U.S.-Russian Relations 1989-2019: Self-Awareness and History
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U.S.-Russian relations, though currently intractable, are nevertheless the most discussed subject in American foreign policy today. In fact, our impressions of how relations with Russia are going are central to how we demarcate our own history. “After the wall fell” and “post-Soviet” are ways of telling historical time. And it is also how the current generation refers to the beginning of modern times, in much the same way as an earlier generation used “post-war” as shorthand for when normal life resumed after the war.

The ability to make sense of the recent past should help us understand where we are and where we are going. The meaning of “post-war” seems clear to us today: It connotes the aftermath of sacrifice, accomplishment, and a certainty about the historical role and significance of the World War II generation. “Post-Soviet” does not have the same historical clarity. The words that evoke our present circumstances convey a sense of uncertainty, persistent conflict, political stasis, and historical confusion. The significance of the present remains elusive for those of us living in the first decades of the 21st century.

America has spent slightly more than a century worrying about Russia without great success. Relations today between the U.S. and Russia are still as bad as they have ever been. If we look closely at the period 1989 to 2019, what significance do we find in our recent past and what does this tell us about the meaning of the present? Do we find a common history that puts the challenges of the present in the proper perspective? Or does where we come from make where we are now even more baffling?

Strictly speaking, U.S.-Russian relations are a cluster of epistemological problems. What do we think we know about the events that occurred between 1989 and 2019? How much confidence should we place in our interpretation? What are the implications of how we see our recent past for how we judge our present circumstances? Why do we currently find our conjectures so unsatisfactory at the personal level and from a policy perspective? Is there another way to look at the last thirty years that connects the events from the pre-history of modern times more closely with what we see in the present? For example, why does post-Soviet Russia look so much like Soviet Russia in 1989 when Western Europe today looks so unlike the confident and self-assured Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall?
Self-awareness and the Political Present: There is a common conceit about history that those alive at the time were at least imperfectly aware of their circumstances. Viennese citizens just prior to World War I must have been aware of the approaching disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and must have foreseen the significance of this event for war and peace at least in general terms. From our perspective a century later, we are prone to believe that those who lived in these times in effect had advance copies of Joseph Roth’s Radetsky March decades before it was written. We insist that it would have been impossible not to know then what we can see so clearly now.

In point of fact, however, no one who lived through these foundational periods in European history foresaw their fate. No one seems to have understood their present, and what they did believe about their times turned out only a few years later to have been completely mistaken. As a general rule, the people in the audience of history do not seem to have understood the plot that played out before them and were often unaware of what led to their own destruction.

At the moment, Americans seem to believe that “our times” began in 1989 with the collapse of the Soviet Union as a result of the moral and political triumph of the United States. Thereafter, there was a flowering of democracies all over the world. Accelerated by the helping hand of globalization, democracy became inevitable and thus ended history. This in turn begat the “color revolutions” that flourished in the normative system managed by the United States (with minimal help from the European Union). The only threats on the horizon after 1989 were the sore-loser revisionism of Russia, the military rise of China, the global war on terror, and the propensity of Third World dictators to pursue weapons of mass destruction. Even if history did not really end, for our purposes from 1989 to the present, this is pretty much the whole story.

Perhaps now is the time to step back and ask whether any of the preceding narrative is really true, or even plausible. We will have to look more closely at all three parts of the story: the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Big Bang of democracies, and the triumph of the West.

The Disappearance of the Soviet Union is generally thought of as a dramatic political collapse which began the post-Cold War period by simply removing the far end of the bipolar see-saw on which world order balanced precariously. Lacking the other half of a balanced system, American hegemony was there to fill the vacuum thereby created. Kissinger was the first to argue that the task of filling it was to turn to mostly European institutions into which Russia could integrate. Needless to say, this did not happen. In the 1990s very little happened politically in the former Soviet Union other than fragmentation and economic dislocation.
Norman Davies offers an alternative interpretation in his *Vanished Kingdoms: The Rise and Fall of Nations and States*. Simply put, after the dissolution of an empire, which is far more an economic than a political event, there comes a post-imperial twilight in which the next generation reconstructs a knock-off version of the old regime from the empire’s wreckage. Thus after sacking Rome, the Visigoths reconstructed the Visigoth Kingdom in Aquitaine to resemble Rome as closely as possible in terms of Latin, law, and the Roman political model.

In this alternative interpretation, the Soviet Union was not defeated by a political idea. The ruling gerontocracy simply exhausted the means and the energy to run an empire. The defining attributes of the Soviet empire did not disappear overnight. In the twilight of post-Soviet states, things remain much as they were, albeit in farcical and less recognizable form.

