Russia’s is a history forged by centuries of nearly constant austerity. Whether bearing the weighty Tatar-Mongol yoke from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries or toiling under a feudal system of serfdom that lasted well into the nineteenth century, the masses scattered across Russia’s vast expanse have rarely known times of abundance. For much of its history, austerity undermined the popular accountability of ruling elites. The deprivations of the First World War and the pressures of Russia’s late industrialization brought down the autocratic Tsarist regime but replaced it with a brutal Soviet dictatorship that, contrary to the claims of its ideology, was neither accountable to nor representative of the people. The austerity of the late Soviet period, product of a decades-long economic decay, eventually brought down the Soviet regime as Soviet citizens demanded a better quality of life and the freedom to live as they wished. However, the openness and accountability borne of the Soviet collapse was short lived, as Russia’s new government struggled to meet the people’s high expectations for the new political and economic system. And so the traumatic, painful, and deep austerity of the post-Soviet economic collapse eventually ushered in a new regime as the people demanded order at nearly any cost. Once again austerity came at the expense of accountability as the government under Vladimir Putin offered a tempting bargain to the country: stability in exchange for liberty. It was a bargain accepted by many, one which allowed Putin to build the semi-authoritarian system he rules today.

Yet cracks have recently appeared in the system, and some (but certainly not all) Russians have begun to question the terms of the bargain. As memories of the austerity of the 1990s recede into history, is a restrictive regime that bears little accountability to its subjects really the best form of government for Russia? The protests following the elections of 2011-12 showed that support for – or at least passive acceptance of – Putin and his regime is not as ironclad as once was. Though the fissures in the foundations of the regime may still be small, under the right conditions – perhaps another wave of austerity as the world continues to grapple with continued economic turmoil – these weaknesses could develop into major cracks that threaten the stability of the Russian polity, economy, and society.

To the degree that Russia’s leaders may be increasingly focused on maintaining domestic stability, the ability for U.S. policy makers to engage with Russia on issues of national and international security will be greatly constrained. Despite some successes associated with the Obama administration’s “reset” of relations with Russia, many challenges remain in the bilateral relationship. With continued uncertainty over Russia’s prospects for long-term stability, the relative domestic calm of the current moment may be the best opportunity to engage Russia on issues of importance to the United States. Such engagement has always been a challenge, but it is a challenge that will only get steeper if the regime’s grip on power is threatened. In order to appreciate fully the domestic constraints faced by those who rule with little accountability from behind the Kremlin walls, it is necessary first to explore the process that brought the country and its rulers to their current position.
The Autocrat’s Tightrope

When Boris Yeltsin resigned the Russian presidency on December 31, 1999, the country issued a collective sigh of relief. The announcement brought to a close a decade of chaos, disorder, and social, economic, and political trauma, most of which had been presided over by Yeltsin and his government. In the first several years following Russia’s independence from the defunct Soviet Union, economic output experienced a precipitous decline on a scale far more severe than had been seen in modern history, including the Great Depression. Ordinary Russians suffered this economic dislocation while a new class of elites, to become known simply as “the Oligarchs,” became increasingly powerful and prosperous by taking control (often through dubious means) of the privatized remnants of the Soviet economy. The state, confounded by political gridlock between Yeltsin and the Communist-dominated parliament, struggled to fulfill many of its basic functions. Not surprisingly, it was the Russian citizenry that suffered most from the brutal economic and political collapse that took place in the first several years of Russia’s post-Soviet existence.

It thus comes as no surprise that after a decade of such trauma under Yeltsin—not to mention the tumultuous Gorbachev years that brought the Soviet state to its knees—the citizens of Russia welcomed, even demanded, a leader who could restore some semblance of order and stability to the chaotic reality that had characterized their lives for so many years. Their savior was none other than Vladimir Putin. Following a career as a midlevel KGB officer, Putin led a relatively unremarkable post-Soviet bureaucratic career in St. Petersburg, before being brought to Moscow as part of Yeltsin’s presidential administration. Plucked from the Russian National Security Council to become Yeltsin’s prime minister in August 1999, Putin quickly cemented a reputation as a strong, stable leader through a forceful execution of the second Chechen War. In short, Putin emerged as the anti-Yeltsin. With Yeltsin’s surprise resignation in December, his antitype succeeded to the presidency according to constitutional procedures.

