

U.S.-Russia Relations in Post-Soviet Eurasia

Transcending the Zero-Sum Game

SAMUEL CHARAP & MIKHAIL TROITSKIY

Working Group Paper 1
SEPTEMBER 2011

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Working Group on the Future of U.S.-Russia Relations

The Working Group on the Future of U.S.-Russia Relations convenes rising experts from leading American and Russian institutions to tackle the thorniest issues in the bilateral relationship. By engaging the latest generation of scholars in face-to-face discussion and debate, we aim to generate innovative analysis and policy recommendations that better reflect the common ground between the U.S. and Russia that is so often obscured by mistrust. We believe our unique, truly bilateral approach offers the best potential for breakthroughs in mutual understanding and reconciliation between our countries.

The Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University is the U.S. anchor for the Working Group. On the Russian side, the partner institutions are the Valdai Discussion Club, the National Research University—Higher School of Economics, and the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy.

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Contents

iv	Executive summary
1	Introduction
3	What is post-Soviet Eurasia?
7	Why is post-Soviet Eurasia a problem for U.S.-Russia relations?
16	The impact of the problem—on the bilateral relationship and the countries of the region
20	Policy recommendations to transcend the zero-sum game
24	Examples
28	Conclusion
30	Acknowledgements
31	About the authors

Executive summary

U.S.-Russia relations have improved dramatically since hitting rock bottom three years ago. Yet several of the sources of tension that precipitated that downturn remain unaddressed. Among them, the nature of the United States' and Russia's relationships with the countries of post-Soviet Eurasia—the eleven former Soviet republics besides Russia that are not NATO or EU member-states—is perhaps the most long-standing, and the one seemingly least prone to resolution.

This study is the first to examine this issue in detail. It concludes that the assumption guiding much strategic thought about post-Soviet Eurasia in Moscow and Washington—that the differences between the two regarding the region are fundamental and therefore irreconcilable—is false. Indeed, the persistence of the zero-sum dynamic between the two countries regarding the region is highly contingent; it cannot be accounted for by immutable factors inherent to either of them or the international system. Whatever its source, not only has this dynamic been a key driver of past downturns in the bilateral relationship, but it has also done serious damage to the development of the independent states of post-Soviet Eurasia themselves.

We identify three sources of U.S.-Russia tensions in post-Soviet Eurasia:

- **Historically conditioned policy patterns.** The legacy of the past can explain many U.S.-Russia disagreements regarding post-Soviet Eurasia. The continuation of Soviet-era patterns of thought and behavior has led Russia to treat post-Soviet Eurasian countries with a heavy hand. In the United States, the objective from the early 1990s of bolstering the sovereignty of post-Soviet Eurasian countries later mutated into a posture of countering all forms of Russian influence in the region. Another path-dependent factor behind the tensions between the United States and Russia is their support for competing economic and security integration initiatives in the region. The absence of pan-Eurasian integration initiatives and fact that the West's institutional enlargement since 1991 has been de facto closed off to Russia have created an “integration dilemma,” which Moscow resolved by pioneering its own integration initiatives.
- **Parochial agendas.** U.S.-Russia rivalry in post-Soviet Eurasia has been further reinforced by the parochial agendas of actors such as business lobbies and “freelancing” government agencies. Rarely consistent with the national interests of either country, these agendas have often been a source of friction between Moscow and Washington.
- **Mutual misperceptions.** Patterns in the analyses and normative judgments concerning U.S. and Russian actions in post-Soviet Eurasia reflect a basic assumption: that the influence of one country in the region necessarily comes at the expense of the other's interests. But frequently these claims lack conclusive empirical evidence. In the United States, Russian influence in the region is often perceived to threaten the sovereignty and independence of the states of post-Soviet Eurasia, and to undermine prospects for democratic reform in these countries. In Russia, meanwhile, some see the specter of containment in any U.S. engagement in the neighborhood.

As a result of these factors, Russia and the United States have become prone to viewing their interaction in post-Soviet Eurasia as a zero-sum game. Over the past twenty years, there have been instances in almost all the post-Soviet Eurasian states where the United States and Russia have sought to balance each other's influence rather than find outcomes acceptable to themselves and the state in question. Indeed, actions based on perceived U.S.-Russia competition have at times set back the political and economic development of the countries of post-Soviet Eurasia and contributed to the ossification of unresolved conflicts.

Washington and Moscow now face a choice: they can pursue a maximalist vision of “victory” over each another in the region (and expect a return to the near-confrontation of 2008), or they can seek “win-win-win” outcomes for the United States, Russia and the countries of post-Soviet Eurasia. The oft-invoked “grand bargains” to demarcate “spheres of influence”—enthusiastically endorsed by some, vehemently denounced by others—are figures of speech, not feasible policy options. We propose six measures to facilitate positive-sum outcomes:

- **Implement greater transparency.** The United States and Russia should regularly convey information about their respective policies and activities in the region on a direct, government-to-government basis to avoid misunderstandings and miscalculations.
- **Regularize bilateral consultations on regional issues.** Officials from Washington and Moscow whose portfolios include post-Soviet Eurasian countries should regularly conduct working-level consultations on regional issues. Diplomats on the ground should establish channels of communication, both with one other and, when needed, trilaterally with officials of the countries where they are stationed.
- **Adjust public rhetoric.** Official statements about the region from the United States and Russia often contain inflammatory rhetoric that provoke counterproductive responses. The governments should modify the language they use in their public statements.
- **Take domestic contexts into account.** U.S. and Russian officials should remember that their counterparts do not operate in vacuums. Proposals that would be anathema in the respective domestic political environments are unlikely to be met with approval.
- **Signal positive-sum intentions.** Officials should make a point of publicly affirming a positive-sum approach to bilateral interactions in the region.
- **Be aware of parochial influences.** Senior policymakers must be conscious of the impact of parochial agendas on policy, and take action to mitigate it when circumstances merit.

The study analyzes in detail two examples of U.S.-Russia disagreement in the region—the Georgia conflicts and competing integration initiatives—and offers practical recommendations for addressing them.

While implementing all of these policy recommendations would not eliminate competition between the United States and Russia in post-Soviet Eurasia—especially among firms from the two countries—it would remove a major source of tension that has in the past nearly upended the U.S.-Russia relationship. Such a breakthrough would bring important benefits to both the United States, Russia and the countries of the region.

Introduction

The United States' and Russia's relationships with the countries of post-Soviet Eurasia have been a major source of tension between them since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This tension has squandered prospects of building mutual trust between Moscow and Washington in the past—it was a key driver in repeated downturns in the bilateral relationship—and could rapidly undo the gains made by the “reset.” Indeed, this issue represents a “landmine” in U.S.-Russia relations that, regardless of the rapidly changing global landscape that increasingly creates common interests between the two countries, could “detonate” at any time and seriously complicate cooperation on other issues.

Of course, some degree of competition in post-Soviet Eurasia between the United States and Russia is inevitable; even military allies like the United States and France sometimes pursue contradictory goals in third countries. But the assumption guiding much strategic thought—and at times, policy—about post-Soviet Eurasia is that the differences between Moscow and Washington regarding the region are fundamental and therefore irreconcilable. We will demonstrate that this assumption is false.

Indeed, the severity of this issue in the bilateral relationship cannot be accounted for by immutable factors inherent to either the two countries or the international system. Instead, a combination of contingent factors—historically conditioned policy patterns, the influence of parochial agendas, and mutual misperceptions—has exacerbated tension to abnormal levels. This serves neither country's interests. Crucially, it has also done serious damage to the development of the independent states of post-Soviet Eurasia themselves.

The contingent nature of this problem suggests that it can be resolved. But such a resolution will not simply materialize out of thin air: transcending the zero-sum game in U.S.-Russia relations in post-Soviet Eurasia will require policymakers in Washington and Moscow to proactively defuse the landmine. This will entail extensive consultations to work through layers of misunderstanding; an adjustment of policy tactics; and, in the long term, an inclusive, multilateral, multi-institutional process to ensure that regional integration initiatives are made compatible, and perhaps even unified. However, creating a positive-sum dynamic in U.S.-Russia relations in post-Soviet Eurasia would not entail the appropriation of any sovereign state's right to make its own decisions.

The nature of U.S.-Russia interaction in post-Soviet Eurasia both affects and reflects the overall state of the U.S.-Russia relationship. In other words, the degree of cooperation between Washington and Moscow on global and strategic issues (arms control, non-proliferation, etc.) can limit or expand opportunities to find agreement on regional issues.¹

The current high level of cooperation on extra-regional issues that the reset has facilitated suggests there is now a window of opportunity for policymakers to transcend the zero-sum game in U.S.-Russia interaction in the region. Although on the surface the task might seem to require simply tackling a number of discrete issues like the region's protracted conflicts, it actually would entail unwavering determination on the part of both the U.S. and Russian governments and a focused effort to address the unfinished yet persistent business of the Cold War. This will not be accomplished without a shift in both countries' perceptions of the other's intentions on a number of key issues, especially regarding post-Soviet Eurasia itself.

¹ In Moscow, some commentators suggest that bilateral disagreements over issues concerning post-Soviet Eurasia demand the continuation of mutual nuclear deterrence. Without it, they argue, Washington's ambitions could never be controlled. See, for example: Alexei Fenenko, "Between MAD and Flexible Response," *Russia in Global Affairs*, April-June 2011, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Between-MAD-and-Flexible-Response-15242>. Some former U.S. officials have given Russian commentators ample reason to believe this is in fact the case. See, for example, comments by Michael Wynne, Secretary of the Air Force from November 2005 to June 2008, in David Axe, "Sacked Air Force Secretary: We Shoulda Sent Jets, Troops to Fight Russia," *Wired Danger Room Blog*, September 9, 2008, <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2008/09/sacked-air-forc/>.