- The post-Soviet world is still run from the Kremlin and by a Keystone Kops version of the old Securitate.

- Post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine retain the same inability to reform their economies that led to the demise of the Soviet system.

- In Russia, a politically salient and very capable military remains intact.

- Isolation from Europe and the West, which was the defining characteristic of the Soviet Union from 1917 to 1989, is still a defining characteristic of Russia and all post-Soviet states today.

- Finally, the nationalities question dominates politics in Moscow and Kyiv nowadays as thoroughly as national identity, ethnicity, language, and religion obsessed Comrade Stalin in the 1930s.

What has changed in political terms? The political thinkers responsible for the Bolshevik Revolution are well-known. Where are the philosophical giants who foresaw and then explained the advent of the post-Cold War world? There are none, unless we credit a handful of obscure neoconservative writers on the other side of the planet, who at best had part of the story. The simplest explanation for the changes after 1989 would be that geo-economic reality rose up and crushed a derelict ideology. The events of 1991 were far more a long overdue economic correction than a political extinction that ended an epoch of brutality.

**The Triumph of Democracy and the End of History?** A senior White House official told me at the time that if he had understood the implications of the reunification of Germany in 1990, he would have pursued the expansion of NATO earlier and far more aggressively.

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1 Norman Davies: *Vanished Kingdoms: The Rise and Fall of Nations and States*
This declaration implies that there was some confusion around the time of the end of Soviet Union about what this unexpected event portended for the rest of Europe. Presumably a few years later, this official achieved clarity: The modern period of post-Soviet peace was a magical time in which all nations would become democracies, color revolutions would occur spontaneously, and the United States could expand the democratic world to the limit of human imagination.

Are we sure that the improved interpretation of German re-unification is more correct than the initially apprehensive impression?

The facts have not been kind to the Hegelian view of history in fashion in the early 1990s. From July 1997 (when NATO issued its first post-Soviet invitations to new members) and its Prague Summit in 2002, 120 million people in Eastern European countries entered NATO—and subsequently the EU. This mass expansion of democracy lasted less than five years. European integration had ended well before the Istanbul NATO Summit of 2004. The movement of democracies into Europe driven by the American-led expansion of NATO had come to a shuddering halt on March 1, 2003 when the Turkish Parliament rejected U.S. plans for the invasion of Iraq. Allied opposition to taking NATO out of the European area in pursuit of enemies had effectively displaced further integration of Europe’s Neighborhood.

Moreover, since the appearance of a coalition of European allies unwilling to follow the American lead in Iraq, no color revolution has accomplished its stated purpose of societal change, nor has any revolution in the Euro-Atlantic world permanently changed its nation’s existing model of government. In light of these failures, the color revolutions in the early 2000s resemble the revolutions of 1848, which promised liberal democracy and delivered a return to autocracy. Indeed, since the sell-by date for transitional democracies in 2003, autocracy has outperformed reform-based democracy worldwide. Far more potential democracies in Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and Turkey have discarded their European ambitions than have found a permanent place in institutional Europe.

In retrospect, the five-year period of rapid European integration looks inconsequential in the context of the almost 30-year period between 1989 and 2018. The slowdown in European integration does not seem to be a consequence of change in the Soviet Union or even less of a flowering of democracies in the West. The malaise and languor of Europe look either like a coda at the end of the Cold War or a prelude to the darkening post-Soviet twilight. Small nations left stranded in the Warsaw Pact after World War II seized their one chance to pack up and return to Europe, where they had lived for centuries. This phenomenon hardly seems to constitute a fundamental change in geopolitics or the coming of a brave new world. To the contrary, this putative expansion of Europe looks more like a restoration of a pre-World War I mix of flawed, liberal democracies and nationalist autocracies in Eastern Europe.

Significantly, both Washington and Moscow misunderstood the natural realignment of captive nations—for diametrically opposed reasons constituting
two sides of the same analysis. For years past the effective cessation of Western integration, Washington insisted on seeing an infinite expanse of democracies freed by the collapse of the Evil Empire. Moscow, meanwhile, could see nothing other than the impending strangulation of Russia by NATO’s new members. In fact, the power vacuums on Russia’s borders have not been this large since early Tsarist times, and such vacuums when they have occurred have never been filled by expanding European democracies. In short, there was no tsunami of democracies, and the geography of the post-Soviet world has not changed even slightly. All we know is that absent the Versailles Treaty or occupation by the Red Army, the smaller states around the North German plain will return to their last point of European reference geographically and will proceed gingerly, if at all, with further integration into European institutions.

The Chaotic Present of the West: The two core beliefs of our political generation are the irrelevance of Russia following the demise of the Soviet Union and the triumph of Western democracy. They both appear to be false, the products of a common misperception that we have entered a unique phase of world history. In fact, we live in chaotic and highly volatile political times. And to judge from these baseless beliefs and gross misperceptions, we live in the Age of Idiots.