An implicit bargain seemed to be struck between Putin and the Russian populace: the regime would provide the order and stability that the country so badly desired, while Russia’s citizenry would allow the regime to take the necessary measures to do so, even if it meant a reduction in the regime’s accountability to the people and a ratcheting back of many of the liberties gained in the Yeltsin period. After all, Russians reasoned, freedom of speech is of limited use when one cannot put food on the table. And so, as Putin consolidated his power and brought order and stability to the country, Russians willingly witnessed the “creeping authoritarianism” that characterized the first Putin presidency. Russia’s nationwide independent media outlets were brought under state control, Oligarchs who resisted Putin’s warning to stay out of politics—men like Boris Berezovsky, Vladimir Gusinsky, and Mikhail Khodorkovsky—were de-facto exiled or imprisoned, and Russia’s once-autonomous and influential regional governors were reined in after presidential appointments took the place of direct gubernatorial elections. Kremlin loyalists in these gubernatorial positions quickly became key players in the electoral fraud that produced favorable results for the Kremlin and its “party of power,” United Russia. As United Russia gained a supermajority in the Duma with the ability to pass any

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legislation and amend the constitution, reforms in Russia’s electoral institutions made it more difficult for small opposition parties and independent candidates to gain representation. Soon the Duma became more or less a rubber stamp for the Kremlin, as United Russia’s *raison d'être* was support of President Putin. Any of these measures taken individually might not have been undemocratic or necessarily illiberal, but when considered as a whole, there was by 2008 little doubt among Russia experts that during his eight years as President Putin had succeeded in significantly rolling back democracy and liberal freedoms.

Russia’s regime since Putin took power has been classified by Levitsky and Way as a competitive authoritarian regime “in which formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which incumbents’ abuse of the state places them at a significant advantage vis-a-vis their opponents.”3 Extensive public opinion research suggests that the Russian population accepted and even supported this trend away from liberalism and democracy during Putin’s first presidency because they believed in what McFaul and Stoner-Weiss have described as the “myth of the authoritarian model.”4 Though the authors argue that Russia’s impressive economic performance in the 2000s came despite – and not because of – Putin’s semi-authoritarian model, the fact remains that much of Russia’s population in the 2000s credited Putin and his strong style of rule with the stabilization of Russia.5 As a result, they believed that Putin had fulfilled his end of the bargain quite admirably and were less concerned about the authoritarian and illiberal direction the country had taken during his presidency.

**Cracks in the System**

Such was Putin’s popularity in 2008 when his second presidential term came to an end that he was able to engineer a seamless handover of power to his chosen successor, then-Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev. The Duma elections of 2007 and the presidential elections of 2008 represent perhaps the apex of “high Putinism,” as the political machine built to support the “power vertical” (the central line of political authority flowing down directly from the Kremlin) executed its mission nearly flawlessly, thereby ensuring an electoral result favorable to the Kremlin.6 In fact, Putin had drawn important conclusions from Georgia’s Rose Revolution in 2003 and Ukraine’s Orange Revolution of 2004-5, wherein semi-autocratic incumbents or their chosen successors were swept from office following sloppily-executed fraudulent elections that allowed an opening for opposition candidates to take power. Instead, Putin would leave nothing to chance, maintaining tight control over a campaign and election that lived up to Levitsky and Way’s archetypical competitive authoritarian regime. Rumors among followers of Russian politics both inside and outside the country suggested that the Kremlin had set an explicit target of approximately seventy percent of the vote total going to Putin’s pick, Medvedev. Such a

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result would imply a landslide endorsement of what was then referred to as “Putin’s plan” for the transition of power while avoiding the absurdly fraudulent appearances of electoral results characteristic in authoritarian regimes where the leader receives upwards of ninety percent of the vote. Dmitri Medvedev won approximately seventy-one percent of the vote total, a picture-perfect outcome for Medvedev and Putin alike. The machinery of electoral fraud “stuck the landing.”

