

U.S. Foreign Policy and Russia: The Role of Internal Debates and Politics

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JACOB KENNEDY, OCT 20 2012

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Introduction

In light of the recent presidential elections in Moscow, much of the debate has centered on whether or not Mr. Putin's election will represent a major rupture in U.S.-Russia relations, which over the past four years have made significant progress under the Obama administration. As the hype of post-election discussions dissipate, resuming positive-developing relations with Russia will become increasingly pressing as the situations in Iran, Syria, and the Middle East continue to ominously unravel. Many, including GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney, have criticized the seemingly unproductive relationship arguing that Russia, often alongside China, has represented "nothing but obstructionism at the United Nations on a whole raft of issues." [i] However, a nuclear Iran and the implications for Israel and the region are among the most pressing issues on Washington's foreign policy agenda and Russia's acceptance of Iran's offer to negotiate its nuclear program, alongside the U.S., Britain, China, France, and Germany, provides an encouraging opportunity for U.S.-Russian relations to restart, or resume, in a positive direction.

In considering the strategic value of U.S.-Russia relations for U.S. foreign policy and its critical linkages to larger foreign policy issues, this paper focuses on the domestic political setting in which debates on Washington's most pressing issues will ultimately influence the formulation of U.S. foreign policy toward its Russian ally. The shaping of U.S. foreign policy decisions toward Russia will be heavily weighed against major developing issues such as the situations in Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, and the greater Middle East region. The positions of U.S. domestic political actors in these debates, particularly in the setting of an election year, will determine the future path of American foreign policy and its impact on relations with Russia. The purpose of this essay is to analyze the internal debates on U.S. foreign policy issues currently taking place in Washington and to determine the implications of emerging policies for U.S.-Russia relations. It is argued that the divergent viewpoints held by various government bodies interact and compete along party preferences in a way that influences and shapes how and what foreign policy decisions might emerge.

The following essay proceeds in four main sections. The first section briefly describes the larger global setting in which debates on Russian relations are currently developing. In doing so, the strategic value of positive Russian relations will become clear as mutual interests offer a political platform from which the U.S. may be better positioned to exert its influence on the global stage. The second section addresses the domestic political setting and the positions of influential actors within the U.S. government that are feeding the current policy debate, which is both far-reaching and complex. The third section expands the domestic setting within the context of an election year and identifies differing partisan-held viewpoints, ideas, and perceptions that influence the policymaking process. It is argued that potential sources for policies of change or cooperation toward Russia emerge as a function of issue-specific, election-year politics. Ultimately, the goal is not to predict election results but rather to identify how domestic political interaction on a wide range of issues, given the internal environment, can impact foreign policy decision-making towards Russia.

U.S. Foreign Policy and Russia: The Role of Internal Debates and Politics

Written by Jacob Kennedy

The Global Context and a Strategic Partnership

Following the Cold War, the emergence of an increasingly multipolar world paved the way for joint institution-building, democratization, and trade liberalization. Facilitated by the positive forces of globalization and communications technology, the United States and its Western allies have been able to lead others to invest their political, economic, and military power in the international institutions that oversee international relations with increasingly legitimate global authority. In this multipolar system, strategic alliances and partnerships have developed among great powers, such as the U.S. and Russia, as national interests have converged around many common threats. The threats posed by the global financial crisis, international terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and violent armed conflict represent major challenges to the international community. The United States, still the leading world power in terms of military and economic force, has sought to combat these threats within a multilateral framework of exercising a balanced strategy of hard and soft power. As a result, America has become considerably dependent on and invested in its allies for maintaining peace and security on the international stage.

The 21st century has already seen a marked increase in the threats to national and international security. The terrorist attacks of September 11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a global economic recession, and violent uprisings throughout the Middle East and North Africa have all contributed to the unforgiving landscape across which the U.S. is extended politically, financially, and militarily. Most recently, the Obama administration has been challenged with the task of restoring America's power abroad while simultaneously trying to reestablish its economy at home. A nuclear-ambitious Iran, a violently oppressive Syrian regime, a defiant North Korea, and a decade-long war in Afghanistan have left the White House under serious domestic and foreign pressure to pursue an effective set of policies. Russia has consistently threatened U.S. propositions for tougher, UN-backed sanctions on Syria and Iran with its veto power on the Security Council. While, on the other hand, Moscow has also recently offered the use of a Russian airbase to help "ease the strain on the [NATO] alliance's increasingly restricted supply chain to forces in Afghanistan," an operational asset that would be crucial to the American-led coalition.[ii]

