

PINpoints

PROCESSES OF INTERNATIONAL NEGOTIATION



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PINPoints

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A Quarter-Century of Post-Cold War United States–Russia Negotiations: The Role of Balance of Power, Domestic Inertias, and Leadership Worldviews

Twenty-six years after the moment when Presidents Yeltsin of Russia and George H. W. Bush of the United States of America declared an end to their Cold War confrontation and a “new era of friendship and partnership” (Wines 1992) such a prospect still seems a far cry. The US–Russia relationship has been developing only in fits and starts, reaching previously unseen lows by mid-2018. Washington and Moscow conducted many rounds of bilateral and multilateral negotiations on the issues of mutual concern – from the ways to deal with the civil war in Bosnia in the early 1990s, to NATO enlargement and US missile defense deployments from the mid-1990s, to the fate of eastern Ukraine since 2014. Despite numerous phases of high expectations, most of these negotiations did not result in sustainable agreements – so that the controversies remained in place and indeed continued to poison the relationship. The reasons for these failures has become the subject of heated debate among policy analysts and academics, many of whom have used the empirical material from developments between the US and Russia as evidence to support theories in the fields of Political Science and International Relations as well as to make generalizations about the two countries’ relations.

Three popular arguments have been advanced to account for the lack of sustainable progress in the relationship. The first approach emphasizes the power disparities between the two sides: while the US has never relinquished its status of being the only global superpower, Russia was hit hard

by the economic crisis in the 1990s and later suffered from corruption, inefficiency, and whimsical foreign policy decision making. Such a disparity, one could argue, made the US reluctant to make bargains with Russia because Washington always expected its best alternatives to a negotiated agreement (BATNAs) to improve with time – and Russia’s only to deteriorate (see, for example Mearsheimer 2014). Russia in turn was hit hard with resentment, and tried to strike back as soon as its powerbase increased – making its own BATNAs more acceptable.

“The diehard negative dynamic in the relationship was perpetuated by the lack of adequate negotiation formats and the unwillingness to engage on the issues of mutual interest.”

The second popular approach stresses identity politics (Clunan 2014) and/or Russia’s unmet aspirations for status in the post-Cold War environment (Troitskiy 2017). From such a perspective, Moscow’s opposition to Washington’s moves and policies since the end of the Cold War has been rooted in the identity that Russia picked for itself as a result of a brief public debate in the early 1990s. While Moscow decided not to break with the foreign policy heritage of the USSR and to largely position itself on the world stage as the successor state to the Soviet Union, Washington saw itself as the indisputable winner of the Cold War and the only remaining global beacon of morality – especially for the “defeated” post-communist countries. In turn, Russia

aspired to an acknowledgment of its role as a co-victor, the party deserving credit for dismantling the mortally dangerous bipolar world and turning instead toward cooperation. However, those status aspirations were not honored by the US and most of its allies – at least until the mid-2010s, when Russia began to feature prominently as a major security threat in the foreign policy doctrines of NATO states.

A third school of thought argues that the main challenge to US–Russia relations has to do mainly with the personal convictions and parochial political agendas of the respective individual leaders (Stent 2018; McFaul and Stoner 2015). From such a perspective, foreign policies have been mutually hostage to domestic politics, personal grandstanding, and the need to keep a hold on power or to mobilize political elites in the respective countries. While each of these approaches is grounded in thorough research and based on solid evidence, they ultimately come across as deterministic – seeking to explain presumably inevitable outcomes or patterns of interaction between Washington and Moscow. The metatheories largely gloss over the process of US–Russia negotiations, however. A look at that process can provide a more nuanced perspective on the lessons to be learnt and the real options for the relationship that have existed in the past – and that may come back to the table in future.

Negotiation Inertias

The first lesson to be learnt from US–Russia relations concerns the nonlinear, self-reinforcing dynamic of conflict

and cooperation. Vicious as well as virtuous circles were more powerful than they are usually presented as being by the deterministic concepts. Positive inertias were generated by the staying power of negotiations, as a key form of engagement between two international actors. Negotiation formats and forums turned out to be difficult to dismantle overnight, because they carried value for their participants in the form of status, useful insights into the counterpart's intentions, and simple positions created within bureaucracies in charge of negotiating in those formats.