Putin maintained a strong stake in the outcome of the 2008 presidential election despite the fact that he was not allowed to run for reelection. Thanks to a peculiarity of Russia’s constitution, while greater than two successive presidential terms was prohibited, a president could run for office for additional terms having sat out for one term. In other words, Putin would be eligible to run for president again in 2012. Thus, as many believed at the time, Medvedev was chosen as an obedient and relatively weak seat-warmer in the Kremlin who would voluntarily step aside to make way for a second Putin presidency in 2012. In the meantime the immensely popular Putin would maintain his public profile as prime minister while holding what many believed were the real reins on power. The fact that Putin engineered and executed such a plan (for indeed, this is precisely the plan that was implemented in 2012) demonstrated his confidence in his hold over the political system. Rather than amend the constitution, which could have easily been achieved with United Russia’s constitutional majority, Putin remained confident that he could formally vacate the Kremlin for four years, only to return again in 2012.

While public support in the Putin-Medvedev tandem remained high, undercurrents of dissatisfaction were building under the frozen surface of the Russian political sphere. Research shows that support for greater democracy in Russia had been building throughout Putin’s second term (2004-8). As the painful memory of the traumatic Yeltsin era receded and the Russian economy took off, increased prosperity led to greater aspirations among Russia’s growing urban middle class, particularly among younger generations who were less scarred by the chaos of the late-Soviet and early post-Soviet periods. As a result, some began to question the terms of the original exchange of stability for freedoms that was the foundation of Putin’s early popularity. The validity of the bargain was further called into question by the financial crisis that began in 2008, which hit Russians particularly hard. After nearly a decade of continuous economic growth, the crisis ushered in the chill of economic austerity that had not been felt on a macro level since the chaotic final years of Yeltsin’s rule. If the regime and its stage-managed “democracy” could no longer deliver prosperity, had it outlived its purpose? Was it time to reconsider “Putin’s plan” and his illiberal competitive-authoritarian model of governance?

Perhaps the first serious cracks in the façade of regime support appeared in September 2011 when Putin and Medvedev answered the question that had held Russians captivated for months: who would stand for election for president in 2012? Would the long-suspected but never confirmed plan be enacted wherein Medvedev dutifully stepped aside, allowing Putin to run uncontested by anyone than the usual communist and nationalist token candidates? Or would the increasing friction within the tandem lead Medvedev to contest the election himself, with or without Putin as an opponent? The mystery was resolved when it was announced that Medvedev would step aside in favor of Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012. In what was perhaps a serious misstep, Putin noted to the delegates of the United Russia party convention that the decision between he and Medvedev had in fact been reached “several years ago,” but had not been revealed for reasons of “political expediency.” This unashamed admission that the 2008 and 2012 elections were all part of the same predestined stage-managed political theater in which
the will of the Russian people mattered little touched a nerve in some spheres of society. The Putin-Medvedev tandem, however, did not fully appreciate the gravity of their situation at the time.

The Duma elections of December 2011 tapped into this simmering but growing dissent, touching off a wave of popular protest that took the Russian leadership (and indeed many Russians) by surprise. Rather than the convincing (or at least convincingly manipulated) display of popular support for United Russia in 2007, wherein the party of power won 64.3 percent of the vote, in 2011 the party won only 49.3 percent of the vote amidst widespread allegations of electoral fraud.

In the Duma elections and the resulting mass protests that soon took place in Moscow and other large cities, two features stood out: first, although the Kremlin’s mechanisms for committing relatively sophisticated electoral fraud were quite developed and had performed admirably in 2007, in 2011 they miscalculated. The fact that Russia’s leaders were caught off guard and failed to falsify enough votes to ensure a more comfortable showing suggests that they had systematically overestimated their own popularity in the run up to the 2011 elections. The Putin-Medvedev regime had become significantly out of touch with the country, a phenomenon that is often characteristic of authoritarian regimes where the absence of political competition prevents leaders from accurately gauging popular support.