Furthermore, Russia's recent accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) holds promising potential for a much-needed economic boost to the hurting global financial situation. The range of benefits of integrating the world's sixth-largest economy into the world market also "presents a lucrative opportunity for the U.S. economy and American jobs," a serious domestic issue that continues to weigh heavily on the American public's perception of its leaders' abilities.[iii] Discussions on Russia's enhanced economic role have not come without expressed concerns from members in the government about the potential dangers of contributing to Russia's rise as an economic power. Security-related pressures to contain a growing Russia will undoubtedly serve as an influential force in the debates on U.S.-Russia trade relations, while others, like President Obama, will continue to emphasize the potential economic benefits.

Threats to American interests are wide-ranging and complex and Russia's value to U.S. foreign policy certainly permeates many of the prominent issues currently on Washington's policy agenda. Recent efforts by the Obama administration to restore good relations have largely been a consequence of the president's personal determination to avoid the past "failures of national leadership to articulate how ramified and substantial the stakes are in the U.S. relationship with Russia." [iv] Whether or not this relationship has proven to be fruitful or detrimental will be determined by the prevailing views and policies that emerge from the competitive processes of internal politics, particularly those of an election year.

Internal Political Context: Framing the Policy Debate

Given the complex issues currently facing U.S. foreign policy decisions, the domestic political environment is characterized by increasingly divergent interests and concerns held by various actors in the government. The internal political setting in the United States is becoming significantly more contentious as government members and the American public debate the prioritization of the policy agenda being promoted in Washington. How the U.S. political and economic setting influences or impinges upon decision-makers' ability to produce and implement effective policy in order to ultimately sustain and further improve relations with Russia is an important question. Considering how Washington and Moscow might be more successful in realizing mutual interests through policies of cooperation

U.S. Foreign Policy and Russia: The Role of Internal Debates and Politics

Written by Jacob Kennedy

requires understanding the domestic political environment within which relevant, influential actors interact and promote their respective preferences. This political interaction and competition is uniquely characteristic of the American political process and necessarily stimulate the rich debate of ideas, interests, and costs and benefits that constitutes an integral part of effective policymaking.[v] However, competing internal forces among political parties, the President and Congress, and other government actors can lead to problems of inefficiency and intransigence.

The pressing issues of the nation currently on Washington's policy radar range from health care reform to solving the humanitarian crisis in Syria, from job creation to managing military operations in Afghanistan. Among the wide array of actions that need to be taken, a divided U.S. Congress has complicated the process of the current administration's ability to choose which action to take, if any. With a majority of Democrats running the Senate and a Republican-held House of Representatives, the bicameral legislature has not provided a particularly favorable political environment for the nation's leader to effectively produce and implement the scope and nature of policies needed to address growing national concerns. The beginning of Obama's presidency saw the successful workings of the "legislative process to achieve his domestic policy goals." [vi] However, as the Republican Party gained control of the House, the difficulties of settling on critical domestic policies such as health care and budget reform suggested a problematic relationship developing between the White House and Congress for the years to come.

Despite the ominous events unfolding abroad, which continue to garner massive public attention, President Obama has sought to "more aggressively use executive power to govern in the face of Congressional obstructionism...[rolling] out dozens of new policies on creating jobs for veterans, preventing drug shortages, raising fuel economy standards, curbing domestic violence and more." [vii] While the Republicans in the House have chosen not to openly condemn the President's course of actions, the political environment of bipartisan enmity could be deepened, further diminishing the prospect of achieving Congressional consensus on larger issues such as trade policy. However, Jack Goldsmith, former legal counsel under the George W. Bush administration, attests to the historical precedent of the President's increasing exercise of executive power as simply an inability to be "in that office with all its enormous responsibilities — when things don't happen, you get blamed for it — and not exercise all the powers that have accrued to it over time." [viii] President Obama's recent actions demonstrate the urgency shared among those in the White House to find ways to make progress on important domestic issues and indicate the ability and willingness of the President to capitalize on his position of power.

