During most of the second half of the twentieth century, the major focus of American foreign policy was on the international competition between the anticommunist coalition of states it led and the communist world—the Cold War. The two major pillars in the communist alignment of countries were also the world’s two largest countries: the Soviet Union as the world’s largest country in physical area and the People’s Republic of China as the world’s most populous state. This period effectively ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies in 1991. The Soviet Union has been succeeded by a reduced Russian Federation that struggled throughout the 1990s to reestablish itself and that has only emerged in the 2000s as a viable player in the international realm, whereas China has steadily progressed to major power status on the back of its vibrant, capitalist-infused economic expansion. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was the major concern of American foreign policy, with China occupying a somewhat lesser role; in the contemporary world order, those priorities are arguably reversed.

In the process of this transformation, the basic nature of relations between the United States and its principal Cold War enemies has changed in different ways with each country. What were relationships expressed almost exclusively in adversarial, military terms have become less confrontational, more congenial, and less easily represented primarily (or even largely) in military terms. The United States, Russia, and China are former adversaries, and much of the content of their relationships with one another is over the content and essence of post–Cold War relationships.

The process of change has not been easy for decision makers and especially for senior leaders who were either educated in the Cold War years or served in positions of authority or influence and whose frame of reference in the world was shaped by the mental constructs of Cold War thinking. This distinction may seem academic, even foreign, to the reader who was either not alive
or cognizant of the foreign policy environment of the late twentieth century and to whom these distinctions are little more than abstractions on thinking about the Russians or the Chinese, but they are quite real and influential to those who lived through the Cold War.

The Cold War affected decision makers’ perceptual framework in two distinct ways. First, the Cold War was a pervasive, compelling confrontation between the so-called “free world” bloc of countries led by the United States and the communist bloc led and controlled by Russia (as the Soviet Union) and, to a lesser extent, China. Managing that competition short of war was the first priority of foreign (and much domestic) policy before which all other priorities paled, and the United States developed an overall strategy for the competition—containment—that dictated U.S. policy toward other countries, international organizations like the United Nations, and even subnational groups like political parties or revolutionary movements within countries. When the communist threat collapsed, the overarching framework was rendered largely irrelevant, and American policy makers have struggled with little success to find a successor principle around which to anchor general foreign policy.

Second, a prime element of the Cold War environment was that it featured a competition between adversaries who thought of themselves as one another’s enemies. This coloration of the relationship created the presumption of adversarial enmity in all relations between the principal contestants. That mutual perception has been difficult to overcome and has left a legacy of suspicion among Americans, Russians, and Chinese that is part of the perceptual environment in which policy is crafted.

Relations with the two countries have evolved in different ways. Post–Cold War Russia has struggled internally and externally in trying to adjust to a new political and economic reality and a new place in the world. Central to the foreign policy element of that adjustment has been the attempt to reinvigorate Russian power and prestige, largely through economic means, to reassert Russian status as a great power. The bulk of American power has been used both to try to help shape Russian internal development in democratic, pro-Western ways and to try to ensure that Russia becomes a fully “normal” state internationally. It has only been partially successful, primarily because the Russian leadership clings tenaciously to visions of returning Russia to the ranks of the great powers, an aspiration that raises fears of a return to a more aggressive Soviet past.

Relations with China have been dramatically different. During the early Cold War period, between 1949 and 1972, the two countries did not acknowledge one another’s existence at the official level, and they have gone, in the period since, to becoming two of the world’s premier trading and economic partners. Much of this change reflects the priorities of the Chinese in the economic realm, particularly as the Chinese fashioned themselves into the world’s largest producer of consumer manufactured goods and unleashed their productivity on the world’s most gluttonous consumer, the United States. In the
process, China has emerged as an economic superpower challenging American preeminence in ways that some find troubling.

The nature of relations with these two countries is evolving differently as a result. Relations with Russia remain proper but cool and still have significant national security content over matters such as nuclear arms control (the New START) and the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2009. While some observers worry about a national security conflict with China, the primary concern is with the evolving economic relationship, and especially the growing indebtedness of the United States to the Chinese government and China’s projected status as the world’s largest economy.
On October 1, 1939, Sir Winston Churchill, in a broadcast in Great Britain on the same day that Nazi German armies entered the Polish capital of Warsaw, described Russia (then the Soviet Union) as “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” The statement, intended to capture the inscrutability of Russia and the difficulty of dealing with the Russians, was issued in the context of the German occupation of Poland, which had been at least partially endorsed by an agreement between the Soviets and the Germans on August 23, 1939—the so-called Nazi-Soviet or Molotov-Ribbentrop (named after the Soviet and Nazi foreign ministers who
had negotiated it) Non-Aggression Treaty, one of the provisions of which divided Poland between them. In his radio address, Churchill, who would lead Great Britain through the war that had begun when the Germans initially crossed into Poland on September 1, 1939, said of the Soviets that they had “pursued a policy of cold self-interest in Poland.” The Soviet Union, of course, later became an ally of the West in the war, playing a crucial role in the eventual overthrow of the Axis regimes.

The 1939 incident and description of Russia at the time rings nearly as true today as it did then in terms of describing the evolution of Russia and American relations with the world’s physically largest country. Through history, there has always been a dynamic tension between the United States and Russia that goes back to the founding of the American republic. Russia was, for instance, a member of the Armed Neutrality of European states that opposed the British during the American Revolution and that at least implicitly provided assistance to the fledgling American colonies. San Franciscans, on the other hand, will tell you that the real purpose of issuing the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 was to warn the Russians, who were at the time establishing a fur-trading colony in San Francisco Bay (presumably including on Russian Hill) to desist in their colonization of what would become part of the expanding United States. Collaboration between the two countries during World War II quickly turned into the encompassing, potentially civilization-threatening Cold War that dominated international relations and their bilateral relations between the late 1940s and 1991, when the Soviet Union imploded and ceased to exist.

The Russian Federation, the main successor to the Soviet state, has been struggling to develop an identity and new place in the world ever since, including a tumultuous, even torturous evolution away from communism during the balance of the 1990s to a petroleum-propelled resurgence in the 2000s. The United States has cheered the positive side of this evolution, including the semblance of market economics and at least the traces of political democratization, and has viewed more cautiously the recent centralization of less democratically inspired politics within Russia. For many purposes, that development remains behind the veil of Western, and specifically American, full understanding: Russia indeed remains the multilayered complex of riddle, mystery, and enigma that Churchill described over 70 years ago.

American foreign policy toward Russia has reflected both the changing circumstances of Russia, its place in the world, and disagreement about how to deal with the Russians. Russia itself has been on a political roller coaster ride, both internally and in its foreign relations. The Russian Empire was part of the classic European balance of power that was shattered by World War I, and during the interwar years, the communist Soviet state that replaced the empire struggled to establish itself and to achieve acceptance as a major power in the international order, a historic goal of Russian affairs that continues to this day. The final decimation of the old international order in the flames of World War II left the Soviets, along with the United States, as the sole remaining global powers of the postwar period, and their Cold War confrontation dominated the international order for 40 or more years. The Soviets’ status as
an unquestioned superpower was shattered by the death of the Soviet state of which Russia was the center, and the Russians have been attempting to reestablish their importance in the global order ever since, a prospect that Americans view with divided enthusiasm.