The diehard negative dynamic in the relationship was perpetuated by the lack of adequate negotiation formats and the unwillingness – usually for domestic political reasons – to engage on the issues of mutual interest. A plausible approach to the domestic political origins of the negotiation inertia is provided by the fashionable theory “New Behaviorism,” which suggests that there is a bias among people with “more intense national attachments to attribute malign intentions to countries that they dislike and attribute benign intentions to the countries that they like” if the behavior of these two types of states is the same (Hafner-Burton et al. 2017).

As a result, it was difficult to turn the ship of confrontation toward a thaw in the relationship and vice versa. Both “resets” and “cold wars” proved surprisingly resilient, and it required consistent effort to shift from one state of affairs to the other. For example, the post-9/11 cooperative push in US–Russia relations, that originated from the shared goal of rolling back

the Taliban in Afghanistan, outlived its initial rationale and did not fade away completely at least until President Putin's acrimonious anti-US speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007 – and even then made a spectacular comeback a few years

ment so much that they were actually prepared to put fundamental disagreements on the backburner – effectively pushing the can down the road (Istomin 2017). Conversely, the lack – or sudden collapse – of negotiation forums in the mid-1990s and then again in the mid-



Source: State Department

later. Negotiations on Afghanistan and the facilitation of US access to the transit infrastructure in Russia and Central Asia gained momentum at various levels of the two governments, and served as the basis for the reset that took off soon after a major bout of tension over Russia's conflict with Georgia in August 2008.

In a similar vein, the fallout from NATO enlargement was kept under control because of the multilevel negotiations between Russian and NATO civilian and military representatives that were conducted between 1995 and 2014. While those negotiations did not allow the matter to be resolved in principle, the different sides valued their engage-

ment so much that they were actually prepared to put fundamental disagreements on the backburner – effectively pushing the can down the road (Istomin 2017). Conversely, the lack – or sudden collapse – of negotiation forums in the mid-1990s and then again in the mid-

2010s led to protracted periods of conflict between the two sides, and essentially required a change of leadership in both countries to overcome these. On the domestic front, once it was explained to the Russians – both policymakers and the general public – by their leadership as well as mainstream media that the US could be a friend, as happened in the aftermath of 9/11 and then again during the reset of 2009–2011, they began supporting more cooperation with that country. The same largely applied to and for the US public as well. Only when the tide of mutual attitudes turned once more in 2012 – apparently because of personal issues between Presidents Putin and Obama,



Source: kremlin.ru

and because of electoral politics in Russia – did the relationship eventually head toward a new round of conflict. Mutual demonization among the respective publics ruined the chances for substantive negotiation, and for the prevention of further conflict.

The Role of Balance of Power

Over the last quarter century, both Russian and US foreign policy makers have frequently claimed that, when defining their mutual stances, they had to focus primarily on the counterpart's potentials – military, technological, economic, and otherwise – as opposed to their declarations of intent. Intentions can easily change, but the capabilities remain. Indeed, a popular official narrative in Russia argues that

it was the balance of power logic that kept changing Washington's approach in its relations with Moscow. When Russia was weak, that narrative claims, the US did not worry about Russia and dismissed Moscow's declared interests and aspirations straight out of hand. When Russia resurged on the world stage in the 2000s meanwhile, the US, according to that same narrative, became obstructionist and set out to fight a covert war against Russia so as to change its regime. A review of the negotiation processes in US–Russia relations shows, however, that despite those declarations, the balance of power only played in fact a limited role in US and Russian stances and strategies vis-à-vis each other. While the US has always had an edge

in power resources over Russia since the end of the Cold War, the latter neither consistently balanced the US nor bandwagoned with it either.

Indeed, by 1996 Moscow formulated a lodestar strategic concept to guide its foreign policy: “multipolarity.” That term comes across as a clear antithesis to “unipolarity” – meaning the perceived global domination of the US. The doctrinal part of multipolarity clearly implied a balancing position vis-à-vis the US. However, in practice, periods of balancing US power in the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere in the late 1990s gave way to bandwagoning in the early 2000s – that is, at the peak of US influence in the world.

