

## U.S.-Russia Relations: Growing Pains

by Joseph Ferguson  
Researcher

The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies

Half a year into the U.S.-Russian antiterror partnership, it is once again apparent that allies in wartime are not immune to down cycles in their relations. This is especially true when the partnership is built on shaky foundations and for reasons of expediency rather than strategic necessity. The United States and the Soviet Union found this out in 1941-45 and it is again the case for Moscow and Washington in 2002. This is not to suggest that a new Cold War will ensue once antiterror operations in Central and Southwest Asia cease. In fact, the international situation shows promise of significant U.S.-Russian cooperation in the future. Nevertheless, as this year's first quarter indicated, it will take concerted efforts from both sides to make this partnership a long-lasting affair.

### **Starting on the Wrong Foot**

The year began with a series of events that cast a negative shadow on U.S.-Russian relations. In early January it was revealed in *The Washington Post* that the Bush administration would not necessarily dispose of large numbers of nuclear warheads that would have otherwise been destroyed according to a verbal agreement reached between Presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin in Texas last fall. Both sides had agreed to begin negotiations on limiting the level of nuclear warheads to between 1,700 and 2,200. Russia criticized the U.S. plan to "put back on the shelf" warheads that could easily be converted back into weapons.

Russian leaders also expressed their unhappiness toward State Department criticism of Russian actions in Chechnya. Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov derided the United States for its "double standards" by calling on the world to combat terrorism around the globe, while criticizing Russia for doing just that in Chechnya. President Bush's reference to the "axis of evil" in his State of the Union address even elicited a response from the normally unflappable Putin. Putin said that Russia was against "blacklisting" any nations, and Russian politicians from all sides rushed to defend both Iran and Iraq. All the while, NATO expansion appears now to include the Baltic republics, perhaps even in the second round of new entries next year. The Russian public then took its turn to heavily criticize the "domineering attitude" of the United States in the wake of the Olympic spat over figure skating, ice hockey, and blood doping. The crowning

indignation for many Russians was the U.S. imposition of tariffs of up to 30 percent on imported steel, a move likely to hurt Russian producers.

U.S. actions in Central Asia have continued to strike a nervous chord around Russia. Each week brings forth new articles in the Russian press about U.S. plans to make the deployment in Central Asia a permanent one. *Izvestia* announced in a headline that the “American flag will stay” in Central Asia. The Moscow daily *Kommersant*, normally given to neutral reporting, added fuel to the fire by speculating that the main goal of the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan was not to combat terrorism but to support U.S. corporations in securing access to oil and gas deposits in the region. In light of U.S. actions, the daily *Vremya Novostei* proclaimed that the new U.S.-Russian “friendship is finished.” Soon thereafter the United States announced that it was sending a detachment of special forces to Georgia to train the Georgian Army to fight terrorism, bringing the criticism in Russia to a crescendo. In an editorial, the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* lamented about the “Georgia we have lost.” President Putin was the object of criticism in the press and the Duma over his seeming passivity in the face of U.S. actions. So great was the criticism from within Russia that U.S. officials publicly denied interest in a permanent Central Asian deployment (see Jan. 23 in the chronology).

### **Putin Stays the Course**

Vladimir Putin, however, remains imperturbable as ever. He has kept on his stated course of integrating Russia with the West. He no doubt feels that Russian and U.S. interests coincide in Central and Southwest Asia. In early March Putin announced that U.S. forces in Georgia are “no tragedy” for Russia’s interests. U.S. forces have at least temporarily stabilized the situation in Afghanistan and are looking to do the same in Georgia. Russian leaders feel that both of these countries are primary staging grounds for “terrorists” operating in Chechnya. Moscow analyst Gleb Pavlovsky, a former Putin advisor, says, “The current situation is very advantageous for our country. The Americans have done this [dirty work] for us.” Another analyst in Moscow, Andrei Piontkovsky, also argues that the geopolitical interests of Russia and the U.S. coincide. Piontkovsky feels that it is better to have the U.S. in control of the strategic Fergana Valley (in Central Asia) than the Taliban. He also feels that Russia and the U.S. have common long-term strategic interests in Northeast Asia (vis-à-vis China). Putin, he surmises, has made his strategic choice in favor of an alliance between Russia and the West. Meanwhile, Putin’s political standing in Russia is still strong. What opposition forces do exist are divided and his popularity remains sky high. Though some can discern chinks in Putin’s armor, thus far his West-leaning stance has not hurt him. It remains to be seen how long this situation can hold.

