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A Half-Democratic Russia will always be a Half-Ally to the US.

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The improvement in Russian-American relations is one of the few positive factors in the muddled picture of international relations today. Russian President Vladimir Putin's support for the American struggle against international terrorism has elevated communications between two former enemies to a new level. The upcoming November summit will be yet another sign of this. Politicians on either sides of the ocean are even calling the US and Russia "allies." Noting the decisiveness with which President Putin supports the US and Washington's extremely positive reaction to this, many Russian politicians and public figures have begun speaking openly of Russia's entry into Western organizations and unions. Membership in the World Trade Organization is discussed in Moscow as an obvious reward Russia should receive for supporting American military actions; entry into the European Union is brought up as a relatively near goal, and so forth. The hopes are great, but do they reflect reality? Inflated expectations and skewed assessments of the speed and character of Russia's integration into the West are dangerous.

It is true, the new situation brings forth many hopes, but it also provides the groundwork for possible future disillusion. Russia's drive toward integration must be welcomed, but without open discussions concerning the entire range of problems hampering the development of relations between Russia and the West, Russian and American officials are simply exaggerating unrealistic expectations, the collapse of which could seriously complicate our relations in the future. This is a replay of the situation ten years ago, when an absence of pragmatism led to the appearance of hopes that were never realized. The last euphoric moment left both sides with a bitter aftertaste and brought about a mutual cooling off. Discussing Russian entry into Western structures without considering realistic criteria is not only useless, but also hazardous, since it could lead to a new round of hostility toward the United States and the West as a whole.

Today, Bush and Putin must develop a realistic approach to Russia's integration into the West. They need to distinguish between short-term and long-term goals. Current relations between Russia and the US are such that they can change fundamentally depending on changes in the political environment. Without a doubt, America needs Russia's help in the fight against international terrorism. But this fight is only an immediate goal and cannot serve as a foundation for a strategic partnership between Moscow and Washington. Strategic partnerships are based not on one country's "need" of another in a particular situation or on the basis of concessions, but on the concurrence of strategic interests. These can involve, for example, National Missile Defense (NMD). What will happen if the extremists get their hands on Pakistan's nuclear weapons? What will they do with them? President Putin asked this question of NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson in October and received no answer. The interests could include the coordination of policy in Central Asia. In its time, the Soviet Union spent billions of dollars but only secured the friendship of nations like Iran, Iraq, Syria, Libya and North Korea. Russian membership in NATO and the European Union could also be one of these mutual strategic interests.

Russia's current attitude toward entry into NATO is an example of disproportionate expectations. During his meeting with Lord Roberson, Vladimir Putin spoke about the desirability of total cooperation between Russia and NATO. Neither of the two leaders saw any reason precluding Russian membership in the organization. Yet at the same time Moscow speaks of making NATO a political organization as a condition for joining. This is a dangerous thing to say. The Kremlin has to decide whether it is trying to change the essence of NATO or find ways of mutually beneficial cooperation.

Speaking about changing the nature and structure of NATO not only irritates many members of the alliance, but also happens to be completely unrealistic. NATO is, and will remain, a military organization. It will not transform itself into a political union just to make Russia a member.

Certain criteria for entry into NATO exist and they will not be changed just to please the Kremlin. The North Atlantic alliance is open to all European nations that want to enter it and comply with the organization's requirements. Russia could join, but other European nations, including the Baltic states, are more democratic and better prepared for membership. They could end up in the alliance before Russia. Preparations for Russia's entry into NATO will take at the least 15-20 years of intensive work. It would be very symbolic if Russia prepared to become a NATO member in 2017 - the centennial of the revolution.

Russia can begin moving in this direction immediately. Moscow has asked for NATO help in modernizing its armed forces. This was without a doubt a daring and risky political step for President Putin. Washington could let NATO nations to buy Russian weapons. This would largely dispel Moscow's arguments that NATO expansion is only profitable to American weapons manufacturers. With US advice, NATO members could buy Russian weapons and resell them to the Northern Alliance and to other military partners.

