

**RUSSIA'S APPROACH TO THE USA:  
BETWEEN HATE AND LOVE**

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**Summary**

During Putin's regime, Russia has achieved visible economic success, mostly due to high oil prices. The declining value of the dollar and American troubles in Iraq provide the elite and masses with the feeling that Russia is on its feet and could challenge the USA. Still, a close analysis shows that there is much common ground between Russians and Americans.

Russians do not object to violence in American foreign policy but assume its application should be well thought out. Russians also think American imperial aggrandizement is not a problem in itself. The problem is that American leadership is guided by unworkable schemes to instill Western-type democracy globally. This is as unworkable as the Soviet plan to spread the socialist system all over the world.

The Russian elite also emphasize that flirtation with Iran and China is due only to US pressure, and could well be changed with the end of this pressure. All this indicates that not much would be needed to resume Russian/American détente.

**Keywords**

Russia, Russian foreign policy, Russian-American relations, Russians views of themselves, Russian civilization, Putin's Russia.

Russia, more precisely the territory of the former USSR, is extremely important for the US geopolitical posture. First, it constitutes a good part of Eurasia and is geopolitically connected with other areas essential for US security-the Middle East, China and Europe. Second, the instability of the countries of the former USSR has provided the USA with

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opportunities as well as potential dangers. Third, and most important from one point of view, Russia's relationship with the USA, including its approach to the US war on terror, is a good example of current geopolitical complexity. In its interaction with the global community, Russia, like many other states, has played the role of both object and subject; that is, Russia can influence the global process by both its strengths and its weaknesses.

The complexity of the Russian position is certainly not unique, and the same can be said about the only superpower, the USA. Still, there is a difference between the American and Russian approaches to the global situation. The USA had recently experienced a period of geopolitical triumph and has not fully internalised the intrinsic limits in the country's geopolitical position. It is a different story in Russia. It is true that Russia has experienced a period of stabilisation in the years of Putin's tenure, and Putin's actions have underlined the country's undeniable assets as a global power, for example, its nuclear arsenal, reserves of gas and oil and influence in various parts of the globe, especially the former USSR. Specialists in Russian studies could, of course, argue the degree to which even Putin's Russia could stand against the USA-many would claim that Russia's decline has continued-but a considerable number of the Russian populace and even elite believe that Russia is once again on its feet. They believe that, at least economically, Russia is increasingly on a par with the USA, where the economy is in trouble due to the decline of the dollar vis-à-vis not only the Euro, but even the ruble. America's problems in Iraq and elsewhere also provide the Russian elite with the sense that America is becoming both weaker and irrational because of its perceived weakness, and that this offers Russia an opportunity to challenge the USA. All this provides the framework for the increasing assertiveness of Russian nationalism, often quite bizarre in nature.

Still, with all their anti-American rhetoric, both the elite and the masses have sent signals that Russia is actually not anxious to break with the USA. In fact, Russians of various political hues are mostly pro-Western. And, if Asia-Iran and China-were to emerge as potential partners, it would not be because a serious geopolitical marriage is planned but simply for pragmatic reasons, e.g., profitable contracts. Russia's flirtation with the East is also seen here as a bargaining chip in dealing with the West. And with all the hostility towards the USA, neither the Russian elite nor the Russian masses are ready to burn bridges that connect Russia with the USA and the

West in general. And, in fact, despite all external manifestations of hostility,<sup>2</sup> not much would be needed to restore the Russian/American détente.<sup>2</sup>

### **Russia's Strength: The Objective Category**

When discussing Russia's position in the post-Soviet era, pundits often emphasise the country's weaknesses. There is no doubt that very serious problems do exist and will increase in the future; this is clear with the decline of the Russian population. Still, by over-emphasizing Russia's problems, one could easily forget that Russia continues to be an important power and has improved its geopolitical standing during Putin's era.<sup>3</sup>

True, Russia has lost most of the economic and military attributes of the USSR, and its position relative to other world powers will most likely continue to decline. But at least for the near future, Russia will preserve some attributes of a superpower. First, even with nuclear arms reduction, it holds the largest nuclear arsenal after the USA, and it has the ability to modernise its arsenal and to produce new generations of weapons, as indicated by the production of a new ballistic missile, Topol (Poplar). Second, Russia has become a major source of oil and other strategically important materials for the West. Its size and location provide it with a special position in the global arrangement. Last, but not least, Russia's elite are keenly aware of the country's recent status as a superpower and wish to restore this position.

Russia's influence is shrinking, globally and in the countries of the former USSR. But it retains considerable influence among those countries; its global position has been enhanced by its role as a major oil supplier; and there are signs of stronger influence in Central Asia. For example, Uzbekistan leader Islam Karimov demanded that the USA close its bases in the country and reasserted Uzbekistan's friendship with Russia and China.

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<sup>2</sup> Those who deal with contemporary events could approach this from two perspectives, that of a journalistic or that of a political scientist. In the former approach, personal impressions are the basis for the analysis; in the latter, the narrative is based on secondary and primary printed sources. I have tried to combine these sources of information. The framework of the paper consists of my personal impressions during my summer 2006 trip to Russia, when I had an opportunity to converse with ordinary Russians and to watch TV extensively.