Political moderates and realists believe that the unexplained power of populism, nativism and mercantilism have hijacked the political imagination of the West, resulting in nasty politics and trade wars. More ideological types maintain that Russia is destabilizing democracies everywhere by meddling with social media and grabbing worthless plots of nearby real estate. For some reason, both schools of thought see these dangers as highly significant, both politically and geopolitically. But to remark that insularity increases during economic recessions and that Russia can often be thuggish is far from exceptional; these are normal occurrences, historically speaking.

To believe the present is exceptionally dangerous or uniquely triumphal seems as mistaken as our distorted views of the recent past. Most obviously, how we describe our times owes more to a blurry memory of the past than to an analysis of the present. Even the campaign slogan for our times, “Make America Great Again,” is both retrospective and regressive.

Empirically, the last thirty years has been characterized by the fragmentation of states, the failure of institutions, and mass migration of peoples due to economic dislocation. Russian resentment and revisionism had little to do with it. Unlike the 19th century when nationalism and language led to the founding of nation states, nationalism in the 21st century is a cause of disunity and insecurity within states. Ukrainians lose sleep worrying if they are Ukrainian enough. Russians spend an inordinate amount of blood and treasure gathering up the lost conquests of Catherine the Great. But the reality is the West of which Russia is an integral part, like it or not, is smaller and in relative terms less powerful economically and militarily than it has been for several centuries.
**Symmetrical Misperceptions:** While historical self-awareness is vanishingly rare in the times in which we live, mutual and even communal misperceptions are remarkably common. For instance, disparate political leaders such as President Trump and President Putin have surprisingly similar mistaken views about what is going on around them.

- Both see economic competition in terms of malicious political intent.
- Neither seems to understand economic theory, and both mistake the economic for the political.
- As a result, Trump claims credit for a recovery he had nothing to do with and Putin claims credit for stopping things that were never going to happen anyway, such as the expansion of Europe into the post-Soviet world.
- Neither is capable of sustained economic reform or in the case of Trump even interested.
- Both prefer a form of isolationism to engagement with a complicated world.
- Both believe in a form of mercantilism.
- Both believe that multi-lateral institutions are fundamentally dangerous.
- Both seem to think that resentment and unpredictable behavior are good ways to handle the stresses of globalization.
- Both seem to find answers in the past to the problems of the present.
- And both leaders seem oblivious of the values which are widely thought to provide the political foundation for the times in which they exercise disproportionate political power.

It is axiomatic that the more chaotic the times, the more tortured their interpretation and the greater the human need for an agreed narrative imposing cognitive coherence—which in turn presses people towards common mistakes. Needless to say, this is not a reassuring phenomenon. A lot of powerful people completely unaware of their historical circumstances are running frantically in the wrong direction.

On this dystopian note, let me touch on a few such topics where political misperception may have diverged from reality. As one would expect, many of these topics are drawn from U.S.-Russian relations where symmetrical misunderstandings are most easily to be found.
**Conventional Deterrence and Geography:** It is commonly believed that Russian revisionism and revanchism have stripped away nuclear deterrence and left Europe exposed to an onslaught of little green men and cyber warriors. The only thing stopping general war is thought to be a U.S. military build-up and the militarization of NATO. The matching misapprehension in Moscow is that NATO is already well along in the entrapment and strangulation of Russia. This thinking is surely creative. But it’s not true.

Just before leaving office, President Obama declared that the United States had no intention of fighting with Russia and described the annexation of Crimea as an off-putting manifestation of disorderly state behavior. What has changed in the past 24 months? If anything, NATO has retrenched and fallen back further than at any time in its history. Incirlik, Aviano, and Ramstein are no longer reliable bases from which to engage Russian forces. Even American access in wartime to EU airspace is far from certain. In the event of a military confrontation along a line from Kursk to Rostov from which Russian armored forces threaten Ukraine, it might take the U.S. Army the better part of a year to get an armored division within range of the battlefield. By the same token, Russian military operations in Chechnya, Georgia, the Donbas, and on the borders of Estonia have not impressed anyone other than local politicians whose careers depend on being terrified of a Russian attack.

If truth be told, U.S. and NATO forces cannot close with Russian forces without exposing themselves to unacceptable risks, and Russia cannot launch an incursion into Europe without being destroyed by greatly superior forces. Conventional deterrence is quite stable in this period of history. To paraphrase an old Soviet saw, Russia pretends to threaten the Baltic States and the U.S. pretends to defend them.

