that Russians desire "a vertical power structure and a strong hand" and that a parliamentary government would result in indecisive talk rather than action. Whether this is mere political cant or if it is true in a majoritarian sense is up to Russian political culture to sort out. We can be certain that there is a cultural disposition to authoritarianism that is incorporated in the Russian Idea.

Our Relations are the Victim

Where does that leave us? It leaves us as victims. We are the victims, you and I, of Unfortunate Circumstances. These Unfortunate Circumstances are identifiable and they could have been avoided. From the US side, we see domestic politics influencing foreign policy and a recent history of overt US meddling in Russian political affairs.

The histrionic pronouncements of an ailing and addled John McCain, the hyper-political polemics of American Democrat party leaders, who have little to no demonstrated grasp of historical and geographic facts or of international political realities, and apparently, no desire for a normal relationship with Russia.

US covert and overt involvement in Russian politics for more than a decade set the stage for a Russian lockdown on foreign involvement in the country in the form of non-profits.

From the Russian side, saber-rattling and military brinkmanship. Russian foreign policy follows a tit-for-tat dynamic with respect to the US, mimicking various US actions – military, political, diplomatic. Much of Russia's military adventurism is gratuitous and serves no discernible national interest. Tit-for-tat administrative sniping has contributed to a general malaise and unnecessary isolation of Russia. Take the mundane issue of travel visas to visit Russia. Unlike India and China, which offer provisions for 10-year multiple entry visas, Russia has contrived a needlessly complex visa process modeled on that of the US for Russia, and the visa process changes in tit-for-tat fashion. This harms Russia in that hard-currency source of tourism is only a fraction of what it might be. Likewise, greater exposure to the Russian people for US citizens – citizen diplomacy – could not help but improve relations on the margins. Russian foreign policy also follows a tit-for-tat dynamic with respect to the US, responding in kind to various US actions in like fashion, military, political, diplomatic. Most apparently, we see the expulsion of US diplomats in numbers that match exactly those of Russian diplomats. In some cases, US rhetoric is itself utilized – witness President Putin's description of the Occupy Movement of 2011 as "American Spring."

Thus, I believe that these Unfortunate Circumstances conspire against us. They conspire against what should be a burgeoning, improving relationship. They conspire against a greater overt integration of Russia into European matters and normal relations.

The future between Russia and the United States has never been more contingent on US domestic political outcomes ... and on gratuitous Russian foreign political adventurism. Certainly, the best outcome is a de-escalation of tensions, the building of mutual respect, recognition of commonality of interests, greater bilateral economic and political cooperation, and a muting of the hot rhetoric that serves no purpose other than to further the careers of opportunistic politicians.

That concludes my talk, and I thank you for the opportunity to speak and for your courtesy in listening. Good luck to all and I wish the best for a successful conference.

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С. Риджли

АМЕРИКАНО-РОССИЙСКИЙ ПАРАДОКС.

РОССИЙСКО–АМЕРИКАНСКИЕ ОТНОШЕНИЯ В ЭРУ ПУТИНА И ТРАМПА

США и Россия являются естественными геополитическими партнерами, и тем не менее по ряду причин это партнерство не возникло. В настоящее время существует четыре препятствия на пути сближения России и США: 1) Европейский союз – Германия – который заинтересован в том, чтобы Россия была слабой в экономическом и военном отношениях; 2) Китай, который намерен стать ведущей азиатской державой по образцу Японии 30-х годов, в планы которой входило создание «Сферы совместного процветания Великой Восточной Азии»; 3) внутривосточные силы США – Демократическая партия – которые, создав образ опасной России, используют его для устрашения президента Дональда Трампа; 4) сама Россия с ее авторитарной прямолинейной внешней политикой, основанной на подозрениях и амбициях, во многом унаследованных из прошлого. Между тем внутривосточные силы США – Демократическая партия – все больше используют против президента Дональда Трампа образ России в качестве международного пугала. Таким образом, потенциал международного сближения был принесен в жертву внутривосточной целесообразности. В международных делах балансирование на грани войны всегда присутствовало в Великой Игре Наций, и мы можем ожидать, что так будет продолжаться и дальше. Если мы поймем связь между внутренней политикой и международными последствиями, возможно, мы сможем смягчить некоторые из наиболее разрушительных последствий радикальных действий и настроений. Эта статья и презентация нацелены именно на такое понимание ситуации, которая своими корнями частично уходит в российскую историю.

Ключевые слова: Советский Союз, Трамп, Путин, американо-российские отношения, Европейский Союз, Китай.

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