These days the term Central Asian “Great Game” is heard in a slightly different context. Rather than U.S.-Russian competition, there seems to be a new pattern of cooperation that extends from antiterrorist operations to oil extraction. One Russian oil firm, LUKoil, has expressed interest in participating in the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline. The Baku-Ceyhan project was initially conceived as U.S. plan to pipe out the resources of Kazakhstan and

Azerbaijan, bypassing Russia and Iran. Now, opposition to this plan in Russia is relatively muted.

Russia has also refused OPEC demands to support a massive cut in oil production meant to prop up world prices. Many in the West fear that increased oil prices would make the current worldwide recession much more severe. Though Russia did initially agree to marginal cuts, it was far below what Saudi Arabia had asked for, and by the end of the year the production quotas were dead in the water. By February Russian oil production had grown to over 7 million barrels per day, topping Saudi Arabian production for the first time in a quarter of a century. The Russian government has patiently explained to the Saudis that Russian firms are private and exports cannot always be controlled. Most oil firms in Russia have come out strongly against production and export ceilings. The U.S. and Europe are quietly happy with Russia's stand. The issue of Iran and Iraq, however, divides Moscow and Washington. Iraq owes Russia a lot of money (estimates reach \$20 billion), and Iran is a steady customer for Russian arms and nuclear technology. Any change in regime could significantly put a dent in Russia's already meager export markets.

### **Turning Heads at the SCO**

Leaders in China are still wondering where they fit in. Officially on board the antiterrorist coalition, China's interests in Central Asia have taken a blow. Their major ally Pakistan is looking to re-engage the United States, and Beijing's dream of building an energy bridge from Central Asia to the Pacific has been put on hold. Though there has been some rejuvenated talk of a Beijing-Delhi-Moscow axis (c.f., *Asia Times*), this thinking seems far-fetched for now. A meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was held in Beijing in January. China and Russia expressed support for U.S. actions in Afghanistan and also expressed their support for a continued strong antiterrorism coalition. Nevertheless, the leaders at the summit seemed to be groping for some sort of agenda and were unable to find one. An editorial in the Japanese *Nikkei Shimbun* speculated that China has been trying to redirect the organization as a bulwark meant to contain Washington's new influence in Central Asia. Meanwhile, at the SCO summit the junior partners (the leaders of the Central Asian republics) had their heads expectantly turned toward the U.S.

Though President Putin seems unfazed by U.S. actions in Central Asia, voices of caution no doubt whisper in his ear warnings about bending over too far backward to please the U.S. At this point most Russians seem divided about the stepped-up U.S. presence in their backyard. It is no doubt a blow to Russian pride. But at the same time many recognize that a strong relationship with the United States is in the interest of Russia in order to shore up what is indeed a "soft underbelly" to the south and southeast of the Volga heartland. For the time being in Russia cooperation seems to take precedence over confrontation.

Now U.S. and Russian policymakers are making preparations for the upcoming presidential summit to be held in St. Petersburg in May. The summit will be less about

terrorism and Central Asia than about arms control. The two sides cannot escape what has been the primary negotiating point between the two nations for the past four decades. What the new spirit of cooperation in Central Asia can do, however, is help the two nations come to agreement in an amicable and long-lasting way.

