
Program Brief

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“U.S.-Russian Relations: Where from Here?”

A Presentation by Dimitri K. Simes

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At a recent Nixon Center seminar, Center President Dimitri K. Simes expressed optimism at the prospects for cooperation between Washington and Moscow, but urged Americans to be realistic in their expectations of the U.S.-Russian relationship. President Vladimir Putin is a pragmatist, he emphasized, and Russia's new interest in closer relations with the U.S. is based much more on Putin's view of Russia's interests than on shared values. Simes had just returned from his third trip to Russia in four months. Former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, now Chairman of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board and a member of the Nixon Center's Board of Directors, moderated the discussion. The audience included former Secretary of State Alexander Haig and former National Security Advisor Robert C. McFarlane as well as key current State Department and NSC officials responsible for policy toward Russia, leading journalists, and top specialists.

Putin's Foreign Policy

Simes stressed that changes in Russian foreign policy under President Putin are serious and real.

Moreover, he said, Russian policy has not transformed overnight; the September 11 terrorist attacks accelerated, but did not initiate, the evolution of the Kremlin's approach. He attributed the shift to Putin's pragmatic assessment of the enormous challenges facing Russia in its economic, social, and political transformation and his determination to address those challenges in a manner that rebuilds Russian power. Interestingly, Simes suggested that Putin in fact feels substantially more nostalgia for the Soviet period than his predecessor Boris Yeltsin, but that unlike Yeltsin, Putin recognizes that the past cannot be undone and that Moscow cannot be a major player again without regaining some portion of its lost power.

This has altered several aspects of Russian foreign policy, Simes said. For example, he explained, Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov now regularly consults Economics Minister German Gref and Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin before finalizing new policy initiatives to ensure that his ministry's proposals will not have a negative economic impact. More substantively, many in the executive branch have begun to appreciate

the limits of Russian power and influence abroad. As a result, Moscow has taken a less assertive, more sensitive approach to its relations with much of the rest of the former Soviet Union; use of the term “near abroad”—which created a distinction between the former USSR and other foreign countries—by Russian officials has declined as well.

U.S.-Russian Relationship No “Love Affair”

Perhaps most important to Americans, Simes continued, President Putin’s foreign policy today seems aimed at establishing Russia as America’s “junior partner”—a status viewed as unattractive (if not offensive) by the Russian government until quite recently. However, he said, this is a result of Putin’s pragmatic calculations about Russia’s weakness and America’s potential role in addressing it through integration into the West. This should not suggest that Russians share American values or goals. “Notwithstanding the beautiful friendship between President Bush and President Putin, the U.S.-Russian relationship is not a love affair,” Simes added; in fact, Russian officials often take rhetorical positions at odds with U.S. policy. Also, the Kremlin routinely stresses its “lack of differences” with Beijing after each U.S.-Russian summit to keep its options open.

Further evidence of this problem, Simes suggested, is that Russia today remains a “virtual democracy,” with many formally democratic structures and institutions but little democratic culture. The rule of law is similarly weak because of selective or poor enforcement.

In response, James Billington—the Librarian of Congress and an authority on Russian history—made an eloquent case that there are encouraging signs of a strengthening civil society and respect for the law in Russia. However, in Simes’ view it will take time and luck for those signs to develop into reality; in Russia, like in many other emerging markets (such as China), people can simultaneously favor both economic reforms

and assertive nationalism. Moreover, Simes continued, the familiarity with the United States developed in exchange programs and other people-to-people contacts does not always produce affection for America. In fact, he suggested, the U.S. has limited moral authority at best in Russia after years of Clinton Administration policies that were viewed as hypocritical and interventionist.

As a result, Simes argued that close relations with the United States would not necessarily benefit immediately from a more democratic Russia. Russian political elites and opinion leaders are generally suspicious of Putin’s policy and—despite growing public support after the Moscow summit—many Russians are also skeptical. At the same time, he said, some Russian executives, especially in the insurance, telecommunications, and energy sectors, are increasingly uneasy about Putin’s drive for Russian membership in the World Trade Organization. They fear that allowing foreign firms access to the Russian market could threaten their industries.

What Should the U.S. Do?

In Simes’ view, the direction of Russia’s domestic evolution remains uncertain. As a result, it is difficult for U.S. officials to make long-term policy decisions based on assumptions about Russia’s commitment to democracy; they must worry not only about who will eventually succeed Vladimir Putin, but also how Putin’s successor enters office and with what aims. While radical shifts are unlikely, there are a number of possible scenarios.

Under the circumstances, Simes recommended that the U.S. work with Russia as much as is practical to advance American interests but urged doing so with no illusions. He emphasized increased intelligence-sharing, cooperation against terrorism, and joint non-proliferation efforts as shared interests with potentially important benefits for the United States.

Simes also suggested that the Kremlin is generally inclined to support the United States when asked—though its willingness to do so in specific situations clearly depends on what Russian interests are at stake. One participant asked, for example, whether Moscow would likely be prepared to back Washington's position that Yasser Arafat must be removed if the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is to advance. Simes answered that Russia could be persuaded to support the U.S. position, but added that the Washington could successfully make such requests only at the highest level and only a very limited number of times. Responding to a similar question about Iraq, Simes explained that Russian officials have more-or-less accepted that U.S. military action is almost inevitable and now essentially hope for the best deal to protect their country's economic, particularly oil, interests. Moscow would probably do more to strengthen sanctions against Iraq if the Bush Administration dropped its stated goal of regime change in Iraq, he said.

Simes expressed hope that the pursuit of common interests would eventually contribute to the development of common values in Russia. However, he concluded, the best way to help this process along is for the United States to develop genuine partnership with Russia. Simes said that an effort to give Russia a real stake in the relationship would likely be much more successful than once again offering U.S. guidance to Moscow.

*This **Program Brief** was prepared by Nixon Center Director Paul J. Saunders.*

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Donald L. Bendetti, Chairman
John H. Taylor, Executive Director

THE NIXON CENTER

Maurice R. Greenberg, Chairman
Dimitri K. Simes, President
1615 L Street, NW, Suite 1250
Washington, DC 20036
202-887-1000 Fax 202-887-5222