What is post-Soviet Eurasia?

We use the term *post-Soviet Eurasia* to refer to the eleven former Soviet republics besides Russia that are not members of NATO or the European Union. It is important to note several key and oft-overlooked facts about this region.

First, the central commonality among these states, along with Russia, is their shared past. For almost seventy-five years they were constituent units of the same country: the Soviet Union. The twelve polities that emerged as independent states in 1991 were in many ways constructs of Soviet-era policies that never envisioned such an outcome. The borders between the new independent states were transparent for average citizens before 1991 and remained largely so afterwards. And these borders never corresponded neatly to “titular” nationalities or to pre-Soviet coherent ethno-territorial units.

Second, 1991 marked the collapse of the Soviet Union and, simultaneously, systemic regime change in all the newly independent countries that emerged in its wake. This confluence of circumstances created paradoxes regarding Russia’s role in the region that persist through the present.

The Soviet Union demonstrated many traits of empire, as seen, for example, in the prominent role of ethnic Russians and Russian language in its non-Russian ethnic peripheries (although ethnic Russians were also subject to Soviet repression, and many ethnic minorities were co-opted into the ruling elite in the periphery as well).² But the Russian Federation is not the rump Soviet Union minus its non-Russian parts, nor is it the former metropole: after all, many Russians played a key role in liberating themselves from Soviet communism. In other words, the collapse of the Soviet Union was not just the dissolution of an empire; it was an event that marked the founding of wholly new states, including the Russian Federation.

But to the outside world, this was not at all obvious. After all, Russia was the legal successor state to the Soviet Union and acquired many of its defining characteristics (especially for Americans): the permanent seat at the UN Security Council, the space program, and (eventually) the Soviet Union’s entire nuclear arsenal—not to mention its foreign intelligence operations and even physical plant (the Soviet embassies). In post-Soviet Eurasia, Russia inherited many “Soviet” assets (particularly weapons), and in the eyes of some of the newly independent states, continued to play the role of the Union center—despite the fact that the Union itself no longer existed. For example, many in Moldova and Georgia saw 1991 as their moment to realize long-repressed aspirations for national self-determination and self-expression. Russian efforts to mediate the ethnic disputes

² See, inter alia, Dominic Levin, *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals* (New Haven: Yale, 2002); John Dunlop, *The Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

A challenge of Russia's post-Soviet transformation has been to develop policies toward its neighbors that will allow Russia to further its interests while respecting these states' sovereign choices.

that erupted in those countries during that period included stationing troops to contain ethnic strife and prevent massive bloodshed; however, Moscow never prioritized resolving these conflicts. The resulting impression was that Russia remained as hostile to national aspirations as the Soviet Union had been.

As far as policy-making is concerned, it is also important to note that most of today's Russian elite is in fact the all-Union elite, which includes many non-ethnic Russians. In the fourteen other former Soviet republics, either republic-level Soviet elites or representatives of the titular nations who sought to displace them took over as the Union fell apart. But the institutions of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) and their office holders—with the exception of Yeltsin and his team, who used these institutions only in the final years before the collapse, after they had been pushed out of All-Union institutions—were largely insignificant in post-Soviet Russia.

In the whirlpool of the early years after 1991 it was unclear how permanent the collapse would be—at least to some in Moscow. Indeed, the existence until 2000 of a Russian Ministry for Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Affairs was indicative of Moscow's initial reluctance to accept its new neighbors as foreign states. Some of the all-Union elite persisted in treating the states of post-Soviet Eurasia like the Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) they were previously—a habit manifested in both attitudes and policies that at times appeared to demonstrate a lack of respect for these states' newfound sovereignty. This phenomenon has decreased over time although it has by no means disappeared completely.

In other words, a challenge of Russia's post-Soviet transformation—underappreciated in many academic studies of the transition from communism—has been to develop policies toward its neighbors that will allow Russia to further its interests while respecting these states' sovereign choices. The pattern of Moscow calling Kyiv or Ashgabat to give ultimatums is a burden of Russia's Soviet inheritance.

Third, it is important to note that some post-Soviet Eurasian governments have been difficult partners for Moscow. On the one hand, they sought to reap full benefits of their newly acquired independence and were quick to conflate newly independent Russia and the Union center when disputes arose with Moscow. On the other, they expected continuation of Soviet-era economic subsidies and at times demanded unilateral concessions. Several of them continue to seek to have their cake and eat it too.

A **fourth** oft-overlooked aspect of the region is the existence of dense economic and people-to-people connections across post-Soviet Eurasia resulting from the Soviet inheritance. These connections were reinforced by the ease with which Russians traveled among the

former Soviet republics after 1991, especially relative to the difficulties faced by Russian citizens traveling elsewhere. This situation—with certain exceptions—continues through the present.³

The economic interdependencies and linkages are well known,⁴ but less appreciated are the dependencies in the energy sphere that came with the Soviet collapse. The fact that metallurgy in Ukraine was (and, if viewed globally, remains) hugely inefficient did not present a problem when the energy inputs were obtained at nominal cost, and within the same (Soviet) economy. Today, Russia must either subsidize this sector to the detriment of its own budget, or compel difficult choices on its neighbor.

Not only were production cycles spread across multiple SSRs, but so too were families, particularly among the three titular Slavic republics—Ukraine, Russia and Belarus. The emotion with which many Russians regard post-Soviet Eurasia in part stems from their having grown up there, or having relatives who remain there.⁵

But beyond emotional affinities—and even in those countries where they are absent—a number of objective geographic, historical, economic and cultural factors give Russia a significant degree of influence in its neighborhood. For the same reason, Russia has many interests at stake in the region.

A *fifth* fact about the states of the region is that by 2011 they have diverged significantly from their common Soviet starting point. Today the countries of post-Soviet Eurasia are extremely diverse in terms of regime type, nation-building processes, foreign policy aspirations, economic prospects, patterns of relations with the outside world, economic openness—practically every measure one can imagine. Indeed, post-Soviet Eurasia is not really a “region” if that term connotes a significant degree of commonality in development trajectory or interests and shared ambitions for integration.

Therefore, the reasons why a given post-Soviet Eurasian country is important to Russia do not necessarily correlate with the reasons why it is important to the United States, and vice versa. The intensity of Moscow’s and Washington’s involvement and ambitions for engagement therefore should naturally differ from one country to another.



Gas-compressor station in Ukraine. Natural gas trade and transit issues have proved politically explosive in Russia-Ukraine relations. (RIA Novosti)

³ As of mid-2011, among forty-two countries Russian citizens can enter visa-free, nine are states of post-Soviet Eurasia (the eleven countries discussed in this paper minus Georgia and Turkmenistan), while most of the rest are Balkan, Latin American and Caribbean nations. This constitutes a potent centripetal force across post-Soviet Eurasia, given that the visa requirements applied to Russian nationals by most Western (as well as Asian) countries have at most slightly eased since 1991. For a full list of countries that have waived visas for Russian citizens, see <http://www.mid.ru/dks.nsf/mnsdoc/04.04.02.01>.

⁴ Such as the Antonov AN-124 aircraft, which depends on production in Ukraine and Russia.

⁵ The 1989 census showed that ethnic Russians in the USSR outside of the RSFSR numbered 25.3 million people, or 18.2 percent of the combined population of the fourteen other republics. In Ukraine, this figure reached 22.3 percent and in Kazakhstan, 37.8 percent. About 2.4 million migrated to Russia from the former Soviet republics between 1990 and 1996. See Igor Zevelev, *Russia and Its New Diasporas* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2001), pp. 96–97, 122.

Despite this divergence since 1991, significant transnational commonalities remain: corruption, criminal networks, poor governance, citizen disengagement, as well as a significant degree of political uncertainty. Indeed, the political evolution of Russia and the states of post-Soviet Eurasia remains dynamic—and the interplay among these processes is complex.

Russia's domestic evolution remains hugely influential for the elites in other countries in the region. This has both negative and positive ramifications, depending on Russia's trajectory: Russia's political and economic modernization could be a powerful lever for positive change throughout the region, while its degradation could drag them down.

The “export” of some of the more troubling characteristics of Russia's political and economic system to its neighbors is reason for concern.⁶ But many in Moscow, including at the highest echelons of power, would agree that these characteristics, such as corruption and the lack of rule of law, are troubling. The problem, in other words, is the socio-economic phenomenon in question, not Russia per se.

In the context of Russia's ongoing post-Soviet transformation, it is important to note that Moscow's interests in the region and the nature of its political system are not inextricably linked. Russia will have a lot at stake in its neighborhood regardless of the nature of its political regime.

⁶ One American perspective on the transposition of Russia's political and economic institutions on the region is presented in: Celeste A. Wallander, “Russian Transimperialism and Its Implications,” *The Washington Quarterly* 30 (2) (2007): 107–122, www.twq.com/07spring/docs/07spring_wallander.pdf

Why is post-Soviet Eurasia a problem for U.S.-Russia relations?

Sources of U.S.-Russia tensions in post-Soviet Eurasia can be divided into three categories: historically conditioned policy patterns (i.e., path dependency); the divisive impact of various interest groups and their parochial agendas; and mutual misperceptions. Contrary to the view commonly encountered in analyses of Russian and U.S. policies in post-Soviet Eurasia, we see no structurally determined clash of interests that would prevent a substantial improvement of the bilateral relationship in the region. Further, we find a number of compelling reasons for both Washington and Moscow to pursue such an improvement.