Russia was, and still remains, one of the most economically and politically undeveloped of major powers. Dating back to the tsarist days, Russia has vacillated between periods of embrace of or isolation from the West and its political and economic ideas, choosing to assimilate in some ways at different times and eschewing Western forms or influences at others, and that pattern remains today. One of the critical flaws that helped lead to the collapse of operational communism was its inability to compete with the West, and strategies going back to Tsar Peter the Great in the early eighteenth century have attempted to incorporate parts of the West (most notably technology, as described later in the chapter) while retaining the distinctiveness of Russia in the process. Some aspects of the West, notably political democratization, have historically been alien to Russian development as a state, and the debate within Russia about how much of what the West calls development to adopt remains central.

Westerners, including Americans, have witnessed this vast Eurasian power with alternating levels of hope and suspicion. Europeans, with a longer and more intimate relationship with Russia than the Americans, have tended to treat Russia with more suspicion and caution. Americans, on the other hand, have applauded more enthusiastically when Russia has shown more active signs of westernization such as the apparent democratization that emerged in the 1990s under Boris Yeltsin, and they have consequently been more disappointed when such efforts seem not to achieve a broad-based emulation of Western democracy, as they appear not to have under the tandem leadership of Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev. Partly as a result, the domestic politics of U.S.–Russian relations are based in a schism between those optimists who see and hope to achieve a movement of Russia more intimately into the Euro-Atlantic order (the apparent goal of the Obama administration) and skeptics who reject the idea of Russian change and believe the relationship must remain largely framed in adversarial terms (the basic position of many within the George W. Bush administration).

These observations set the context within which to frame the discussion of U.S.–Russian relations. They are, as the subtitle suggests, historically enigmatic, fluctuating from periods of apparently greater comity and cooperation to periods of equally great despair about their present and future direction. It has become commonplace to describe the relationship as being at a critical “crossroads,” but that description has been used so often as to border on being hackneyed. It is a complex relationship, as is probably fitting for two large and complex countries, each of which spans a continent physically and each of which has been and, at least in some respects remains, central to international relations.

Current Russian relations with the United States are somewhere between the poles of basic comity and conflict. The major theme of those relations currently hinges on the resurgence of Russia as a major power and how the
United States should deal with and attempt to influence that growth in Russia’s place around the table of countries within a framework of less encompassing ties between the two countries because, as Shleifer and Treisman put it, “Today, Russia and the United States share few interests and even fewer priorities.” The major engine of Russian reassertion of its place has been its emergence as a major energy supplier to the world, but everyone, including its leadership, basically understands that the energy stimulus cannot long endure and that Russia must diversify to compete. In its quest for development, it has been led by two leaders in the twenty-first century, Putin and Medvedev. Putin is an emblematic incarnation of the Churchillian vision of Russia, a powerful yet inscrutable figure originally plucked from obscurity within the Russian intelligence community by Boris Yeltsin but clearly obsessed with a return to Russian greatness and displaying a lesser commitment to democratization than westerners would prefer. Medvedev seems a more pliant, positive individual, but it is unclear how independent his power base is from Putin’s and whether optimistic depictions of him are soundly grounded or the result of not-atypical Western wishful thinking. The 2012 Russian presidential elections shed some light on this subject; the one clear outcome is that Putin remains the senior partner in the relationship. In the meantime, Russia and the West remain tentative, and partially suspicious, partners.

RUSSIA: A SKETCH

Russia is a difficult, if not impossible, place to typify in simple, broad-brush terms. The Russian Federation that emerged from the rubble of the disintegrated USSR is physically the world’s largest country, with a land area that spans the Eurasian area; as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, its physical area was over 8.5 million square miles (by contrast, the land area of the United States is 3.8 million square miles), and even after the splintering of the USSR into 15 independent states, the Federation retains 6.6 million square miles (approximately 1.8 times the size of the United States). Despite this physical vastness, however, Russia has historically had trouble feeding itself, with only 7 percent of its land considered arable; the rest is either too cold or too dry to sustain agricultural production.

The Russian enigma runs throughout any description one may draw of the country. Russia has existed as an entity since the thirteenth century, but much of it was under Mongol rule for two centuries, and the Russian Empire did not emerge as a major world actor until the eighteenth century. Although formally a part of the European balance of power during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Russian Empire was always considered something of an outsider among the royal courts of Europe, part Asian as well as part European, and the poorest, most backward member of the system. One of the consequences of World War I (in which Russia performed poorly and eventually sued for peace) was the overthrow of the imperial government and its replacement by the Bolshevik communists under V. I. Lenin; after the war, the other countries of Europe sought to isolate and exclude Russia in a “quarantine” they
hoped would result in curing Russia from the “disease” of communism. The treatment, of course, did not succeed, and the Soviet Union (as the USSR was known in shorthand terms) emerged alongside the United States as one of the two major participants in the Cold War competition that dominated world politics from the late 1940s until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The implosion of the Soviet Union is one of the most remarkable political events of the twentieth century and is a unique event in world politics. While Russia has endured for nearly 800 years, the Soviet experiment lasted less than 75 years from the beginning of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 until December 26, 1991, when its dissolution was formally announced by the government of Mikhail S. Gorbachev. What is remarkable is not that the Soviet state dissolved or that a regime and form of government was replaced; both have happened in the international realm. What was remarkable is that the process of dissolution of the Soviet Union occurred peacefully, with scarcely a hint or threat of violence. The result was that the Soviet Union—the inheritor of the Russian Empire that included most of the lands the empire had conquered and annexed—reverted to 15 independent states, of which Russia is the largest and most prominent.

The Russian reaction to this dissolution has been ambivalent. The Communist Party that had ruled for the duration of the Soviet experience has drastically declined (although some of its members have resurfaced in other guises), and residual longing for a return to the Soviet system is minimal. At the same time, the breakup has meant that physical Russia is diminished as a world actor, a situation about which there is considerable regret among many Russians. Vladimir Putin, who has characterized the demise of the Soviet Union as the most tragic world event of the twentieth century, is the strong symbol of this nostalgia.

The long-term impact of the breakup of the Soviet Union has been to leave Russia as a lesser state on the world stage than it was during its most glorious run as a Cold War superpower, and it has been the major theme of Russian foreign policy to find ways to reassert Russian influence and power in the world. How this can be accomplished, and how its pursuit should be viewed and aided or impeded, has been a major part of evolving American foreign policy toward its former major adversary in the world.

Russia in the World
The major dynamic of Russia as a part of the international system over the past half century has been akin to a pendulum swing, where one extremity of the swing is toward greater power and prestige and the other is a decline in both power and prestige. A half-century ago, the Soviet Union was one of the two great powers in the Cold War, and it was a state that seemed to many people around the world to be on the ascendancy in its competition with the capitalist world led by the United States. The peak of Soviet power, it now appears in retrospect, probably occurred somewhere around 1970, when by measures like nuclear weapons explosive power the Soviet Union surpassed
the United States. By the early 1970s, however, tiny fissures began to appear in the façade of Soviet power, primarily in the form of the beginnings of economic decline that would ultimately contribute mightily to its decline and collapse. These problems were largely unnoticed or unappreciated either within or outside the Soviet Union, contributing to the utter surprise with which the implosion was received at the end of the 1980s. After the Soviet Union voted itself out of existence in 1991, the Russian Federation witnessed the continuing decline of former Soviet power, reaching its nadir at the end of the decade. The 2000s have seen the pendulum swing back to a larger role for Russia in the world.

