

Power without Purpose – George W. Bush's Failed Policy towards Russia

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In the US presidential election that is now under way, relations between Washington and Moscow are playing almost no role. That is unusual and all the more astonishing in that here at the close of George W. Bush's term of office they have ended up where they started: in a Cold War – and this after attaining their historical apogee in the shadow of 9/11.¹ There are therefore ample grounds for addressing the question familiar from previous elections: »Who lost Russia?«

There is a simple reason why this has not happened; although there is little doubt concerning the diagnosis, opinions on the causes of the decline in relations between Washington and Moscow are sharply divided. In the public debate there are clear attributions of guilt: authoritarian-étatist Putinism and the excessive self-assurance of the energy bully, on the one hand, stand over against Bushism and its militarized efforts to form the world after its own democratic image on the other.

Certainly, these contrary evaluations do not follow any party-political rationale, and both represent inadequate reductions of real complexity that do not properly take account of either the interaction between Washington and Moscow or Bush's radical change of direction in the wake of 9/11. This is how the regime question became the axis of international relations and grounded the growing alienation that the encounter between Bush's freedom postulate and Putin's appreciably more clearly outlined authoritarian course inevitably triggered off. Even when in American policy towards Russia »prima facie« the realistically inspired interest divergence of the early Bush Jr was superseded by the idealistically inspired value divergence of the later, we are in fact dealing, as in the case of Clinton, with both a contradictory and a changeable amalgam of values and interests.

1. This was the view of the US ambassador in Moscow at that time, Alexander Vershbow, in February 2002; see Goldgeier, James M. and McFaul, Michael: »George W. Bush and Russia«, in: *Current History*, 101 (657): 318.

A striking constant of the Bush administration, however, is the neglect, even ignorance of Russia, which there, in turn, is increasingly considered as malign neglect. In contrast to Clinton, from the very beginning Bush not only perceived Russia through the prism of other problems, but also took the view that he had no need to pay much attention to Moscow and its interests, based on Russia's weakness in the 1990s and due to his belief that the USA was an unbounded hyperpower with a universal mission.

Russia in turn since 2006 has reacted indignantly to Washington's nonchalant unilateralism and the indifference towards its needs that go with it, in keeping with its growing weight. In this way Moscow has shaped a geostrategically motivated line that represents nothing less than a multipolar challenge to the USA's global dominance – most strikingly in Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007. Since then it has been less a matter of collapsing relations between Moscow and Washington – due to diverging values – being held together by residual common interests, than of increasing gaps in the core sphere of mutual foreign and security policy interests. This now touches on basic questions concerning how US foreign policy sees itself and can no longer be regulated solely by the promotion of global democracy.

Prelude: Bush's Soul Searching

Nothing is more closely associated with Bush's policy towards Russia than his legendary look into Putin's eyes at their first meeting in June 2001, which provided him with »a sense of his soul.«² The way to Putin's soul was far from being fathomed in this fashion, however. Rather at the beginning Bush's presidency was characterized by a double dissociation: from Clinton's »alliance with Russian reformers« and from the »happy talk« with which he indecorously courted the Russian leadership. Bush believed that he had to counter this with a »hard realism.«³ This explicitly renounced democratizing interventions since the Western reform strategy

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2. Press conference given by President Bush and Russian Federation President Putin, Brdo Pri Kranju, Slovenia, on June 2007, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov>.
 3. Bush cited by Goldgeier/McFaul (2003): *Power and Purpose. U.S. Policy toward Russia after the Cold War*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 306.

had in any case foundered with the ruble crisis of 1998 at the latest, and the creation of a »more democratic world« in the course of internal transformation was regarded as a »second-order effect,« which, as after the Second World War, would occur of its own accord alongside the consistent pursuit of American interests, as Condoleezza Rice remarked.⁴ And he demanded the right to concentrate wholly on American security interests, which included strong complaints about Russian proliferation practice in relation to Iran, as well as vigorously pursued plans to set up a strategic missile defense system.

Russia, the Bush administration had no doubt, was now only of second-rate significance and was perceived solely through the prism of other problems, such as proliferation. As regards its weakness, Thomas E. Graham, whom Rice entrusted with the Russia portfolio in the National Security Council in 2002, believed that it was even possible to conceive of »a world without Russia.«⁵ This diagnosis was combined to such an extent with the consciousness of American strength, the »triumphalistic tendency and the feeling of unlimited possibilities,« that Moscow barely came into Washington's calculations any longer.⁶ But also the American unilateralism that had its origin here could be practiced differently, as Bush showed during the first few months of his period of office.

