



U.S.-Russia Relations:
Further Strategic Disconnect

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Since the outbreak of the global war on terror in late 2001, leaders in Moscow and Washington have crafted a policy designed to minimize political differences in order to maximize the effectiveness of the “strategic partnership” in its struggle against terrorism. But by late 2004 and early 2005, the limits of this partnership were becoming apparent. The series of mini-revolutions or coups in the former Soviet republics along Russia’s border over the past quarter may have marked the beginning of the end of this so-called strategic partnership. Moscow now has serious concerns about the penchant for Washington to “export” revolution to Eurasia. Washington, meanwhile, continues to view political developments in Russia with great displeasure, calling each successive move by President Vladimir Putin to consolidate his power a step backward for Russian democracy. As in Eurasia, U.S.-Russian cooperation in East Asia seems to have reached its limit, as Moscow looks more and more to Beijing as a partner, potentially along with New Delhi.

Revolution in Central Asia and rumblings in both capitals

The second quarter of 2005 witnessed a number of events that marked a significant setback for political relations between Moscow and Washington. Following the Ukrainian presidential election in late 2004, pundits across Russia warned of an ominous trend in which the U.S. was looking to unseat rulers across the former Soviet republics and replace them with more “suitable” leaders. The earlier transfer of power in Georgia in 2004 seemed to presage a further changing of the guard in post-Soviet Eurasia. These warnings gained further credence in Russia at the end of March 2005 when the president of Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akayev, was ousted by the opposition in the so-called “tulip revolution.” Akayev was quickly given asylum in Moscow. The media and political analysts in Russia denounced this “naked” grab for power by the U.S. “neo-cons.” Well-known political pundit Gleb Pavlovsky (supposedly connected to the Kremlin) suggested on the state television station *Rossiya* that the U.S. was merely using Kyrgyzstan as a testing ground for techniques to be tried later against Russia. Another Kremlin ally, Vyacheslav Nikonov – also speaking on state television – suggested that U.S. NGOs operating in Kyrgyzstan fomented the coup. Several Russian media outlets purportedly held in hand copies of a letter from the U.S. ambassador in Kyrgyzstan (Stephen Young),

urging a strategy of maximizing U.S. influence in the region, while minimizing the influence of Russia and China.

At the same time that this outcry was underway, Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko was receiving red-carpet treatment in Washington and elsewhere in the U.S. during his three-day state visit. Yushchenko was also given the honor of addressing a joint session of Congress, something normally reserved for only the closest partners of the U.S. There was also talk from the Pentagon that Ukraine could participate in U.S. ballistic missile defense plans. The Ukrainian issue has been the most sensitive area in the former Soviet republics for Russians, as they feel that this nation is, more than any other part of the former Soviet or Russian empire, a true part of Russia and of the Russian soul – culturally, historically, and spiritually. Additionally, this spring saw a great deal of squabbling between Russia and Ukraine over naval basing rights and the territorial waters around the Crimean Peninsula. The Moscow daily *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* speculated that one day Russians will wake up and find that Ukraine has joined NATO, and U.S. ships will become daily sights at centuries-old Russian naval bases on the Crimean Peninsula, and in Georgia, as well.

Russian angst about U.S. strategic designs in Central Asia moved to an even higher level when it was revealed that in early April Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld made a quick, unpublicized visit to Azerbaijan, where he reportedly (*RIA Novosti*) discussed with the Azeri government the possibility of setting up at least one U.S. military base. The report was given further credence when Gen. James Jones, commander in chief Allied Forces Europe, publicly voiced his interest in establishing bases and special forces training centers in Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, at the end of April, the Georgian and Russian governments reached a tentative agreement for the withdrawal of all remaining Russian troops from Georgia by the year 2008, another sign of the Russian retreat from former areas of influence.