The second surprising feature of the post-election protests was the fact that there were protests at all. Russians had been willing to look the other way when electoral fraud was committed in the 1999-2000, 2004-5, and 2007-8 electoral cycles. Explaining this puzzling reversal is beyond the scope of this paper, though the answer is likely that the stability-for-liberty bargain had been undermined by the economic crisis that lasted throughout Medvedev’s entire presidential term.

In any case, by December 2011 many in Russia were no longer willing to give Putin or his protégé the benefit of the doubt. A series of opposition rallies in Moscow in late 2011 and early 2012 represented the most significant incidents of mass protest in Russia since the troubled Yeltsin years in the 1990s, shattering the illusion of a Russian public content with its path of political and economic development under the strong control of the Kremlin. To be sure, many have noted that these protests did not extend beyond Russia’s largest cities and that the percentage of the population that participated was relatively small and largely limited to younger, better educated members of Russia’s still-small middle class. Yet the boy who declared that the emperor was wearing no clothes had spoken: popular support for Putin’s version of the social contract had been shown to be far from universal.

Maintaining Control

These cracks in the system only increased calls for greater accountability from opponents of Russia’s increasingly authoritarian political system. In an attempt to quell the protests, President Medvedev offered some concessions in early 2012 that built upon other liberalizing measures he had introduced, often with public criticism from Prime Minister Putin. One such concession was the restoration of gubernatorial elections in Russia, a measure slated to go into effect in late 2012. Just as Putin had drawn lessons from the revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine that toppled undemocratic incumbents, so too did he and Medvedev draw lessons from the uprisings that swept across Middle East in what has become known as the “Arab Spring.” Recognizing that harsh crackdowns on protesters could easily generate a backlash that only
fueled the fires of opposition, in the lead-up to the presidential election in March 2012, the regime took a cautious approach, calculating that allowing the still-limited protests to proceed was less risky than the alternative. The gamble, characteristic of a pragmatism that has appeared at various points throughout Putin’s decade of dominance, seemed to pay off: On March 4, 2012, Putin was elected as president with 63.3 percent of the vote. While such a result would be considered a landslide in most western democracies, it fell noticeably short of the 71.2 percent received by Medvedev in 2008 and the 71.9 percent received by Putin in 2004. Putin would maintain his perch above Russia’s political apparatus but without the Teflon-like invincibility he once possessed.

Despite winning the presidency (this time for a six-year term thanks to a constitutional amendment passed during Medvedev’s tenure), Putin’s election was characterized by continued protests and calls for greater accountability before and after his election. Major protests were held in Moscow shortly after the election, and another series of protests occurred before his inauguration. Yet these protests did not unleash the kind of country-wide cascades of protest that would be required to bring down the regime as they did in the Arab Spring countries or the Soviet Union in its dying days. While some initially thought that Putin’s pragmatic streak would lead to a grudging acceptance that a greater degree of political opposition would have to be tolerated, the first several months of Putin’s presidency have suggested that Vladimir Vladimirovich has returned to his authoritarian instincts. Besides reversing many of the liberal reforms introduced during the Medvedev presidency, Putin has overseen a new reining in of opposition and protest activity including the introduction of far harsher penalties for participation in unauthorized demonstrations. The politicized protest and resulting trial and imprisonment of the feminist punk band “Pussy Riot” has become a symbol for many outside Russia of the coming deep freeze in Russian political life.

But what of those inside Russia? Have the flames burning for greater accountability and greater say in their political destiny been extinguished again, or do the embers continue to smolder beneath the surface? Have Russia’s citizens returned to their pre-2011 state of passive indifference to the authoritarianizing tendencies of their distant and minimally-accountable leaders? Recent research suggests not, though it is perhaps too early to tell whether the Russian public will demand to have its voice heard by its leaders in the coming years. As Dmitriev and Treisman argue, the currently passive “other Russia” – those outside the cities who care less about abstract ideals like accountability and more about their practical material needs – could easily turn against the regime:

Serious economic deterioration, prompted perhaps by the collapse of the eurozone, could galvanize the other Russia into action. Clumsy moves by the authorities, such as an attempt to implement much-needed but unpopular economic reforms, might do the same. Although not yet on the side of the middle-class urbanites, the other Russia is today just barely content to tolerate the status quo.