As confrontational as the prelude was – barely had it come to office when the administration ordered the expulsion of 50 Russian diplomats on the grounds of spying – a moderately cooperative turn followed in June in Ljubljana. September 11, 2001, deepened the incipient harmony considerably since in the »black and white world« of the war against terrorism proclaimed by Bush Russia had immediately chosen the right side. Putin offered the USA not only intelligence cooperation and logistical support in the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan, but also tolerated, in the face of open criticism within his own security policy establishment, the setting up of American military bases in Uzbekistan and Kirghizstan. The Russian leadership saw in these measures a unique opportunity to

4. Rice, Condoleezza; Campaign 2000: »Promoting the National Interest,« in: *Foreign Affairs*, 79 (1) (2000): 50.

5. Graham Jr., Thomas E.: »A World without Russia?,« Jamestown Foundation Conference, Washington D.C. (June 9, 1999), available at: <http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/3336.html>.

6. Simes, Dimitri K.: »Priorities, Not Delusions,« in: *The National Interest* online (April 25, 2007), available at: <http://www.nationalinterest.org>.

switch from object of American world-order policy to subject, not in confrontation, but in cooperation with its powerful opponent.

Bush embraced this with enthusiasm. It did not prevent him, however, a little later – December 13, 2001 – from terminating the ABM treaty after the true aim of the rapprochement in Ljubljana, to overcome the treaty's restrictions in agreement with Russia, could not be attained. Nevertheless, this termination remained without serious consequences; rather in May 2002 both sides confirmed that they were in the process of setting up a »new strategic relationship« and wished to resolve their differences »in the spirit of mutual respect.«⁷ The prospects for this were shown by the Moscow »treaty« on strategic weapons (Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty or SORT) signed on the same occasion, which broadly followed the American script: Contrary to Russian ideas on the matter, entirely as announced by Bush during the presidential election, SORT was little more than the confirmation of unilateral reductions in the form of a treaty. Similarly in the case of the recent eastern extension of NATO, which Bush had announced in Warsaw in summer 2001. With the creation of the NATO-Russia Council in May 2002 an enhanced consultative body was envisaged for the purpose of integrating Moscow; the Alliance believed, however, that with the Baltic States' admission to NATO in April 2004 the »red line« once drawn around them by Yeltsin could easily be crossed.

According to the dominant opinion in Moscow the balance of demonstrative support for the USA was largely negative, which, however, did not allow Putin to dissociate himself from Bush. This happened for the first time in the course of the American deployment against Iraq and along the so-called Paris–Berlin–Moscow »axis« and thenceforth awoke doubts in Washington concerning Russian reliability in the »global war on terror.« This brought about a cooling, though not a crisis. In fact, Bush made it clear that differences on the issue of Iraq should not call into question the »relationship of trust« with Putin. Rather both sought immediately to pick up where they had left off before Iraq. Bush did this by means of an invitation to the Russian president to a meeting on September 27, 2003, at Camp David, the highpoint and terminus of the undiminished, rhetorical bestowal of sympathy on the part of the »allies in the war against

7. »Joint Declaration on the New Strategic Relationship between the Russian Federation and the United States« (May 24, 2002), available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru>.

terror,« which Bush expressed in the following oft-cited words: »Our goal is to bring the US–Russian relationship to a new level of partnership. I respect President Putin’s vision for Russia: a country at peace within its borders, with its neighbors, and with the world, a country in which democracy and freedom and rule of law thrive.«⁸

What is remarkable about this is that this entirely positive evaluation of the political situation in Russia took place within the framework of Bush’s programmatic about-turn in the direction of idealistically inspired interventionism that extolled the global extension of democracy as the cornerstone of the peace and security of free nations. In the case of allies – this was the lesson of the Cold War – one does not look too closely; despite Washington’s recent discovery of the significance of the nature of particular regimes.