All this change was both unprecedented and unanticipated. Seeing Russia adorned with vast nuclear and conventional military power, few in the West considered the possibility that the Soviet Union was really a Potemkin village—a false front—behind which the bases of Soviet power were slowly but inexorably crumbling. As is now known (but was not then), Soviet decline was well underway by the early 1970s in the form of economic decline, what Soviet economists later called “the era of stagnation.” What that meant was that the socialist economy of the world’s largest country simply quit growing and, by most measures, fell into decline in the early 1970s, progressively affecting the ability of the Soviet Union to compete across the board. The conditions that would undermine the Soviet state were exacerbated by the disastrous Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989 and, along with the increasingly visible nonperformance of the Soviet economy, convinced Communist Party general secretary Gorbachev that the Soviets could no longer afford to compete with the West but rather needed to end the competition and join more actively the world system.

These decisions, collectively known as glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring), included democratization and a nonconfrontational foreign policy known as “new thinking” and were intended to fine-tune and improve, not to destroy, the Soviet socialist system, as Gorbachev explained in his 1987 book Perestroika. Their effect, however, was to open dissent, criticism, and ultimately demands for dismantling the structure of the Soviet Union. The process became public and ineluctable in 1989, as the countries of the Soviet orbit in Eastern Europe overthrew communist regimes and renounced their affiliation with the Soviet Union. They were soon joined by member republics of the USSR, who declared their intentions to secede from the union. When Moscow did not respond to stop the process, it continued. With the last tick of the clock in 1991, the Soviet hammer-and-sickle flag came down from atop the Kremlin, replaced on New Year’s Day, 1992, by the Russian tricolor.

Russia was sent reeling by the experience. The shaky Soviet economy went into a freefall as it attempted to adopt Western values and forms with essentially no preparation for the transformation. The Soviet Union, for instance, was largely a noncash economy, meaning it had neither an efficient banking system nor the means to handle capital or capital transfer. The country also had no central bank to regulate the economy, which meant there was no reliable mechanism through which outside economic assistance could be made
available to the Russians, for instance. In these circumstances, the black market thrived, and the Russian mafia emerged as a major economic participant and source of lawlessness within a chaotic society. In these circumstances, living conditions worsened in the Federation, and about the only bright spot to which Russians and outsiders could turn was that the country was able to hold reasonably honest elections at the federal level.

This reduced situation was enormously embarrassing to the proud, status-conscious Russians, and returning their country to its place among the first ranks of world powers was a common aspiration of most Russians at the millennium’s turn. The figure who seized upon this desire and rode it to political power was Putin, a former career KGB officer whose name has become synonymous in the West with Russian resurgence and even Russian resistance to the West. His rise has coincided with and been propelled by some erosion of political democracy as the Russian condition is improved and, as Laqueur puts it, “Putin’s strength [is that] the Russian people prefer stability to democracy.”

The engine of Russian resurgence has been economic revival, and the fuel for that engine has been the emergence of Russia as a major energy exporting country, joining what New York Times political correspondent Thomas L. Friedman terms the ranks of “petrolist” countries—states whose economy is closely tied to energy exports and where energy revenues are used by the state effectively to buy political support from the population. Much of the problem that Russia poses for American foreign policy is how intricately tied the Russian future is to a form of economic development that is also not conducive to Russia’s emergence as a modern democratic partner.

The Physical Setting

The Russian condition is at least partially defined by its geographic characteristics and by its demographics. The most notable geographic features include the physical size of Russia and the natural resources within its boundaries. The demographics include an ethnically diverse population, particularly along its extremities, and a declining population among citizens of the Russian Federation.

As noted, Russia has the world’s largest land area (Canada is second, the United States third). It physically spans Eurasia from the Baltic Sea in the west to the Pacific Ocean in the east. The Arctic Ocean essentially defines its northern boundary. It also borders on 13 different states. Its longest boundaries are with four countries: Kazakhstan* (6,846 km), China (3,645 km), Mongolia (3,485 km), and Ukraine* (1,576 km). Other countries bordering on Russia are Azerbaijan*, Belarus*, Estonia*, Finland, Georgia*, Latvia*, Lithuania*, North Korea, and Norway. Most of these countries (those noted with an asterisk) are former republics of the Soviet Union, who were former parts of the Russian Empire or were otherwise forcefully added to the Soviet Union and are considered by the Russians as the “near abroad,” which the Russians now like to claim are part of its “sphere of privileged interests” (a euphemism for sphere of influence). Others include other former or current communist countries not
part of the Soviet Union, and two Scandinavian states. What these states share is some level of animosity toward Russia. It has been said that Russia is surrounded by richly earned enemies, and it is not a bad description. Being ringed by potential adversaries adds to the Russian compulsion with security matters.

The vast Russian territory provides both advantages and limitations. As already noted, climate leaves only a fraction of Russia arable, and the country struggles to become agriculturally self-sufficient (a priority of the Medvedev government). An additional burden of Russian geography and climate is that Russia has always lacked warm-weather ports (port facilities that are not blocked by ice for part of the year), and it has been a geopolitically necessary priority of historic Russian foreign policy to try to gain permanent access to warm-water ports both for naval and commercial purposes. At the same time, Russia is richly endowed with mineral and energy resources. The latter have provided the basis for considerable Russian economic revival, although they are also a double-edged sword.

Russia has emerged in the twenty-first century as the world’s second largest exporter of petroleum and as the world’s leading supplier of natural gas. According to 2009 figures, Russia exports almost five million barrels of oil per day (bbl/day), ranking it behind only Saudi Arabia as a world supplier. The overwhelming importance of oil and gas to the economy is demonstrated by Shleifer and Treisman’s observation that “hydrocarbons fund about one-third of the Russian government’s budget.”

Russian demographics is a sword that hangs over the country’s future. The population of Russia according to July 2010 estimates in the CIA World Factbook stood at 139,300,000, making Russia the ninth most populous country in the world. That gross number is down from even two years earlier (when it stood at a little over 140 million), and the demographic time lines are all negative. The population growth rate (birth rate minus death rate) is −0.465 percent, and life expectancy in Russia is actually in decline at 66.16 years, which is 161st in the world. This decline exists despite a Russian medical system that is far better than most other countries that have short life expectancies, and the figures are in worse decline for ethnic Russians (who comprise 80 percent of the country’s population) than it is for other groups. Moreover, the mortality rate is not compensated for by an increased fertility rate, as Eberstadt explains: “By 2025, Russia is projected to have just 6.4 million women in their twenties, 35 percent fewer than today.” To maintain population at its current levels, women generally need to produce 2.1 offspring each—in the Russian demographic situation, this smaller cohort of women would have to have an average of four children each, when the fertility rate is currently 1.5 children per woman.

