

U.S.-Russia Relations:

## Will Terrorism be a Salve for Bilateral Relations?

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The events of Sept. 11 put the U.S.-Russia relationship in a whole new perspective. Many are asking whether the leading items on the bilateral agenda of yesterday will take a back seat to the pressing issues of today. Until the terrorist attacks, discussions of missile defense and the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which had assumed a position of major importance in defining the bilateral relationship, seemed dead in the water. The decision to expand NATO to include the Baltic nations in 2002 seemed a foregone conclusion. Chechnya threatened to become a sore point again in relations, as did the issue of freedom of the press. But since Sept. 11, things may have changed. Many analysts are speculating that Russia can use cooperation in the fight against terrorism as a bargaining chip. The new U.S. ambassador in Moscow, Alexander Vershbow, however, has insisted that the agenda with Russia remains unchanged. Vershbow declared soon after the attacks that the U.S. will push ahead with national missile defense (NMD), NATO expansion, and will continue opposing Russian actions in Chechnya. Whatever may be the case, President Vladimir Putin has been unequivocal in his support for the United States, and Washington has much to be thankful for this. Putin undoubtedly realizes, however, that Russia is walking a tightrope.

### **Before Sept. 11**

The bilateral agenda all summer long was centered on missile defense and the ABM Treaty. One American delegation after another crossed the Atlantic to discuss with Russian counterparts how the United States might deploy a national missile defense system without having to confront Russia over the ABM Treaty. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice twice visited Moscow to discuss this issue. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld also made a visit to Russia. Joining the parade of high-ranking U.S. delegates were Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, and Undersecretary of State John Bolton. All of these visits were centered on the ABM/NMD issue. In each case there seemed to be little progress. The United States insisted that an NMD system would be deployed and that Russia would have to live with it. Russia countered that a breach of the ABM Treaty would threaten the entire foundation of arms control agreements brokered since the early 1970s.

Presidents Bush and Putin met at the G-8 summit in Genoa, Italy in July and reportedly cemented a deal in which the two agreed to massive cuts in nuclear missiles in exchange for Moscow turning a blind eye to a U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty. Afterward, Putin distanced himself from these reports and denied that Russia was lifting its opposition to U.S. deployment of an NMD system.

Other issues also appeared to be heading toward an impasse. In response to reports that NATO intended to expand into the Baltic states, Putin stated that it would take a “sick mind” to imagine that Russia posed a threat to Europe. In spite of Russian expectations to the contrary, the Bush administration had harped on human rights issues in Chechnya and in Russia itself. Press reports from Russia all summer commented on the malaise in relations that had set in after an optimistic second quarter. Then things changed overnight.

### **After Sept. 11**

President Putin was the first foreign leader to contact President Bush after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. This gesture was much noticed and much appreciated in Washington. Putin spoke of the need to eradicate terrorism and stated that Russia would do whatever was necessary to help the United States. Though there appeared to be some backtracking by Russian officials over the next week, by the end of September it was clear that Russia was firmly in the U.S. camp. In a televised address to the Russian nation on Sept. 24, Putin authorized the flight over Russian territory of U.S. planes conducting humanitarian and support missions in Central Asia. He also held out the possibility of conducting search and rescue missions in Afghanistan, were the United States to request Russian assistance. Putin promised that Russia would increase its military support of the Northern Alliance, Russia’s quasi-allies in Afghanistan who have fought the Taliban over the past half-decade. He also reportedly spoke with the presidents of the former Soviet republics of Central Asia and told them that the decision to allow U.S. forces to use bases in these territories would be supported by Moscow. The Bush administration was effusive in its praise of Russian support. Russia has always equated the war in Chechnya with the international struggle against terrorism. Russian leaders are all but saying, “we told you so.”