Path dependency

As noted above, Russia has historically treated its bilateral relationships in the region differently from those it has with other countries. This is only natural given sheer proximity, economic links, cultural commonalities, the Soviet legacy, and other historical ties. However, this “special treatment” has at times reflected a lack of respect for the sovereign choices of these states, especially with regard to the role of the United States and other international actors in post-Soviet Eurasian countries.

Indeed, Russia has often acted with a heavy hand. Over the last twenty years, there has hardly been a country in post-Soviet Eurasia whose policymakers have not been subjected to pressure from Moscow toward or against a particular course of action. Such activity is hard to document, but many in the region and in the United States accept it as fact. Examples have included bans on imports of key produce from Georgia and Moldova, and soft loans to Kyrgyzstan’s leadership.

Moscow’s attempts to influence political outcomes in the neighboring states have been particularly problematic. In Ukraine, examples included multiple presidential visits in the run-up to the 2004 elections; the early congratulatory phone call from then-President Vladimir Putin to candidate and then-Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich in November 2004; and the prominent role of Kremlin-connected political advisers. In other countries, Moscow is reported to have offered unsolicited “advice” on senior cabinet appointments, provided direct financing of friendly politicians’ campaigns, and indirectly stoked separatist movements.⁷

⁷ See, for example, Clifford Levy, “The Georgian and Putin: A Hate Story,” *New York Times*, April 18, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/19/weekinreview/19levy.html>; Anders Åslund, “The Orange Velvet Revolution,” December 21, 2004, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/aslund18/English>; and Rebecca Chamberlain-Creanga and Lyndon K. Allin, “Acquiring Assets, Debts and Citizens: Russia and the Micro-Foundations of Transnistria’s Stalemated Conflict,” *Demokratizatsiya*, Fall 2010.

In many of these cases, Moscow may have been pursuing an outcome that was just, or seeking to prevent an outcome that was not. But instead of going through diplomatic channels, providing transparent incentives to change behavior, or consulting directly with the external actor that was the source of Russia's concerns, Moscow often applied pressure to coerce smaller states into accepting terms that ran contrary to their will. Such behavior clearly intensified when U.S. engagement was perceived as encroaching on Russia's interests, but in the countries of the region, where unmediated relations with the West were considered one of the primary benefits of independence, this was a distinction without a difference.

Such policies, which alienated local elites and populations, never served Russia's long-term interests.⁸ They also set off alarm bells in Washington, where officials regularly voiced objections to Moscow's heavy-handed tactics. These objections were raised regardless of the overall atmosphere of Russia's relations with the United States at a given time. In other words, upswings in Russia's relations with the United States have never entailed U.S. administrations' approval of Russian policies in the region that they would have objected to under other circumstances—contrary to the perceptions of some in Moscow.

Overall, in relations with its neighbors Russia has struggled to steer a balanced course that would fully account for both their sovereignty and their historically conditioned threat perceptions, and at the same time fully capitalize on the remaining economic ties, political affinities and people-to-people connections in the region.

While the Soviet legacy largely accounts for Moscow's heavy hand, certain U.S. policies in the region are also path-dependent. In the U.S. case, the objective from the early-mid-1990s of strengthening the newly acquired statehood of Russia's neighbors continues to influence policy.

That objective resulted from both security concerns and values. Washington acted on the assumption that the existence of a multitude of sovereign states would best serve U.S. security interests by preventing the emergence of an anti-Western bloc in the Soviet Union's stead. But many in the United States also viewed the newly independent states through a post-imperial lens, perceiving them as long-repressed nations now pursuing self-determination. American eagerness to support these national projects derived from the widely held view of the USSR as an empire—a political system designed to repress minorities on its periphery—as well as the notion (less widely held in the United States, but certainly prevalent in the region) that the Russian Federation was, and remained, the imperial core.

In the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union's disintegration, the United States therefore became deeply involved in the transition process in many Soviet republics, helping to cement their independence. By the end of the 1990s, this project was largely complete: despite the persistence of protracted ethnic conflicts, the formal trappings of sovereignty were secured for the states of post-Soviet Eurasia.

⁸ It should be acknowledged, however, that Russia's heavy hand in post-Soviet Eurasia was only one of several factors that undermined Russia's image among the political elites and general public in some post-Soviet Eurasian countries. Other trends and developments clearly played an important role, such as nation-building projects in these countries and the attractiveness of the West as the world's economic leader and a source of economic aid. All of this contributed strongly to the determination of these countries to distance themselves from Moscow regardless of Russia's policies.

Even though its objective had been achieved, aspects of this policy continued unabated, often devolving into outright balancing games: the objective of bolstering sovereignty was confused with countering all forms of Russian influence in the region. For example, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, hatched in the 1990s, was envisioned in part as a means of providing Azerbaijan and Georgia with independent sources of revenue by bypassing routes through Russia. Today, the Nabucco gas pipeline is often pushed on similar grounds, even though the stated aim of cementing the statehood of transit and producer states was accomplished long ago.

Many in the United States have also viewed the stationing of Russian troops anywhere in post-Soviet Eurasia with suspicion.⁹ Among lawmakers on Capitol Hill, there has been a consensus in favor of pursuing their complete removal as a primary policy goal in itself regardless of circumstances, unless there is full host nation consent.¹⁰ This belief came to be reflected in policy, as, following a resolution by the U.S. Senate that was accepted by President Clinton in 1997, NATO's conditionality for ratification of the Adapted Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe shifted from Russia's compliance with the treaty's flank limitations to its implementation of the so-called Istanbul Commitments regarding Russian troops stationed in Georgia and Moldova.¹¹ Reducing Russia's influence in the region appeared to take priority over other policy goals, in this case modernizing Europe's arms-control regime.¹²

As a result of this path-dependent approach, Washington also has at times overlooked the authoritarian nature of some post-Soviet Eurasian governments, or focused on the problems in Russia's political system while seeming to ignore those of its neighbors. For example, former Vice President Dick Cheney harshly denounced Russia's human rights record in a May 2006 speech in Vilnius, declaring the Baltic region "the very front lines of

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⁹ Perhaps this suspicion is a function of a conflation of post-Soviet Russia with the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire. For example, after the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, a senior U.S. official said, "Russia's behavior in Georgia recalls bad traditions of years we had believed behind us: 1979 and Afghanistan, 1968 and Czechoslovakia, 1956 and Hungary, 1921 and Georgia, and numerous Russian imperial interventions in the 19th century." Daniel Fried, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs' testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, "U.S.-Russia Relations in the Aftermath of the Georgia Crisis," September 9, 2008, <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2008/September/20080911193551xjsnommis0.5195886.html>.

¹⁰ The United States Senate's 1997 Resolution of Advice and Consent to the Conventional Forces in Europe Flank Document included a condition for ratification that declares "[it is] the policy of the United States to achieve the immediate and complete withdrawal of any armed forces and military equipment under the control of the Russian Federation that are deployed on the territories of the independent states of the former Soviet Union...without the full and complete agreement of those states." U.S. Senate, Resolution of Ratification to the Flank Document Agreement to the CFE Treaty, Report to Accompany Treaty Doc. # 105-5, May 9, 1997, available at <http://www.gpo.gov/sfsys>.

¹¹ See Ulrich Kühn, "From Capitol Hill to Istanbul: The Origins of the Current CFE Deadlock," Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg, Center for OSCE Research, Working Paper 19, December 2009.

¹² As a recent report by Sen. Richard Lugar put it, "Consistent with the U.S. Senate's Resolution of Advice and Consent to the CFE Flank Document in 1997, the United States and NATO allies have insisted since 2002 that ratification of the Adapted CFE Treaty would not be sought until the Russian Federation fulfilled its commitment to withdraw remaining forces from Georgia and Moldova." Sen. Richard Lugar, "Will Russia End Eastern Europe's Last Frozen Conflict?" A Report to the Members of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, February 8, 2011, p. 5, available at <http://www.gpo.gov/sfsys>.

freedom in the modern world” before flying off to Astana for energy and security talks with Kazakhstan’s President Nursultan Nazarbaev, a leader hardly known for his commitment to democratic norms.¹³

Further, path-dependent attitudes have led some in the United States to either implicitly condone or explicitly support regional political leaders’ discriminatory policies toward ethnic Russian minorities. Such balancing games ignore the inherent contradiction between ethnic discrimination/exclusionary nationalism and democratic politics, and have made many Americans too quick to dismiss their Russian counterparts’ concerns as “neo-imperialism.” Coupled with the harsh—if justified—criticism of human rights abuses in Russia, this approach created a widespread impression among the Russian public and policymakers that the United States applied “double standards” to Russia and its neighbors in post-Soviet Eurasia when assessing their democratic credentials.



Russian President Dmitri Medvedev with other heads-of-state of CSTO member-states during a summit in Kyrgyzstan in July 2009. (Russian Presidential Press and Information Office, www.kremlin.ru)

Another path-dependent dynamic that creates tensions between Moscow and Washington is their current support for different and mutually exclusive regional economic and security integration projects. Moscow champions the CIS, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Eurasian Economic Community (EURASEC), the trilateral (Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan) Customs Union, as well as bilateral security arrangements with Belarus, Ukraine, Armenia and Uzbekistan. At the same time, the United States consistently promotes the engagement of post-Soviet Eurasian countries with NATO and supports the EU’s economic integration offerings.

The competition between these agendas has acquired its own institutional inertia and vicious-cycle dynamic that are to many observers indicative of the “structural,” “inherent,” or “international order-conditioned” nature of U.S.-Russia rivalry across post-Soviet Eurasia.

