

Making Russia Policy



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During the 2012 US Presidential election, there was some early back-and-forth on Russia policy, culminating in a memorable exchange during the third and final debate on 22 October 2012. After US President Barack Obama deliberately mischaracterized Republican candidate Mitt Romney’s statement about Russia being America’s #1 *foe* – not *threat*, as Obama claimed he said, Romney doubled down, emphasizing the discord that Russia under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, whether as President or Prime Minister, had been causing around the world. Obama, in turn, taunted: “The 1980s are now calling to ask for their foreign policy back because the Cold War’s been over for 20 years.” Whether this response was simple flippancy of the type Obama showed Hillary Clinton during the 2008 primaries, when he called her “likeable enough,” a naiveté about Putin, or a deeper misunderstanding of Russia – all three of which, in retrospect, are equally likely – it

must be pointed out that the foreign policy of the 1980s was quite successful in dealing with the Soviet Union and was a culmination of much of US policy toward it since the 1950s.

The Truman Doctrine, wherein the United States gave aid to any state threatened by the Soviet Union, and George Kennan's policy of containment became the hallmarks of a bi-partisan foreign policy against the USSR. The Marshall Plan and the Korean War put these policies into action. Kennedy won election in 1960, arguing there was a missile gap in which the United States trailed significantly. Nixon and Kissinger brought forth détente, in which America would work with the Soviet Union on nuclear reduction, but they also opened the path for China to re-enter the world, thus ensuring the lasting Sino-Soviet split and a weakening of Soviet influence throughout the world. Ford's support of the Helsinki Accords gave voice to hundreds of thousands of political dissidents and ordinary citizens behind the Iron Curtain. By the time Reagan came to office with a goal of defeating the "Evil Empire," no amount of Soviet support for the unilateral disarmament movement would stop the inevitable fall. The policies had worked.

In the 1990s, Russia policy shifted from trying to defeat the USSR to working constructively with it and the successor Russian Federation. This policy, however, took the form of working with the current leader – Mikhail Gorbachev for George HW Bush, Boris Yeltsin for Bill Clinton, Putin for George W Bush – rather than pushing for the larger democratic process and growth in civil society: there was little attempt to engage the political opposition or the wider Russian society. Nevertheless, it was a policy, and it did have moderate success. The USSR crumbled peacefully, and the Russian Federation initially was no longer obstructionist in the world.

For the day he took office, it has never been entirely clear what Obama's Russia policy is, if he even had a coherent one. He entered office wanting to improve relations with Russia that had turned hostile over its 2008 invasion of Georgia. He ended the Eastern European missile defense project, established the mislabeled "reset" policy with the help of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, ended sanctions against the Russian arms export agency, told then-President Dmitry Medvedev that he could show "more flexibility" after the election, and failed to follow through on his

own “red line” in Syria, ultimately inviting Russia to re-enter the Middle East. Improving relations smacked of appeasing Russia by giving it everything it wanted. As Romney would note in an article for *Foreign Policy*, “We give, Russia gets.” Perhaps this is why the CIA has leaked its operational planning for a cyber-strike on Russia – to force Obama to authorize it, as even his closest aides are wondering why he will not stand up to an increasingly provocative and aggressive Putin/Russia.

In all these actions, Putin took the measure of Obama as a leader and found him lacking. This had not happened since the presidency of Jimmy Carter and, there, the USSR ultimately paid the price in its war with Afghanistan. Likewise, Nikita Khrushchev thought President Kennedy weak, only to be forced to back down in the Cuban Missile Crisis. Putin has not paid such a price; he has even found a way to declare victory in light of the sanctions, which to everyone’s amazement continue to hold strong, imposed after his invasion and annexation of Crimea, as they have played right into his increasingly nationalistic hands.

While it might no longer matter, except to historians, what, if any, policy Obama has had toward Russia – the damage is already done, and American credibility has taken a huge hit – it does matter what the Russia policy of the two leading candidates for President in 2016 is, and, therefore, it is troubling that neither seems to have one.

Donald Trump unwittingly told the truth in the 9 October 2016 debate, when he noted: “I know nothing about Russia.” Despite his subsequent claims to the contrary and the suspiciously close relationship some of his advisors seem to have with the Kremlin, he does not know anything, and his continued refusal to accept intelligence findings stating clearly that Russia is responsible for the hacking of the DNC demonstrates that he has no desire to learn. Statements such as “Putin is a stronger leader than Obama” simply tell a truth that dictators tend to be “stronger” leaders than those elected democratically, whether they be found in politics, business, or academia, but their authority is on much shakier ground, and such statements do not even begin to make policy. Nor do comments such as “I think I’d get along very well with Vladimir Putin. I just think so.” Perhaps Trump thinks that his goal to “Make American Great Again” is identical to Putin’s desire to “Make Russia Great Again,” and that therefore they will have common ground from day one. Trump does not

understand that “making Russia great again,” if it were ever “great” to begin with, means diminishing American power and influence around the world even further.

