



Fear and Opportunity: Russia's Foreign Policy

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Give me a sense of what you think drives Russian foreign policy. To what extent is it a reflection of Russia's national interest, and to what extent is it a reaction to the U.S. and the rest of the world?

I think that the main driver is Russian national interests. You need to remember that this is a country with a centuries-old history; the sense of what it needs for security and prosperity has grown out of its historical experience. So there is a deep-rooted belief within the Russian political elite that they need secure borders, that they need to drive those borders out as far as possible to protect the Russian heartland, because Russia itself is located on a great Eurasian plain that has very few physical barriers to protect its borders. The historic imperative to drive that space out has created the sense among Russian leaders that they really need to maintain their preeminence over the area that we would today call the former Soviet states—those regions that have come into Russia's sphere of influence through a series of diplomatic maneuvers and military operations over the past three or four hundred years.

In addition, there's the sense that Russia needs—again, this is sensed within the political realm—that Russia needs to maintain firm control over the governmental apparatus as a way of ensuring that Russia can, when necessary, gather the resources that it needs to enforce and defend itself. It is against that historical background that current Kremlin leaders think about their needs. They look at the world through that prism, and they react.

What the United States does certainly has an impact. The expansion of NATO, and, more recently, the developments in Ukraine, were seen by the Kremlin as mounting threats that required an adequate response on the part of the Kremlin. So, national interests drive Russian foreign policy. They look at what other countries are doing, and they try to divine what the intentions of those countries are, and that determines the specific tactics that they implement in the pursuit of their national interests.

How rational is Russia's preoccupation with geographical security? It seems to dwell in a world of land warfare. This was always described as Stalin's motive for wanting a buffer zone in Eastern Europe after the Second World War. Certainly the czars to some extent wanted that, their territorial expansion was to some extent driven by this impulse. But in an era when the more likely threats are either asymmetric or from missiles, does it make sense to view the world through that kind of prism?

Well, the world has changed, and adjustments are necessary, but that doesn't mean that territory has lost all its meaning. Productive resources are still located on territory; threats arrive from specific territories. Distance still has some value in giving you time to react to certain events. If you take the nuclear situation, for example, obviously the advent of not only nuclear weapons, but ballistic missiles, and aviation all redefine the role of territory and borders. Historically it had

been necessary to defeat the other country's military in order to devastate a country. We now have the capability to devastate another country without doing that. But that doesn't mean that distance has lost all its value. You need time to react, to see what your options are in a situation like that. Even with the asymmetric threats that we face today, distance has some impact on the way various nonstate actors can operate—terrorist organizations, for example. Distance still creates a lengthened logistics line. Territory is still important, but you're absolutely right that the nature of the global environment, the nature of new technology, will compel everybody to rethink what the real requirements are for effective defense and how that technology and how the empowerment of nonstate actors begins to readjust the way we think about the threats we face.

Why does Russia matter to the United States? It is often said that Russia is a declining power, with a relatively weak economy, particularly in relation to the U.S. If Russia is determined to be a spoiler, why shouldn't the United States simply sit back and leave it to its own devices?

Russia remains important to the United States for the same reason it has been important to the United States for the past 50, 60, 70 years. First of all, it has the second-largest nuclear arsenal in the world, it has the world's richest endowment of natural resources, and it has a world-class scientific community. Importantly, it is also situated in the heart of Eurasia, which means that it borders and has the ability to project some power in the neighboring regions: Europe, East Asia, Central South Asia, and the Middle East, regions that are of clear strategic value to the United States.

There's a lot of talk about the country being in decline, but decline is relative. It plays itself out over a long period. And, with its capable military, intelligence services, and world-class diplomatic corps, Russia does have the ability to project power to a certain extent into areas that are important to the United States. That complicates U.S. foreign policy; it complicates the pursuit of our national interests. For those reasons, we cannot ignore Russia.

In addition, it's also clear that Russia is indispensable for certain national priorities. People tend to forget about the strategic balance. It hasn't been as pointed an issue for people as it was during the Cold War, but there are still thousands of nuclear warheads out there, and it's critical that we maintain a strategic balance in the world. Nuclear proliferation is also a threat to the United States. Because of its role in the development of nuclear weapons and its scientific expertise, Russia is an important player in limiting the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

We need to think not only about threats, but also about opportunities. If the United States and Russia can find a way to cooperate, Russia could be an important partner with us in helping to create a stable, flexible balance of power in Northeast Asia. We're concerned about the rise of China. Having Russia in the mix gives us another tool that we could use in order to manage that difficult relationship with China. We're seeing today that Russia is a player in the Middle East, and while we have radically different notions of what needs to be done at the current period, Russia could certainly be a partner with the United States in defeating terrorism and insuring stability in the Middle East if we were able to come to some sort of common understanding. In Europe, if we found a way to work with Russia, we would be able to focus our resources on issues that are important to the security and the prosperity of peoples in all those countries.

How does Russia fit into the overall context of U.S. foreign policy priorities, and does Russia's place in our foreign policy reflect its importance to American and global security?

It's clear that Russia cannot supply the place in American foreign policy that the Soviet Union once did. We're in a different global situation, and Russia fits into a different weight category. It's

never going to be the country that lies at the center of our foreign policy the way the Soviet Union did during the Cold War; it's not going to be the country through which we're going to look at all the other foreign policy challenges we face, the way we looked at the Soviet Union. It occupies a somewhat less of a priority, but I think if you consider the challenges the United States will face going forward—whether it be in strategic stability, regional security, nonproliferation, terrorism, global climate change, energy security, and so forth, Russia is still a significant player, even if the country is not as powerful as it once was, and even if it might be in secular decline.