Examined through a historical lens, however, this problem has a clear non-systemic source: the lack of pan-Eurasian integration initiatives. More specifically, Western institutional enlargement since 1991 has de facto been closed off to Russia, creating what can be called an “integration dilemma.”

In international relations theory, a “security dilemma” describes the phenomenon whereby “many of the steps pursued by states to bolster their security have the effect—often unintended and unforeseen—of making other states less secure.”¹⁴ If one state perceives another’s actions, regardless of their intended purpose, as a threat to its security, a security dilemma results: the “threatened” state must choose between engaging in a defensive buildup (which could trigger another round of insecurity) or tolerate lessened security.

An integration dilemma, then, occurs when one state perceives as a threat to its own security or prosperity its neighbors’ integration into military alliances or economic groupings that are closed to it.

¹³ “Text: Cheney’s Speech in Lithuania,” May 4, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/04/world/europe/04cnd-cheney-text.html>.

¹⁴ Quotation from Robert Jervis, “Was the Cold War a Security Dilemma?” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3:1 (2001), p. 36. See also Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30:2 (1978).

Take the example of military alliances. Although NATO's "open door" policy technically applies equally to Russia, its membership seems highly unlikely in the medium term. The United States has traditionally argued that NATO membership for the countries of post-Soviet Eurasia would alleviate their threat perceptions and facilitate their democratic consolidation and security sector reform, thereby providing Russia with constructive, stable neighbors. And many in Washington have repeatedly stressed that NATO remains a defensive alliance that would never mount an offensive operation against Russia, and dismissed as dated, manipulative, or baseless the stated concerns of Moscow about the implications of NATO enlargement for its interests.

Such responses have not been particularly effective in convincing Moscow. Russia thus sought to counter NATO enlargement, consolidating collective security groupings in post-Soviet Eurasia under its own leadership. These have taken the form of the CSTO, SCO and a variety of bilateral security arrangements with Belarus, Ukraine, Armenia and Uzbekistan.¹⁵

In its turn, Washington not only dismissed Russia's concerns about its preferred integration initiatives, but also regarded the Russia-led groupings as "paper tigers" imposed on the other members, lacking legitimacy and therefore fragile. The United States reportedly opposed establishing ties between NATO and CSTO, apparently out of conviction that the CSTO would eventually wither away, its members shifting toward NATO.¹⁶

The integration dilemma is equally acute in the economic sphere, especially surrounding EU engagement with post-Soviet Eurasian states, which the U.S. has strongly supported in the form of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTA). The DCFTA model requires these states to adopt a portion of the *acquis communautaires* (EU laws and regulations), thus integrating them into the EU's economic-legal space and diverting trade away from other partners, including Russia. So Moscow not surprisingly sees adoption of DCFTA agreements as a threat to its economic security—no matter what the EU's intentions were—in cases like Ukraine, where the bilateral trade ties are thick.

By promoting engagement with the states of post-Soviet Eurasia largely through integration initiatives that are de facto closed to Russia, the United States has (often unintentionally) forced them to make zero-sum choices. As a result, in some cases these choices deepened social and political divisions, which held back market reform and democratic development. In other cases, Russia's own responses to the integration dilemma set back progress.

¹⁵ The security-focused integration initiatives pioneered by Moscow have had multiple and evolving purposes, and neither of them was created in order to counter NATO in post-Soviet Eurasia. For example, the Collective Security Treaty was signed in 1992 when NATO enlargement was not yet on the public agenda, and the CSTO itself was not formed until 2002, after enlargement was already a reality. Regardless of the intention behind their creation, the CSTO or SCO members often both perceive limitations on and face practical challenges (e.g., interoperability) to engagement with NATO which, in its turn, positions itself as the premier security organization in Europe and pursued cooperation with many states in the region. Moscow sought to demonstrate that the security needs of such allies as Armenia, Belarus or Kazakhstan could best be met through the CSTO and bilateral arrangements. Judging from exercises conducted in recent years, CSTO defensive planning seems to envision a potential attack by NATO member states.

¹⁶ Joshua Kucera, "U.S. Blocking NATO-CSTO Cooperation," *Eurasianet*, February 12, 2011, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62882>.

Parochial agendas

U.S.-Russia rivalry in post-Soviet Eurasia has been exacerbated by the parochial agendas of actors such as business lobbies and “freelancing” government agencies on both sides. These agendas, rarely consistent with the national interests of either country, have often been a source of friction between Moscow and Washington.

Given the peripheral significance of post-Soviet Eurasia for the United States in the global context, Washington has at times struggled to identify a clear guiding rationale for its engagement there. U.S. policy has therefore been vulnerable to “hijacking” by powerful commercial or bureaucratic actors. In Moscow, the government has often not distanced itself from the actions of Russian businesses or rogue agencies, or used the available levers to rein them in.

To further their parochial agendas, actors in the United States and Russia have often cast the other country as an irreconcilable and insatiable adversary in the region. They have portrayed attempts at reaching agreement on regional affairs as dangerous concessions (to the United States)¹⁷ or acts of appeasement (of Russia).¹⁸

Both U.S. and Russian firms have at times also sought to cast economic issues in post-Soviet Eurasia as security concerns. The private sector firms involved in the Nabucco gas pipeline, for example, are quick to highlight the dangers of failing to complete the project—dangers not for their bottom line, but for Euro-Atlantic security.¹⁹

In the United States, ethnic diaspora communities from the countries of post-Soviet Eurasia have played a visible role in debates about policy toward Russia and the region. Politicians, activists, lobbyists and experts with roots in the region have at times been driven by a perception that Russia inherited the mantle of Soviet repression of their ancestral homelands’ national aspirations—homelands they or their ancestors were forced to flee.

¹⁷ One vivid example of a parochial actor trying to exert influence on Russian foreign policy-making was former Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov who, while in office, repeatedly addressed the highly politicized, emotional issue of the Crimean peninsula. By loudly claiming that Ukraine must “return” Crimea (and especially the Crimean naval base city of Sevastopol) to Russia, Luzhkov sought to boost his public profile and position himself as a national political figure in Russia, despite the fact that his mayoral mandate only included management of the city of Moscow. Among other goals, Luzhkov’s inflammatory rhetoric was aimed at deflecting public attention away from the blatant cases of corruption and inefficiency that marred his city government. He regularly made his case in geopolitical terms: “Sevastopol is a city, a Russian naval base in Russia, which provides the geostrategic balance in southern Russia. But its loss is the loss of the South of Russia.” “Luzhkov: Russia Must Not Leave Sevastopol,” *FOR-UA*, July 22, 2010, <http://for-ua.org/politics/2010/07/22/171054.html>. For other examples of Luzhkov’s statements on Crimea, see: “Luzhkov Again Raises Russian Right to Sevastopol,” Jamestown Foundation, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, August 9, 2010, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=36729.

¹⁸ For example, a representative of the contractor for fuel supplies at the U.S. airbase at Manas, Kyrgyzstan, justified his use of complex schemes to avoid a direct agreement with Russian suppliers, saying, “We got one over on ‘em. I am an old ‘Cold Warrior,’ I’m proud of it, we beat the Russians, and we did it for four or five years.” See U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs, “Mystery at Manas,” December 2010, http://democrats.oversight.house.gov/images/stories/subcommittees/NS_Subcommittee/Mystery_at_Man/Mystery_at_Man.pdf, p. 45.

¹⁹ An adviser to the Nabucco pipeline project has stated that such a failure “would be geopolitical disaster.” Quoted in: Rawi Abdelal, “The Profits of Power: Commercial Realpolitik in Eurasia,” Harvard Business School Working Paper, March 2011, <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/6505.html>.

Government agencies often pursued their own agendas in the region. Some, like the intelligence agencies, continued their Cold War-era attitudes toward one another, directly exacerbating tensions. Others inadvertently ratcheted up rivalries. For example, the U.S. Defense Logistics Agency's non-transparent handling of fuel contracts for the Manas airbase in 2010 was a major factor in destabilizing the political situation in Kyrgyzstan, and also risked a major flare-up in bilateral relations.²⁰

At times the post-Soviet Eurasian governments have also upped the ante by playing the United States and Russia against each another to maximize political or economic rent and/or consolidate power. This occurs both behind the scenes among officials, when regional governments attempt to maximize freedom of maneuver by driving wedges between Moscow and Washington, and publicly, when certain post-Soviet Eurasian states shift their declared foreign-policy loyalties in order to secure political support and material assistance from a new patron. One vivid example is Uzbekistan, whose leadership vacillated between joining, leaving and then returning to the CSTO. More recently, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko held on to power in late 2010 by capitalizing on the perceived competition for influence over his country between Russia and the West.

Mutual misperceptions

In addition to path dependency and parochial agendas, mutual misperceptions also cause tension between the two countries in the region. By “misperceptions” we mean frequently encountered patterns in the analyses of, and normative judgments about, U.S. and Russian roles and policies in post-Soviet Eurasia, which lack conclusive empirical evidence. We do not claim that these perceptions have no basis in reality. Some amount to tendentious inferences based on indisputable facts—and regardless of their source or veracity, their impact on policy is very real.

Both sides' policies often reflect a fundamental misperception at the core of the problem under examination: that one country's influence in the region necessarily comes at the expense of the other's interests. For some policymakers and commentators in the United States, Russian influence in the region is seen on its face as a threat both to the sovereignty and independence of the states of post-Soviet Eurasia, and to their prospects for democratic consolidation. Indeed, even discussion of the region with Moscow, let alone joint action there, immediately conjures the “ghost of Yalta”: the lingering sense of responsibility many Americans feel for those arrangements that essentially gave the Soviet Union *carte blanche* to impose repressive regimes fashioned in its own image on the states of Central and Eastern Europe. Although the Soviet Union is long gone, these phantoms of past transgressions against smaller countries in the region continue to haunt many in the United States.