<sup>3</sup> On Russia's geopolitical recuperation during the Putin presidency, see Herman Pirchner, Reviving Greater Russia? the future of Russia's borders with Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Moldova and Ukraine, Washington, DC, American Foreign Policy Council, 2005; Thomas Ambrosio, Challenging America's global preeminence: Russia's quest for multipolarity, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2005; Jakob Hedenskog, Russia as a great power: dimensions of security under Putin, London, Routledge, 2005.

All this, the stabilisation of the regime under Putin, the new investment in the Russian armed forces and the windfall oil revenues indicates that Russia continues to be a strong power, and the country's standing is backed by still substantial resources. But the feeling of the country's strength in the minds of the Russian elite and the populace is built not on hard or abstract data, but on vivid images. These increasing symbols of prosperity indicate to them that Russia once again is a great power. On the other hand, the steady decline of purchasing power of the U.S. dollar indicates, to the elite and masses alike, that America is in decline and Russia could thus assert her rightful place in the global pecking order.

### **Russia's Rise: Economic Prosperity as Image**

Russians' increasingly assertive image of themselves is in many ways a result of the increasing sense of economic revival, due primarily to the high oil/gas prices. This dependence on oil has concerned some Russian officials. Minister of Finance Kudrin stated that the economy has developed only because of oil money, and this leads to inflation and, in general, is not healthy.<sup>4</sup> One could easily validate Kudrin's views on Russia's exclusive dependence on oil without engaging in extensive research. Indeed, when I crossed European Russia by train, many times I saw tanks with the logo Lukoil and the words: "Lukoil is always on the move." In fact, almost nothing else was being transported except timber and, of course, passengers. But it is true that the oil boom can proceed for a while and easily provide Russia a great deal of cash. And, indeed, Russians already have a lot of cash.<sup>5</sup>

The flood of currency now circulating in Russia is a clear sign of the improvement of the living standard for many Russians, which apparently has a strong implication for Russians' self-image as residents of an increasingly prosperous country. This is especially clear in Moscow. The downtown has become indistinguishable from that of any prosperous European or North American city. There is a proliferation of first-class apartment buildings, banks, restaurants and shops with all conceivable kinds of goods. The huge amount of money in circulation can be seen by the fact that even such items as diamonds seem to be in high demand.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> On Kudrin's skeptical views in regard to Russian economic/financial well-being, see "Rossiia mozhnet pribegnut' k novym zaimam Vsemirnogo banka," *Izvestiia*, 18 September 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Russia has been enriched not only by oil/gas money but also, it seems, by increasing foreign investments. Alexei Kilichev, "Thanks to the dollar," *Novye Izvestiia*, 14 September 2006.

<sup>6</sup> On the considerable rise of income among some segments of the Russian population, see Anna Kaledina,

One can definitely assert that at least a considerable segment of Russians are enjoying “unprecedented levels of comfort, confidence and security.”<sup>7</sup> And the increasing prosperity or, at least the image of prosperity, is not just limited to capital. Indeed, the building boom is not just a Moscow phenomenon, but is found even in the countryside. While travelling on the train from Moscow to the Urals, I saw gorgeous summer houses, which often pop up amid the dilapidated buildings of the simple folk like the manors of landlords in pre-revolutionary Russia. While most of the wealth is either spent on consumer goods, often in the most extravagant way or invested in real estate, some is invested more productively. I was told by an acquaintance that there are some investments in infrastructure. And there is an apparent revival of the defence industry. Another acquaintance told me that all her elderly pensioner friends worked: they were building rockets. Finally, some technological amenities, such as cell phones, have become widespread even in provincial Ekaterinburg. Here I saw petty traders with boxes on the street selling things. And they combine these primitive arrangements with cellular phones.

Besides these signs of economic revival, there are also signs of a trend towards a more civilised capitalism, so to speak. These trends are changes not just in behaviour but also in the perception of the society: it has become seen as more stable, reliable and, implicitly, wealthier and stronger. People and banks assume that those who take out consumer loans will indeed pay them back with interest. And if this does not happen, a civilised form of loan collection is emerging; at least I saw an organisation that advertises this service. One could assume that this kind of organisation has slowly started to replace the criminal gangs that engaged in this business at the beginning of the post-Soviet era.

The improvement of Russia’s financial well-being, and, consequently, the improved living standards of an increasing number of the Russian populace have profound implications for the image of the USA. Throughout the Soviet period and the beginning of the post-Soviet era, the USA was a symbol of economic might, and this was related to America’s high living standards and, of course, the purchasing power of the dollar. The rising financial health of Russia combined with the decline of the

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Mikhail Khmelev, and Georgii Ilichev, "Rossiane ne zameteli, chto u nikh vyrosli dokhody," *Izvestiia*, 14 September 2006; Natal'ia Baranovskaia, "Sdelka s garantiei," *Izvestiia*, 14 September 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Laura M. Brank, "Russian Federation: the United States is missing out on the Russian evolution," [www.mondag.com](http://www.mondag.com), 14 September 2006.

dollar creates the image that American power is generally in decline, regardless of what the American elite and masses think about their conditions.