The Obama administration, however, must also address the consequences of unproductive or insubstantial effects of the policies it implements with regards to larger issues such as the situations in Iran and Syria, trade relations, and other military commitments against the backdrop of America's own financial crisis. Debates and ideas among the prominent political figures in the U.S. government on these matters mirror the partisan divisions and resulting policy consequences similarly experienced by a divided Congress. Partisan party politics and the decidedly conflicting preferences and interests that emerge fuel the debates within these policy circles. If areas of cooperation, or at least compromise, among U.S. policymakers fail to materialize, the implications for prospective cooperation on policy issues with the Russians could be negative and counterproductive to American interests. From this perspective, it is within the internal political environment that exist "the shadows and potential pitfalls of U.S. policy toward Russia." [ix]

Recently, the White House has taken forceful but militarily nonaggressive measures (remaining military elements of efforts in Afghanistan are being increasingly handed over to the Afghan security forces) to address the nation's major issues by attempting to exercise a balance of diplomatic pressure and, uncharacteristically, restrained hard power. In the cases of Iran and Syria, it has been Obama's mission to pursue multilateral actions to be taken through sanctions implemented by the UN, pressures exerted from the Arab League, and more specifically, possible solutions stemming from the popularized "Friends of Syria" coalition, which has received criticism from Russian officials. However, much of these actions have not precipitated the types of results that many in Washington and abroad believe to be necessary if an Iranian nuclear weapons capability or Syrian civil war is to be averted.

Adopted on April 21, 2012, UN Security Council Resolution 2043 established an observer mission in Syria "to monitor a cessation of armed violence 'in all its forms by all parties'" with the hopes of moving toward a more lasting resolution to the conflict.[x] In a statement on the Resolution's mission, Susan E. Rice, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, alluded to the consequences of a resumption of violence stating that if the Syrian regime continues

U.S. Foreign Policy and Russia: The Role of Internal Debates and Politics

Written by Jacob Kennedy

with violent acts against the Syrian population after the 90-day observer mission, the mission's potential will have been exhausted and renewed commitments to subsequent action against Assad must be taken.[xi] Given this circumstance, measures taken by the Obama administration could revert back to its position established earlier this month of agreeing to send communications equipment to the Syrian opposition. A resurgence of violence, indicating the mission's failure, will undoubtedly cast a sense of frustration over Western and Arab leaders and fuel a sense of entitlement for the need for harsher actions. However, the hope engendered by Resolution 2043 for Russian and Chinese cooperation on the Security Council going forward could be smothered by U.S. and Arab nations seeking to arm the opposition. The Obama administration supported this strategy just weeks ago, a pronouncement that "seemed to deepen [differences] between the United States and Russia over a solution to the crisis..."[xii]

Furthermore, failure of the observer mission to effect any substantive changes in Assad's behavior may lead many in Congress to mobilize behind elements of Republican Senator John McCain's position, who recently criticized "the Obama administration for being too passive in its response to Syrian violence and called for U.S.-led airstrikes on President Bashar al-Assad's military forces." [xiii] If violence deepens, which is a dangerously plausible scenario, and as the media continues to inform the world of Syria's violent downward spiral, the Obama administration and the State Department will come under increasing public pressure to rethink its more diplomatic approach. Concerns from Congress have also been expressed regarding the need for a quick and definitive solution to the situation in Iran. In emphasizing the need for wider sanctions and less "confidence-building measures", members of Congress "sent a warning shot to President Obama warning that any deal short of a 'full resolution' of the Iranian nuclear issue would be inadequate." [xiv] U.S. Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, recently argued that Tehran's game is to use empty promises to ward off Western sanctions and to buy more time for its nuclear weapons program," implying the need for more stringent action from the current administration.[xv] As GOP criticisms against Obama's Iran policy began to heat up last November, National Security adviser Tom Donilon offered a different view suggesting that international efforts and sanctions against Iran have been successful in hindering Iran's ability to produce a nuclear weapons capacity.[xvi] Defense Secretary Leon Panetta also reasserted the importance of keeping a unified international effort against the Iranian regime, but, to a much lesser degree than Senator McCain, he has not removed the potential for the use of military force from the discussions concerning possible solutions to an augmented Iranian nuclear trajectory.[xvii]

As described above, the ideas and viewpoints held by various political actors in the U.S. government will inform the political debates on Washington's most pressing policy issues. While the situations in Iran and Syria, and Russia's involvement, have been among the most popular, partisan differences on trade policy toward Russia, namely the implications of Russia's recent accession to the WTO, and military policy in Afghanistan and Europe further complicate and deepen the domestic political environment of divergent interests and competing preferences.