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10 Dmitriev and Treisman 2012, p. 72.
Ongoing uncertainty over the health of the global economy, continuing instability in the Eurozone, and Russia’s own domestic economic structural issues suggest that maintaining this barely tolerable status quo could be challenging. Should the country find itself in lean times once again, Russia’s leaders may discover their public support – and ability to retain power – disappearing quite quickly.

**Challenges to the United States**

Vladimir Putin and his government must maintain this delicate balance atop the autocrat’s tightrope for the next six years, during which time “it will take all the current leaders’ skill just to manage the day-to-day challenges.” And yet recent experience has shown that the increasingly insulated leadership in the Kremlin has lost touch with the demands of the public in important ways. Should the sparks ignite the flames of protest calling for greater voice and accountability, will Putin be able to maintain his position? This question will go unanswered until the next great test of the regime’s strength and support, a test which Dmitriev and Treisman note could easily be out of Putin’s hands.

It is no stretch of the imagination that a weakened Putin – even before his authority is in jeopardy – could turn to the tried and true strategy of fomenting anti-American populism in order to generate domestic support. This strategy was pursued with success in Russia following the Orange Revolution and the 2008 war with Georgia, events that Putin used to galvanize popular support in the face of real and perceived American support for Russia’s opponents. Indeed the “encirclement threat” resonates in a Russia still confronting its post-Soviet imperial decline. The perceived threat has been stoked by events like NATO expansion into former Soviet states, the planned deployment of missile defense technologies near Russia, and repeated U.S. “meddling” in Russia’s traditional sphere of influence in the former Soviet states. Similarly, the dwindling number of traditional Russian allies, especially in the Middle East, has put Russia further on the defensive. Russia has been unable to check what it perceives as arrogantly unilateral American expansionism, further exacerbating the frustration of post-imperial impotence.

An internationally and domestically weakened Putin under the threat of protest and possible ouster will be far more difficult to engage diplomatically, partly because domestic threats to Russia’s stability would surely occupy the bulk of its leaders’ attention. The resort to anti-American populism would also make any kind of meaningful diplomatic engagement challenging, as has been seen in other periods characterized by a deep chill in U.S.-Russian relations.

What would be the consequences of Putin’s premature exit from power due to mass protests and Putin’s inability to walk the tightrope for the next six years? Nightmare scenarios of a chaotic collapse of the political system, plunging the country into a political, economic, and social crisis are certainly not outside the realm of possibilities. But they are not particularly likely, either. Twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia does have the institutional framework in place to support a new transition to democracy. To be sure, the establishment of democracy post-Putin would face significant hurdles, as these formally democratic institutions have been gutted of most of their democratic content. Furthermore, the inevitable economic contraction resulting from the political upheaval caused by Putin’s premature exit from power would pose a serious threat to the consolidation of stable democracy in a post-Putin Russia.

11 Ibid.
And so we wait. It is entirely possible that the pragmatic and often politically astute Putin will find a way to hold on, at least for the next six years. It is also possible that factors internal or external to Russia might reignite the flames of protest that began to burn in Russia in 2011-12. What U.S. policymakers need to appreciate is that as long as this delicate balancing act is underway by a regime whose footing is less sure than it once was, it will be difficult to find common ground with Russia on substantively significant issues. Preoccupied at best, or overly defensive and hostile at worst, a threatened Putin regime is not one focused on deepening its engagement with what it perceives as the world’s bully.

Finally, it is essential to point out that twenty years of post-Soviet experience have shown us that the United States has limited leverage when it comes to influencing Russia’s political development. Years of democracy promotion have failed to steer Russia toward a more liberal or democratic path. Indeed, Levitsky and Way’s seminal work on competitive authoritarian regimes identifies western leverage – “governments’ vulnerability to external democratizing pressure” – as a key factor explaining whether a competitive authoritarian regime is likely to drift toward stable authoritarianism.¹² Levitsky and Way argue that the United States lack such leverage over Russia, meaning that the United States will continue to be ineffective in preventing the country’s authoritarian drift for the foreseeable future. Ironically, recent policies put in place by Putin have made this somewhat of a moot point. By severely restricting Russian NGOs’ abilities to accept financial support from abroad and by terminating United States Agency for International Development (USAID) activities in Russia, the Kremlin has reduced the ability for domestic and foreign entities to carry out programs aimed at democracy promotion in Russia.