### **The Image of American Decline**

While the increasing glitter of Russian cities has instilled many members of the elite and the masses with the feeling that Russia once again has become a great economic and geopolitical power, the decline of the dollar provides Russians with clear proof that the American economy and its geopolitical influence are waning.<sup>8</sup> Predictions about the future of the dollar and, implicitly, the entire American economy (one should remember that the problems of the American economy are not just Russia's perception but in many ways a reality; for example, the continuous troubles of the American auto industry)<sup>9</sup> are reported even by respectable publications, whose contributors advise their readers to sell dollars as soon as possible.<sup>10</sup> But even those who do not read newspapers cannot avoid the fact. The decline of the dollar's purchasing power has negative repercussions for many Russians, especially those with dollar-denomination salaries, which have started to decline sharply in purchasing power. Even in Ekaterinburg, in the provinces where life is usually cheaper than in the capital, people complain that \$400-500 per month (a princely salary ten or fifteen years ago) is not money. There were complaints that this is due to inflation and the decline of the dollar vis-à-vis the major currencies and the ruble.

Consequently, increasing salaries in dollars do not always lead to actual improvement in living standards because of the rise in prices. One young professional in Ekaterinburg told me that one needs \$1000 per person per month to live well, and he argued that the price of oil is the same as in the USA. A Moscow acquaintance, with much fewer demands than the young professional, said that \$600-700 would provide just for his most basic needs. I told him that this would have been a large sum a few years ago. He responded that this indeed was the case, but not now.

The decline of the dollar has had a variety of repercussions in the minds of average Russians. In some cases, it has led to an upsurge of

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<sup>8</sup> On the decline of the purchasing power of the dollar and its implications for America's economic vitality, see Oleg Mitiaev, "Zarplata v dollarakh-gore sem'i," *Izvestiia*, 14 September 2006; Anna Kaledina and Georgii Ilichev, "Za god dollar mozhet podeshvet' na 2 rublia," *Izvestiia*, 21 September 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Maynard, "Ford takes new steps to cut costs," *New York Times*, 15 September 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Olga Zaslavskaiia, "V kakoi valiute delat' vklady," *Izvestiia*, 13 September 2006.

national pride. A man in a bank in Ekaterinburg argued that one should forget about the dollar and deal only in national currency. For others, it implied a deeper shift in perspective on the global arrangement and the USA as a prime economic power. One casual interlocutor stated that “The dollars are falling, but people still keep them in the bank.” This, she implied, plainly indicated that average folk are not always rational and do not understand that America’s role as a great economic power with a stable currency is in the past. For others, the decline of the dollar has shaken belief not just in the USA, but in the political/economic order the dollar symbolises. My Russian friend compared his feeling watching the decline of the dollar with the feeling he experienced at the beginning of Gorbachev’s reform when the power of the Communists was challenged, which indicated for him that the very foundation of the old system was going to fall apart.

Besides the declining strength of the dollar, there are other signs that increasing numbers of Russians do not regard the USA as a major economic and global power. The overall American economic presence is scanty. The foreign goods I saw were mostly European, Turkish and Chinese. When I asked why there were so few American goods available, I received a variety of answers. Some stated that there are few American goods because of the distance. Others, apparently the majority, proclaimed that it was due to the fact that few people wanted to buy them. American goods, they claimed, were both too expensive and of dubious quality. With the declining dollar and shabby goods, the USA is not the symbol of the good life it was for so long in the Soviet and early post-Soviet era.

Deprived of its role in economic prosperity and the good life in general in the minds of many, the USA exists only in movies full of violence. Indeed, as America has emerged in the minds of average Russians as almost an insane “cowboy” country, there are other negative perspectives among the Russian public, including a sharp decline of interest in America. Indeed, at least judging by anecdotal evidence, Americans have disappeared from the minds of a considerable part of the Russian population, where in the earlier post-Soviet years Americans evoked love or hate but not indifference.

The sense of Russia’s resurgence as a great power and the feeling that America is in decline, while desperately trying to preserve its influence and still denying Russia a rightful place in the sun, has led to the rise of

nationalism in various forms, combined with strong anti-Americanism and in some cases even anti-Westernism.

### **The USA as Irrational Imperialist**

The image of the USA as an imperial predatory power that often hides its imperial pragmatism (e.g., control over oil under the cover of noble purpose to promote democracy), is definitely not just a Russian view, but widespread globally. It often constitutes the ideological framework of anti-Americanism, especially in Europe. The situation is in many ways different in Russia, although the above-mentioned negative image of the USA is quite alive, especially among the older part of the population. Still, for the Russian elite, its views could be gauged from the images on the TV screen and the younger people, the problem with American foreign policy is not its use of violence but that it is poorly conceived and in many ways irrational.