²⁰ U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs, “Mystery at Manas.”



Ukrainian, American, Georgian and Romanian soldiers salute under their national flags in Crimea, Ukraine, during NATO's Sea Breeze-2010 exercise. (Ministry of Defense of Ukraine)

In Russia, some see the specter of Cold War-era containment policies in any U.S. engagement in the neighborhood. Many in Moscow are convinced that Washington will support “anti-Russian” politicians in order to limit Russian influence. Some even assert that the chance a public figure will get support from the United States depends on the intensity with which that person undermines Russian interests.

These ghosts of the past have also precluded transparent approaches in the United States and Russia vis-à-vis each other's policies in post-Soviet Eurasia. Both sides have at times acted based on an assumption that bilateral consultations on regional affairs necessarily come at a cost.

These misperceptions have proven almost immune to improvements in the overall bilateral relationship. The two countries still question each other's motives in the region even in 2011, despite the mutually acknowledged success of the “reset” in their relations. Many politicians and commentators in the United States still see ties with post-Soviet Eurasia through the prism of stark choices: Washington can only have a “reset” with Moscow if it “abandons” Russia's neighbors.²¹

When discussing post-Soviet Eurasia, Americans and Russians use vocabulary that creates misperceptions.

For Russia, this pertains in particular to the phrases “sphere of influence” and “sphere of privileged interests.” In the United States and in the region as well, these phrases imply enforced Russian primacy, if not an attempt at restoration of the Soviet Union. Yet the fact of significant Russian influence in the neighborhood does not necessarily entail coercion, let alone forceful elbowing-out of other states.²²

In its turn, Moscow perceives the notion of “free choice of alliances,” especially after the 2008 Bucharest NATO Summit declaration which stated in no uncertain terms that Ukraine and Georgia “*will become*” members of the Alliance,²³ as an indication of Washington's intent to impose NATO membership on Russia's neighbors, regardless of their preparedness for membership or their populations' support for accession.

U.S. support for democratic institutions and practices in post-Soviet Eurasia has largely been sincere and is not an inherent threat to Russian interests. However, such support has been widely perceived in Russia as a smokescreen for backing regimes that are hostile

²¹ See, for example, Sens. Jon Kyl (R-Ariz.), Ron Johnson (R-Wis.), Jeff Sessions (R-Ala.) and Mike Crapo (R-Idaho), “‘Belt of Freedom’ Seeks Valuable U.S. Support,” *Roll Call*, May 16, 2011, http://www.rollcall.com/issues/56_122/-205623-1.html; and David Kramer, “U.S. abandoning Russia's neighbors,” *Washington Post*, May 15, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/14/AR2010051404496.html>.

²² President Medvedev sought to downplay the highly negative perception in the West of his August 2008 reference to Russia's “sphere of privileged interests” by explaining in an interview with *The Financial Times* in June 2011 that what he had meant was “the privilege of establishing especially good relations with neighbors.” See “Transcript: interview with President Dmitry Medvedev,” *Financial Times*, June 19, 2011, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/4bfa1f38-9a90-11e0-bab2-00144feab49a.html#axzz1PnSaBoya>.

²³ The full passage in question reads, “NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO.” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Bucharest Summit Declaration,” April 3, 2008, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm.

to Russian interests. It is true that some of the reformist leaders in the region have also sought to distance their countries from Russia. And the United States does maintain good relations with quite repressive post-Soviet Eurasian governments as well. Given consistent U.S. public statements about Russia's democratic shortcomings, this has created the misperception that U.S. democracy promotion is a tool of minimizing Russian influence.

Some in the United States argue that Russia has fostered authoritarian practices in its neighborhood, and claim that close Russian ties with post-Soviet Eurasian states impede their democratic consolidation.²⁴ However, the most direct evidence presented to back this case is Moscow's active role in CIS election monitoring missions. These missions have predictably testified to the fairness of elections in such countries as Belarus and Kazakhstan—even when their fraudulent nature was obvious. But the impact of these missions has been minimal, and their existence seems more a response to a misperception of the intent of U.S.-backed observer missions than a clearly articulated alternative normative framework for the conduct of elections.

It is true that Russia has not prioritized facilitating the political transformation of its neighbors. However, since Russia's transformation is still ongoing, to expect otherwise would be unrealistic.

In a similar vein, Moscow's attempts to promote Russian language and culture in the region are often perceived as threatening on their face.²⁵ Some even see these moves as a challenge to the independence of the states of post-Soviet Eurasia. Twenty years after 1991, it is fair to say that this is a misperception.

The described array of persistent differences and misperceptions has brought the United States and Russia to an impasse of profound distrust and a deep uncertainty about the possible intentions of the other's future political leaders. This phenomenon has led to a spiral of worst-case-scenario planning that reinforces zero-sum instincts and disincentivizes conciliatory policy shifts due to the perceived future risks they would entail.

For example, it would be difficult to convince policymakers in Moscow that their future Washington counterparts would not prioritize undermining Russia's positions in post-Soviet Eurasia. Likewise, U.S. policymakers often act on the assumption of Russia's inherent determination to establish outright regional hegemony through bullying tactics—if not today, then someday in the future. As a consequence, both sides have regarded any case of successful cooperation as “accidental” while continuing to plan responses to the other side's next potential adversarial move.

²⁴ See, for example, Thomas Ambrosio, *Authoritarian Backlash: Russian Resistance to Democratization in the Former Soviet Union* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

²⁵ See, for example, Alexa Chopivsky, “Turning Ukraine into a ‘Nation without Identity,’” RFE/RL, February 25, 2011, http://www.rferl.org/content/ukrainian_commentary/2320473.html.

The impact of the problem—on the bilateral relationship and the countries of the region

As a result of these factors, Russia and the United States have often treated their interaction in post-Soviet Eurasia as a zero-sum game. The fallout for the bilateral relationship and the region has been disastrous. First and foremost, the benefits that cooperation could bring the United States, Russia and the states of post-Soviet Eurasia, which all share many important interests vis-à-vis the region, remain unrealized. These include enhancing prosperity, promoting peace and preventing the spread of transnational threats (nuclear proliferation, epidemics, disease, narcotics, etc.). Attempts at furthering these shared interests, which are perceived as beneficial by all, are far more likely to be successful than approaches perceived by one or more parties as threatening.

Indeed, many mutually beneficial possibilities for engagement have been held hostage to U.S.-Russia tensions in the region. When a perception of U.S.-Russia competition “over” the countries of the region intensifies, it obscures shared interests and often precludes positive-sum outcomes or coordinated approaches.

U.S.-Russia competition has also stunted the political and economic development of the states of post-Soviet Eurasia and contributed to the ossification of unresolved conflicts.²⁶ For example, the instability in Kyrgyzstan in early 2010 was in large part a function of both countries’ policies toward Bishkek devolving into a bidding war over basing rights, which facilitated the entrenchment of a highly corrupt, deeply unpopular clique. In Ukraine, perceptions of U.S.-Russia rivalry deepen existing cultural-linguistic fault lines, complicating the process of developing an inclusive national identity for all Ukrainian citizens.

In almost all of the post-Soviet Eurasian states during the last twenty years, there have been similar examples of the United States and Russia preferring to balance the other’s influence rather than to find outcomes that are mutually acceptable and beneficial to the states of the region. In so doing, Moscow and Washington have either ignored or intensified the region’s problems, from corruption to ethnic strife.

²⁶ On the detrimental impact of competition among external actors on the region’s protracted conflicts, see William H. Hill, “Reflections on Negotiation and Mediation: The Frozen Conflicts and European Security,” *Demokratizatsiya*, Summer 2010, pp. 219–227.

Such behavior did further harm to the bilateral relationship on issues unrelated to the region. Again and again, disputes in post-Soviet Eurasia have prevented Washington and Moscow from building confidence and restoring the trust deficit that remains from the Cold War.²⁷

Indeed, the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia marked the nadir of a downward spiral of mutual recrimination over Russian and U.S. policies in the region. Relatively high-ranking individuals in the U.S. administration pushed for a direct military response to Russia's invasion of Georgia.²⁸ The fact that Russia's invasion was preceded by escalating violence on the ground, culminating in Georgia's shelling of a city where Russian peacekeepers were stationed, was even declared irrelevant by a prominent columnist known as a supporter of the then-incumbent U.S. administration:

The details of who did what to precipitate Russia's war against Georgia are not very important. Do you recall the precise details of the Sudeten Crisis that led to Nazi Germany's invasion of Czechoslovakia? Of course not, because that morally ambiguous dispute is rightly remembered as a minor part of a much bigger drama.²⁹

This breathtaking statement still reflects the attitudes of many prominent voices in Washington—and there are just as many in Moscow who would make similar sweeping characterizations of U.S. actions in the region.

Despite the persistence of such attitudes, the two countries have developed a decent track record of cooperation in the region since the broader “reset” began. Kyrgyzstan in particular stands out as a locus of joint pursuit of shared interests. Both Russia and the United States abstained from direct intervention during the period of intense internal strife in early 2010 and tried to avoid action that would precipitate negative reactions from the other.