The result is that the population of Russia is becoming both smaller and less Russian, with potentially dire consequences. Eberstadt summarizes the short- to medium-term problem: “Russia today is in the grips of an eerie, far-reaching, and in some ways historically unprecedented population crisis. Since the end of the Soviet era, the population of the Russian Federation has fallen by nearly 7 million, [and] life expectancy at birth in Russia looks to be lower
today than it was four decades ago.” In the longer term, the problem could be even worse. Ukrainian anti-Russian politician Yuliya Tymoshenko, for instance, predicts that “Russia’s population will shrink even more dramatically, perhaps to below 100 million by the middle of the twenty-first century.” In a RAND study, DaVargo and Grammich concur, arguing the Russian population could shrink by one-third by 2050.

Thanks both to its size and historically low levels of development, the Russian Federation has an impressive array of natural resources, and especially energy resources, that it has been able to exploit to fuel the economic resurgence associated with the Putin years (notably his presidency from 2000 to 2008). Even the impressive expansion of the energy sector, however, has had costs that shadow the future of the Federation, in at least three ways.

The most obvious problem is that the rate of exploitation of energy resources is not indefinitely sustainable and must be augmented for overall economic growth to occur. As noted, Russia is the world’s second largest exporter, but it has only the world’s eighth largest known reserves of petroleum (at 79 billion barrels). Continuing exploitation at current rates means Russian reserves will be depleted more quickly than those of other petroleum exporters, meaning the “oil card” can only be played in the way it has been in the past decade for so long. The problem is not so severe with natural gas, a commodity of which Russia has the world’s largest reserves by a comfortable margin.

The second problem, arising from the first, is that the Russian economy is particularly vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the world economy. As the countries of the world slipped into the grip of the economic downturn in 2009, for instance, the GDP growth rate for a Russian economy dependent on resource export was ranked at 206th in the world at a –7.9 percent level. The reason, for course, was that the slowdown of economic activity was accompanied by a concomitant decline in demand for raw resources, including energy resources, that provide the motor for things like manufacturing. The result is to accentuate the problems of the Russian economy. As Laqueur puts it, “the country’s municipal infrastructure is very poor, and its dependence on the export of oil, gas, and other raw materials is undesirable and, in the long run, dangerous.” This problem was most dramatically demonstrated during 1998, when world prices for petroleum fell to $9 a barrel and the Russian economy basically imploded.

The third, and derivative, problem is that this dependency suggests that, like many other countries whose economies are essentially like those of countries in the developing world, the Russians are not entirely the masters of their own economic fate and are structurally, and in terms of the quality of life, still far behind the other countries with which they want to be compared. The situation has improved greatly since the 1990s, but even with the growth of Russia to being the world’s eighth largest economy, per capita GDP still stands at $15,100, about a third that of the United States and ranking only 79th in the world. Despite impressive growth, especially in the middle of the 2000s, Russia still remains economically outside the mainstream of world powers.

The Russian physical endowment thus both helps accelerate and impede Russian desires to reemerge among the world’s great powers. Things like Russian
rates of dependency upon and exploitation of natural resources and its demographic time bomb provides a frame around understanding and dealing with the Russians, as does the unique evolution of Russia as a political entity.

Russia as a Unique State

Dealing with Russia is indeed like unpeeling Churchill’s onion because the Russian experience has been unique among world states. The history of the Russian experience has produced a culture that is distinctly Russian and that presents different challenges to the world than do other states.

The overwhelming theme of Russian history has been expansion. What is now Russia began as a political entity in the ninth century, and the predecessor to modern Russia began around Muscovy (Moscow) in the thirteenth century as part of the process of expelling the Mongols from Russian soil. In the centuries that followed, Russia became the Russian Empire, pushing outward from its base west of the Urals into Asia and south into the Caucasus region. Although the Russian Empire was a victim of the First World War, the Soviet state that rose from its ashes maintained control of the old empire and expanded its holdings into places like the Baltic states on the eve of World War II. As the Cold War congealed in the second half of the 1940s, Russia’s sway was effectively extended into Eastern Europe in the form of communist satellite states that were coerced into the Warsaw Pact. In this period, Russian/Soviet power reached its territorial apex, achieving the territorial control of its most ardent xenophobes. The physical dimensions of that Russian expansion remain part of the legacy of which Russians are most proud, and Russian resurgence has as a subtext the desire to reassert Russian domain, a fear that unsettles its relations with its neighbors and former vassals.

The wind of expansionist change has blown in both directions for the Russians, as one consequence of the breakup of the Soviet Union (which many observers consider to have been an empire) meant the dismantling of imperial lands garnered, normally reluctantly, from the various peoples who escaped that domain. One of the results of that uneven change has been, in Laqueur’s view, to influence the political character of the people. “Contemporary Russia,” he maintains, “is a conservative country. The Russian people have witnessed too much negative change in the past 100 years.”

In addition, the breakup of the empire has created unique problems for Russia and its relations with the rest of the world. One of the artifacts of the Empire and Soviet Union was “russification,” the attempt to impose Russian language, culture, and thinking in the conquered territories, and one of the major instruments of that emphasis was to encourage the development and growth of ethnic Russian communities in the additions to Russia. Shleifer and Treisman report that 16 million ethnic Russians remain in the near abroad. The Russians tend to think of non-Russians within and outside the Federation (but who are part of the old Soviet state) in two categories. The former Soviet states that are now independent are known in Russia as the “near abroad,” and they are the territories which Russia claims as a “sphere of special interests” that is
partly aimed at protecting Russian minorities in these countries. Georgia, with whom Russia went briefly to war in 2008 and which is a continuing source of tension between Russia and the United States, is an example discussed in the next section. Within the Federation, areas with a large non-Russian, largely Muslim population, mostly in the North Caucasus, are referred to as the “internal abroad,” according to King and Menon, and pose an internal terrorism threat that is one of Russia’s major concerns in the world. Chechnya is a prime example of this problem, and the January 2011 suicide bombing in Moscow’s major commercial airport is evidence of its continuing status as a problem.

Part of the legacy of expansionism has been Russia’s on-again, off-again flirtation with the West. Russia is, after all, partly European and partly Asian, which is part of its unique heritage and a distinction many Russians view with pride. At the same time, the most powerful states over the last 300 years have been Western, and much of their power has derived from a distinctly Western view of the world, including technology and other causes of material advancement. Going back at least as far as Tsar Peter the Great, the Russians have flirted with westernization as a way to overcome the historic backwardness of the Russian society. These flirtations have alternated with Russian rejection of westernization as destructive of Russian uniqueness, resulting in a paradox for the Russians historically and today pointed out by Shevtsova: “Russia is trying to copy the West while remaining anti-western in essence.” Shevtsova further asserts that this dynamic underlies efforts by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev toward the West, which she described as “a mere reiteration of the Russian tradition of using technological innovation from the West to strengthen the old state.”