This irrationality is blended with a peculiar type of ideological indoctrination. In fact, gist of the problem is that the USA has become a sort of Soviet-type state. In European criticism, especially strong among the Left-Bush's USA emerges as almost a new edition of Nazi Germany, where the pragmatic ruthlessness of the *realpolitik*, with its drive for vital resources and *lebensraum* in general, is covered by a fig leaf of ideological justification. They believe that the USA, cynically ruthless, has a well-defined and calculated plan. In short, the USA is a cold, calculating beast. Russians look at the American elite differently. For some of them, US imperial policy is, indeed, an attempt to serve economic and geopolitical interests by covering them with a fig leaf of noble slogans about the spread of democracy or fighting global terrorism. But Americans are seen not as rationally sober Nazis, but as irrational, almost mad adventurers, close to the reckless stock broker or compulsive gambler in casinos who cannot restrain his behaviour and wild impulses even if they are clearly leading him and others to catastrophe.<sup>11</sup>

Catastrophic consequences of American foreign policy are imminent not only because of poorly thought out plans and reckless impulses as a framework of geopolitical posture, but because of how the plans are executed. While in the past Americans were famous for efficiency and a business-like approach, at present everything is the opposite. The

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<sup>11</sup> Aleksandr Nagorny, "Piat' let-otveta net... Al Kaida kak filial spetssluzhb SHA," *Zavtra*, 12 September 2006.



huge sums allocated for Afghanistan, for example, are misused or plainly stolen, with no positive implications for the country.<sup>12</sup>

While some Russian pundits see Americans as mostly irrational in their geopolitical posture, other groups have their own idiosyncratic views of American foreign policy. For them, the “neoconservative” inspired American foreign policy and the USA in general look more like a new edition of the USSR.<sup>13</sup> In this reading, “neocons” indeed believe in what they preach that the spread of democracy should be the major goal of American foreign policy. In this, they are quite similar to the Soviet leaders who shaped Soviet society and foreign policy to spread their pet project socialism which was as unworkable a utopian dream as is building a global democracy. And similar to the Soviets, Americans have engaged in their grandiose utopian projects with a sagging economy. In fact, their irrational behaviour, as possibly implied by the Russian elite, might be compared with Zhirinovskiy’s insanity and it is perhaps one of the reasons why Zhirinovskiy has re-emerged on the TV screen, apparently with Putin’s blessing. All this can bring nothing but disaster, not just to the rest of the world, but to the USA itself.

The image of the USA as driven by an almost insane elite seems to be one of the most popular. The notion of America as a paranoid society with an absolutely irrational foreign policy was especially clear in Mikhail Leontev's shows.<sup>14</sup> In one of them, Leontev presented America as the neurotic, crazy country that took advantage of the end of the Cold War to start wars all over the globe under the excuse of spreading democracy. During the Vietnam War, one was sure that it would be one war. But now the USA has become crazy, and one can expect an American war anywhere.<sup>15</sup> Under the excuse of fighting terrorism, America itself has become a terrorist. And Russian liberals who support US foreign policy have become similar to cynical and paranoid American leaders.

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<sup>12</sup> V. G. Korgan, “Kuda ukhodit amerikanskaia pomoshch’ Afganistanu,” Iran News, 19 September 2006.

<sup>13</sup> This, for example, is the view of Gleb Pavlovskiy, one of the members of Putin’s close circle.

<sup>14</sup> Mikhail Leontev, one of the most popular Russian television journalists, eagerly supports nationalist ideologies. On Leontev’s intellectual milieu/influence, see Andreas Umland, *Formirovanie Fashistskogo “Neoevraziiskogo” intellektual’nogo dvizheniia v Rossii: Put’ Aleksandra Dugina ot marginal’nogo ekstremista do vdokhnovitelia post-sovietskoi akademicheskoi i poiticheskoii elity, 1989-2001 GG; Ab Imperio, Russia, 2003, pp. 289-304.*

<sup>15</sup> The assumption that the US elite does not always behave rationally seems to be shared by Putin. In a recent speech, he wished that those who occupied the White House would be “predictable,” and added “This is a very important issue for us. . . . Russia wants consistent, predictable relations with the USA,” ITAR-TASS, 12 September 2006.

The paranoid aspects of the American elite's employment of violence are directly related to the assumption that the USA is indeed driven in its foreign policy by abstract and unworkable plans, a grand social/political construction quite similar to what one could find in the former USSR. This interpretation of American foreign policy can be found in televised discussions between those who support and oppose American oriented foreign policy. For example, in one televised debate, leading Russian journalist Vladimir Solovev proclaimed in a discussion with Valeriia Novodvorskaia, a prominent liberal politician, that she was a terrorist and implicitly a Soviet-type utopian because she believed that America could do anything for the victory of global democracy. Americans here are implicitly compared with Soviets. Indeed, Solovev implied that the Soviet elite not only thought the Soviet brand of socialism could be installed all over the world, but, in their delusion, assumed it was their historical duty to install it globally, regardless of the cost. Precisely this sort of mistake is being repeated by the present American administration.

The implication is that the USA has become a danger for the world and ultimately for itself-not because of its supposed military might, but because of the irrational behaviour of the elite. A major reason for American irrationality is not just that Americans are preoccupied with unworkable doctrines, but also that they overestimate their resources, their economic strength first of all, and are unable to understand that new centres of power have emerged, Russia being one of them.