The Freedom Agenda and the Limits of Realism

9/11 had a cathartic effect on the Bush administration’s foreign policy: As a war-time president in the global confrontation with terrorism Bush suddenly, due to the attacks on American territory, had a mission, which his foreign policy had hitherto largely neglected. After the dissociation from Clinton’s liberal internationalism had lost its momentum after only a few months the inherent tension between his unipolar basic disposition and his realistic program of a multipolar concert of powers within the limits of international power relations had come to light. Bush’s war rhetoric resolved this in favor of an offensive change in international power relations by means of regime change and – previously scorned – nation-building in the American image. The script was provided by those neoconservatives for whom the liberal and the imperial missions had entered into an unholy alliance. Bush announced their program in paradigmatic terms in January 2005 in his second inaugural speech, in which, as in the »global war on terror,« he presented every nation with a »moral choice«: »between oppression, which is always wrong, and freedom, which is eternally right.«⁹

The freedom agenda thus announced had an ambivalent effect as far as Russia was concerned. On the one hand, as the victim of terrorist at-

8. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov>.

9. »President Sworn-In to Second Term,« available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov>.

tacks and an early ally Russia was undoubtedly a »faithful supporter« in the war against terrorism.¹⁰ On the other hand, with Bush's neoconservative sleight of hand, with which democracy had moved to the center of foreign policy criteria, Russia's turning away from the path of US democratic virtue necessarily constituted a centrifugal element – among the realistic initial conditions this played no role whatsoever.

In fact, on January 26, 2004, only a few months after Camp David, Secretary of State Colin Powell became the first high-ranking member of the Bush administration to criticize Moscow's authoritarian tendencies, in *Isvestia*. This was relatively restrained in comparison with the vocabulary familiar today, though it was perceived as a clear warning. In the meantime, in December 2003 came the elections to the State Duma – according to the OSCE Observation Mission they were free, but not fair. Before that, on October 25, 2003, however, came the arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, which initiated the dismantling of the largest private oil company, Yukos. This was of particular interest for the USA not only on regulatory policy grounds, but also on account of its declared preference for the US market. As a result, the reactions of American politics and public opinion were particularly violent, especially since Washington and Moscow had as recently as May 2002 agreed to commence a bilateral energy dialogue, which underlined the growing American interest in an extension of its hitherto minor energy purchases from the CIS sphere.

In 2005 criticism of Putin's domestic policy course became somewhat sharper. And it was presented in a more explicit way because the »D« question was for the first time the focal point of a meeting between Putin and Bush, in February 2005 in Bratislava. The practical consequences remained limited, however, because the administration in principle rejected the democratic conditionality of »strategic partnership« and so came out against demands from the Congress to remove Russia from the G8. Rather it expressed demonstrative understanding of the difficult conditions in Russia and expressed its trust in the gradual democratizing effect of economic modernization.

This seemed all the more justified when in 2004–2005 the expectation of a progressive democratic change in the form of so-called »color« revolutions appeared to find visible confirmation. For Bush, as previously in the case of the Baltic States, there was no question of welcoming Ukraine

10. Quoted after Goldgeier/McFaul (2003): *Power and Purpose. U.S. Policy toward Russia after the Cold War*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 317.

and Georgia after their electoral revolutions not only into the »freedom camp,« but also into the »Euro-Atlantic family« – namely NATO and the EU.¹¹ The signal given by his detours to Latvia and Georgia, the Kremlin's notorious archenemies, during his Moscow trip on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in May 2005 was along similar lines; in the course of these, he expressed, in the spirit of the global »advance of freedom,« his optimism concerning further »color revolutions.«¹²

In this respect Russia appeared to many among Washington's political class to be merely another domino, so that the main task of policy towards Russia would be only consistent support for the democracy movement of electoral revolution.¹³ The administration endorsed this in principle, though it wished to found its policy towards Russia on two further pillars: a continuous dialogue with the Kremlin on the rule of law and democracy, and Russia's integration in organizations promoting liberalization and democratic development, such as the G8.¹⁴

In fact, on its winding path through the administration the promotion of democracy was in practice much more modest than the high-flown declarations might have led one to expect – at least as far as the amount of resources made available for the purpose are concerned and in accor-

11. »President Discusses American and European Alliance in Belgium,« Concert Noble, February 21, 2005, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov>.

12. »President Discusses Freedom and Democracy in Latvia,« May 7, 2005, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov>.

13. A particularly crass example of the prevailing euphoric mood is represented by Anders Aslund, at that time at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, for whom Putin's fall was only a matter of time: Since his power base had shrunk to a »small group of KGB officers from St. Petersburg« the question merely remains whether he will be challenged by these »KGB cronies« or by a »people's uprising«; Aslund, Anders: »Putin's Decline and America's Response,« Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Brief, No. 41, (2005), 6 f.