Russia itself has been a victim of terrorist attacks since the first Chechen War in 1994-96. It has long been suspected that various groups operating in Chechnya (or supporting Chechen separatists) carried out many of these attacks. Russia has insisted that Osama bin Laden supports Chechen “bandits,” and that Arab mercenaries like the “warlord” Khattab are fighting alongside them in Chechnya. As Putin stated in his televised address, “Russia has long been waging self-reliant combat on international terrorism and has on many occasions appealed to the international community to join hands against it.” Undoubtedly, Russian leaders hope that the U.S. declaration of war against terrorism will give them a free hand in Chechnya to prosecute the war as they see fit. This is the spin that all major newspapers in Russia are playing. In this respect, Russia hopes to play the fight against terrorism like Israel did in the Persian Gulf War in 1991: sit back and allow the United States to exterminate a sworn enemy, and do what one pleases internally (in

Chechnya) and hope the international community turns a blind eye. They also hope to play it as Egypt did in 1990-91: support the United States and hope for debt relief.

To expect the Bush administration to completely halt its criticism of Russian actions in Chechnya, however, may be expecting too much. Much depends on the length and severity of the conflict against terrorist networks. An increase in terrorist activities around the world could cause a backlash in the Bush administration and diminish concern for the rights of the Chechens. On the other hand, Washington might take a more severe stance toward Russian actions in Chechnya and pressure them to negotiate. The latter option would be a much wiser choice for the Bush administration. In return for unqualified Russian support it would be best to offer Moscow carrots unrelated to security issues, such as partial debt forgiveness.

Many experts feel that Russia is more apt to be on the receiving end of a terrorist backlash. Most Russians feel that the front line of international Islamic terrorism begins in Chechnya, and Russian cities are but one step away from there. Analysts in the Russian press express concern that if Moscow supports U.S. military actions across the region, Russia will be left without any type of security guarantee. Most of Russia's major dailies have enunciated these fears. NATO members, they point out, can be guaranteed a security net. But where will Russia be? This has increased calls for Russian membership in NATO and a restructuring of that organization to combat terrorism, rather than prepare for a conventional ground war in Europe.

Other analysts (mostly Western) have written that Russia's chief concern is not fear of a terrorist backlash. Instead, the real fear is that U.S. influence in Central Asia would grow (and Russian influence decline), should a successful campaign be carried out with Uzbek, Tajik, or Kazakh assistance. Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov initially stated Russian opposition to any U.S. deployment in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia. "Central Asia is within the zone of competence of the CIS Collective Security Treaty – [there are] no grounds, even hypothetical, for a possible NATO deployment in Central Asian States," he said soon after the attacks. Once it appeared, however, that these young republics might allow U.S. basing rights anyway, Moscow was quick to assure the states of Central Asia that Moscow would support any U.S. deployment in the region. But as Dmitri Rogozin, chairman of the State Duma Committee on Foreign Relations noted, "If the United States uses military bases on the territory of the Commonwealth of Independent States, it is important to make sure that these don't become permanent residences for the Americans." The concerns about U.S. designs on Central Asia still loom large in Moscow.

The new situation could also create interesting dilemmas and/or opportunities for the American-Chinese-Russian strategic triangle. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO – comprising four Central Asia states and China and Russia) hardly registered on the U.S. radar screen as anything other than a tool for furthering Sino-Russian rapprochement. The participants, however, have stated from the beginning that the forum was created to share intelligence on Islamic separatist movements in the region and to discuss ways to jointly combat terrorist forces linked to these movements. Now that all

members of the SCO (save perhaps Kyrgyzstan) are offering assistance, the United States might find this organization extremely useful. China is wary of spillover, including refugees from Afghanistan into Xinjiang and terrorist attacks in Chinese cities. It seems that on this score, however, China is much less vulnerable than Russia. But like Russia, China is also concerned that this crisis will provide an opportunity for the United States to expand its influence in Central Asia, a region where Chinese influence had been growing. Energy (specifically pipeline) issues also leave Beijing and Moscow nervous. Both countries have felt that U.S. activities in Central Asia are attempts to gain control of key energy export routes. The fight against terrorism has only slightly mollified these concerns.

It will take several years to see the picture clearly; nonetheless, Sept. 11 might one day be seen as the day U.S.-Russia relations were changed forever.