Thus, in the minds of the Russian elite and the masses, there is clearly a negative image of the USA as a country that is engaged in irrational, violent and ideologically obsessive foreign policy, and at the same time is in overall decline, especially economically. The USA has emerged in the Russian mind as almost a caricature of the USSR in the last years of the Soviet regime. In this image-popular among some Western politologists/Sovietologists of the Cold War era the USSR was engaged in a dogmatically framed foreign policy in which geopolitical ambitions corresponded less and less with the country's economic base. Still, it would be wrong to assume that Russians have only a negative image of the USA that precludes cooperation. Messages of different types imply that Russia and the USA actually have quite a few common points and could well work together.

## Good Violence

When observing the image of the USA as a country engaged in violence, one should remember that Russia's views on violence are quite different from those of Asians and especially Europeans, who are strongly against all types of violence unless fully legalised. Post-Soviet culture hardly accepts this notion. Keeping this in mind, one should closely observe the images of America related violence in present day Russia. It is true that Russian mass media have often portrayed the USA as a country whose people engage in constant violence. The irrational nature of the US culture of violence is underscored by endless American thrillers with escalating violence, which are an intellectual staple for the Russian public; at least they continue to be shown on Russian TV. The popularity of such movies on Russian TV indicates that violence in itself, even if it does not have much rationale, is not always related to negative characteristics. In fact, it could well be connected with masculine toughness what Russians call *krutoi* on both the personal and state levels and becomes seen as an essential attribute of the male and the state. And, needless to say, violence continues to be an essential aspect of Russia's daily life-underscored by high profile killings of the people on the very top of the social ladder.<sup>16</sup> And the spread of criminal violence throughout the Yeltsin era<sup>17</sup> is also ingrained in the country's history, where it was often glorified as the manly way of getting all the goodies of life, from assets to women to the throne.

Consequently, in some cases, even American aggressiveness has received a sort of twisted blessing.<sup>18</sup> During one televised debate, a participant pointed out that not the USSR but the USA engaged in wars all over the world. One should behave like the USSR, which was respected and feared. It was implied that Russia should emulate the USA, that is, use force, if needed, to defend its national interests and resources. Thus, violence, including that in which Americans engage, is criticised not because a law of any sort has been discarded, but because of its irrational character, because its application has not been well thought out. And Russia

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<sup>16</sup> "A top banking official is killed in Russia," Reuters, September 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Vadim Volkov, *Violent entrepreneurs: the use of force in the making of Russian capitalism*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2002; Vadim Volkov, "Violent entrepreneurship in post-Communist Russia," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 5 (1999), pp. 741-754.

<sup>18</sup> One must add here that not only does love of violence (toughness) not exclude a kind of respect for the USA, but even ardent verbal anti-Americanism/Russian nationalism can coexist with craving for fame in the USA or love for Western funds. See Denise J. Youngblood, "The cosmopolitan and the patriot: the brothers Mikhalkov-Konchalovsky and Russian cinema," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2003), 27-41.

cannot deal with irrational people who have an inflated sense of their might. On the other hand, members of the American political elite who, while not shunning violence, have a sober view of America's role would be welcome for discussions.

Indeed, while most media images are of the USA as an irrational cowboy, a televised interview with Kissinger sent a different message. It is true that the USA has an ambitious geopolitical agenda, and at best the Russian-American relationship could be characterised as a condition of a "cold peace."<sup>19</sup> But the objective limitations of Russian-American rapprochement do not preclude cooperation. Indeed, not all members of the American elite, as Russian pundits have implied, are ideologically obsessive neoconservative fanatics similar to Soviet ideologues. Some are people of a rational frame of mind. Indeed, some members of the American elite, Kissinger, for example, are people of great savvy and balanced viewpoints. They also, it was implied, have a good understanding of Russia.<sup>20</sup> And while the views of these people could be rejected, their logical, rational frame of mind made it possible to engage in dialogue with them.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, it proved that America should not overstretch its imperial presence and that division of its sphere of influence in Eurasia would be in the interests of both the USA and Russia.

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<sup>19</sup> V. O. Rukavishnikov, *Kholodnaia Voina, kholodnyi mir: obshchestvennoe mnenie v SShA i Evrope o SSSR/Rossii, vneshnei politike i bezopasnosti Zapada*, Moscow, Akademicheskii proekt, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Russians have different views on the way the USA views their country and its history. In the early Gorbachev era, most Russian intellectuals discarded the official presentation of Russia's past and were fascinated with Western views on Russia. Later, as a result of disappointment with post-Soviet expenses and general revival of nationalistic views of a sort, the focus changed. Quite a few intellectuals returned to a sort of modified Soviet view of the Western, especially American, view of Russia. Criticism was based on the assumption that American scholars are unable to present an adequate picture of Russian society, not because of their anti-Marxist views, but because of the preconceived negative vision of Russia as a civilisation and general inability to understand a civilisation so different from their own. These views continued to be dominant in the Putin era. See, for example, Izmail Ibragimovich Sharifzhanov, "Istoriia rossii na stranitsakh shkol'nykh, uchebnikov SShA," *Russia: prepodavanie istorii v shkole*, 2002, pp. 69-76; Elena Vasilevna, Lapteva, "Nekotorye kharakternye tendentsii v razvitiu amerikanskogo rossievedeniia, 1990-kh godov," *Otechestvennaia Istoriia*, Vol. 2 (2004), pp. 159-169. But other views implied that some Americans had not only a true understanding of Russia but a genuine love for the country. See, for example, Nikolai Nikolaevich Bolkhovitinov, "Polveka spustia," *Novaia i Noveishaia Istoriia*, Vol. 3 (2001), pp. 94-98.