## **Chronology of U.S.-Russia Relations January–March 2002**

**Jan. 8, 2002:** *The Washington Post* reveals that the Bush administration is planning to retain nuclear warheads that would normally be dismantled under a proposed bilateral arms control agreement with Russia. The article also hints that the U.S. may be preparing to resume nuclear weapons testing. Russia reacts with a terse statement by Foreign Ministry spokesman Aleksandr Yakovenko that calls for reductions in the Russian and U.S. strategic nuclear arsenals to be “radical,” “verifiable,” and “irreversible.”

**Jan. 10, 2002:** “The latest information on Russian operations in Chechnya indicates a continuation of human-rights violations,” State Department spokesman Richard Boucher tells a news briefing. The official statement marks the end of a post-Sept. 11 period during which the U.S. government avoided criticizing Russia’s campaign in Chechnya.

**Jan. 15-16, 2002:** Russia-U.S. consultations on strategic offensive arms reductions are held in Washington. The U.S. delegation is headed by Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith. The Russian delegation is headed by deputy chief of the General Staff Gen. Yuri Baluyevsky.

**Jan. 23, 2002:** Gen. Tommy Franks, commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, says that the Pentagon is not planning to build permanent military bases in Central Asia. Under Secretary of State Richard Armitage backs up Gen. Franks’ statement, announcing that Washington considers the Central Asia region Russia’s sphere of influence.

**Jan. 27, 2002:** An op-ed piece written by Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov is published in *The New York Times*. It is part of an effort by Moscow to stem the perceived deterioration in relations between the U.S. and Russia.

**Jan. 30-Feb. 2, 2002:** Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov visits Washington and New York to meet with U.S. officials and business groups to promote Russian WTO membership.

**Feb. 2-3, 2002:** At a security conference in Munich U.S. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov exchange barbs over President George Bush’s reference to an “axis of evil” in his State of the Union speech. Ivanov defends the record of Iran and accuses the West of “double standards” for failing to condemn the Chechens as “terrorists” with the same vigor they pursue Usama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network.

**Feb. 6, 2002:** In testimony to the Senate, CIA Director George Tenet gives Russia a mixed report card. He lauds improved U.S.-Russian ties since Sept. 11 but warns that Russia has lost the ability to prevent the spread of dangerous technology.

**Feb. 11, 2002:** In an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, Russian President Vladimir Putin praises U.S.-Russian relations, but in a reference to the “axis of evil” speech, he says that Russia opposes “blacklisting” certain countries.

**Feb. 12, 2002:** Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov says that the U.S. should abandon its military presence in former Soviet republics in Central Asia once the war in Afghanistan is over.

**Feb. 19, 2002:** In Moscow Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Georgii Mamedov and John Bolton, the U.S. under secretary of state for arms control and international security, draft an agreement on nuclear disarmament for signature at a May presidential summit.

**Feb. 20, 2002:** The United States announces that it will send a team of 200 military advisors to Georgia to help train the Georgian Army in combat against terrorists ensconced in the Pankisi Gorge in the eastern part of Georgia near the Chechen border.

**March 5, 2002:** President Bush announces the imposition of tariffs from 8 percent to 30 percent on several types of imported steel (including Russian steel) in an effort to aid the ailing U.S. industry. Russia threatens retaliation and soon imposes a ban on U.S. poultry imports.

**March 9, 2002:** *The Los Angeles Times* reports that the Bush administration has drawn up contingency plans that include targeting nuclear weapons on six nations, including Russia.

**March 12, 2002:** Russian Defense Minister Ivanov, in Washington on an official visit, holds separate meetings with President Bush and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. Talks center on the war in Afghanistan and strategic arms agreements.

**March 18-20, 2002:** Gen. Franks meets with senior officials at the Russian Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs.

**March 21-22, 2002:** U.S. and Russian negotiators meet in Geneva. Mamedov and Bolton discuss arms control issues and set the agenda before an April meeting between U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell and Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov.