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ANALYSIS

The Case for a "Strategic Pause": Russia and the United States in a New Era[1]

By Maxim A. Suchkov (Moscow State Institute of International Relations, MGIMO)

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Abstract
U.S.–Russia relations are no longer central to international relations, but they still occupy center stage when it comes to global security. While these relations are usually analyzed based on problem areas between the two countries, this article argues that the key issue between Russia and the United States at the moment is not the poor state of the relationship, but rather its changed nature, since the two pillars that used to shape the relationship—principles and agenda—have evolved. The essay also argues that Moscow and Washington need a "strategic pause" to critically assess the value of relations for each party and that it may take some time—and a few election cycles in the US and a change of power in the Kremlin—to produce a situation that is qualitatively different from what we are observing today.

It has become commonplace to begin any discussion of U.S.–Russian relations by referring to them as "the lowest since the end of the Cold War." This is an accurate assessment where things stand today. But there's even worse news: relations between Russia and the United States as we knew them throughout the Cold War and in the post-Soviet era no longer exist. One can debate whether this was caused by a single crisis or followed many years of gradual erosion. But the two fundamental pillars—principles and agenda—that used to define the relationship dramatically changed some time ago, even if the thinking about them largely persists.

Re-Thinking the Cold War Paradigm

The Cold War, although frequently referred to as a benchmark, is a misleading one today. In contemporary Russian discourse, the term "Cold War" is used primarily in three contexts:

(a) to describe a historical period that shaped the international system for a good portion of the twentieth century; (b) as a catch-phrase for contemporary U.S.–Russia confrontation; and (c) to refer to a time when, despite bitter disagreements, the great powers still abode by certain "gentlemen's agreements" and unspoken rules of the game—a vision propounded by many senior Russian experts and policymakers. In this latter reading, the Cold War is counterintuitively portrayed as a "gold standard" that the contemporary great-power rivalry should seek to reproduce if it wants to avoid massive nuclear conflict.

The problem with this vision is that today, both the intentions of the actors and the structural factors of the rivalry are different. The modern world is more complex and intertwined than the world between 1946 and 1991. Today's Russia is no Soviet Union. Its resources are more modest, the scope of its global ambition is narrower, and unlike the USSR, Russia promotes no particular ideology on the world stage. The autocratic character of Putin's governance and Moscow's seeming inclination toward "conservative values" offer some competitive advantages for Russia in international politics, but they do not make up for the lack of ideology in modern Russia, nor even pass for one, albeit that they are often perceived that way by outsiders.

Unlike during the Cold War, there is today a great *asymmetry* between the US and Russia in terms of what they each want *from the world* and *from one another*.

The United States seeks to preserve its declining—yet still dominant—position against a rising China. Russia, meanwhile, does not seek to establish dominance on the world stage, nor does Moscow seek to prove that its socio-political formation is a more efficient development model than that of the US, as it did during the Cold War—this is China's approach. Rather, having been deceived by the West in the 1990s and mistreated in the 2000s, *Moscow has embarked on de-Westernization of the international system*, even if Russia still occasionally attempts to engage with that system on its own terms.

As a result, in Russian political discourse, the idea of a "multipolar" world—a concept coined in the mid-1990s—has come to represent the ideal of a "just" and "inclusive" system that would be more responsive to Russia's national interests. The concept is raw, as reflected in its contradiction with another view widely shared in the Russian policy-making community: that a world with multiple power centers may be a lot more chaotic and is unlikely to be any friendlier to Russia. This contradiction, however, is seldom seriously addressed, since dissatisfaction with the existing U.S.-dominated system prevails over rational concerns about what the

1 Maxim Suchkov acknowledges the financial support of RFBR and EISR (project number 21-011-31278) in the preparation of this study.

"multipolar" world might bring. Simply put, Russia does not necessarily know what system it wants to construct, but it does know what system it wants to deconstruct.

But here is where the reference to the Cold War era comes in handy. For the majority of the Russian political establishment, thinking in "Cold War" terms props up the idea of Russia's "greatness." Perhaps this is one reason why among all episodes of the Cold War, Russia often focuses on *détente*, the period when—in the face of nuclear disaster—great powers abode by the same rules. This is the period when Moscow felt "most equal" to Washington.

For American elites, the Cold War paradigm likewise seems comfortable and understandable. This was an era of rapid American development, an era that helped mobilize the population against a serious enemy, and an era from which America emerged as a winner. Whereas the Russians stress *détente*, the Americans, perhaps not coincidentally, frequently highlight the Reagan presidency—the period when the US dealt the most decisive blow to the Soviets.

Now that the grand showdown with China is on the agenda, the era of the Truman presidency is also being evoked. America needs a new strategy for containment of China, similar to the one that was designed in the late 1940s and early 1950s to combat the Soviets and communism. There seems to be a bipartisan consensus in Washington that the rivalry with Beijing is systemic and will define the 21st century. Whereas China is a strategic challenger, Russia is a strategic nuisance—and only enjoys the modifier "strategic" due to its nuclear arsenal, cyber, and some space capabilities. This essentially dissolves the philosophy that shaped the relationship in the previous era—"the systemic struggle of the two mutually respected great powers"—and puts the U.S.–Russia relationship in some other category. To make matters worse, the dissolution of this philosophy of the relationship overlaps with the exhaustion of the agenda of the previous era.

Russia and the United States until 2024: "Further No Harm"

The current state of relations between the U.S and Russia is a logical result of where things have been drifting since the "reset" policy of 2011 failed and set relations on a downward trajectory. Rare episodes of cooperation, such as the joint Putin-Obama initiative for the destruction of Syria's chemical arsenal in 2013, have not developed into something more sustainable. Russia condemned the US for what it considered America's "superpower arrogance," which it believed prevented Washington from seriously considering Russian proposals to address "issues of mutual concern." The US, in turn, labeled Russian behavior in international conflicts (particularly in Ukraine and Syria) as the "revisionism of a declining power."

The election of Donald Trump and the widening socio-political divide in the US made Russia a "toxic factor" in American domestic politics—an unpleasant addition to its usual status as "foreign adversary." The relations between the two nuclear superpowers "narrowed" to the topic of the interference of these powers in each other's domestic affairs. The word "cooperation" gradually disappeared from bilateral parlance, giving way to "de-conflicting" when American and Russian troops came dangerously close together in Syria.

The list of issues that the parties can even discuss has been dramatically reduced. When Moscow and Washington realized—perhaps after the Trump-Putin summit in Helsinki on July 16, 2018—that even discussions were fraught with new escalations and sanctions, the format of presidential summits lost its meaning. Communication channels were cut off; diplomatic missions were shut down. The only intriguing question that remained was which new crisis or scandal would plunge relations to new lows.

From Moscow's perspective, the Democrats sought to punish Russia for its electoral interference and alleged support for Trump. The Republicans, for their part, appeared keen to rid themselves of their newfound status as the pro-Russia party—a status largely driven by Trump's complimentary remarks about Vladimir Putin and the general appreciation expressed by Trump's conservative base for Putin's style of governance—and therefore aimed to punish Russia in order to avoid appearing weaker than their Democratic opponents. At the same time, the United States expressed confidence that as soon as America needed Russian assistance on major issues, Moscow would be happy to help. This attitude apparently persists: "You can walk and chew gum at the same time," as President Joe Biden put it.

Russia was dissatisfied with this attitude and eventually recalled its ambassador from Washington after Biden agreed with the journalist George Stephanopoulos, who interviewed the U.S. president, that Putin was a "killer." Russia's action may have been largely symbolic, but the driving force behind that decision—other than Putin's wounded ego—was the need for a reassessment of Moscow's relations with Washington. The bilateral relationship paradigm that existed in the 1990s symbolically sank into oblivion during Putin's Munich speech in 2007. The paradigm of the 2000s lost its value with the Russian takeover of Crimea in the spring of 2014. The "killer" moment represented the most recent "cut-off point."

In an effort to halt the escalation of tensions, Presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin held a summit in Geneva on June 16, 2021. Following the meeting, Moscow and Washington established a diplomatic channel led by U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov to discuss arms control and cybersecurity. In parallel, the two

countries' respective Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley and General Valery Gerasimov, opened a military channel.

These channels are part of the political infrastructure to "manage confrontation" and are instrumental in at least two ways. First, they help address urgent security challenges, such as avoiding a direct military clash in places where American and Russian forces operate in close proximity or take actions that the other side may deem provocative. Second, they serve the long-term objective of maintaining strategic stability in the new technological era. The nature of strategic stability, however, has been changing both quantitatively and qualitatively. With regard to the former, China has been catching up with Russia and the US in building up its nuclear capabilities, including missiles and the means of their delivery. As for the latter, the focus of great powers today is on the development of precision-guided and hypersonic weapons that are almost as destructive as their nuclear counterparts but are not subject to the same treaty regulations. The rise of technology may soon shift the focus of strategic stability from nuclear arms to the cyber domain altogether: like nuclear weapons, cyber warfare has the potential to be a marker of one's military might and great-power status.

Even if all of this is taken into account, the negotiation infrastructure designed to work on these issues is defensive. It is oriented toward fending off (mostly military) threats but is *not* designed to "multiply cooperation" in other areas.

That the U.S.–Russia relationship is in dire need of a comprehensive common agenda is glaringly apparent every time Russians and Americans get together—whether for academia, in expert circles, or as diplomatic working groups. They tend to energetically seek a positive agenda, even as the energy of the U.S.–Russia relationship is gradually waning.