²⁷ Despite the trust deficit, cooperation on certain discrete issues began early in the post-Soviet period and has been largely maintained through the present, especially joint U.S.-Russia cooperation on nonproliferation in the region. But these are the exceptions to the rule. For recent examples, see:

United States Department of Energy National Nuclear Security Administration, “Press Release: NNSA Achieves Milestone in Removal of HEU from Ukraine,” December 31, 2010, <http://nnsa.energy.gov/mediaroom/pressreleases/ukraineheuremoval>;

Glenn Kessler, Mary Beth Sheridan, “Belarus agrees to give up stockpile of highly enriched uranium,” *Washington Post*, December 1, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/12/01/AR2010120101198.html>; and

United States Department of Energy National Nuclear Security Administration, “Press Release: NNSA Secures 775 Nuclear Weapons Worth of Weapons-Grade Nuclear Material from BN-350 Fast Reactor in Kazakhstan,” November 18, 2010, <http://nnsa.energy.gov/mediaroom/pressreleases/bn35011.18.10>.

²⁸ Ben Smith, “U.S. pondered military use in Georgia,” *Politico*, February 3, 2010, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0210/32487.html>; and Ronald D. Asmus, *A Little War That Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West* (New York: Palgrave, 2010), pp. 186–187.

²⁹ Robert Kagan, “Putin Makes His Move,” *Washington Post*, August 11, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/08/10/AR2008081001871.html>.

They also coordinated their responses to the humanitarian crisis. Presidents Medvedev and Obama issued a joint statement on the situation in Kyrgyzstan during their June 2010 meeting in Washington.³⁰ Since then, high-level diplomats from both countries whose portfolios include post-Soviet Central Asia have met specifically to discuss the region.³¹

In February 2011, the commander of the Russian air force base at Kant, Kyrgyzstan, accompanied by fellow officers as well as his wife and son, visited his U.S. counterpart at the Manas Transit Center—the first meeting of U.S. and Russian military personnel there despite nine years of living twenty miles apart. And in April, the first three-way meeting among U.S., Russian and Kyrgyzstani representatives to hammer out the base’s fuel supply contract took place.³² This episode reinforces the point that the reasons behind the conflictual pattern of U.S.-Russia interaction in the region are not structural, but rather circumstantial and contingent. Nothing in the international system changed between February 2009, when Moscow essentially offered a \$2-billion bribe to then-President Kurmanbek Bakiyev to close Manas, and the February 2011 visit of the Kant commander there.

What changed was that Americans elected a president who did not see zero-sum competition in the region as a U.S. national interest. After he adjusted U.S. policy accordingly, his Russian counterpart responded in kind—an example of another pattern in bilateral interactions in the region, namely that one country’s posture there affects the other’s.

The significance of developments around Kyrgyzstan—both positive and negative—should certainly not be overstated. It remains a rather symbolic case. However, it is reflective of a notable departure from previous approaches and may therefore be a sign that an opening for tackling tougher issues now exists.

Indeed, the lessening of tensions in the region goes beyond the cooperation in Kyrgyzstan, but it was not a function of U.S. or Russian policies. In 2010 Ukrainians elected a president who legally ruled out NATO membership for his country, ceased his predecessor’s tradition of publicly antagonizing Moscow, and made policy concessions such as extending Russia’s lease of the naval base at Sevastopol. Georgia remains a source of friction, but given that NATO allies are highly unlikely to find consensus on accepting a member engaged in a border dispute with one of the Alliance’s neighbors, Tbilisi’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations are likely to remain aspirational. In other words, NATO enlargement to post-Soviet Eurasia is unlikely in the near- or medium term for reasons independent of U.S. and Russian intentions or actions.



U.S. troops stationed at the Manas Transit Center and Russian Air Force personnel from Kant Air Base during a tour of a C-17 at Manas, in February 2011. (U.S. Air Force photo/Staff Sgt. Stacy Moless)

³⁰ The White House, “Joint Statement of the Presidents of the United States and the Russian Federation in Connection with the Situation in the Kyrgyz Republic,” June 24, 2010, http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/us-russia_joint_statement_on_kyrgyzstan.pdf.

³¹ United States Department of State, “Press Release: Assistant Secretary Robert O. Blake, Jr. Travels to Tajikistan and the Russian Federation,” August 26, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/t/pa/prs/ps/2010/08/146311.htm>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Press Release: Meeting of Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia Grigory Karasin with Deputy Secretary of State Robert Blake,” September 2, 2010, http://www.mid.ru/bdcomp/Brp_4.nsf/arh/235BB240B1AD42A6C3257792003278B5?OpenDocument; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Press Release: Meeting of Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia Grigory Karasin with Assistant Secretary of State Elliott,” March 22, 2011, <http://www.mid.ru/bdcomp/Ns-rsam.nsf/arh/432569D80021825EC325785B004A2FE0?OpenDocument>.

³² Joshua Kucera, “Russians Make First-Ever Visit to Manas,” *Eurasianet*, February 26, 2011, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62912>; and Deirdre Tynan, “Kyrgyzstan: Pentagon to Revamp Manas Fuel Supply Arrangements,” *Eurasianet*, May 5, 2011, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/63428>.

Although circumstances have come together to produce a pause in the most severe tensions, the basic problem remains. A number of possible developments in the region could easily precipitate a downturn in bilateral relations. For example, the 2015 Ukrainian presidential elections could bring to power a politician with policy preferences more akin to the incumbent's predecessor's. A renewed push for accelerated NATO membership for Ukraine might exacerbate the integration dilemma and complicate the U.S.-Russia relationship. Armed conflict between Georgia and Russia and/or the Abkhazian and South Ossetian authorities could flare up at any time, especially given Tbilisi's recent allegations of Russian involvement in subversive activities and Moscow's denunciations of Georgia's purported attempts to stir up separatist sentiment in Russia's North Caucasus regions. Finally, mass protests against incumbent authorities in almost any country in post-Soviet Eurasia cannot be ruled out. Faced with such a development, Moscow and Washington might well instinctively take opposite sides in the dispute.

Any of these contingencies would pose a challenge to U.S.-Russia relations. Managing that challenge—and thus preserving the benefits both sides have reaped from strengthened cooperation—would require the kind of restraint and highly deft diplomacy that is notable for its absence in contemporary U.S.-Russia ties. All available evidence demonstrates that the current pause in unconstructive U.S.-Russia rivalry in post-Soviet Eurasia is highly contingent and unlikely to be sustained by inertia.

Policy recommendations to transcend the zero-sum game

It is clear that business as usual for the United States and Russia in post-Soviet Eurasia is likely to drag down the bilateral relationship at some point. If countering the other's influence remains a policy objective for one or both, an upswing in tensions is inevitable.

Washington and Moscow face a choice: they can pursue a maximalist vision of “victory” over the other in the region and expect a return to the near-confrontation of 2008, or they can seek mutually acceptable outcomes that do not taint the rest of the bilateral relationship. To be clear: this need not and would not represent a “condominium” of big states over small ones.³³ Rather, it would facilitate “win-win-win” outcomes for the United States, Russia and the countries of post-Soviet Eurasia.

The first necessary shift is a move toward greater transparency on both sides concerning their policies and activities in the region. Such an effort does not necessarily involve traditional transparency measures intended for public consumption, such as posting information on websites. Instead, the focus must be on directly conveying on a government-to-government basis the details of each country's engagement with all the states of the region (with exceptions made for classified or proprietary information), and establishing routines to do so on a regular basis. This will help overcome the “trust gap” that currently exists.

The constructive bilateral interaction in Kyrgyzstan following the instability there in the spring of 2010 demonstrated that such transparency measures need not be formalized or even based on an expectation of reciprocity. In that case, there was a high-level push in Washington on the bureaucracy to be transparent about U.S. programs and activities. Moscow eventually responded in kind, but even had it not, the additional clarity about American activities served U.S. interests as well.

Second, after establishing routines for transparency, Moscow and Washington should begin regular working-level consultations on regional issues. Government officials from the United States and Russia who have the portfolios for the countries of post-Soviet Eurasia should keep regular contact, periodically meeting face-to-face with their counterparts. It is not enough for the Russia portfolio manager from the United States to meet with the Russian official who covers the U.S. portfolio; for example, U.S. officials who cover the South Caucasus should travel to Moscow, and their Russian counterparts should travel to Washington. On the ground, the Russian and American ambassadors should also establish direct channels of communication, and, when needed, meet trilaterally with officials of

³³ See also Samuel Charap and Mikhail Troitskiy, “The Myth of Yalta II,” *International Herald Tribune*, March 9, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/09/opinion/09iht-edcharap09.html>.

the country where they are stationed. In places where both U.S. and Russian armed forces are stationed, they should seek out opportunities for transparent, structured interactions, including jointly with their local counterparts where possible.

These channels of communication should be used for discussion of both the situation in the region, as well as the sides' concerns about the other's policies or actions. Both Washington and Moscow have a bad habit of sharing such concerns through public statements condemning the other side's actions in the region or, even worse, expressing them either through comments to the press or directly to policymakers in the region. Even if the intent is not to coerce, such steps give the clear impression of coercion, wedge-driving or "balancing games."

Third, both Moscow and Washington can reap benefits for both the bilateral relationship and their ties with the peoples of the region by adjusting their public rhetoric. In many cases, their rhetoric actually undermines their policy objectives. Given the threat perceptions created by the Soviet legacy, every utterance of the phrase "sphere of influence" by senior Russian officials serves to undermine Russian influence by alienating elites and publics alike—as well as arousing overreactions in Washington. Indeed, Russian officials seem to be uniquely tone-deaf when it comes to understanding the impact of their words in the neighborhood, and the secondary impact of those words in Washington. U.S. officials indulge in similar short-sightedness when, for example, referring to Abkhazia and South Ossetia as merely Georgian "territories" or "areas"—terms which, given the current perceptions and recent history of ethnic victimization, imply the United States endorses wholesale denial of their aspirations for self-determination, regardless of the form in which that occurs.