Although it is currently a US ally in Afghanistan, Russia is not perceived as a strategic military partner. Washington could pressure its European allies and force them to consider officially recognizing Russia as NATO's military ally. This would be a serious step toward the establishment of partnership relations and bring Russia closer to entry into the organization. President Putin could demonstrate the seriousness of his intentions by sending, as his ambassador to NATO, not just a diplomat or intelligence officer, but a trusted representative, a man who has a certain amount of political weight in Russia as well as in the West, a man who has direct access to the president at all times, somebody like Gorbachev, for example.

The coming closer of Russia and NATO would certainly bring about a negative reaction from China, which will not welcome NATO's advance towards its borders. Moscow is currently not addressing this question, at least not publicly, and it might not be able to resolve it with Beijing one on one, without Washington's participation. At the same time, it would be difficult for Washington to reach an agreement with China on the NMD without Moscow's support.

Until 11 September, the idea of abandoning the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty was motivated not only by the interests of American security, but also by the ideology of some Bush administration officials. Moscow hoped that the NMD idea would collapse on its own, unable to withstand the financial pressure and the technological limitations. Now, the White House must review its entire threat perception and alliance system, which may produce a new approach to the ABM Treaty and Russia's role in establishing international security. From one side, it is clear that the treaty is a relic of the Cold War, but from another side, US President George W. Bush has shown that his administration might agree to retain the agreement if certain changes are made.

The large arsenal of nuclear weapons the two nations possess is also a relic of the Cold War and it fosters mutual distrust. If Washington decreases the number of its strategic missiles to under 2,000, Moscow will be more secure that the new defense system proposed by President Bush is aimed at protecting the US from the missiles of rogue states, that it is not a weapon to potentially be used against Russia. Moscow and Washington must agree on an acceptable balance of offensive and defensive weapons and on the methods to control adherence to this balance.

When Russia becomes a member of Western structures and a more reliable partner, Washington may even foster the creation of a joint Russian-American missile defense system. President Bush could ask Russia to consider the advantages of such a strategy. The immediate development of a joint early-warning system could be the first step. It could be established with a new agreement between Moscow and Washington, an agreement Moscow would really like to have. This is only natural, since

Washington has agreements with all of its closest allies, the Western European nations. If a bilateral agreement is concluded, Putin should give Bush a chance to create an NMD system.

At the same time the United States could do a lot to strengthen economic ties between Russia and the West. Not only should Jackson-Vanik amendment to the Trade Act of 1974 be repealed, but so should all of the laws and limitations that were aimed at the Soviet Union. These were mechanisms for putting pressure on a communist country, and Russia is no longer one. President Bush could also soften restrictions on the import of Russian steel into the United States and review the limitations on the export of high-tech products to Russia. He could begin a dialogue about a fundamental trade agreement that would be an important part of preparing Russia for entry into the WTO (World Trade Organization).

As for the WTO itself, much is in Moscow's hands. American political support is not enough. Economic policy must be carried out in accordance with WTO criteria and bilateral talks with the leaders of all WTO members must be conducted. At the same time, Bush could urge his European partners to create a special trade mechanism between Russia and Europe. Such an arrangement could be built on the principles of the North-American Free Trade Agreement and put into effect long before the discussion of Russia's entry into the European Union begins.

Yet domestic problems in Russia remain the greatest obstacle for a long-term strategic partnership with the West. For Washington, President Putin's impressive economic successes will not obscure the fact that Russia's already-fragile democratic institutions are weakening. The role of the parliament's upper house has diminished, key media organizations have been destroyed, a complete disregard for human rights by the nation's own army can be seen in Chechnya, and so forth. Bush's administration needs Russia today, and it is not emphasizing those problems, but they will be crucial to a conversation concerning strategic partnership.

Russia can only become a full-fledged and respected member of the European community and a trusted US ally if it is an authentic democracy. In the 20th century, the US and other Western nations had an assortment of allies - from democracies to bloody dictatorships. Even Stalin was an American ally at one point. The U.S. is currently pursuing alliance relations with all sorts of dictators in the Middle East and Central Asia. But it has only been the democracies that were able to prove that they could be trusted in the long run, outside of one particular political situation. History shows that the ostensible benefits the US receives from cooperating with anti-democratic and dictatorial regimes, alliances with the Shah in Iran, Suharto in Indonesia, the mujahideen in Afghanistan, or the apartheid regime in South Africa, threatened US national security in the long run and generated a number of foreign policy problems and embarrassments. And today, no democracy is hostile to the United States, while every American enemy is a dictatorship.