On the other side, as former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton owns the Russia “reset” and, despite her protestations at the same 9 October 2016 debate, she was Secretary of State when Obama set the “red line” in Syria and holds some responsibility for it and the administration’s failure to follow through. Thus, she bears some of the blame for Russian resurgence in the Middle East, resurgence that she must now find a way to slow. On her way out of the Obama administration, she penned a farewell letter in which, according to those in the know, she declared the “reset” over, but tellingly she did not offer a counter to it. It is likely, knowing the Clinton penchant for putting political viability before principle and meaningful policy, she simply wanted to put herself in the position to claim later that she had had misgivings about it for some time; however, it is her picture with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and the bright red button, not Obama’s. Her letter to Obama and her recent harsher rhetoric against Moscow are an attempt to distance herself from her role in the Obama administration, particularly because it has refused to take a harder line against Russia. Clear policy doctrine, however, would go further toward making this distancing a reality. To this date, she has not offered a Russia policy, outside of pushing for a no-fly zone over Syria – something Republicans have themselves been arguing for – preferring to descend to name-calling, including referring to Putin a “bully” and that “as a KGB agent, by definition he doesn’t have a soul.”

Based on their backgrounds and statements thus far, the best guess we can make concerning their respective Russia policies is that Trump would try to cut deals with Putin to make both look good, something that should make all nations surrounding Russia, whether American allies or not, NATO members or not, very nervous, while Clinton would be much more aggressive than Obama has been, potentially leading to direct armed conflict between the two nations. Neither should bring much confidence to the American voter or the world citizen.

Therefore, it would be meaningful to have a debate on whether to engage, appease, or contain Russia, but we are not having that discussion, and no one is insisting we do,

just as no one did back in 2012. Obama's retort to Romney was the end of the debate. Much of this is because, unlike in the 1980s, Russia has faded from the public discourse, much as Russian studies have faded from American education. In this way, American education is failing American national security policy. A 30 December 2015 report in the *Washington Post* presents what many of us in the Russian field have known for some time: there is a lost generation of Russia specialists, "the government's bench of experts and the quality of Eurasia analysis is 'shallower'" concludes the article. In fact, one reason that Trump and Clinton have no clear Russia policy is because of this lack of Russia hands to advise them and to emphasize to the general public the overall importance of Russia.

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the USSR, United States federal monies began to flow away from Russian studies, and as student enrollments, which grew during the *perestroika* era, faded, universities were quick to follow with cuts to Russian programs, a process that continues to this day at many institutions. For example, Rice University, Houston, TX, USA, used to have a vibrant and thriving Russian studies program, which was an integral part of the Asian Studies program. Today, only one level of Russian is offered, taught by an inexperienced post-doc, rather than a long-term, full-time instructor, as had been the case for years; it has also not replaced an eminent Russian historian who left more than a decade ago, and it no longer supports teaching Central Asian history. Russian studies are simply not a priority, a clear lack of vision and mission to educate the next generation of national security leaders.

This is the new normal when it comes to Russian studies: Russian-language programs, when full time, are more often than not held by contract positions: instructors, lecturers, or Visiting Assistant Professors, who are not given the time, incentive, or funding to build up a program. Those Russia experts in other fields often find their Russia-related courses cancelled due to "low enrollments" and are, instead, asked to teach general education courses. If universities are unwilling to invest in Russian studies, then where will the next generation of Russia experts come from?

Flagship language programs, the Critical Language Scholarship, and recent \$1 million grants to Indiana University, Bloomington, Columbia University, and the University

of Wisconsin, Madison, have gone a long way to helping rebuild Russian Studies, but one key problem remains: an increasingly small number of universities offer great depth, meaning that students who know they are interested in Russia can go there and thrive, but the lack of breadth, in a number of universities offering Russian (and other critical languages), even with small numbers, means that someone who might suddenly get interested in Russia, through the study of Russian or related courses, no longer has that opportunity. As we never know where the next great Russia expert might come from, that is a significant risk to take with American national security.

Making and keeping a coherent policy toward Russia is difficult in the best of times; it's made all the more challenging when the leader of Russia acts erratically and is devoted to overturning the established world order rather than contribute to it. Nevertheless, anyone running for President should be able to articulate basic ideas of how he or she would deal with Russia. The fact that neither major party candidate has done so or been compelled to is why one of the first policy initiatives of a new administration must be to devote the resources needed to train the next generation of Russia experts throughout academia. As is clear from the last eight years and what looks to follow based on this election campaign, the United States is in great need of that next generation today.

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