The kind of agenda that would at least have caused the parties to consider cooperation a decade ago—for instance, cooperation on Afghanistan or counter-terrorism—is no longer exciting for Moscow and even less exciting for Washington. Climate change is now a high-priority issue for the US and is often brought up in conversations on the future of the U.S.–Russian relationship, but there is little here for Russia and the US to talk about. Russia's reliance on oil and gas as its primary energy resources, the very structure of its economy, its small domestic market, its climatic conditions, and its vast geography do not militate toward the rapid development of a "green economy." It does not help that many senior members of the Russian government believe absolutely that the climate change agenda has been pioneered by the West as a tool for maintaining its economic, technological, and political dominance. In light of all this, it is arguably actually a good thing that Russia has not yet taken a serious interest in the climate change agenda, as it would likely diverge from the American agenda and propose its own vision for how things should work in this area.

Conclusion

U.S.–Russia relations are no longer central to global international relations, but they still occupy center stage when it comes to global security. The previous paradigm for the relationship has been exhausted, yet no new paradigm is emerging. Indeed, it may take some time—and a few election cycles in the US and a change of power in the Kremlin—to produce a situation that is qualitatively different from what we are observing today. The spiraling confrontation seems to have been brought under control since the Biden-Putin meeting and is being managed by the diplomats and the military, but the relationship as a whole lacks resiliency and seems to be one crisis away from collapsing.

Today, both the US and Russia are, for their own reasons, looking inward. The state of relations between Russia and the United States is now dictated *less by bilateral dynamics and more by outside events*—be these events crises in the Middle East or conflicts in the post-Soviet state. This is the "new normal" in the relationship.

Under such circumstances, perhaps the best solution for the present moment would be to take a "strategic pause" to critically assess the value of relations for each party. Russia should ask itself what exactly it wants from the United States in the new era. The US should ask itself whether its current approach to Russia is in America's long-term interests.

Five years hence, we may well see a picture similar to what we are observing today: Russia and the US on opposite ends of almost every regional conflict; persistent divisions in some of the post-Soviet states; economic crises or pandemics not having brought the parties together. Looking at the relationship in a ten-year perspective, there is a chance that relations will have a more optimistic outlook. In fact, both countries face three of the same major challenges that may define them in the 21st century: how smoothly they navigate periods of elite change; what type of social contract and control system their governments establish with Big Tech; and their respective relationships with other influential regional powers (India, the EU, Turkey, Iran, etc.) Russia and the U.S. may still hold divergent values, but they may also emerge as two big powers that understand each other's redlines and do not interfere in each other's internal affairs. If not, a decade from now, commentators will still be referring to U.S.–Russian relations as being "the lowest since the end of the Cold War."

Please see overleaf for information about the author and recommended literature.

About the Author
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Recommended Literature

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ANALYSIS

Mutual Images of Russia and America as Part of Their Domestic Culture Wars

By Ivan Kurilla (European University at St. Petersburg)

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Abstract
Conflicts over national identity in both Russia and the US have helped to fuel the deterioration in relations between the two countries. Understanding the nature of these conflicts improves our understanding of how each side views the other and highlights the nature of the obstacles standing in the way of improved relations.

Conflictual Domestic Politics
Over the past few years, U.S.–Russian relations have cooled almost to freezing, putting them at a level comparable to the worst days of the Cold War. Indeed, "new Cold War" has become a popular descriptor in books and articles analyzing contemporary international politics. The two most popular explanations for the deterioration of relations between the two countries are rooted in (1) foreign policy, where one side reacts to the actions of the other; and (2) domestic politics, where politicians mobilize support and justify their actions by inflating the foreign threat. Without rejecting these explanations altogether, I suggest shifting our attention to the processes of social change that have altered the context of U.S.–Russian relations.

During these years of rising tensions with each other, both Russia and the United States have seen their domestic politics overwhelmed by conflicts that reflect competing approaches to their respective national histories. In the United States, the removal of monuments to the leaders of the Confederacy started in 2017 and had developed by 2020 into a wave of iconoclasm against historical figures expressed in everything from vandalism against statues to the *New York Times*' "1619 Project," an ambitious effort to rewrite national history. Russia, meanwhile, has seen the passage of a series of "memory laws" that began with the 2014 law prohibiting the "rehabilitation of Nazism" and continued through the 2020 constitutional amendment that requires the state to defend "historical truth." Different state actors have increasingly come to interfere in the domain of history, while the largest social movement of the epoch is the Immortal Regiment, an annual mass rally to commemorate Russian war veterans.

In my view, the simultaneous rise of these two conflicts is no coincidence. They represent two sides of the same culture war—or domestic fight for identity—that has been particularly acute in the second decade of this century.