<sup>21</sup> This desire of the Russian elite to be engaged with the rational-thinking American elite, at least from their perspective, could be seen in an attempt to work on the nonproliferation issue. See, for example, *Strengthening U.S.-Russian cooperation on nuclear nonproliferation*, Washington, DC, National Academies Press, 2005. On Russian/American cooperation, see also Geoffrey Allen Pigman, "The new aerospace diplomacy: reconstructing post-Cold War U.S.-Russian economic relations," *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (2004), pp. 683-723; Morten Bremer Maerli, "U.S.-Russian naval security upgrades: lessons learned and the way ahead," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (2003), pp. 19-38; Markus Siebenmorgen, "Russland und der Raketenabwehrkonflikt, mit den vereinigten Staaten: Perzeptionen, Strategien und Initiativen, 1999-2002," *Asien Afrika Lateinamerika*, Vol. 30, No. 6 (2002), pp. 517-538; Ian Bremmer and Alexander Zaslavsky, "Bush and Putin's tentative embrace," *World Policy Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (200), pp. 11-17.

Moreover, a strong Russia could be the best arrangement for the USA, in fact, the only way for the USA to save itself. Stanislav Belkovskii and Mikhail Remizov, both well-known political analysts, argued in an article in the liberal *Izvestiia* that the USA continues to live in the bygone days of the Cold War.<sup>22</sup> The ruling strata of the American elite continue to believe that Russia is its foremost enemy and the ally of America's major threat China and Iran and proceeds to press Russia. This is a grave mistake, the authors argue, for Russia is not the ally of either China or Iran but serves as a counterbalance to these powers and prevents them from really challenging the USA. This geopolitical logic, the authors implied, pushed the two countries to be allies. America could, indeed, succeed in further weakening Russia and lead to the country's disintegration, but it would be a Pyrrhic victory, for the USA would destroy Russia at its own peril. The authors suggest that Iran could rise as a great nuclear power, but an even greater threat would emerge from China. Taking advantage of Russia's collapse, China would appropriate a good chunk of Asiatic Russia. China, indeed, would be transformed into a colossus with unprecedented power with which the USA would not be able to deal.

A similar idea can be found in the nationalistic *Zavtra*, the major vehicle of the "Red to Brown" of the Yeltsin era. Vladimir Filin argues that American recklessness, including hostility against Russia, has led not to Pax Americana, but to global instability from which everyone, including the USA, will suffer greatly.<sup>23</sup> And thus, it is implied, not Russia's weakness but its strength should have been a guiding light of sober-thinking, savvy American elite. Russian pundits implied here that Russia could actually be a better US ally than Europe, which is emerging as a major American geopolitical rival, and some European analysts support these views.<sup>24</sup>

It seems that even some Russian pundits who made their intellectual/quasi-political careers on the assumption that Russia/Eurasia and the USA have been locked in mortal struggle are not implacable enemies of the USA. One acquaintance told me that Alexander Dugin, the leading proponent of the Eurasian theory, who usually asserts that

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<sup>22</sup> Stanislav Belkovskii and Mikhail Remizov, "Filosofiiia perigiba," *Izvestiia*, 12 September 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Vladimir Filin, "Novyi mirovoi besporiadok, Nachalo XXI veka-epokha global'nogo Khaosa," *Zavtra*, 12 September 2006. Not only should America not be Russia's enemy, but following sober pragmatic considerations, Russia should be the USA's foremost ally.

<sup>24</sup> Vassilis Fouskas, "The 'European dream'," *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2003), pp. 71-81.

Russia/Eurasia and the USA should clash due to the law of geopolitics, loves the USA.<sup>25</sup> He simply assumes that the USA should not be involved in the political life of Russia. He and the sizeable segment of the Russian elite whose view he represents would not mind if the USA maintained its influence in other parts of the globe without harming Russia's interests. In this approach, American actions became not the embodiment of an irrational, self-destructive drive, but a healthy imperial masculinity that Russia should emulate. Sober minded people of the Kissinger type do not dominate the American administration, but they are not absolutely out of power. And this implies that Russia and the USA could engage in mutually beneficial cooperation, even in the context of the Iraq war.

### **The War in Iraq: Mixed Feelings**

The images of the Iraq war and related images on Russian TV are controversial. On one hand such images are quite negative and could be placed in the context of the USA as an irrational/ideologically obsessed power engaged in a course of unbridled aggression after the collapse of the USSR.<sup>26</sup> The invasion of Iraq is seen as a logical continuation of this imperial policy.<sup>27</sup> According to a Russian TV show, the USA has committed crimes in Iraq under the slogan of the implementation of democracy. Another TV news program also dwelt on the brutality of the USA in Iraq.