State visits prove to be no balm

The visit by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to Moscow later in April did nothing to improve the worsening atmospherics. In Moscow, Rice gave a series of interviews to both independent and state media outlets, and her message was crystal clear: the U.S. is unhappy with the state of democracy, civil society, and human rights in Russia. In an interview with the liberal *Ekho Moskvy* radio station, Rice stated that Putin had amassed too much power. Rice was quite conciliatory in her private meetings with Russian leaders (including Putin), but the strains in the relationship were becoming clearly evident, as they have been for several months. In response to Rice's thinly veiled criticism, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov gave an interview on the state-owned *Rossiya* television network and said that as the U.S. was interested in the democratic development of Russia, "Russia is interested in a democratic U.S. that works with other governments on the basis of international law." Interestingly, however, throughout Rice's visit no mention was made whatsoever of the situation in Chechnya, a familiar pattern in U.S.-Russia relations over the past several years.

President George Bush visited Moscow in May to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe. He met amiably with Putin and the two left most political issues out of their talks, preferring to enjoy the celebrations – perhaps to honor their own fathers who had fought in this struggle. But in the run-up to the trip, the U.S. media was highly critical of Russia and called for tough words from the White House. Bush preferred to do his tough talking in front of an audience with presidents of neighboring republics – before his Moscow visit in Riga, and in Tbilisi with the young president of Georgia – when he wasn't in Russia. This strategy has left many observers (U.S. and Russian) with the impression that the U.S. leadership is critical of the Russian leadership, but it is hesitant to voice this criticism in private dialogue. *The Wall Street Journal* chastised the Bush administration for its failure to take a strong stand against the Kremlin, and exhorted the West to “liberate” Moscow (in reference to the “liberation” of the Baltic states by Soviet forces in 1944).

U.S.-Russian cooperative efforts in preventing nuclear proliferation have moved in fits and starts so far this year. Funding for these programs (known widely as the Nunn-Lugar nonproliferation programs) is always under threat in the U.S. Congress. And many Russians are still hesitant to allow U.S. experts access to the more sensitive nuclear sites across Russia. It is a testament to the increasingly fragile nature of the U.S.-Russian partnership when arguably the most successful foreign policy program for the U.S. since the end of the Cold War is in danger of being cut.

Diplomatic maneuvering in Eurasia

The uprising and subsequent bloody suppression in Uzbekistan in mid-May also cast a shadow on U.S.-Russian relations. For the same reasons in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, many Russians see U.S. machinations behind the events in Uzbekistan. U.S. and European criticism of Uzbek President Islam Karimov led Russia to move closer to Karimov. This was done with an eye on circumventing U.S. influence in that country, where a U.S. airbase was established in late 2001. Relations between Russia and Uzbekistan were rocky through the 1990s, but now Karimov (and other Central Asian leaders) are looking to Russia as a potential balancer against the tremendous U.S. presence in the region, and against growing Chinese influence as well. Russia has also moved to negotiate with the new regime in Kyrgyzstan for rights to another military base (a Russian airbase was established there in 2004).

The completion of the Baku-Ceyhan, trans-Caucasus pipeline in late May also served as further rationale for Russian angst about U.S. strategic designs for post-Soviet Eurasia. Prominent Duma deputies denounced the pipeline and suggested it was a way for the U.S. to carry “revolutionary” ideas to the Caspian states. In early June the daily *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* (known as a Kremlin organ) suggested that the current U.S. leadership was a modern-day version of the Bolsheviks: “The revival of the Bolshevik practice of exporting revolutions threatens both the moral and political health of modern European civilization, the principle of the rule of law and the establishment of democratic values in former Soviet republics. Most importantly, it threatens the sovereignty and political stability of the new Russia.”

On May 31 Russian oil magnate and political opposition figure Mikhail Khodorkovsky was declared guilty (after a lengthy trial) of a number of counts of corruption and was sentenced to nine years in jail. This trial has been followed closely by the U.S. government and by political analysts in the West, and is seen by some as the benchmark for democracy in Russia. Most of these analysts feel that Khodorkovsky was given an unfair trial. The fact that he was also given such a harsh sentence was noted with displeasure by Washington, and by George Bush personally. Bush immediately commented that he thought the trial “unfair.” Interestingly, as anxious as the U.S. government has been about the Khodorkovsky affair, U.S. businesses and investors seem – on the whole – much less concerned about the investment climate in Russia. They are prepared to obey the Kremlin maxim: stay out of politics and we will stay out of your business. Vladimir Putin met with a group of U.S. and German business executives at the end of June and personally assured them of the stability of the investment climate in Russia. Robert Kraft perhaps best personified the goodwill of some Western executives toward Putin – who is recognized by business leaders as having introduced at least some stability in the Russian market. Kraft – owner and CEO of the New England Patriots football team – gave Putin his Super Bowl ring as a personal gift during the Petersburg meeting.