The conservative bias of Russian history is further exemplified by Russian attitudes toward politics at odds with those of the West. Before the demise of the Soviet state, Russia had essentially no experience with democracy except for a brief interlude between the fall of the Empire and the success of the Bolshevik Revolution. Prodemocratic sentiment has been restricted to the intelligentsia, much of which has been an exile community, and although there is support for a move toward democracy among many Russians, it is one of several competing values to which the Russians aspire. Their ambivalence and willingness to reject democracy in return for greater security, for instance, has been a major element in the success of Putin in gaining and maintaining influence despite his cavalier attitudes toward Western-style democracy, a concept he regularly dismisses as inappropriate for Russia, to the discomfort of Western observers who want to see Russia become a more “normal” (by which they mean politically democratic) state.

U.S.–RUSSIAN RELATIONS
The context within which U.S.–Russian relations develops is the old Cold War competition, a 40-plus-years relationship that both colors the nature of how the two countries view one another and conditions the hopes and expectations they have about future relations. The net effect of the Cold War experience
was a legacy of distrust and suspicion about how Russia and the United States do and can interact that, when combined with inherent characteristics of Russia, make positive change in relations difficult to create and to maintain.

The Cold War was an extraordinarily intense, encompassing international experience. The United States and the Soviet Union emerged from World War II as the only major countries with significant residual power, although their conditions were quite different. The United States suffered some of the comparatively lightest casualties among major combatant countries (a little over 405,000), and its economy was revived by turning a Great Depression-era economic system into “the arsenal of democracy.” If anything, the United States was actually strengthened by the war and emerged from it as the world’s most powerful state by a degree probably unparalleled except in the immediate wake of the Cold War in the 1990s. By contrast, the Soviet Union suffered the war’s heaviest human losses (estimated at nearly 20 million, more or less equally divided among military and civilian casualties), and the devastation of the Soviet countryside and economic infrastructure by marauding Nazi armies was enormous. What the Soviets had at the end of the war was a huge Red Army that it did not demobilize and that became the instrument of Soviet power in the postwar world.

The Cold War competition was about how the postwar world would be organized, and it had both political and military aspects. The traditional members of the European balance of power were either defeated (e.g., Germany, Italy) or were exhausted by the war (e.g., Britain, France) and could no longer become the focal points for arranging power. Instead, the world went from multipolar (several independent sources—or poles—of power and influence) to bipolar (only two major states), and the question was how the United States and the Soviet Union would organize the international order. The two possibilities were an international order on which they both agreed and could manage peaceably and cooperatively and a world in which they would disagree and which they could not manage cooperatively. The latter prospect prevailed in the form of the Cold War.

The political source of the divide between the two giants was their philosophical worldview, about which both were quite evangelical. The American model stressed political democracy and capitalist economics as its central values, whereas the Soviet Union adhered to a model of communist authoritarianism and socialist economics. In philosophy and practice, the two views were almost entirely antithetical and irreconcilable. It was impossible to construct a vision of world organization that comparatively encompassed both. Since both were evangelical, they sought to spread their beliefs, particularly to countries in Africa, Asia, and part of Latin America that were emerging from colonial status to being independent states. At the political level, the competition came to be principally about how much of the world map could be turned “blue” (pro-Western) or “red” (communist). As the competition was carried out around the world, it was a contest between communism and anticommunism.

The most visible and dangerous part of the Cold War was its military aspect. For over 40 years, the United States and the Soviet Union faced off
against one another with large, lethal armed forces in a state of perpetual readiness for the “balloon going up” (the onset of war). Both sides retained large forces (including the forces of allies) along either side of the Iron Curtain (as Churchill described the barbed-wire fence dividing communist and non-communist Europe) as “forces in being” to fight the initial battles of that war, should it come. Away from the central battle zone of Europe, both sides used various forms of mutual defense arrangements to arm surrogates in countries willing to pronounce some allegiance toward one or the other.

The pinnacle of this military confrontation, of course, was the existence of nuclear arsenals on either side that increased in lethal capacities as time went by. By the 1970s, when that competition arguably reached its zenith, both sides had over 10,000 strategic nuclear warheads (weapons aimed at one another’s territory) atop ballistic missiles against which there was, and arguably still is, no effective defense (discussed below). While the employment of these nuclear arsenals could easily lead to the mutual disintegration of both states and thus made essentially no sense, the fear that somehow nuclear war could be the ending of the Cold War was a pall hanging over both and created a set of perceptions about the other that has proven extraordinarily difficult to modify.

Two other points about the atmosphere created by the Cold War are worth noting. First, the nuclear shadow created a sense of enormous fatalism, certainly in the American population, during the darkest days of the Cold War—especially the 1950s and 1960s. The perception became widespread that it was not a question of whether there would be a nuclear holocaust but when. Within the United States, Americans debated the question in terms of “better red than dead” (surrendering to avoid a nuclear war) or “better dead than red” (whether it was preferable to go down in a flaming war) as people flocked to see apocalyptic movies like On the Beach or Dr. Strangelove. Hidden within these debates was the implicit assumption that a thoroughly malevolent, even evil, Soviet leadership was behind all these concerns.

The second perception added to the fatalism: the idea that the competition was perpetual, a protracted conflict in the words of Yugoslav dissident Milovan Djilas. There were, in the popular and most informed public views, only two ways the Cold War could end: peacefully or through a nuclear hot war that would destroy both countries. The possibility of a peaceful ending was viewed as so far-fetched as to be hopelessly naïve and unrealistic, and that meant the only way to avoid nuclear war was to keep the Cold War alive. The Cold War, in other words, was viewed as perpetual.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, however, it ended. The Soviet Union ceased to exist, and the question was what that might mean for the United States and the rest of the world. Initial reactions were sometimes hysterical. Within the George H. W. Bush administration, for instance, one important faction argued that the United States should do everything it could to save its mortal enemy because the alternative of a world without the Soviets would be so much more dangerous and unpredictable as to offer a worse prospect than “saving” the Cold War opponent and structure. Once that process began, however, it proved inexorable. From the Soviet ashes, the Russian Federation
appeared, and American policy has been trying to adapt to this changed reality without consensus for the 20 years since.

Old habits and old perceptions die hard. The Russians as Soviets were America’s dire enemy for so long that it has been difficult to countenance the possibility that relations between them can be based on a footing other than one of basic enmity and competition. When Russia was prostrate in the 1990s, the question was less urgent than it is today facing a resurgent Russia. In the last decade of the twentieth century, the problem was how to avoid total Russian collapse. Since the turn of the millennium, the concern has turned back to the possible need to control a resurgent Russian foreign policy and methods for doing so.

The current debate over dealing with the Russians can be depicted in terms of three overlapping areas of policy interaction, which are presented in no particular order of importance or priority. All are influenced by the Cold War experience. From the American vantage point, the question is one of Russian sincerity and trustworthiness when mutually cooperative outcomes are sought. From a Russian viewpoint, each is affected by a basic distrust of the United States honed over a period of four decades and by the degree to which American motives are influenced by the desire to stunt the reassertion of what the Russians believe to be their proper place in the world.