One of the most important implications of these messages about the USA's engagement in Iraq and its geopolitical posture in general is that US aggressiveness has no rationale, even from the viewpoint of America's own interests. While engaging in an endless chain of violence and supposedly having absolute military predominance, the USA is not able to achieve its goals-one of the TV news shows suggested-and the USA is bogged down in Iraq. Moreover, Russian officials insist, American involvement in Iraq not

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<sup>25</sup> Geopolitics became a popular explanatory model not only in Russia but also in the West. See, for example, Lena Uutti, "Det geopolitiska spelet om georgien," *Internasjonal Politikk*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (2004), pp. 325-343; Nick Megoran, "Revising the 'pivot': the influence of Halford Mackinder on analysis of Uzbekistan's international relations," *Geographical Journal*, Vol. 170, No. 4 (2004). Recently, Dugin visited the USA and saw Zbigniew Brzezinski, to whom he felt sort of a love/hate emotion.

<sup>26</sup> Vladimir Konstantinovich Volkov, "Novyi mirovoi poriadok i Balkanskii krizis 90-KH godov," *Novaia I Noveishaia Istorii*, Vol. 2 (2002), pp. 11-50.

<sup>27</sup> Vladimir Zhirinovskii, *Iraq, the sore of the planet: things corporate media won't tell you*, Moscow, Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia; Boca Raton, FL, Universal Publishers, 2003. And not just the members of the elite, but also the masses, looked at the American adventure in Iraq quite unfavourably. See John O'Loughlin, Gearoid O Tuathail and Vladimir Kolossov, "Russian geopolitical storylines and public opinion in the wake of 9-11: a critical geopolitical analysis and national survey," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (2004), pp. 281-318.

only does not diminish terror, but actually stimulates proliferation of terrorism.<sup>28</sup>

Still, not everything about the American war in Iraq is presented as bad. For example, there was rather positive information on TV concerning America's success in discovering documents about the terrorist network. And there was even the suggestion that the Russians and Americans could cooperate in certain areas,<sup>29</sup> such as the war with international terrorists and Islamic extremists in general. Elaborating on Russia's collaboration with other Western countries in fighting the menace, Russian TV informed viewers that Russia, together with other countries from the Group of 8, participated in a conference dealing with terrorism and illegal immigration.<sup>30</sup> The necessity of cooperation with the USA was acknowledged, even if done under the pressure of circumstances.

On Russian TV, the war is presented as solely an American adventure, and it is implied that those who fight the Americans in Iraq understand that they fight just Americans and nobody else. For example, when insurgents seized Russian diplomats as hostages in the summer of 2006, Russian TV informed viewers that it was quite possibly a mistake because those who did it not usually take Russian diplomats. Yet when the diplomats were killed, Russian TV changed its tone and implied that it was done by Islamic terrorists. Russia would cooperate with everyone, including the USA, to punish the murderers. The possibility of joining the USA in a fight against terrorists is conveyed to the public in various ways. For example, in a movie about Russians fighting against the Taliban, Americans and Russians, while having no love for each other, fought together against a common enemy. And the fear of common enemies, the Islamic terrorists, is directly related in the minds of many Russians with Chechen terrorism and the general assumption that the state should be tough in dealing with foreign threats. And this could possibly be an explanation of why, according to a VTSIOM survey, "as many as 22 percent of Russians aged 19-24 said they support the US efforts, including in Iraq."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> "Russian MP sees war in Iraq as distraction from war on terror," RIA-Novost, 11 September 2006.

<sup>29</sup> On Putin's rather guarded criticism of American involvement in Iraq, see Galia Golan, "Russia and the Iraq war: was Putin's policy a failure?" *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (2004), pp. 429-459.

<sup>30</sup> On the Putin regime's willingness to cooperate on international terrorism and nonproliferation, see "US-Russia launch 'Strategic' post-Cold War security dialogue," APP, 15 September 2006; "Lavrov says Russia should cooperate with US in war on Terror," Interfax, September 2006.

<sup>31</sup> "Five years after September 11, Russian attitude toward America," RIA Novosti, 12 September 2006.

While the cooperation of the USA and Russia is possible, especially in the above context, which implies a revival of rational thinking among the members of the American elite there is also the possibility that the West, including the USA, will cooperate regardless of circumstances. This idea was elaborated on in a radio discussion in which business leaders discussed the role of Russia. The consensus was that the global community will love Russia because it needs oil. And from this perspective, state and business cooperation is essential, not just for economic growth, but also for using Russia's oil/gas clout to promote the country's geopolitical interests.