### **Chronology of U.S.-Russia Relations July - September 2001**

**July 5-6, 2001:** A delegation of U.S. Congressmen led by House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt visits Moscow and meets with Duma counterparts and Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov.

**July 10, 2001:** U.S. Ambassador James Collins leaves Russia after serving four years in Moscow.

**July 12, 2001:** The U.S. State Department and the Pentagon announce that the United States will soon begin conducting tests to help with the deployment of an NMD system; the tests “will come into conflict with the ABM Treaty in months, not years.”

**July 13, 2001:** The U.S. Senate confirms the nomination of Alexander Vershbow as the next ambassador to Russia.

**July 15, 2001:** U.S. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice visits Moscow to discuss the ABM Treaty and plans for a U.S. deployment of an NMD system.

**July 21-22, 2001:** U.S. President George Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin meet at the G-8 summit in Genoa, Italy. It is reported that they worked a deal that ostensibly will iron out differences over the ABM Treaty, linking the construction of an NMD system with cuts in the nuclear arsenal of both countries.

**July 25, 2001:** National Security Adviser Rice returns to Moscow with a mandate from President Bush to put arms control talks with Russia on a “fast track.” Concurrently, U.S. Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill and Commerce Secretary Donald Evans arrive in Moscow to discuss attempts to step up economic cooperation.

**July 30, 2001:** Both the Russian and Western press report that Russia has begun testing and deploying RS-12M Topol (SS-25) ballistic missiles in response to NMD ambitions.

**Aug. 3, 2001:** American Fulbright scholar John Tobin is released from prison after receiving parole for good behavior a full six years before his sentence was due to end. Tobin's incarceration was seen as part of the crackdown on academics in Russia associated with the "spy mania" that had erupted last winter in both countries.

**Aug. 7, 2001:** A Russian defense delegation visits the Pentagon to discuss the ABM Treaty.

**Aug. 12, 2001:** U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld visits Moscow to discuss with his counterpart Sergey Ivanov missile defense issues and the ABM Treaty.

**Aug. 21, 2001:** U.S. Undersecretary of State John Bolton arrives in Moscow to meet with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Georgii Mamedov and other top officials about missile defense.

**Sept. 9, 2001:** On Sunday morning talk shows Secretary Rumsfeld and National Security Adviser Rice state that the U.S. will push on with the deployment of an NMD system and a deal over the ABM Treaty is unlikely.

**Sept. 11, 2001:** Shortly after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, President Vladimir Putin is the first foreign leader to call President Bush and offer condolences and support.

**Sept. 12, 2001:** President Putin announces that Russia is standing by and ready to help in the rescue efforts in New York, and Russia will share intelligence on terrorist networks and operations around the world.

**Sept. 13, 2001:** Across Russia, citizens observe a minute of silence in memory of those who perished in the terrorist attacks in the U.S.; more than 90 Russian citizens are missing in New York.

**Sept. 16, 2001:** Defense Minister Ivanov rules out "even hypothetical assumptions" that Russia and other former Soviet states would lend troops or bases to any NATO military action.

**Sept. 19, 2001:** Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov meets with President Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell in Washington. Ivanov reiterates President Putin's promise of Russian support in the war against terrorism. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage arrives in Moscow to discuss the support Russia is willing to offer.

**Sept. 22, 2001:** U.S. warplanes are reportedly deployed to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in preparation for potential air strikes on Afghanistan. If these reports are true, the Russian decision to allow overflight appears to be an abrupt distancing from earlier comments by Defense Minister Ivanov that U.S. or NATO troops would not be allowed to deploy in former Soviet Central Asia.

**Sept. 23, 2001:** Putin telephones Bush and promises more support and more intelligence on terrorist networks in Central Asia. He also phones the presidents of the Central Asian republics and gives them the OK to allow the deployment of U.S. forces in their countries.

**Sept. 24, 2001:** In a televised speech Putin announces that Russia will increase its assistance to the Northern Alliance operating against the Taliban in Afghanistan to help the world struggle against terrorism. He also says that Russia will allow U.S. overflight of its territory by planes conducting “humanitarian” missions.