Primakov redux?

Over the past few months the Kremlin and top political analysts in Moscow have brought up the idea – first floated by then-Foreign Minister Yevgenii Primakov in 1996 – of a Russo-Sino-Indian strategic triangle, or partnership. At one point earlier this year Putin declared that trilateral cooperation between Beijing, Delhi, and Moscow “would make a great contribution to global security.” An unprecedented meeting took place in Vladivostok between the foreign ministers of China, India, and Russia on June 2. There the ministers discussed not only joint economic cooperation, but also the need to be wary of “unilateralism,” a catch phrase for the U.S. How viable or even realistic such trilateral cooperation could be remains to be seen, but Moscow is certainly more wary of the U.S. in Central Asia than anytime since 2001.

Meanwhile, there has been some activity in Japanese-Russian relations over the past few months, though not necessarily of a positive nature. In May Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro attended the 60th anniversary V-E Day celebrations in Moscow, where he did manage to have a brief talk with Vladimir Putin. Prior to the meeting both governments had traded barbs about the territorial dispute and there was a question whether Koizumi would even attend the V-E Day celebrations. Additionally, it was unclear whether Moscow would ever agree on a date for a long-expected Putin visit to Japan in 2005. Both Putin and his influential chief of staff made public comments during the spring questioning the viability of the Siberian oil pipeline project and the commitment of the Japanese to see this project through. But the cordial talk between Koizumi and Putin seemed to pave the way for improved atmospherics between the two governments.

In early June, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov visited Tokyo and met with his counterpart Machimura Nobutaka. The two agreed that Putin would visit Japan sometime in 2005, but no date was fixed. Later at a meeting between Putin and former Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro (visiting St. Petersburg at the invitation of Toyota, which is building a factory in Russia's "northern capital"), a date for Putin's visit to Japan was announced – probably after the APEC summit scheduled to take place in Pusan, South Korea. More Japanese investment is moving into Russia, according to the *Nikkei Shimbun*, led by the Toyota plant which is the largest single Japanese investment project undertaken in Russia (outside of the energy sector). It was also announced during this quarter that Japanese-Russian two-way trade figures in 2004 were up 50 percent from 2003, reaching \$9 billion.

As difficult as relations between Moscow and Tokyo have been, the Russian leadership seems to have given up all hope that the Korean nuclear impasse can ever be resolved. In April, Alexander Losyukov, Russia's ambassador in Tokyo, expressed his doubts that the Six-Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear development would ever reach a successful conclusion. He is recognized as Moscow's top DPRK diplomat. Moscow appears prepared to sit on the sidelines and await the other players' moves.

Moscow and Washington appear united – on the surface – in their determination to see through the "partnership" in the war on terror. But Moscow's strategic angst toward U.S. policy in Central Asia and the Caucasus, combined with the rising concern in Washington about the progress of democracy in Russia could together come to trump the carefully crafted strategy that has guided bilateral relations over the past four years. Strategic necessity has thus far outweighed whatever political disagreements the two capitals have had over the last few years. Now that Russia sees strategic reasons to balance against the U.S. in Central Asia, we could see the crumbling of the edifice of cooperation between Washington and Moscow.

Chronology of U.S.-Russia Relations

April-June 2005

April 4, 2005: Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko arrives in the U.S. for a three-day visit. Besides meeting separately with George Bush, Condoleezza Rice, and Donald Rumsfeld, Yushchenko addresses a joint session of the U.S. Congress.

April 7, 2005: A delegation from the Japanese Association for Trade with Russia and Western Europe (ROTOBO) arrives in Vladivostok to discuss the Siberian oil pipeline project. The delegation includes executives from the Japanese Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC), Itochu Corp., Nippon Steel Corporation, and Tokyo Gas Co. Ltd.