Now, where does that fit in the priorities of the United States? I think we need to ask about specific administrations. Each administration, since the Cold War, came to office with the sense that Russia was an important player for the United States, and it came with expectations and hopes that they would be able to build a cooperative relationship. All three presidents—President Clinton, President George W. Bush, and President Obama—ultimately failed in that objective. I think we've reached a point now where, for the current administration, Russia does not occupy that high a priority. You can see it from the types of policies that this administration has implemented to deal with the crisis in Ukraine. There is a clear effort to isolate Russia diplomatically, to cut it off from the outside world economically, a decision made fairly early on after the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis. Day-to-day working relationships between the two channels have been cut off and channels of communication are kept to a minimum. The President has delegated Secretary of State John Kerry with maintaining the relationship with the Russians. He talks fairly frequently to his counterpart, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, but at other levels in the government there's very little relevant communication at this point. Unfortunately, Russia has been downgraded, and the extent of contact between our two countries does not really reflect the important role that Russia plays in our foreign policy, both for good and bad.

There are many areas that could have served as points of convergence for the U.S. and Russia: climate change, ISIS, some of the issues surrounding Europe's economic problems, energy. What is it that's become such an impediment to the improvement of relations or at least the building of stable relations? How do we overcome those impediments to cooperate on issues of mutual importance?

This is a complex issue. There has been a tendency over the past 25 years to simplify the problem, to make it appear as if things were easier than they were going to be. First and most important, we see today that there really is a deep difference between the two countries in our understanding of how the world should function and the basic rules of global order. If you think about the principles of global order, we might agree on what we would call them: sovereignty, legitimate use of force, national self-determination. We would have some differences over spheres of influence, but how we interpret each of those is radically different. The United States, like many of our western partners, takes a very expansive view of sovereignty, which includes not only rights, but obligations. If a state is not meeting its obligations to the international community, which in our mind means that it is either engaging in genocide or in crimes against its own people, then the international community has a right to intervene. Russia, on the other hand, takes a very traditional view of sovereignty, almost exclusively focused on rights, like the right against interference by outside powers in domestic affairs for example. As we scan other principles of global order, we see significant differences. That's a problem in building a sustainable cooperative relationship between our two countries.

We talk a lot about shared interests, about common threats, but I don't think that we look at these things in detail. A shared interest exists at a very abstract level. When you drill down on some of these issues, you see that we understand them in somewhat different ways. We think the resolution of these problems requires different means. Most important, we assign different priorities to these issues in our own national interests. Terrorism is a very good example. Everybody believes that we share a common interest in defeating terrorists. I think the problem is that

we think of terrorism in different ways. For Russians the whole terrorist threat is summarized by the problem in Chechnya, a group inside Russia that was fighting for independence from Russia through means that we would consider terrorism. That's somewhat different from the threat that the United States sees, which is really 9/11, an alien force from the outside coming to our shores with the intent of undermining and ultimately extinguishing the United States as a community of values. So they are very different views of what terrorism is, what the nature of that threat is. Very different ideas about how to go about combatting or countering terrorism emerge from that difference in perception. The Russians have continually focused on the need to support what they would consider legitimate governments against extremists, against separatists, against terrorists. You see that currently in the Russian effort to defend Assad in Syria, and arguing that that is the key priority if the ultimate goal is to defeat ISIS. The United States looks at it in a different way, and believes that it is the structure of a political society that creates opportunities for terrorists, that creates reservoirs of discontent that terrorists can exploit, and therefore the goal should be to promote legitimate governments that deal with social problems. So we think the solution in Syria really involves eliminating Assad, a brutal dictator, who, in a sense, is creating the recruits for ISIS.

Finally, if you're thinking about priorities, we do look at them in different ways. If you go and read Russian national security documents, they see things like the expansion of NATO, the U.S. anti-ballistic missile system, other methods states take to fortify themselves or expand their zone of security as the top concerns for Russian national security. The fight against international terrorism actually ranks fairly low in their sense of priorities. If you listen to the discussion in the United States, terrorism is a significant threat. Again, these perceptions grow out of different historical experiences, and different national ideologies. Russia has always existed in an environment where it has had to deal with external threats, largely coming from powerful states. The United States, on the other hand, has been one of the most secure great powers in the world because of our geographical location. We have friendly states to the north and south that don't compare to us in terms of potential power, and we have two great oceans that provide an element of protection, and so we don't see other states as being significant threats to us in our own environment. We tend to rank nonstate actors higher in terms of threats to our national security than the Russians do because they can operate across borders, and have greater capabilities thanks to developments in information technology and globalization.

The challenge in U.S.-Russian relations is getting all this aligned without denying some of the very real differences we have in the way we look at the world, and that, to my mind, requires a much more subtle diplomacy than we have pursued up to this point.

Let me make one final point. There is a danger in our talking about shared interests and common threats, in that when we do that we tend to create the impression that it ought to be easy to cooperate. And when we find out that it's much more difficult to cooperate than we anticipated, we don't naturally fall back on the different interpretations, different priorities, and so forth. The reaction tends to be that there's something wrong with the other side: "Why is it that the Russians can't see the nature of this threat? Why aren't they prepared to be really helpful in this?" And so, the talk of shared interests and common threats, instead of leading to greater cooperation, actually has the impact of eroding the very trust that you need in order to cooperate on serious issues.