The first concern is the nature of economic and political development in Russia, and pits an American first priority on democratization and making Russia a more “normal” state against a Russian emphasis on returning Russia to the ranks of world powers. The second is bilateral security between the two countries in a post–Cold War environment and centers on the remaining symbol of the confrontation, the nuclear arsenals and their control. The third is the direction of Russian behavior in its own region, a question largely of how it deals with the near and internal abroad, as well as Russia’s evolving role in the global system, including Russia’s potential association with European and Atlantic institutions like the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

The Future of Russian Development

The failure of the Soviet Union left its successor state, the Russian Federation, without either a political or economic framework from which to fashion itself. When President Gorbachev declared the end of the political monopoly of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) as part of his reforms, the long-term victim was the authoritarian, even totalitarian, political system that had been part of the Leninist legacy. When the Russian Federation was declared and its new president, Boris Yeltsin, was elected, the path seemed set toward democratization, and at least presidential elections have been fairly held since then. The idea that the process would lead to an orderly movement to Western-style political democracy was, however, sidetracked somewhat under the rule of Putin (who argues, somewhat vaguely, for a distinctive, Russian-style democracy that is somehow different from Western forms). Moreover, Putin’s
background is in the old Soviet KGB and the Russian version of that intelligence organization, the FSB, hardly citadels of democratic activism. According to Soldatov and Borogan, “When Putin came to power, he offered current and former officers from Russia’s security services the chance to move to the upper echelons of power.” They argue this presents a barrier to the emergence of democratic practices because “the security services have concluded that their interests, and those of the state they are guarding, are above the rule of law.” President Medvedev, who was elected in 2008 (with Putin as his prime minister), is a more public advocate of democratization, but optimism about his ability to cause a movement toward more open rule is tempered by how effective he may be and how closely his prospects are tied to Putin.

Socialist economics was the other victim of the demise of Soviet communism, and Russia has struggled, with only moderate success, to make the transition to a market-based economy. Part of the problem was the enormous inefficiency of the Soviet economy (one of the factors leading to its demise was its inability to compete globally or even to satisfy internal demands). The new government has been saddled with this legacy of ineffectiveness in the economic realm, and basically unregulated growth of the private sector has only added to the chaos of disorderly growth. The situation was dire during the 1990s and has improved with the infusion of “petro-dollars” into the economy. As noted, this impact is problematic in the long run and is of concern regarding future Russian development since, as Laqueur points out, “To a large extent, Russia’s prospects still depend on the price of oil.”

The result of this uneven internal development is what Charap calls “the ‘values gap’—the contrast between the ideal that defines politics in the United States and Russia’s controls on participation in public life and continued limitations on personal freedom.” For Americans who actively seek to undo the entire structure of animosity and discord between the two countries, political democratization is viewed as a central tenet, and the slowness and unevenness of Russian movement in that direction is a problem (which is why many view Putin as an antagonist). Those more suspicious of Russia counter that the lack of movement toward democracy simply reflects Russian history and character, including the depiction captured by Shevtsova (2010) of Russia as entrapped by “the ‘dilemma of the captive mind’,” which “boils down to a desperate clinging to old stereotypes in mentality and behavior and an inability to comprehend a new reality.”

Bi-Lateral Security: The Nuclear Legacy

One important aspect of the Russian difficulty in making the transition to more democratic forms is the continuing perception of rivalry and animosity with the United States and the belief that their relationship remains military competitive and potentially combative (an attitude shared by some American analysts). As noted, part of Putin’s strength has been in convincing the Russian people that trading off some of their political freedom for added security is a good bargain, and it is based on the residue of historically antagonistic
military relations with the United States. The clearest reminder of that relationship is in the area of nuclear weapons, both in terms of remaining arsenals and the prospects of missile defenses.

Nuclear weapons were a double-edged sword in U.S.–Soviet relations. Their destructive potential defined the parameters of how bad total deterioration in their relations could reach (nuclear war), but they also helped nurture a healthy realization on both sides that no matter how bad the relations were, that deterioration could not be allowed to degenerate to war. This realization first appeared in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, when the superpowers came as close they ever were before or since to nuclear war and did not like the prospect they saw. From that crisis, a growing recognition that they had a mutual interest in avoiding their own nuclear evaporation provided the first spark for winding down the Cold War, a phenomenon I have elsewhere described (Snow, Necessary Peace) as a “necessary peace” (the absence of war born not of the desire for friendship but from fear of war).

Nuclear arms control became the vehicle and symbol of this recognition and played an important physical and symbolic role in undermining the rationale of the Cold War. Physically, it placed at least some limits on the burgeoning lethality of nuclear arsenals and set in motion a process that would transcend the Cold War and provide the precedent and venue for nuclear arms reduction since the end of the Cold War. Symbolically, cooperation in arms control eventually helped abet a movement toward cooperation in other areas and thus became an important symbol for those who favored a policy directed toward reducing animosities and conflict in the overall relationship.

The so-called New START represents the contemporary manifestation of an arms control process that began in 1963 with the signing of the Limited Test Ban Treaty (LTBT) of 1963. The three nuclear powers (the superpowers plus Britain) were all party to this historic agreement that banned nuclear testing in the atmosphere and was, among other things, an indirect way to try to limit horizontal nuclear proliferation (the spread of nuclear weapons to current nonpossessors), an emphasis that continues. During the balance of the Cold War, a number of other arms control agreements were reached that defined the nuclear relationship, and since the end of the Cold War, the continuation of these efforts has been directed primarily at reducing the size of existing arsenals and discouraging proliferation; these efforts are tied in that progress in one seems to encourage progress in the other.

New START, as the Obama administration nicknamed the current culmination of the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START), was negotiated and signed by Obama and Medvedev in April 2010. It was ratified by the U.S. Senate during its lame duck session in December 2010 and approved by the Russian parliament in January 2010, thereby bringing its provisions into force. The agreement has two basic thrusts. One is to reduce the total warhead numbers to 1,500 for each country on no more than 800 launchers; the pre–New START limits were 2,200 warheads and 1,600 launchers (see Charap). The other is to reinforce procedures by which each country can inspect and monitor compliance with its provisions by the other.
While New START is arguably substantively innocuous, it was both important and controversial for other reasons. Its importance, in the minds of its supporters, was that in its absence, the arms control process might be interrupted and cooperation between Russia and the United States damaged in related areas such as bringing pressure on Iran not to become a nuclear weapons state. It thus had traction beyond the reduction of nuclear arsenals by approximately one-third, which still left both powers with more weapons than anybody else and with the continuing capacity to do grievous harm to one another. At the same time, the Obama administration has agreed to spend $85 billion over 10 years to improve the infrastructure of American nuclear forces to ensure that remaining forces maintain maximum physical and thus deterrent value.

Controversy arose over two matters relating to New START, basically on partisan political grounds within the United States. Led by GOP Senator John Kyl of Arizona, a number of Republicans argued that there were inadequate assurances within inspection provisions to ensure that the Russians could not cheat on the limits to which they had agreed. To paraphrase President Reagan’s famous rejoinder about such agreements, the United States under New START could “trust, but verify,” but it could not verify (monitor) adequately. The second and related Republican objection came over the implications of the agreement for ballistic missile defenses (BMD). Also, some maintained that the impacts were asymmetrical: the United States was forced to undo real capabilities, whereas the Russians, in Shleifer and Treisman’s words, “mostly ratified cuts in the Russian arsenal that were occurring anyway as the weapons aged.”