Engaging Russia

Despite the many current and potential hurdles to U.S.-Russian engagement noted above, this does not mean that U.S. policymakers cannot or should not try to engage Moscow. A stable domestic situation in Russia will provide the best opportunity to engage with the country’s leadership. Despite American distaste for the means by which Putin has restored stability since the protests of 2011-12, the fact that stability has emerged provides an opening for engagement. Should policymakers pursue deeper engagement with the Russians, there are several points to consider and questions to answer:

To engage or not to engage?

As noted above, the stabilization of Russia’s domestic climate provides at least an opening, however limited or handicapped, for diplomatic engagement. However, there is an increasingly vocal minority within U.S. political discourse that advocates a hard-line approach to Putin’s increasingly authoritarian regime. Harkening back to a Cold War mentality that sees Russia as a major geopolitical foe with whom confrontation is more likely than cooperation, these voices call for disengaging from Russia in order to punish Putin for his “bad behavior.” Thus, U.S. policymakers must first decide whether engagement for the sake of cooperation is a desirable policy. If the decision to continue engagement is made, the following issues must also be considered.

(How) do we promote democracy in Russia?

As argued above, our ability to exercise leverage over Russia in the face of Putin’s illiberal and undemocratic policies is extremely limited. Some would argue that our efforts at democracy promotion would be better spent in other countries where authoritarianism is less entrenched, or where recent democratic breakthroughs need the critical support to complete democratic consolidation. Such an approach would advocate shifting resources and attention from the now “lost cause” of Russia to its neighbors like Ukraine and Georgia, where the gains of the Rose and Orange revolutions are not yet secure, but where democracy has a better chance of surviving. Furthermore, if democracy were consolidated in these neighbors, they could one day serve as guideposts for a new generation of Russian liberals.

Another approach advocates engaging the Russian public directly. Although thanks to Putin’s recent policies it may be hard for Western organizations to carry out the kind of civil society development that is crucial for consolidated democracy, this does not mean that U.S. policymakers should shy away from the type of public diplomacy that generates good will for the United States and (more importantly) its values of freedom, liberty, and accountability. In a 2008 article, Michael McFaul and Francis Fukuyama argued that expanded and improved efforts at public diplomacy – directly engaging foreign publics and attempting to better understand their views and values – should be central to future U.S. efforts at democracy promotion. Today, McFaul serves as the U.S. Ambassador to Russia, where his active (and bilingual) use of social media like Facebook and Twitter to reach Russian citizens directly suggests that he has taken his own advice to heart. Whether these efforts resonate beyond those who are already attuned and sympathetic to liberal democratic values is an open question, however.

Russia’s place in the world economy?

While we should not expect Russia’s recent entry into the World Trade Organization to dramatically change its political trajectory (see China), its deeper integration into the global economy is a positive development for the country and for the prospects of U.S.-Russian engagement. Being more tightly integrated into global economic institutions will increase the pressure to behave as a “responsible” player in international politics and over time will enhance the ability of Russia and its economic partners to turn relationships based on interests into genuinely cooperative relationships. International institutions fulfill many functions, including providing opportunities for reciprocity. As such, those who wish to engage Russia should welcome these recent developments.

