

U.S.-Russia Relations:

## *De facto* Alliance or Temporary Rapprochement?

by Joseph Ferguson  
Researcher

The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies

As was the case at the end of the preceding quarter, the global war against terrorism and the war against the Taliban government in Afghanistan continued to galvanize the U.S.-Russia relationship and to give it a newfound purpose. The summit meetings between Presidents Bush and Putin in Shanghai in October and in the United States in November went off very well. Differences over issues like the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) and missile cuts were smoothed over as a united front in the war against terrorism was presented.

Nevertheless, the United States vowed to push forward with the development of a missile defense (MD) system, contrary to what many assumed would be a shift in U.S. strategy after the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11. U.S. forces were able to utilize bases and assets in two Central Asian countries with Russian approval, also contrary to what many assumed would be the case in mid-September. Within the U.S., the nation focused almost exclusively on the war in Afghanistan.

But in Russia, the war brought up a wider debate that has simmered in Russia for centuries: whether to join with the West or to define Russia's own unique path. President Vladimir Putin seems to prefer the former, but voices of opposition are beginning to question the wisdom of such a choice. Can Putin continue to dominate the Russian political world or will his decision to go with the West divide the Russian leadership? These questions are much more important to the people of Russia than the war against terrorism and the debates over arms control. Ultimately, they are important questions for the United States, as well.

### **The War in Afghanistan**

The war against the Taliban government in Afghanistan has proven to be more successful than perhaps either government in Moscow or Washington originally envisioned. For the U.S., the rapid demise of the Taliban was an unquestionable victory. Although the battle against al-Qaeda will have to be carried out for much longer, the host government in Afghanistan has, for now at least, been eliminated, which was a major goal. For Russia,

the quick collapse of the Taliban regime is seen more as a double-edged sword. The Russian leadership has long viewed the Taliban as a cancer threatening to spread through Central Asia and into the Caucasus. Therefore, its elimination was a major goal in Moscow. As recently as late in 2000, the Russian government had purportedly sent feelers to the U.S. concerning joint bombing raids against Afghanistan from bases in Central Asia (see "Return to Realism; Fewer Bear-hugs Expected," *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 2 No. 4).

Many in Russia, however, are wary of the U.S. military presence in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and wonder whether this could be the precursor for permanent U.S. military bases in Central Asia. At the other extreme, many in Russia feel that once the U.S. has accomplished its goals in Afghanistan, it will withdraw from the region, creating a vacuum that Russia is ill-prepared to step into. The website *Strana.ru*, which is seen as a quasi-official Kremlin mouthpiece, published an analysis of the Russian press in which both sets of views were demonstrated to have received almost equal attention in all the major dailies. The Russian daily *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* published in October one analyst's views on what he called a new "*de facto* alliance" between Russia and the United States. This view was echoed in an article published in November in the English-language daily *Moscow Times* by U.S. Ambassador to Russia Alexander Vershbow.

Meanwhile, other Russian press reports describe a growing unease among some leaders (especially in the military leadership) about the direction Putin is taking Russia. They point out that both Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin were seen to have followed the West too blindly and that in the end this was partly their undoing. Some generals have openly criticized Putin for being "too compliant" to the U.S. *Izvestia* reported that even the average Russian citizen is wary about moving too closely toward the U.S. and NATO.

Perhaps most significant for many Russians, the relative ease of the U.S. military campaign and the success of the sustained air assault further highlights Russia's decline as a major power. Though Russia's economic performance has improved over the past two years, its leadership and its people are ever sensitive to the issue of Russia's status. Many feel that by following blindly behind the U.S., Russia is simply becoming even more marginalized in the world and demonstrating its impotence.

### **Summits in Asia and America**

The war in Afghanistan has only temporarily lessened the bilateral focus on arms control that had previously dominated the relationship. At their meeting during the Shanghai APEC Leaders' Meeting in October, Presidents Bush and Putin appeared to move beyond the strictly anti-terror dialogue that had come to be the sole talking point after Sept. 11. The two sides reportedly began discussions on the status of the 1972 ABM Treaty (according to *The New York Times*) in order to lay the groundwork for what was expected to be some sort of an agreement inked at the upcoming Texas summit.