**Proxy and hybrid wars and unintended consequences:** In the context of a stable deterrent relationship between powers on opposite sides of the globe, the resurgence of proxy war in Ukraine and hybrid warfare in the large vacuums which separate the powers are dangerous aberrations. If deterrence is really stable, theory suggests that the adversaries should agree to some management mechanism which would lock the stand-off in place and eliminate the need for expensive jockeying at the margins. In short, peace and the cessation of hostilities should quickly become a post-war mechanism for managing the withdrawal of military forces and verifying compliance. But even such primitive institutions have not appeared in Ukraine. The Minsk Agreement, the proposal for UN peacekeeping forces, and even a deal on balanced gas transit, all of which have the potential to become institutions, have come and gone. What remains is evidence of system-wide insecurity and the potential for a failed state in the center of Europe.

Rationally, neither the U.S. nor Russia should be trying to create a Balkanized outcome when an independent, sovereign, increasingly prosperous and neutral Ukraine, in the model of modern Finland, is in the interest of both the big powers as well as Ukrainians themselves.
**Economic Sanctions and Moral Hazard:** Sanctions are the preeminent policy instrument of our times. In order to avoid a war which is not in the cards, we have developed an economic weapon designed to coerce our adversaries at long range without risking the blood and treasure that wars require. Needless to say, politicians cannot get enough of economic sanctions. Seemingly cost-free to impose, they are immensely popular. Applied in the absence of any obvious limits, however, sanctions introduce considerable danger into the international system. They take frozen conflicts and encase them in an amber of economic harm. For a time, the answer to sanctions is more sanctions, because there is no conceivable reason to curtail the use of such a good thing. As long as the United States believes that sanctions are without consequences and that all the costs will be borne by Russia or other adversaries, the cumulative weight of sanctions on world trade will increase. Sooner or later, moral hazard leads to global recession and the wreck of what remains of geopolitical order. Limitless economic sanctions cannot be transformed into a stabilizing institution. By definition, sanctions are unilateral and intentionally coercive.

**Arms Control as an Institution:** Because political leaders and peoples tend to exaggerate military threats and the risk of political conflict between nations, they also tend to neglect institutions such as arms control negotiations, which restrain expensive and dangerous categories of weapons. In a period when conventional deterrence is stable and truly existential issues between the Great Powers are minimal, it makes sense for the beneficiaries of international order to reduce the weapons that could be used against each other. Traditionally, winners try to lock in their gains by banking a favorable outcome in an institution to make it last. So too with arms control.

**Stability and Prosperity:** I have alluded throughout this paper to the surprising neglect of geo-economic conditions, trade relations, and economic reform in this chaotic and disorderly period of history. Normally, the prosperity of the populace is the key to the stability of the state and to its ability to defend itself. Nevertheless, Russia has not attempted any meaningful economic reforms in the last thirty years and the president of the United States seems to go out of his way to disrupt existing trade relations and to burden allies with tariffs and sanctions. Both strike me as complete misunderstandings of the economic foundations of the West.

**Conclusion:** What we think of as the seminal events of the recent past and the foundations of our political present probably did not occur as we tend to believe. The Soviet Empire did not disappear; it drifted into the post-Soviet twilight clinging to its congenital inability to reform or to modernize. There was no worldwide renaissance of democracy. If anything New Europe is living further in the past in Turkey, Hungary, Poland, Ukraine, and Russia than Old Europe itself. And it is clear that we are not living through the Triumph of the West and an emergence of a global system of order.
The last thirty years have been a period of disintegration, fracture, separation, migration, and often retreat into isolation. Like the citizens of Vienna prior to World War I, it is not clear that contemporary political leaders and today’s voters are aware of their circumstances and the warning signs of long-term distress. Realism is in dangerously short supply. Eventually, self-defeating decision-making will lead to major recession and potentially to irreversible economic decline and that will bring to an end a period in history that we could not make sense of.

It now seems that the breakdown of the last of Europe’s 20th century totalitarian states, both Stalinist and Yugoslav, extended far into the 21st century. The suppression of human rights, state-sponsored assassination, and military aggression still occur, but sectarian warfare and ethnic nationalism have replaced gulags and ideology as the defining characteristics of fragmenting states.

The problem of U.S.-Russian relations remains much as it has always been: never very good, not as bad as we like to imagine, and always troublesome. What has changed is the human element. Self-awareness linked to national purpose has dwindled as recent history has become strangely indecipherable and perspective has disappeared. What is left are two isolated and resentful nations lost in a maze of minor conflicts.

Because of the way American and Russian leaders and elites have misread their recent history, the creation of peace and the reconstruction of institutions appear to be beyond the power of nations. The belief that order cannot be imposed on our chaotic circumstances is also without historical foundation.