While Russia is not anxious to break with the USA, despite various grudges and the sense of regained strength, it desires even less to break with Europe. In fact, Europe has emerged as Russia's true love, to which Russia dreams of being geopolitically married, despite continuous rejection on the European side.<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusion

In recent years, there have been visible signs of the deterioration of the Russian-American relationship and the Russian-West relationship in general.<sup>33</sup> The flirtation with Iran and China seems to prove that Russia continues to drift away from the West, and Russia's economic revival of a sort provides outside observers an additional argument for asserting its strong hostility to the West. With the windfall of oil dollars, Russia not only is not dependent on the West, but can assure its independence and basically anti Western geopolitical posture. These assumptions require further scrutiny. It is true that the Russian elite have become increasingly hostile to the USA, as can be seen in images from TV, a medium tightly controlled by the authorities, and other mass media. Russia's increasing financial strength and the USA's economic troubles, indicated, among many other things, by the decline in the purchasing power of the dollar and a set of geopolitical

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<sup>32</sup> Dmitrii Trenin could be regarded as one of the best examples of ideologists who speak for the majority of the Russian elite who desperately want to be a part of the West. In his recent book, he states that, while the Russian-Western relationship has deteriorated recently, Russia should not be upset. Russia should not beg the West to accept it as a part of the West, for it is already part of the West. Russia just belongs to the Eastern part of Western civilisation. See Dmitrii Trenin, *Integratsiia i identichnost': Rossiia kak novyi Zapad*, Moscow, Evropa, 2006. See also Dmitry Trenin, "Conclusion: integrating Russia into the West: the challenges before the United States, Russia and Europe," in Alexander J. Motyl, Blair A. Ruble and Lillia Shevtsova (eds.), *Russia's engagement with the West: transformation and integration in the twenty-first century*, Armonk, NY, M.E. Sharpe, 2005.

<sup>33</sup> On Russia's geopolitical/military flirtation with China, see Marcel De Haas, *Russian-Chinese military exercises and their wider perspective: power play in Central Asia*, Camberley, Surrey: Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, Conflict Studies Research Centre, 2005.



setbacks, provide the Russian elite and populace with the feeling that it could challenge the USA more boldly than in an earlier period of post-Soviet history.

Still, the Russian elite and the masses, at least judging by anecdotal evidence, are aware of the country's basic geopolitical isolation. And those whom the Russian elite proclaims as the country's most important geopolitical allies/friends-China and Iran, are viewed with suspicious eyes and approached with caution as powers that could potentially create serious problems.<sup>34</sup> The geopolitical and demographic squeeze from the East, which Russia has never experienced in such intensity, is a powerful push for the majority of Russians of all political stripes to seek a way to be part of the West's geopolitical/economic arrangements, broadly defined. The fact that even the Russian neo-Nazis have become passionately pro-Western of course, in their idiosyncratic way indicates the basically pro-Western orientation of the Russian elite and public. While marriage to Europe is seen as most desirable, rapprochement with the USA is also not impossible. In fact, close analysis of Russian negative images of the USA shows that Russians deplore not so much violence per se, but that it has been applied without thinking much about its consequences and long-term implications.

Current American policy, the Russian elite imply, can lead to nothing but disaster for the global community and even more for the USA. In fact, the USA could well repeat the fate of the USSR. On the other hand, if the USA abandons its unworkable Soviet style approach to reality and its elite mature into sober-minded rational politicians well aware of America's weaknesses as well as its strengths, they could easily find common ground with the Russian elite. In fact, if the American elite were to engage in this rational behaviour, they would find Russians more understandable than Europeans; for Russians would be much less inhibited than Europeans in using force. Thus, even in dealing with the USA, which, for Russia is a less attractive option than Europe, the basic pro-Western underpinning of the Russian geopolitical posture could still be seen regardless of all the anti-American rhetoric.

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<sup>34</sup> On the limits of Russia's China rapprochement, see Richard Weitz, "Why Russia and China have not formed an Anti-American alliance," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (2003), pp. 39-61. On the general ambivalence of Russia's approach to Asia, see Andrei Kolesnikov, *Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin: mezhdru Evropoi i Aziei*, Moscow, Eksmo, 2005.

The basic West-oriented drive of the Russian public, or to be precise, the vision of the West as a much more appealing geopolitical option than the East, will most likely continue even in the case of an increasing nationalistic trend or even the country's fragmentation. One may assume, at least by judging the views of present Russian neo-Nazis, that this trend may even increase. The change in paradigms could come about not so much from political changes as from basic demographic changes. Indeed, while I am using the word "Russians," I mean not just the citizens of the Russian Federation but all ethnic Russians. The situation with increasing numbers of Russian Muslims of various ethnic backgrounds is a different story. It would be wrong to say that they totally reject a European, Western orientation; in fact, Euro/Islam is quite popular among the Tatar elite. Still, quite a few Russian Muslims clearly look to the East not the West. The same can be seen with the increasing numbers of Chinese émigrés in the Russian Far East and Siberia. The demographic and cultural shift, if it proceeds for a while, indeed, would change the country's geopolitical orientation, especially if reinforced by transforming the East, most likely Southeast Asia into a major, if not the major, global economic center. But if this real geopolitical attachment to the East were indeed to happen, it would most likely not be by Russia as it has existed for the past thousand years. Most likely, that Russia would not exist at all. And Russia's development would fit into the global trend, in which the demographic and economic power of Asia would profoundly change the global community in the generations to come.