For the most part, debates on Russia's membership to the WTO have emphasized the potential benefits. According to the WTO, "with Russia's accession, more than 97 percent of all world trade will take place among member countries" – approximately 2 percent higher than without the large Russian economy.[xviii] With the opening up of a major commercial export market, American and the world's businesses will stand to benefit and under recently-elected President Vladimir Putin, Russia will assume "a bigger role on the global stage." [xix] However, nuances in the debate in the U.S. highlight important points of disagreement among the President and Congress, as well as among members within Congress. The repeal of the Jackson-Vanik amendment, a trade restriction from the Cold War era that prevents normal trading relations with Communist and former Communist countries, is a crucial issue that has yet to be settled.

With the decision in the hands of the Congress, Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) with Russia cannot reach discussions until the repeal of the trade amendment is approved. Differences within Congress could potentially obstruct President Obama's call for the amendment's repeal. Democratic Chairman of the U.S. Senate Finance Committee Max Baucus has argued that "if Congress doesn't pass PNTR, Russia will join the WTO anyway, and U.S. exporters will lose out to their Chinese and European competitors [who] will expand their exports at our expense." [xx] However, Republican Senate Minority Whip Jon Kyl and company oppose the amendment's repeal without "its replacement with legislation that is appropriately tailored to the contemporary human rights problems facing the people of Russia." [xxi] As discussed in the following section, debates on this issue will be founded on the

U.S. Foreign Policy and Russia: The Role of Internal Debates and Politics

Written by Jacob Kennedy

larger positions espoused through election-year politics.

The major concerns described in this section represent only part of the larger internal political debate. Approval of the use of the Russian airbase, Congressional ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and adopting a missile defense strategy in Europe are all issues of which policies will be shaped by the internal factors that characterize domestic politics. As important issues and interests are contested over the next six months, the direction of these critical policy issues will take on increasingly divisive forms within the inherently competitive rhetoric of election-year politics. Which policies are elevated up out of the debates and onto the agenda will have significant consequence for the direction of U.S. policy toward Russia.

The Politics of an Election Year

Within the context of an election year, debates on the many U.S. policy issues previously discussed become particularly contentious with interests and positions becoming increasingly pronounced and divided. While it is conceptually difficult to view foreign policy decisions as an internal political resultant, considering the different positions that constitute the policy platforms of the Presidential incumbent, the GOP candidates, and their respective parties illuminates the process by which preferences are potentially translated into policies for implementation on Washington's agenda. Within the purpose of this paper, the issues and positions framed above are further drawn upon within the context of upcoming elections to determine which foreign policy decisions will impact our relations with Russia, and to what extent, in the future.

The "resetting" of relations with Russia was an initiative mutually undertaken by the Obama administration and its Russian counterparts. Achievements during the recently-ended Obama-Medvedev presidential partnership include ratification of the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START); ratification of the civil nuclear 123 Agreement; the Iranian sanctions of UN Security Council Resolution 1929; the successful operational use of the Northern Distribution Network for supply shipments to coalition forces in Afghanistan; and the 2009 establishment of the U.S.-Russia Bilateral Commission. Among these many successes, barriers to cooperation between the two nations remain and "given the skepticism with which Putin is viewed in the U.S.,...the optimism engendered by the Obama administration's reset with Russia has dissipated." [xxii] In particular, election-year politics and the ensuing debates will determine and shape the possible policy avenues for the U.S., whether a new leadership is elected or not, and the resulting policies will have a profound impact on U.S.-Russia relations.

In the atmosphere of an election year, however, issues of both domestic and foreign will be cast as a matter of internal politics. After all, election is contingent upon gaining the votes of the national populace. Dan Schnur, a former GOP presidential aide, recognizes an important concept that "no president of either party has any flexibility whatsoever during a re-election year." [xxiii] Whether or not this has characterized Obama's recent actions is not particularly clear, but what is clear is the discontent and concerns over worsening situations in Syria, Iran, and the domestic and global financial crises and its potential impact on these issues' debates. It can be assumed that "Obama and his political lieutenants are acutely aware that this growing frustration has the potential to complicate an election year that otherwise seems to be shifting in the incumbent's favor." [xxiv]