Those who hope that Russia’s deeper integration into global economic structures and institutions will eventually lead to better political relations surely recognize that this strategy requires repeal the Jackson-Vanik Amendment by the U.S. Congress. Originally enacted in 1974 to pressure the Soviet Union to allow emigration, the measure denies permanent “most favored nation” status to Russia, though its provisions have been waived on an annual basis since the end of the Cold War. While successive U.S. Presidents from both parties have advocated “graduating” Russia from its provisions, hard-liners in Congress have resisted doing so, essentially keeping the amendment on the books in order to punish Russia for its democratic backsliding. Until recently, this debate – repeal or retain Jackson-Vanik – was largely a symbolic one. However, with Russia’s new membership in the WTO the measure will put the U.S. in violation of the WTO’s non-discrimination requirements. American businesses that trade with Russia would stand to lose should the WTO permit Russia to take punitive measures in

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response to the U.S. policy. Thus, policy makers will have to decide whether the symbolic statement made by keeping the Jackson-Vanik amendment is worth the consequences to U.S. business interests and broader U.S. interests in developing a more cooperative relationship with Russia through international institutions.

Missile Defense – An Insurmountable Hurdle?

The single largest stumbling block in the U.S.-Russian bilateral relationship remains American plans to deploy an antiballistic missile defense system. These plans, though slow to develop, have been an irritant in U.S.-Russian relations since the Clinton administration began serious efforts to develop missile defense capabilities. While the 2002 abrogation of the Anti-ballistic Missile Treaty by the George W. Bush administration did not bring about the severe deterioration of relations or Russian backlash that some expected, tension over the issue has not receded either. Indeed, it has increased as the United States has drawn nearer to achieving the capabilities that Russia’s leader fear threaten their country’s national security.

Critics of the Russian position argue that Russian resistance to American missile defense plans – which U.S. Presidents have repeatedly stated are not directed at Russia – is a holdover of a Cold War mentality. If Russian elites could only get past that mentality and recognize that their security is not threatened thanks to benign U.S. intentions, they argue, the missile defense issue would not be a problem. However, theorists and policymakers of the realist tradition would argue that it is not a “Cold War mentality” that drives Russian opposition, but rather the mindset of any great power engaged in the constant balance of power logic that drives the international system.

Regardless of the motivations behind Russian resistance to U.S. missile defense plans, it is safe to declare that it is strong and steadfast. Russian leaders were somewhat placated by the Obama administration’s plans to reconfigure and scale back the proposed system in a way that was seen as less threatening to Moscow, though this was not Washington’s stated reason for the reconfiguration. Yet in order to be fully satisfied that the system is not a threat to Russian interests, Russian leaders demand a level of access and even participation in the missile defense system that U.S. leaders are as of yet unwilling to grant.

With neither side particularly willing to budge, the issue complicates other aspects of the bilateral relationship thanks to the tradition of issue linkage that has existed in U.S.-Russian (or Soviet) relations since the 1970s. While there is no guarantee that resolution of the missile defense issue would make Russia more amenable to U.S. positions on Iran’s nuclear program or Syria’s current conflict, some would argue that the persistent thorn of missile defense has hurt our ability to find compromise with Russia in other areas. Of course, the U.S.-Russian bilateral relationship is only one piece of the U.S. national security puzzle, and policymakers will have to weigh the costs and benefits of their continued efforts to achieve a national missile defense.

Conclusion

The hurdles to a significant deepening of U.S.-Russian engagement are great. Those hurdles arise largely out of domestic issues in Russia over which U.S. policy makers have minimal influence. Indeed, Russian leaders may have little influence over them as well. Uncertainty looms large as Russia looks toward the horizon. Will the country experience yet another painful era of austerity? How might the Russian public, glimmers of whose dissent appeared for the first time in a decade, react to the failure of Putin’s semi-authoritarian regime’s
bargain of liberty for prosperity? How might the regime react to a new wave of mobilization of protest? Is it possible to imagine a premature exit from power for Putin and his regime, and if so, what might replace it?

To be sure, uncertainty and instability will be bad for U.S.-Russian engagement on a host of issues, be they domestic or international. The relative calm that has prevailed in Russia thus represents a window of unknown duration within which the United States has an opportunity to engage Russia’s leaders despite the many real hurdles to such engagement. This may not be a good opportunity by objective standards, but such is the opportunity U.S. policymakers have to work with. Whether they choose to attempt engagement, how they engage, and how successful those efforts are remain open questions for debate.
**Recommended Readings**

Dmitriev, Mikhail, and Daniel Treisman. 2012. “The Other Russia.” *Foreign Affairs* 91(5).


Additional Readings