In Russia, the backing for Putin's foreign policy is not as strong as it could be and public opinion is split. Of course Putin enjoys more support than the leaders of Pakistan, Egypt or Saudi Arabia, but if Russia's economy begins to deteriorate, if oil prices drop further, there will be mass criticism of President Putin. What will happen then? Past experience shows that in a situation like that, Putin might change his foreign policy objectives. The Russian president already has developed an image as a politician whose actions do not always follow his words. A former highly-placed official in the Clinton administration once articulated that when Yeltsin said "no, no, no," he usually meant "yes." As for Putin, it seems that while he's been saying "yes, yes, yes," he often means "no." Furthermore, during his meeting with Lord Robertson, Putin declared that he will hold office for four years, and that his successor might not be as pro-Western. This has led Western leaders to consider the extent to which they can trust Russia, and the ways in which they can help it to remain on the path of integration into Western structures. Even if Bush trusts Putin, future American presidents might have to deal with future Russian presidents that are not so trustworthy. As such, the basis for a closer strategic partnership has to be more than just personal chemistry.

President Putin has not presented a list of concessions he would like to receive from the West in return

for supporting the anti-terrorism actions. This won him no small amount of respect in the Bush administration. But lately, there are more and more calls from Russia for a creation of a list of demands in exchange for Russian support. Russia wants to feel instant gratification from cooperation with the West. This has some validity, but Moscow needs to understand that its participation in the anti-terrorist operation serves its direct interests, as does a long-term union with the West. And if Putin is genuinely interested in Western integration, then he must also take a greater interest in strengthening democracy and civil society, without which full integration is impossible.

For its part, the US can and should tie cooperation to serious financial support aimed at directly strengthening the civil society and democratic institutions. Soviet and Russian debts could be used as a financial lever. In Moscow there is open discussion of the advantages of writing off old Soviet debts and restructuring Russian ones to ease financial pressure over the next few years. This is not easy to obtain, since Russian economic indicators have sharply increased, and since simply writing off debts will irritate conservatives in the West.

One solution could be a compromise in which Soviet debts (about 30 billion dollars, half of which is owed to Germany) and the interest on Russian debts would be collected, but used within Russia. Some of the debts could be written off under political conditions. For example, the Russian nuclear projects in Iran are worth about 10 billion dollars. The West could write off a matching sum on the condition that Russia-Iranian nuclear cooperation ends. With Bush's insistence, the rest of the money could be distributed in the following manner: Over the next 10 years, some of the money could be invested directly into the Russian economy by the US Export-Import Bank. Some of the money could go toward strengthening Russia's democratic institutions: support for the civil society, independent press, human rights and environmental organizations and etc. Some of the money could support education and social reform. A special joint Russian-American organ could be put in charge of allocating the money and deciding on how to invest it. Finally, the old idea of purchasing Russia's nuclear potential - nuclear submarines and nuclear weapons -- could be modernized. For example, 1,000 nuclear bombs could be bought from Russia for destruction for only a fifth of the old Soviet debt. The most important thing is that the money remains inside Russia.

An alliance based on necessity is always unpredictable, since the necessity could decline or disappear. For a strategic partnership, trust, concurrent views and the closeness of interests and ideals are essential. A common foundation, which includes democracy and the priority of human rights, is indispensable. Democracy in Russia is more important factor for the United States than whether Russia will sign security agreements or allow Washington to conduct another dozen nuclear weapons tests. Ignoring the short-term problems of democratic development would guarantee that Russia would never become a full partner to the West in the long term. A half-democratic Russia will always be a half-ally to the US. To prevent this, Washington needs to offer new incentives for Russia to join the West, while Moscow needs to continue pursue democratization. The November summit offers a truly historic occasion to advance these ends.

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