

## The Dawn of the post-Cold War Era: Russo-American Relations in the 1990s

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### Abstract

Relations between Moscow and Washington underwent significant changes in the final years of Soviet Union, and these changes shaped to a considerable extent the ties between post-Soviet Russia and the United States in the wake of the Soviet collapse. Important factors like Russia's deep economic crisis and weakened statehood with dangerous implications further complicated the picture. The article shows that these factors conditioned the kind the "Russia first" approach, whereby significant political support and financial assistance was extended to the country to save its embattled allegedly pro-Western leadership, while a blind eye was virtually turned to the early manifestations of Russia's neo-imperial foreign policy.

**Keywords:** Post-Soviet era, relations, Russia, USA

### Introduction

It will probably be an overstatement to claim that relations between Washington and Moscow were the most important bilateral ties in the world, but in certain historical junctures the relations between the two countries have had major implications for the fortunes at a global scale.

From the standpoint of international relations theory, the end of the Cold War heralded a very interesting systemic transition: from the bipolar world order to the unipolar one. The dissolution of the already weakened Soviet Union and the Warsaw Bloc left no doubt that not a single state matched the United States in economic or military might and the world of the 1990s and beyond will be the world of one superpower – the Pole. It was not until 2008 that the evidence of the gradual loss of America's commanding preeminence had mounted to the degree that warranted scholarly inquiry (Zakaria, 2008).

### Polarity Transition

For virtually every major IR theory, this period of 'polarity transition' is considered to be fraught and unstable, with the behavior of the remaining super-power and of the state that lost its status to be the most consequential. The proponents of the Realist school of thought are believed to be particularly vocal in their warnings (Robert, 2009 & Waltz, 1964).

Therefore, it comes no surprise that the disintegration of the Soviet Union riveted the world's attention to the relations between the United States of America – the world's sole remaining superpower, and the Russian Federation, the successor state of the USSR. How the former will handle its unrivaled global supremacy and how the latter will put up with its reduced stature? The relevance of these inquiries is supported by vastly dif-

fering stories of the victors and the losers. If after its World War One victory over the Central Powers, Britain and France imposed excessively harsh and unfair retribution on Germany, thus spurring its embittered vengefulness, the generous post-World War Two behavior of the US toward Germany and later Japan ensured that yesterday's foes became Washington's most trusted allies.

No historical analogies are fully accurate, and one distinctive feature in the newly established relations between the United States and the Russian Federation was that they were being created on the heels of a major thaw between Washington and the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, and these unusually cordial relations between the formal Cold War rival laid the groundwork to a considerable degree of warmth between the two states right after the Soviet collapse.

These improved relations against the background of weakened Russian economy dictated a genuinely unprecedented mode of interactions between the two states, friendly but very unequal, whereby Washington would assist Russia to sort out its massive economic woes. But this simple donor-recipient way of interaction was compounded by three very important domestic circumstances.

The first was the need for thorough market-oriented reforms, which would put the moribund economy on a more healthy footing. American aid, as well as that from other G-7 countries would only contribute to sustainable growth if there were an in-depth transformation of the economic policy in the country. Otherwise all the massive aid, which in 1993 amounted to \$2.5 billion would evaporate in the maw of a cumbersome, leaky and corrupt system (Talbot, p. 85).

The second problem, closely related to the first one, was that only a fraction of Russia's political elite was

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pro-Western. President Yeltsin, foreign minister Andrey Kozyrev had to operate in a very hostile environment of retrogrades and obscurantists who viewed the disintegration of the Soviet Union as “Gorbachev’s Treason”, and thought that Yeltsin and Kozyrev are kowtowing to the western leaders, Americans in particular. Their pernicious influence had been manifesting itself from the very first months of Russia’s post-Soviet life. On more than one occasion Yeltsin was forced to make uncomfortable concessions to their demands, like the removal of market reform-oriented Yegor Gaidar from the position of the Prime Minister and replacing him with the Soviet-type industrial entrepreneur Viktor Chernomyrdin (Ibid, p. 40). A number of political crises pitting reformers against retrogrades ravaged Russia in 1992 and 1993, and the challenge confronting Washington was to save the former. Oftentimes, the necessity to help Yeltsin out politically and economically trumped the economic aid conditionality that would have allowed Russia to reform more responsibly.

And the third problem directly tied with Russia’s economic weakness. As the successor state of the recently disintegrated USSR, the Russian Federation was home to the biggest stockpile of nuclear weapons, and Russia’s troubled economy and institutional faultiness led to legitimate apprehension regarding the ability of the state to control its massive nuclear arsenal and prevent it from falling into the hands of terrorists or the rogue countries. Besides, there were thousands of top-notch nuclear scientists in dire economic straits, who could easily end up counseling rogue states as a way out of poverty (Stent, Princeton University Press).

These three huge domestic problems created the atmosphere of massive apprehension of what might follow in case of some of all the above risks would become a reality. The prospect of having a country with enormous nuclear arsenal, ruled by quasi-Soviet retrogrades pining for the Cold War, all the while experiencing enormous economic troubles to an extent that render questionable the ability of the state to control its most lethal weapons was too scary. And this was the reason Washington’s threw its weight behind Yeltsin and reformers in order to avoid a more acrimonious version of the Cold War. Stephen Kotkin in his well-known book makes a convincing case of what the alternative to a very imperfect leadership of Yeltsin could have been (Kotkin, 2001).

Needless to say, with domestic tensions running so high and Western support coming in huge quantities, Russian leadership was oftentimes abusing this lavish assistance, being assured that the flow will continue. They started to increasingly deviate from their original pledges of democratization and liberalizations at home and benign attitude towards the newly independent state internationally. The term ‘near abroad’ in reference to the post-Soviet republics (connoting their ‘incomplete’ status) became a currency. Strategic documents adopted by the various agencies of Russian Federation between 1992 and 1995 reveal a clear-cut trend towards increasing rigidity in Moscow’s approach to the post-Soviet republics and a more confrontational

attitude toward the West (Trenin, 1996).

Much worse, Russia started to back up its resentment toward the independence of the post-Soviet with direct policies, which reverberated in many corners of the former Soviet Union. South Caucasus was the region when the renewed penchant of Russia for raw geopolitics was felt the strongest. Russia instigated the conflicts on the Georgian territory (both in South Ossetia and Abkhazia) and, also was not an initiator, assisted Armenia with weapons and logistics in the war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabakh.

## Conclusion

One can argue whether Russia’s top political leadership (including President Yeltsin) and foreign policy establishment (Minister Kozyrev) were really calling the shots – many analysts concur that it was the military top brass headed by maverick Defense Minister Pavel Grachev who was in real charge of military operation and had little regard for the country’s political leadership and their policy preferences (Talbot, pp. 148-149). But most importantly for the bilateral relations between Washington and Moscow, and sadly for the newly born states, in the first years of their independence the three republics of the South Caucasus could not become a meaningful factor in the Russian-American relations – the United States preferred not to complicate relations with Moscow in fear of a much worse alternative, thus “averting Armageddon”. It was not until mid- or even late 1990s that the United States became increasingly willing to protect and cooperate with the countries of the region (Khelashvili & Macfarlane, pp. 112-114).

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