Fourth, policymakers in Moscow and Washington should seek to better understand the incentives and limitations created by their counterparts' domestic political environments. For example, Russian officials and analysts have so far demonstrated little sensitivity to U.S. political culture's instinctual distaste for "grand bargains"—agreements between two countries to decide the fate of a third—and particularly the historical baggage associated with Moscow–Washington discussions on Russia's neighbors. (They seem to be even less sensitive to the way in which this historical legacy has affected perceptions in the region.) Specifically, they often fail to recognize that proposals extended to the United States that carry an imprint of a "grand bargain" are likely to be "dead on arrival," since even U.S. officials who might be inclined to entertain them know that such a move would be politically suicidal.

Likewise, U.S. assertions that the membership of post-Soviet Eurasian states in NATO and the EU will inevitably benefit Russia fall on deaf ears in Moscow—no matter how many times they are repeated.³⁴ It is unreasonable to expect any country to support its neighbors' joining organizations when these organizations are closed to that country, and when it perceives concrete downsides to its neighbors' membership. It will therefore remain difficult to convince Russian officials to maintain existing preferential arrangements—

U.S. assertions that the membership of post-Soviet Eurasian states in NATO and the EU will inevitably benefit Russia fall on deaf ears in Moscow—no matter how many times they are repeated.

³⁴ Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed the U.S. position speaking in 2010 in Paris: "For years, Russia has expressed a sense of insecurity as NATO and the EU have expanded. But we strongly believe that the enlargement of both has increased security, stability, and prosperity across the continent, and that this, in turn, has actually increased Russia's security and prosperity." Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Remarks on the Future of European Security," given in Paris, France, on January 29, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/01/136273.htm>.

such as free-trade zones or favorable migration regimes—for neighboring countries irrespective of their governments’ stance on NATO- or EU membership. The refusal to continue such preferential arrangements is not in itself a manifestation of “bullying behavior” or “resurgent imperialism.”

Fifth, officials from both countries should find ways to signal their positive-sum intentions. Most importantly, they should publicly reject the notion of “irreconcilable differences” between Moscow and Washington in post-Soviet Eurasia, and privately do so to the officials of the countries of the region as well. Such a process of “positive reassurance” is low cost and offers the potential for high gains.

On this score there has been marked improvement of late, as seen in the following three examples of senior political leaders decrying zero-sum approaches to post-Soviet Eurasia. In July 2009, President Obama said in Moscow:

Unfortunately, there is sometimes a sense that old assumptions must prevail, old ways of thinking; a conception of power that is rooted in the past rather than in the future. There is the 20th-century view that the United States and Russia are destined to be antagonists, and that a strong Russia or a strong America can only assert themselves in opposition to one another. And there is a 19th-century view that we are destined to vie for spheres of influence, and that great powers must forge competing blocs to balance one another. These assumptions are wrong.³⁵

President Medvedev echoed this sentiment in June 2011, when he said:

It is ridiculous to say that in the 21st century that the world is divided into parts, with a state responsible for each of them, e.g. America is responsible for this country, Russia for that, China for that. This is just not serious. This does not fit my conceptions either.³⁶

The month prior, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigori Karasin, whose portfolio includes post-Soviet Eurasia, foreshadowed President Medvedev’s remarks:

Russia is not laying claim to any exclusive role in Central Asian affairs and is open to cooperation with other states...Russia still believes that the Central Asian region can be an arena of broad international cooperation in the interests of ensuring its stability, security and sustained economic development.³⁷

Finally, both governments should also try to be keenly aware of the influence on policy of those interest groups, bureaucratic actors and commercial entities that perpetuate rivalry for reasons inconsistent with national interests, and to take action to minimize that influence on policy design and implementation if circumstances merit. This is no easy task because of the

³⁵ “Text: Obama’s Speech at the New Economic School,” *New York Times*, July 7, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/07/world/europe/07prexy.text.html>.

³⁶ FT interview with Medvedev.

³⁷ “Russia unfazed by foreign presence in Central Asia,” *RIA Novosti*, April 13, 2011, <http://en.rian.ru/russia/20110413/163510766.html>.

inherent difficulty in distinguishing between “genuinely national” and “parochial” interests. However, policymakers can take steps to minimize the destructive impact of parochial agendas while not denying any group the opportunity to express itself and seek recourse for grievances through its country’s political system.

Together with their parliaments and non-governmental experts, officials should exercise vigilance and make note of policy proposals that only serve the interest of a particular group (corporation, bureaucracy, lobby, etc.) while undermining the relationship. Political leaders should in turn speak out (whether publicly or within their governments) against such proposals. If attempts at implementation of parochial agendas are stigmatized, they are far less likely to be successful.

For example, disputes in the region between American and Russian firms should not be treated as national security concerns. Of course, neither government can ignore the needs of their country’s companies seeking to maximize profits from their business ventures in post-Soviet Eurasia. Each government has a duty to help its businesses in their activities abroad. That said, both sides need to be frank with each other, and honest to their publics, when business interests clash. In such cases, Moscow and Washington would be well advised to acknowledge the firm-based, as opposed to state-based, nature of the dispute and the actual stakes involved. Instead of elevating the problem into the realm of national security or “strategic interests,” competition between economic actors can then remain “business as usual.”

When problems do arise between the United States and Russia due to the activities of interest groups pursuing parochial agendas, such disputes should be kept in perspective of the entirety of the bilateral relationship. This effectively means comparing a particular problem to others that have been overcome in the past and, at the same time, remembering the benefits, if any, to be gained from other aspects of the relationship. No single issue should be portrayed as a *sine qua non* of U.S.-Russia ties.

Examples

This section analyzes in detail two examples of U.S.-Russia disagreement in the region and offers practical recommendations for addressing them.

Georgia conflicts

There is almost a precise parallel with the role of Georgia in U.S.-Russia relations in terms of the matters of principled disagreement, in particular borders and status.

The United States and Russia have sharply differing positions over matters of principle regarding Georgia: the location of its borders, the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the meaning of the ceasefire agreement that ended the August 2008 conflict. They even differ on the meaning of the term “party to the conflict.”³⁸ One would think this would be the last case where U.S.-Russia relations in post-Soviet Eurasia could be positive-sum.

However, a model for such a scenario does exist: namely, the role of Cyprus in U.S.-Turkey relations, and Turkey’s own relationship with Cyprus. There is almost a precise parallel with the role of Georgia in U.S.-Russia relations in terms of the matters of principled disagreement, in particular borders and status. Yet Turkey’s 1974 invasion of Cyprus, its subsequent military occupation and recognition of the north as an independent state represent a problem Washington and Ankara have been able to manage. They do disagree, but this dispute has not torpedoed their capacity to cooperate on other issues, or even to remain part of the same military alliance.

Meanwhile, Turkey remains the only state to have recognized the north as an independent state and has allowed a UN peacekeeping presence there; before the southern referendum for uniting with the north failed in 2004, Ankara had implicitly committed to reversing its positions on status and borders, and withdrawing its military presence. Given the successful referendum in the north, such a move would not have been considered abandonment. On the ground, populations are provided a significant degree of freedom of movement, and there is no imminent threat of use of military force by any side. Although the United

³⁸ For a detailed analysis of the current differences see: Samuel Charap and Cory Welt, *A More Proactive U.S. Approach to the Georgia Conflicts*, Center for American Progress report, February 2011, <http://ampr.gs/georgiaconflicts>.

States is not a neutral party in the status dispute and does not support the Turkish military presence, American officials use conciliatory language that acknowledges the inter-community conflict and maintain contact with northern Cypriot officials and residents.³⁹

But for the U.S. and Russia to attain this level of constructive interaction vis-à-vis the Georgia conflicts, Washington and Moscow would have to take steps along the lines above, which they have thus far been unwilling to do. First, they would need to cease prosthetizing their respective versions of the status dispute. In the months following Russia's August 2008 decision to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Moscow encouraged, including through the use of financial incentives, other states to follow suit. After minimal success (only Nauru, Venezuela, and Nicaragua were enticed), this pursuit appears to have been abandoned. Russia should now make clear its lack of intent to convince others, and in turn Washington should work with Moscow in international forums to find status-neutral solutions to the practical security and humanitarian issues arising from the conflicts.

Second, Russia and the U.S. should speak openly not just about the matters of principled disagreement, but also work together on status-neutral areas of shared interest. This effort should include a greater degree of transparency on the nature of Russian and American military presence in and around Georgia. Third, they should cease issuing statements along the lines followed from 2008 to 2011. To begin with, Moscow should tone down its references to the "Saakashvili regime," while Washington need not condemn every Russian official's visit to Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Mitigating the negative effects of competition among integration initiatives

Moscow and Washington can also take steps in the short term to address the fallout of the integration dilemma described above. In order to prevent new bouts of intense competition among alliances and economic integration initiatives in post-Soviet Eurasia, Russia and the United States (together with the organizations to which they belong, and the other member-states) should consider the following four principles to guide their actions. These principles are interlinked; following one while ignoring the others will not produce the intended effect.