Ballistic missile defense has long been a partisan issue between Democrats and Republicans, dating back to the 1960s when such systems were first physically proposed. Generally speaking, Republicans (and especially GOP administrations) have favored and encouraged such systems for the potential protection they could provide against a nuclear attack, while Democrats have been skeptical of the practicality of these systems and have generally opposed deployment of them. The Obama administration basically follows in the Democratic tradition on the issue, although it has come out in tepid support for a minimal European-based defense system intended to intercept a small attack with nuclear weapons by a rogue state like a nuclear Iran.

This issue becomes internationally important because Russia (like the Soviet Union before it) adamantly opposes missile defenses. Part of their reason is a skepticism shared with Democrats that such systems can provide a meaningful defense against a concerted nuclear missile attack (a capability that has yet to be demonstrated). Another aspect of their objection is their belief, honed during the Cold War, that such defenses are aimed at Russia in an attempt to render the Russian nuclear threat “impotent and obsolete,” as claimed in Reagan’s famous defense of his ambitious Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) proposal of the 1980s. Their third fear is that the research spawned by work on BMD might lead to spin-off discoveries which could produce exploitable military advantages for the United States. Finally (and arguably most
importantly), the Russians have been notably unsuccessful in developing such systems themselves and thus want to cancel an area of competition in which they are unable to prevail.

The Republican objections have a distinctive Cold War aura to them that reflects the extreme distrust and animosity that existed during that period. Although the end of the Cold War largely removed any rational basis for war between Russia and the United States, many Cold Warriors cling instinctively to images of the Soviet Union and its penchant for cheating on agreements and even hatching plans for a nuclear strike against which defenses are necessary, yet another demonstration of the domestic political restraints on policy toward Russia. In the end, the Obama administration won the support of enough Republican senators to gain the necessary two-thirds vote for ratification (the final vote was 71–26 in favor) by promising that approval of New START did not in any way preclude the deployment of a missile shield in Europe that it was able to convince the Russians was too “thin” and ineffectual to pose a threat to them.

**Russian Regional Foreign Policy**

One of the major symbols of great power status attained by the Soviet Union and remembered longingly within Russia is possession of an acknowledged “sphere of influence” in which its interests were accepted as supreme by other powers. Those Russians like Putin who desire a similar level of international recognition now phrase this as a claim for a “sphere of special interests,” as already mentioned. The problem with this designation is that the major power may use its status as a carte blanche to interfere in the affairs of states within its sphere, as the Russians did, over American objection, most recently in 2008 in Georgia.

Russia’s invasion of the former Soviet republic and independent state of Georgia on August 8, 2008, (in response to a Georgian invasion of its renegade province of South Ossetia on the frontier with Russia on August 7) has come to serve as a partisan lightning rod of international and domestic concern about Russian relations with the countries of its region, notably the former republics of the Soviet Union. To the Russians, primary interest and influence in these countries is a geopolitical necessity and a sphere-of-interest prerogative of their status as a great power. To outsiders, heavy-handed actions like the invasion of Georgia are evidence of the kind of brutishness that was a hallmark of the Soviet past and a clear indication that things have not changed much in Moscow. The invasion occurred during the 2008 American presidential election campaign, and Republicans seized powerfully the Georgian cause, both to show the Bush administration’s support for its pro-Western regime and to try to create a source of differentiation between the candidates for president.

The basis of the war was the status of mountain enclaves within Georgia known as South Ossetia and Abkhazia; the former had an ongoing secessionist movement seeking either independence or union with North Ossetia, which...
is separated from South Ossetia by the Russian–Georgian border. The Ossetians themselves are an independent ethnic group within Georgia, and along with the natives of Abkhazia, have resisted rule emanating from the Georgian capital of Tbilisi. Any distinctions between Georgia and these renegades could formerly be ruthlessly suppressed by the Soviets, who also provided protection for ethnic Russians who had migrated to both areas. The breakup of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a Georgian state after 1991, however, created tensions between Georgia and the two rebellious areas; in 1992 and 1993, the Abkhazians rebelled and established themselves—with Russian help—as a semi-autonomous region within Georgia; the initial military action by the Georgians in 2008 was part of its campaign to prevent a similar outcome in South Ossetia.

The war itself was unremarkable, pitting the Russian armed forces against much smaller Georgian forces that had been trained by the Americans and Israelis. The Georgian resistance (or counterintervention in Russian eyes) was quickly brushed aside by the Russians, and within days, the Russians menacing the Georgian capital, bringing ringing pleas for assistance from the Georgian president, American-educated (as a lawyer) Mikheil Saakashvili. On August 15, Georgia accepted the terms of a Russian-proposed ceasefire, and on August 26, Russia recognized the independence of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia, a de facto condition which continues to prevail.

The Georgian (or South Ossetian) war became a cause célèbre, particularly within the United States as an irritant in U.S.–Russian relations. On August 11, President Bush declared that the Russian action “substantially damaged Russian standing in the world,” and Vice President Richard Cheney declared that “Russian aggression must not go unanswered.” The war became a partisan issue as GOP presidential candidate John McCain condemned the Russian action and declared the war “a matter of moral and strategic importance” to the United States. The message was clear: the United States stood firmly behind what it deemed the freedom-loving Georgians and their valiant and charismatic president Saakashvili against the thuggish actions of the Russians. The message extended to other former Soviet republics like Ukraine, which, along with Georgia, had been flirting with the West, including preliminary explorations of becoming part of NATO—a possibility the Russians deeply opposed on the not-unreasonable grounds that “no state would welcome the extension of a historically hostile military alliance up to its borders, no matter how often that alliance said its intentions were peaceful,” according to Shleifer and Treisman. Although the Georgian war had no visible impact on the 2008 U.S. election, the Obama administration felt the need to establish its support for Georgia, sending Vice President Joe Biden to Tbilisi in April 2009 to reiterate that bond.

Russian attempts to reestablish influence or control over the near abroad and efforts to suppress separatists and other dissenters in areas of the “internal abroad” like the North Caucasus (e.g. Chechnya, Dagestan) that have opposed Russian rule have created a wedge in U.S.–Russian relations and especially a partisan divide on how to deal with the Russians inside the United States. This division, which acts as a barrier to policy change toward a more
congenial relationship, comes principally (but not solely) from the political right in the country, who voice the opinion that Russian actions are as brutish as their predecessors’ and that Putin in particular is simply the most recent Russian expansionist despot. This construction certainly underlay much of the opposition to New START—the notion the Russians could not be trusted—and toward increased dealings with Russia. President Medvedev, in these interpretations, was little more than a puppet to the master Putin, and Russia is to be viewed with restraint and handled only with a strong element of military power. The return of terrorism from the North Caucasus at the Moscow airport in January 2011 has muted this criticism.

All these issues affect the final U.S. concern, which is with Russian foreign policy in the world generally, and especially toward Europe. Current Russian policy reflects classic patterns of ambivalence as expressed by Shevtsova (2010): “The Putin-Medvedev foreign policy doctrine justified simultaneous cooperation with and containment of the West.” This balance between cooperation and conflict is demonstrated by its attitude toward NATO. On one hand, Russia adamantly opposes further eastward expansion of NATO into places like Ukraine and Georgia, but it simultaneously cooperates with the NATO-based effort in Afghanistan (allowing a supply corridor into that country) and has some limited and evolving relationship with the alliance. Some Westerners (see Kupchan) openly advocate bringing Russia into the alliance as a full member, which the Russians do not discourage entirely. The future relationship between Russia and the EU remains a work in progress as well, subject to further development of the Russian economy and democratization.