Revisiting some of the main issues facing Washington, as sources of election-year politics, can help determine where party preferences lay and perhaps the points at which the American public could be swayed one way or the other. Perceptions toward Russia are founded on larger domestic concerns of the public and the political actors. As illustrated above, some government individuals and "some GOP candidates see Russia as a potential competitor and a security challenge, while others take an approach similar to President Obama's in looking for opportunities for improvement on issues such as trade." [xxv] As debates among these actors unfold, prospective policies begin to take form depending on how strongly the underlying issue resonates with the public. Domestic concerns about the rise of China, when coupled with the public's increasing calls for economic growth and job creation, may cause interests in Congress to more actively promote the potential economic benefits of Russia's accession to the WTO. Under this circumstance, Republicans in the Senate may find their positions overshadowed by a growing Congressional agreement for the need to repeal the Jackson-Vanik amendment and pass the PNTR "to ensure US exporters can access the growing Russian market..." [xxvi]

U.S. Foreign Policy and Russia: The Role of Internal Debates and Politics

Written by Jacob Kennedy

As Democrats and Republicans discuss the potentially explosive situations of a nuclear Iran and North Korea, the concurrent advancement of, say, further North Korean nuclear tests or Iranian noncompliance with the IAEA, could propel many to pressure Congress to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in order to “help stem nuclear proliferation by preventing nations from conducting test explosions required to develop new or more potent weapons.”[xxvii] The opposite could be argued as well; if debates inside the U.S. lean toward viewing the North Koreans or the Iranians as a major security threat that would not honor the CTBT, opponents of the ratification would then appeal to the underlying security concerns and the possibility “that the United States might in the future need to end its two-decade voluntary moratorium on testing to ensure the viability of its strategic deterrent.”[xxviii]

Furthermore, years of internal debates on U.S. military presence abroad have been invigorated by the perceptions of the worsening economy and the deaths of thousands of American troops. While the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan are by no means resolved, troop drawdowns have triggered an overall sigh of relief from a war-fighting weary American public.

In the face of budget cuts, advocates for military intervention in Syria or preemptive strikes on Iranian enrichment facilities might not find much support among those in Congress or the people it represents. However, as troops return home, American leadership will look for ways to retain its strategic military presence in the regions from which it withdraws. Advancing a missile defense strategy in Europe may increasingly become the viable alternative to conducting military operations in the Middle East region, a policy that would not bode well with the Russians or for the prospects of the new START treaty.

Conclusion

While this certainly does not constitute the full range of potential policy avenues, the goal of this essay is to highlight the potential sources of domestically-driven policy change that have further consequence for U.S.-Russia relations. As the complex political environment in the U.S. deepens with the onset of election campaigns, these debates and positions will become increasingly pronounced. Mitt Romney has already positioned himself against the current administration, stating that “the sum total of President Obama’s policy toward Russia has been: ‘We give, Russia gets.’”[xxix] On this principle, a Romney presidential campaign that supports the domestic policies which serve to greatly toughen our relations with Russia can be envisaged given the internal political environment of the upcoming election year.

However the debates unravel, the U.S. and its leaders have invested time, money, and political capital in restoring and building a relationship with the Russian Federation for many of the reasons outlined above. The internal political debates poised to take place are informed by the perceptions of the American leaders and citizens that underscore the fundamental foundations of the policies of any nation; political, social, and economic security. As the world trends toward increasing multi-polarity, or at least diffused state power, imagining a great power-focused, cooperative strategy between the U.S. and Russia will only be possible if internal political debates in the U.S. create an environment for such a relationship to develop.

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U.S. Foreign Policy and Russia: The Role of Internal Debates and Politics

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U.S. Foreign Policy and Russia: The Role of Internal Debates and Politics

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[iii] Max Baucus, "Baucus Says Jackson-Vanik Repeal, Russia PNTR Will Boost Exports, Create U.S. Jobs," Press Release, (2012).

[iv] Robert Legvold, "A Conversation on Evolving U.S. Policy toward Russia," (2010), p. 24.

[v] See Walter Mead, *Special Providence*, (2002). Mead stresses the influence of ideas and the way those ideas are contested as a characteristic of the competitive political process of the U.S. He argues that there is a distinct American foreign policy, "a special providence", which represents a synthesis of hard power, diplomacy, ideas, and values.

[vi] Charlie Savage, "Shift on Executive Power Lets Obama Bypass Rivals," (2012).

[vii] See Savage, (2012).

[viii] Jack Goldsmith, in "Shift on Executive Power Lets Obama Bypass Rivals," (2012).

[ix] See Legvold, (2010), p. 26.

[x] UN Security Council Resolution 2043, (2012).

[xi] Susan E. Rice, Statement in UNSCR 2043, (2012).

U.S. Foreign Policy and Russia: The Role of Internal Debates and Politics

Written by Jacob Kennedy

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