The meetings in the U.S. went off very well in the eyes of the White House. The Texas *tête-à-tête* was replete with barbecue, country music, plenty of backslapping, *bonhomie*,

and mutual admiration. To the surprise of many, however, no major announcement was forthcoming after the three days of meetings. In Washington, Bush had announced his intention to slash the nation's long-range nuclear arsenal to between 1,700 and 2,200 weapons over the next decade. Putin, however, was evasive in his reply to Bush's statement, perhaps in response to pressure from certain groups at home. And though Putin had made statements prior to his arrival in the U.S. suggesting that he would be flexible in discussions over the ABM Treaty, the two leaders apparently left Texas agreeing to disagree, as had been the case. This apparent change in Putin's stance might also be attributable to pressure from political groups in Russia. This is at least what the press in Russia was claiming.

Not long after the Texas summit meeting in December, President Bush hinted in a speech at the Citadel Military Academy in South Carolina that the U.S. would soon announce its withdrawal from the ABM Treaty. The reaction from Russia was surprisingly muted, most likely because the move had been anticipated in Moscow since Bush took office at the beginning of the year. In a talk soon after Bush's speech Putin stated that though a U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty was not a "crime," it was a "mistake." *Izvestia* stated that the decision had been discussed off-the-record at Bush's ranch in Crawford. Leaders in the Russian Duma responded as expected, threatening to abrogate the START II Treaty. Many Democrats in the U.S. Congress were also upset at Bush's "hasty" decision.

What irked many in Russia was that they expected the U.S. to soften its stance on the ABM Treaty and NATO expansion in return for Russia's unqualified support for U.S. actions in Afghanistan. In addition, Putin had announced Russia's withdrawal from its communications base in Lourdes, Cuba and the naval base in Cam Rahn Bay, Vietnam. Many in Russia considered these major concessions to the U.S. and expected equal concessions in return. New plans to include Russia in a NATO consultative body (19+1) were outlined by NATO Secretary General George Robertson in his November Moscow visit, but many Russians considered these mere bread crumbs. Many had hoped for either a postponement of NATO enlargement, the continuation of the ABM Treaty, or some sort of debt relief. With nothing on the horizon in terms of major U.S. concessions, influential Moscow weekly *Kommersant' Vlast* argued that Russia's "sacrifices are likely to prove one-sided – if not fatal."

This is where Vladimir Putin finds himself: between a rock and a hard place. He wants Russia to draw closer to the West, but how far can he afford to go? Will it be far enough to please his creditors in the West? Or will it be so far that he will lose political ground at home?

Thus far, Putin's position in the Kremlin seems unassailable. Most mainstream liberal and conservative political parties and movements back his position. The Russian Communist Party opposes him. This is to be expected.

But what is likely more ominous for Putin is the rise of dissenting voices within the emasculated, but still influential, Russian military. Putin holds the support of the so-

called “power ministries” (defense, emergencies, foreign affairs, interior), and he is backed by his group of *siloviki* (represented by many of his former KGB colleagues from St. Petersburg and former internal security *apparatchiks*). But how far he can go with their support is subject to debate. He seems to have distanced himself from and alienated many in Yeltsin’s inner circle (the so-called “family”), whose power has not been completely eclipsed.

In spite of Putin’s seemingly ironclad grip, there is room for dissension and potential political opposition at home. The situation in Afghanistan and the convoluted arms control picture have begun to complicate Putin’s political position. He is counting on U.S. and European assistance in this regard. Once he feels he can no longer count on the U.S. and Europe to deliver, we may see some hedging on his part to cover himself politically.

### **The Eurasia Factor and China**

China has been quietly supportive of the war in Afghanistan. Though it officially opposes war and bombing as instruments for political settlements, the reaction to U.S. bombings has been muted. The Taliban was seen in Beijing as a potential trouble case, especially considering the fact that al-Qaeda has supposed ties to Uighur separatist groups operating in Xinjiang. China will not miss the Taliban.

Nevertheless, for many of the same reasons Russia views the events in Afghanistan in two ways, and for additional reasons as well, China is wary of U.S. actions there. The stepped-up U.S. presence in Central Asia cannot be viewed benignly in China. As Chinese leaders probably see it, political control in Central Asia means control of the resources of the region. China has had high hopes for the development of these resources. In addition, China does not want to see a U.S.-Russia deal on missile defense that leaves China out in the cold. As the Russian bi-weekly *Sovietskaya Rossiya* reports, the Chinese leadership is in a quandary. On the one hand, it cannot permit even a virtual devaluation of its nuclear forces in the eyes of its people and the international community. On the other hand, it would be extremely politically dangerous for China to reply by building up its nuclear forces.