Moscow also took a break from its attempts to balance Washington's in-

fluence in post-Soviet Eurasia and beyond soon after the Russia–Georgia war in 2008, allowing for another round of bandwagoning from 2009–2011. During that period, Russia, for example, opened the door to the removal of the Qaddafi regime in Libya by abstaining in March of 2011 on UN Security Council Resolution 1973. Moscow and Washington continued to negotiate in good faith on the transit of US military equipment to and then from Afghanistan. In a major feat of accomplishment for their relationship, the two sides completed several rounds of difficult negotiations on a new strategic arms reduction treaty – the New START – and then successfully convinced their domestic constituencies to ratify it. Concurrently, an overarching institution was established to oversee the multitude of cooperative projects undertaken during the latest US–Russian reset – the Bilateral Presidential Commission (BPC). In turn, the BPC created significant negotiation inertia – but also kept the sides from direct confrontation for about two years after their relations began to sour once more. From 2012 on, Moscow began voicing concerns about alleged efforts by the US to subvert not only the Russian government but also those in post-Soviet Eurasia that favored cooperation with Moscow. Russia thereafter gradually wound down most of the negotiating with the US that had flourished under the most recent reset.

The US also treated Russia differently during the periods of that country’s both supposed weakness and strength. For example, the US was far less dismissive of Russia’s concerns in

the mid-1990s than it could have been given the latter’s weakness at the time. For example, US President Bill Clinton was careful not to undermine Russian President Yeltsin’s domestic standing or to reduce the latter’s chances of reelection in 1996 by expanding NATO ruthlessly and without visible concern for Russia’s reaction. Clinton therefore favored conducting negotiations with Moscow on a legal and institutional framework to underpin relations between Russia and NATO. That negotiation ushered in, by May 1997, the Founding Act on NATO–Russia Relations, which among other accomplishments promised that NATO would not deploy substantial armed contingents on the territory of its new members. Clinton also undertook a good-faith effort to resolve the missile defense controversy – a long-standing and major source of security concern for Russia – by signing with Yeltsin in 1997 protocols differentiating between strategic and non-strategic missile defense systems.

“In a major feat of accomplishment for their relationship, the two sides completed several rounds of difficult negotiations on a new strategic arms reduction treaty.”

In stark contrast, after Moscow declared an end to the era of Russia’s “strategic softness” and moved decisively to engage the US in the conflicts around Crimea and eastern Ukraine, Washington showed readiness to contain Moscow both in Ukraine, Syria and elsewhere and even to accept Russia’s

brinkmanship challenge – despite the latter openly featuring as a resurgent and confident actor (see the leaked version: United States Department of Defense 2018). Bilateral negotiation has stalled on almost all fronts, while the US has displayed few signs of willingly accommodating Russia’s increased clout in world affairs. Whether Russia’s net power vis-à-vis the US and the rest of the international community besides, as well as Moscow’s leverage in negotiations with Washington, lately increased in comparison to earlier periods of US–Russia interaction is highly debatable.

A more plausible explanation for the evolution of reciprocal policies might be provided by mutual perceptions of threat to the status quo considered favorable by the opposing side. Indeed, policy biases in favor of the status quo constitute another important takeaway from the now-fashionable New Behaviorism.

Since the end of the Cold War the US has behaved at times in such a way that it has been perceived as a paragon of unfavorable change to the status quo that Russia has championed, and vice-versa. Moscow considered US missile defense initiatives as an assault on Russia’s parity with its counterpart in strategic nuclear deterrence, and US support for revolutionary change of governments in post-Soviet Eurasia to be a wave of externally orchestrated coups ultimately directed against Russia. In turn, Washington has always feared the new challenge to US global leadership that may seemingly be mounted by Moscow at any point – and has taken Russia’s attempts to unite its neighboring countries in trade and de-

fense blocs, to influence US domestic politics, and to drive a wedge between the transatlantic allies as manifestations of that country's immutable opposition to US global leadership.

In the meantime, Russia has seemed paradoxically unfazed by China's rapidly growing military capabilities – possibly because Beijing's policies are not seen by Moscow as a challenge, at least in the short term, to the status quo in their areas of mutual interest.

The implications of the above for policy could be that the two counterparts may have benefitted from trying to dispel the notion of being committed to change in the status quo merely for the sake of it. However such mutual understanding would have been difficult to achieve given the diverging perspectives on change, with the US largely viewing its political forms as a sine qua non of social and economic progress – and Russia as surreptitious attempts to further undermine its own post-Cold War status.

Overall, the US–Russia relationship was hardly driven by a balance of power or by other “systemic” immutable forces. Much more, it was influenced by domestic politics and pressure groups, personal chemistry between

the three dyads of leaders, and often by these leaders' emotions and quests for personal vindication. By implication we should, therefore, in the final reckoning remain skeptical of any accounts of US–Russia relations advanced by metatheories seeking to explain the whole two and a half decades and counting of this extremely complex relationship.

■

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