³⁹ Compare the statements made by the same U.S. official on these issues in 2008: "The United States remains firmly committed to offering all possible support to UN efforts to foster a just and lasting Cyprus settlement.... We believe the two communities themselves must generate the solution to the longstanding division of the island"; and, "Moscow's pretext that it was 'intervening' in Georgia to protect Russian 'citizens' and 'peacekeepers' in South Ossetia was simply false... The real goal of Russia's military operation was to eliminate Georgia's democratically elected government and to redraw Georgia's borders... Russia acted to support the South Ossetian and Abkhaz leaderships, sowing the seeds of future conflict." Respectively: Matt Bryza, "Invigorating the U.S.-Turkey Strategic Partnership," Speech delivered in Washington, DC, June 24, 2008, http://www.disam.dsca.mil/pubs/Indexes/Vol%2030_4/Matt%20Bryza.pdf; and Matt Bryza, "Russia, Georgia, and the Return of Power Politics," Testimony before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, Washington, DC, September 10, 2008, <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2008/September/20080911114025eafas0.9974481.html>.

States that are not members of an organization should avoid publicly questioning its legitimacy.

The governments of prospective member-states—not Russia or the United States—shall decide on their preferred alliance commitments and economic integration projects. The first rounds of NATO enlargement would have been impossible without the clear preferences for membership expressed by the democratically elected governments of former Warsaw Pact members in Central and Eastern Europe. Only the elected leadership of a country can decide on its aspirations for membership in any international organization. It follows logically that no state or international/sub-national actor can “veto” another’s decision to seek membership in an international organization. At the same time, it serves no party’s interest to overdramatize post-Soviet Eurasian states’ choices as artificial binary options—arguing, for instance, that a country in post-Soviet Eurasia can prove its democratic credentials only by aspiring to join NATO and/or the EU, or that seeking membership in NATO or the EU is tantamount to undermining the unity of the Slavic nations.

Alliances or economic groupings shall determine eligibility for membership based on a clear set of criteria, employing a thorough, transparent process to evaluate whether a prospective member’s accession is in the interests of the organization. No aspiring member should receive guarantees of membership through either formal declarations or informal arrangements. Nor should criteria for membership be adjusted on the fly. Rather, organizations should emphasize their authority to offer or decline membership in accordance with their considered judgment.⁴⁰ Members and non-members alike should refrain from questioning the credibility of an organization that passes on a particular country’s membership bid for whatever reason.

States that are not members of an organization should avoid publicly questioning its legitimacy. Questioning another organization’s reason for existence only undermines trust and diminishes opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation. If no indisputable evidence exists to the contrary, member nations should be assumed to have made sovereign decisions to join an organization because they believe it in their interests to do so. For example, Russia should refrain from casting NATO as a “Cold War relic” and making explicit or implicit calls for the alliance to be disbanded. In turn, the United States should acknowledge the existence of the CSTO and the Customs Union.

If Moscow or Washington finds a post-Soviet Eurasian government’s ambitions for cooperation with or membership in a given organization problematic, it should express its concerns to the organization in question, avoiding public denunciations of these ambitions or attempts to convince the government in question to change course. The current practice is to raise the issue directly with the government in an attempt to convince policymakers to alter their decisions. Russia and the United States should commit to exhausting opportunities for

⁴⁰ The 1995 NATO Study on Enlargement was quite emphatic on this point. After outlining the criteria for new members, the Study stipulates: “States which have ethnic disputes or external territorial disputes, including irredentist claims, or internal jurisdictional disputes must settle those disputes by peaceful means in accordance with OSCE principles. Resolution of such disputes would be a factor in determining whether to invite a state to join the Alliance...Decisions on enlargement will be for NATO itself. Enlargement will occur through a gradual, deliberate, and transparent process, encompassing dialogue with all interested parties. There is no fixed or rigid list of criteria for inviting new member states to join the Alliance. Enlargement will be decided on a case-by-case basis and some nations may attain membership before others...Ultimately, Allies will decide by consensus whether to invite each new member to join according to their judgment of whether doing so will contribute to security and stability in the North Atlantic area at the time such a decision is to be made.” *Study on NATO Enlargement, Chapter 1: Purposes and Principles of Enlargement*, September 1995, <http://www.nato.int/docu/basicxt/enl-9502.htm>.

restoring mutual understanding between the organizations to which they belong on a controversial issue before moving to implicate other parties. Both sides are also well advised to avoid official public statements on each other's actions in the region until consultations have taken place.

The proposed terms of engagement do not imply veto rights for any one party over any other's decision-making. All states and organizations would continue to enjoy the same freedom of maneuver they do today. Nor do these rules require dramatic changes in the alliance architecture in Europe and Eurasia, such as enlargement bans or far-reaching legally binding treaties. Instead, they connote a process of consultation and mutual reassurance that offers the best chance of finding win-win-win solutions in the short term. Rather than begin with formal negotiations to resolve all contradictions, the parties would through engagement find outcomes acceptable to all. If implemented, the proposed principles could defuse many of the tensions resulting from the existence of competing integration initiatives in post-Soviet Eurasia.

Conclusion

Although it arose only in recent years and is certainly not destined to be eternal, the integration dilemma in post-Soviet Eurasia is perhaps the most significant long-term obstacle to positive-sum outcomes for the United States, Russia, the countries of the region, and the broader Euro-Atlantic community. The United States, EU and NATO, on the one hand, and Russia, the CSTO, SCO and EURASEC, on the other, could certainly continue the current pattern of ignoring the other side until a problem arises, and then indulging in familiar mutual recriminations. Or they, along with all the other members of the Euro-Atlantic region, could begin the kind of high-level sustained dialogue that would bridge the incompatibilities between integration initiatives and perhaps offer a vision for how to unify them in the long term.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) began a similar process in June 2009 on the Greek island of Corfu, but by 2011 the effort had already ended without results. It was in part a response to President Medvedev's call for a Euro-Atlantic Security Treaty in October 2008. The two proposals that eventually came out of Moscow were not well received in Washington and many European capitals. However, the U.S. response indicated that the negative side effects of the integration dilemma have yet to be fully appreciated in Washington. As Secretary Clinton put it: "We believe that these common goals are best pursued in the context of existing institutions, such as the OSCE and the NATO-Russia Council, rather than by negotiating new treaties, as Russia has suggested—a very long and cumbersome process."⁴¹ A treaty might not be practical or desirable, but a "very long and cumbersome process" may indeed be necessary to resolve the integration dilemma. A resolution is unlikely to materialize by both sides' continuing their current policies.

Today's political realities make such a "big tent" process seem unlikely to begin, let alone come to a successful conclusion. But that does not diminish the importance of the task.

In the short term, despite the persistence of the integration dilemma, the United States and Russia can modify their existing policies to transcend the zero-sum game in post-Soviet Eurasia in ways that both serve their national interests and benefit the countries of the region. But even if they do so, we should still expect a degree of competition between them in the region, especially among American and Russian firms. However, this kind of competition would differ from today's in several key respects: it would not set back the transformation processes of the states of post-Soviet Eurasia; it would not pose a threat to other aspects of the U.S.-Russia relationship; and it would allow the two countries to develop enough mutual trust to strengthen those other aspects. It would also lay bare the extent to which U.S.-Russia competition today is divorced from the reality on the ground. When one looks at savvy regional elites' expertise at manipulating both Moscow and

⁴¹ Clinton, "Remarks on the Future of European Security."

Washington after twenty years of practice, or China's determination to further its interests with little regard for U.S. or Russian objectives, the U.S.-Russia zero-sum dynamic seems truly akin to shadowboxing.

Transcending the zero-sum game would clearly benefit the region, the United States, and Russia. A dissipation in U.S.-Russia tension would allow the region's political leaders to focus on the pressing socio-economic problems plaguing their countries. In 2011, the formal sovereignty and independence of the eleven post-Soviet Eurasian states are not under threat. But they all suffer in varying degrees from poor governance, crippling corruption, economic inequities, degrading human capital, weak political institutions, ethnic violence, and social dysfunction. The zero-sum U.S.-Russia dynamic in the region did not cause these problems, but it certainly has not helped solve them, and has at times exacerbated them. If Washington and Moscow were able to jointly address regional concerns, including the protracted conflicts, regional elites could no longer credibly claim that "external forces" were responsible for their countries' woes.

More effective bilateral and multilateral cooperation can enable the United States, Russia and the relevant countries of the region to better manage the impending U.S./NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan. Today, the only truly effective multilateral cooperation is on the transit of men and materiel, although there has been some success in joint counter-narcotics efforts as well. But as the U.S. drawdown of forces begins in earnest, multilateral cooperation will become essential to stability in Afghanistan and the region. While the reduced U.S. presence could pose new challenges to the region and exacerbate current ones, effective regional coordination could provide the stability necessary to sustain a potential political settlement in Afghanistan.

Transcending the zero-sum game in post-Soviet Eurasia would significantly improve the U.S.-Russia relationship. Russia's threat perceptions that justify the continuance of a Cold War-era nuclear posture vis-à-vis the United States would be significantly diminished, thus facilitating arms control and non-proliferation efforts. If Washington were to undertake the efforts necessary to transcend the zero-sum game in post-Soviet Eurasia, it would serve as a powerful signal of intent to Moscow, since the region is so much more central to strategic thinking there. (Cooperation on reigning in Iran's nuclear ambitions is an example of the same phenomenon in reverse; Moscow's solidarity with Washington on that issue served as a similarly powerful signal given the centrality of the Iranian nuclear issue for the United States.) More broadly, the United States and Russia could devote their attention and resources to the new challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. Instead of continuing their current tug-of-war for new members, multilateral institutions in the region could find ways to bolster the security and prosperity of all.

But achieving this outcome will not be easy. We can only hope all parties soon begin working toward it in earnest.

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