This is where Japan factors in. The Japanese leadership has responded to U.S. calls to support military actions in Afghanistan with a show of the Japanese flag in the Indian Ocean. This can only be of concern to the Chinese leadership. Additionally, if China builds up its nuclear forces in response to a U.S. deployment of an MD system, leaders in China and across Asia fear that this would give Japan the impetus to beef up its forces even more and perhaps even one day to deploy its own nuclear force. Meanwhile, Russia’s leadership has tried to reassure Beijing that the strengthening of relations with the U.S. is in no way at the expense of the Sino-Russian “strategic partnership.”

The ramifications of Sept. 11 are still shrouded in a cloud of dust much like Manhattan was for weeks after the attacks. What is clear is that U.S.-Russia relations are in a dramatic transition period, and this affects not only the international political situation

throughout Asia, but also the internal political dynamics of various countries. Nowhere is this more so than in Russia.

## **Chronology of U.S.-Russia Relations October - December 2001**

**Oct. 7, 2001:** The U.S. and Great Britain begin air strikes in Afghanistan. Russian President Vladimir Putin immediately praises the strikes, saying they are a just response to the Sept. 11 tragedy.

**Oct. 17, 2001:** U.S. Commerce Secretary Don Evans, leading a delegation to Moscow of U.S. corporate leaders on the first high-level trade mission of the Bush administration, praises Russia as a reliable U.S. partner and says both countries will reap economic rewards from fast developing ties.

**Oct. 19, 2001:** U.S. President George Bush and Russian President Putin meet in Shanghai on the occasion of the APEC Leaders' Meeting. Putin reaffirms his strong support for the U.S. in its war against terrorism. Talks are reportedly held on the status of the ABM Treaty.

**Oct. 26, 2001:** The U.S. decides to postpone two missile defense tests ahead of next month's U.S.-Russia summit; Russian lawmakers praise the decision.

**Oct. 30, 2001:** U.S. House lawmakers reject an effort by Representative Chet Edwards, (D-TX), that would have added \$131 million to a \$173 million program that helps Russia guard its nuclear facilities.

**Nov. 1, 2001:** Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov and U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell meet in Washington to work out an agenda for the upcoming presidential summit in Texas.

**Nov. 3, 2001:** U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld visits Moscow on his way to Central Asia, he visits with Putin and his Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov to discuss the military campaign in Afghanistan.

**Nov. 5, 2001:** Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Georgii Mamedov meets with U.S. Undersecretary of State John Bolton in Moscow to discuss strategic offensive weapons and missile defense.

**Nov. 13, 2001:** Putin arrives in Washington for three-day U.S. visit. During the first meeting President Bush proposes reducing U.S. nuclear arsenal to between 1,700 and 2,200 warheads. Putin says he will "try to respond in kind" but offered no hard numbers.

**Nov. 15, 2001:** Bush and Putin fly to Texas to continue their summit at Bush's ranch in Crawford. Though the atmosphere and camaraderie are great, there is no announcement on a decision of the status of the ABM Treaty.

**Nov. 26, 2001:** U.S. Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham arrives in Russia to represent the U.S. government at a ceremony marking the completion of the Caspian Pipeline Consortium route from Kazakhstan to the Black Sea. Abraham also meets with his Russian counterpart, Igor Yusufov.

**Nov. 26, 2001:** Russian troops from the Ministry for Emergency Situations unexpectedly arrive in Kabul with the announced mission of erecting a field hospital and re-establishing a Russian Embassy in the city.

**Dec. 5, 2001:** Russia and the U.S. state they will slash their strategic weapons stockpile to the levels required by the START II treaty, signed by the U.S. and the Soviet Union in 1991. A Russian Foreign Ministry statement announces that the number of vehicles had been reduced to 1,136 and the number of nuclear warheads to 5,518, well below the ceilings of 1,600 and 6,000 established by the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty.

**Dec. 9, 2001:** After visits to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, Powell arrives in Moscow for talks with Putin and Igor Ivanov. Powell reportedly leaves Moscow unable to declare victories either on the long-simmering missile defense issue or on a firm commitment from Russia on reducing its nuclear weapon levels.

**Dec. 11, 2001:** The White House announces that the “time is near” to move beyond the 1972 ABM Treaty amid signs that President Bush would formally announce U.S. withdrawal plans.

**Dec. 13, 2001:** U.S. announces its withdrawal from the ABM Treaty.

**Dec. 18, 2001:** At a NATO conference in Brussels U.S. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld meets with Russian counterpart Ivanov to discuss the campaign in Afghanistan and Russia’s participation in NATO’s 19+1 plan.