**U.S. OPTIONS**

While relations between the two former Cold War adversaries are warmer and less dangerous than they were before, the countries are still at odds with one another on important matters. The question is the degree to which the United States has the ability to move Russian policy in directions more congenial to American preferences and interests.

The contemporary consensus seems to be that U.S. leverage and thus options are very limited. With direct military confrontation removed from the table, the two countries have a limited level of interaction and thus of interests that can be translated into leverage. American investment in the Russian economy is minimal, particularly compared to that of Europe, and thus there is a limited ability to influence economic development; this limits the ability to affect movement toward political democratization. Moreover, Charap points out that there are important sources of tension between the two countries: conflicting approaches to international security issues like missile defense; the “values gap” regarding conceptions of internal governance; and conflict over whether Russia has a sphere of influence, and if does, how the United States should treat it (Georgia being the most recent lightning rod of concern).
It is against this dual backdrop of conflicting policy preferences and limited leverage that American policy proceeds. The Obama administration issued, through Biden, the intention to “reset” the relationship in February 2009, a catchphrase that remains intact. The heart of this new approach has been, in Charap’s words, “to engage with Russia on shared threats and on issues where interests converged, while pushing back against Kremlin actions that contradicted US interests.” In effect, this change represented a movement away from the more personalized, confrontational approach of the Bush administration: Bush declared in 2001 a personal affinity for Putin, while his administration pursued a more hard-line policy toward the Russians, chiding them on the slowness of democratization and opposing their harsh treatment of internal-abroad factions like Chechen separatists, whom the Russians think of and treat as terrorists. The large intent of the Obama policy is clearly toward improving relations with the Russians from the condition in which it inherited those relations.

U.S. options are also constrained by American domestic politics. As noted earlier, the political right in the United States, most heavily represented within the Republican Party, maintains a more guarded, even confrontational, view toward the current Russian regime, a position hardened by the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008. That issue illuminates the difference in worldviews between the Russians and their GOP opponents. To the Russians, American adoption of Georgia after the so-called Rose Revolution brought Saakashvili to power represents an unwelcome and unwarranted intrusion on Russian primacy in the near abroad; to American opponents of Putin and Medvedev, American championing of the Georgians was an act of support for democratization and freedom in the face of renewed Russian imperial intent.

The opposition to the Russians is particularly loud and often couched in highly patriotic language that has made the effort to lower the rhetorical confrontation and to reestablish warmer relations more difficult as part of “resetting” the relationship. New START, whatever its substantive merits, has been a first step in that process, and even it drew loud, if ultimately unsuccessful, ire in the form of opposition to ratification in the U.S. Senate. Nonetheless, those who want to improve relations with Russia must rely on Russian “good behavior”—actions that do not openly inflame and activate its American domestic opponents and skeptics. Since the two countries are at odds on a number of basic issues, this further limits the extent to which their relations can be warmed, but that may simply be an honest reflection of the current state of their relationship, one where both sides must “recognize the limits of their shared interests” and proceed accordingly, in Shleifer and Treisman’s view.

Disagreement and discord extends to foreign policy directed toward nontraditional actors. While the U.S.–Russian relationship within general international organizations like the United Nations have moved from broad-based enmity and opposition during the Cold War to frequent cooperation in matters before the Security Council, there remain selective matters of disagreement (UN responses to Georgia, for instance). At the same time, the role of Russia in Euro-centered international organizations like NATO and the European Community remain controversial in terms of future Russian participation. The
same is true regarding subnational actors. While the Bush administration in particular was prone to accept the Russian depictions of Chechen separatists as terrorists, it chafed at similar descriptions of the Georgians in their actions toward the Ossetians and the Abkhazians, and the Obama administration has also been less willing to lump together all internal-abroad opponents as terrorists.

CONCLUSIONS

The relations between the United States and Russia have run the gamut of possibilities. During the first century and a half of the American experience, those relations were occasional (e.g., Russian participation in the Armed Neutrality against Britain during the American Revolution, rubbing against one another in San Francisco Bay) and not very prominent. During the first half of the twentieth century, the United States joined much of the European world in first decrying the rise of communism in the Bolshevik Revolution and then embracing the Soviets in the common mission of World War II. The second half of the century was consumed by the encompassing competition of the Cold War and then adjusting to the remarkable implosion of the Soviet state and the communist threat it presented.

Relations between the two countries in the early twenty-first century are influenced by that past. Many Americans remain wary of the Russians both because of their enigmatic status and their Soviet legacy, interpreting events and trends in Russia through the conceptual lens of the Cold War experience. Other Americans are hopeful, even optimistic, about the prospects of transforming Russia into a “normal” state, which is to say one that progressively resembles mature Western democracies. The Russians themselves share ties to their history, longing for the power and prestige of the old Soviet days and trying to chart a distinctly Russian place in the world.

Within this context, U.S.–Russian relations have lost some of their urgency, as the United States has turned its attention to other parts of the world, notably the Middle East and East Asia. Russia is still a formidable power, particularly as a nuclear weapons state, but its importance has been eclipsed by other parts of the world in the American list of priorities. If Russia as the Soviet Union was the primary American foreign policy concern of the second half of the last century, that focus has shifted eastward to the other major communist country of the last century, China. U.S.–Russian relations have cooled in intensity and priority as the two country’s interests have diverged and been subsumed by competition for attention, but they have not disappeared altogether.

STUDY/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why, in Churchill’s terms, is Russia an enigma? How have its traumatic changes since the end of the Cold War contributed to its enigmatic status?
2. Discuss the Russian self-image of Russia’s place in the world. How did its status as the Soviet Union and its post-Soviet decline affect that self-image and its contemporary view of its place in the world, especially the attractiveness of “resurgence”?
3. What are the notable physical characteristics of Russia discussed in the text? How does each contribute to its present and future status? Emphasize the role of energy in your answer.

4. Discuss the idea of Russia as an expansionist empire. How do the Soviet and post-Soviet experiences demonstrate the problem of Russian expansionism and status as a great power?

5. How does the Cold War experience color the way that Americans view Russia? Cite examples.

6. What are the three overlapping areas of U.S. foreign policy concerns with Russia identified in the text? Describe each, including how American domestic politics affects and is affected by each of them.

7. What are the principal sources of limitations on the American ability to influence Russia in ways contributing to the accomplishment of U.S. foreign policy goals? How do these limits constrain the United States in pursuing different options of foreign policy toward Russia?

**READING/RESEARCH MATERIALS**


Kupchan, Charles. “NATO’s Final Frontier: Why Russia Should Join the Atlantic Alliance.” *Foreign Affairs* 89, 3 (May/June 2010), 100–112.


Tymoshenko, Yuliya. “Continuing Russia.” *Foreign Affairs* 86, 3 (May/June 2007), 69–82.