April 12, 2005: Defense Secretary Rumsfeld departs on an unannounced visit to Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan.

April 13, 2005: Mikhail Margelov, chairman of the Russian Federation Council's (Upper House) Foreign Affairs Committee visits Washington and meets with Senate leaders, including Richard Lugar, to discuss economic cooperation.

April 18, 2005: Russian Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin visits Washington to attend a meeting of G8 finance ministers, and to attend sessions of the IMF and the World Bank. Kudrin also has a separate meeting with Treasury Secretary John Snow and Acting Trade Representative Peter Algeier.

April 19, 2005: Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice starts a two-day visit to Moscow. There she meets with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. From Moscow she travels to Vilnius, Lithuania for a meeting of NATO foreign ministers.

April 22, 2005: Japanese METI Minister Nakagawa Shoichi meets with Russian Energy Minister Viktor Khristenko in Tokyo to discuss the Siberian oil pipeline project.

May 5, 2005: Former Russian Nuclear Power Minister Yevgenii Adamov is arrested in Switzerland. He is wanted in the U.S. on fraud and money-laundering charges.

May 7, 2005: President Bush meets in Riga, Latvia with the presidents of the three Baltic Republics, and expresses his discontent with the state of democracy and the rule of law in Russia. He also refers on several occasions to the "occupation" of the Baltic States by the Soviet Union after World War II.

May 9, 2005: President Putin hosts world leaders in Moscow (including George Bush and Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi) to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany.

May 10, 2005: President Bush travels to Tbilisi, Georgia to meet President Mikheil Saakashvili. Bush expresses support for Georgia's democratic development.

May 13, 2005: Protestors storm key government buildings and free more than 2,000 prisoners in the eastern Uzbekistan city of Andijan. The Uzbek government quickly and violently suppresses the protestors, killing several hundred people.

May 21, 2005: Senate passes a resolution urging the Russian government to issue "a clear and unambiguous statement" admitting to the illegal occupation until 1991 of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

May 25, 2005: Energy Secretary Sam Bodman visits Moscow to discuss U.S.-Russian energy ties and to declare U.S. concerns about the recent "upheavals" in the Russian oil sector.

May 25, 2005: Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline linking the Caspian Sea oilfields with a Mediterranean port in southern Turkey is officially inaugurated.

May 30, 2005: Russia agrees to shut two military bases in Georgia and pull out 3,000 troops from that republic by 2008.

May 31, 2005: Russian oil magnate Mikhail Khodorkovsky is sentenced to 9 years in prison by a court in Moscow. George Bush calls the verdict “unfair.”

May 31, 2005: Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez arrives in Moscow to discuss the investment climate in Russia and potential WTO membership for that country. He meets with Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov.

June 1, 2005: Russian FM Lavrov visits Tokyo, meets counterpart Machimura Nobutaka and discusses political relations and a proposed Putin visit to Japan in late 2005.

June 2, 2005: FM Lavrov hosts Chinese FM Li Zhaoxing and Indian FM Natwar Singh in Vladivostok for talks on multipolar approaches for global problems.

June 5, 2005: U.S. officials complete inspection of a missile base in Bryansk where Russian stockpiles of strategic weapons are dismantled in compliance with the START-1 treaty.

June 10, 2005: In an interview, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov says that Russia cannot prevent former Soviet republics from joining NATO, but warns that the establishment of NATO bases in any neighboring country would be viewed by Moscow as a threat.

June 15, 2005: Putin attends groundbreaking ceremony in St. Petersburg for a Toyota auto plant. Also attending is former Japanese PM Mori Yoshiro. In a private meeting with Mori, Putin affirms that he will visit Japan in November 2005.

June 25, 2005: Putin meets with U.S. and German corporate executives, and assures them of the stability of the investment climate in Russia. Executives include representatives from Alcoa, Citigroup, ConocoPhillips, Intel, and IBM.

June 26, 2005: A poll released by the Pew Center shows that more than half of Russian citizens interviewed feel that Americans are a rude, immoral, and greedy, but hard-working people.