14. Rice, Condoleezza; »Remarks to the Press en Route to Ankara,« February 6, 2005, available at: <http://www.state.gov>. This also represents a fundamental change of course after the export of democracy, in accordance with Bush's realistic starting position in 2000, had in principle been rejected, since American influence had been »always marginal« and ultimately the Russians themselves had decided what the character of their country would be: »That has been the great lesson of the 1990's which should have been obvious at the very beginning.«

Graham Jr., Thomas E.: »The State of U.S.-Russian Relations and the New Bush Administration«, BOFIT Online, No. 13 (2000) 7, available at: <http://www.bofi.fi>.

dance with the maxim that »policy« is not »what the president says in speeches. Policy is what emerges from interagency meetings.«¹⁵ This is shown by, for example, the resources made available to USAID within the framework of the Freedom Support Act. Their marginal increase was due solely to Congress whose provisions of funds precisely for the promotion of democracy, and particularly since 2005, have been much greater than the demands of the administration. These have scarcely changed, and even in 2008 after widespread complaints amount to less than democracy promotion in Liberia and Kosovo.

In 2006, however, optimism concerning »color« revolutions was already a thing of the past. On the one hand, this was due to extremely ambivalent experiences with the new political leaderships in Tiflis, Kiev, and Bishkek; on the other hand, the Russian leadership organized resistance together with others that might potentially be affected in such a way that for the promotion of democracy the »most difficult period since the beginning of the third wave in the mid-1970s« dawned, as Carl Gershman, President of the National Endowment for Democracy complained.¹⁶ Since then the backlash and no longer the »advance of democracy« has determined the Washington scene and has given rise to violent debates also concerning policy towards Russia.¹⁷

The Domestic Policy Side of the Freedom Agenda

The »ultimate goal« of American foreign policy, announced by George W. Bush in his second inaugural speech, getting rid of »tyranny in our world,« provided it with a handy label and an equally handy mission. For his critics in Washington, however, it provided a no less handy instrument with which they could challenge his policy towards Russia and the clear discrepancy between its idealistic claims and realistic policy making.

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15. Baker, Peter: »As Democracy Push Falters, Bush Feels Like a ›Dissident‹«, in: *Washington Post*, August 20, 2007, A01.
 16. Inaugural Meeting of Members of the Advisory Committee on Democracy Promotion with Secretary Condoleezza Rice, November 6, 2006, available at: <http://www.russiaprofile.org>.
 17. Carothers, Thomas: »The Backlash against Democracy Promotion,« in: *Foreign Affairs*, 85 (2), (2006): 55–68; Gershman, Carl and Allen, Michael: »The Assault on Democracy Assistance,« in: *Journal of Democracy*, 17 (2) (2006): 36–51.

The Congress played a particularly prominent role in this, in which there were and are vociferous critics in both parties, but no Russia lobby. In this context two veteran Russia bashers came to the fore: the present Democratic Chair of the Foreign Policy Committee in the House of Representatives, Tom Lantos, and John McCain, Republican senator and presidential candidate. McCain, in common with another Democratic senator, Joseph Lieberman, was also the initiator of a Resolution that sought to bind Russia's involvement in the G8 with the maintenance of democratic standards as early as November 2003 – an initiative which they have pursued with increasing vigor in ensuing years.¹⁸ Together they attempted in both Houses, with the *ADVANCE* Democracy Act in March 2005, to elevate the freedom agenda announced by Bush two months previously, in the face of vested interests and potential reservations among the ranks of the administration, to an obligatory guideline of American foreign policy.¹⁹

The relationship between the legislature and the executive in Germany appears to be similar, although in the USA, in contrast, outside politics and also in the American economy there has so far been no influential Russia lobby that could exercise a moderating influence. Economic relations have been too weak for this purpose, even if since 2003 they have been quite dynamic, with double-digit growth rates.²⁰ In tandem with this an increasing number of voices, in the shadow of the darkening political climate and its associated headlines, wish to raise awareness of the »great untold story« of economic relations,²¹ or, like US trade secretary Carlos Gutierrez in April 2007 during his visit to Russia in the name of

18. S.CON.RES. 85 and identical to it in the House of Representatives, Lantos and Cox's H.CON.RES. 336.

19. Among other things by creating a Democracy Bureau and an Advisory Committee in the State Department, as well as by making available another 250 million US-Dollars for democracy promotion; »McCain, Lieberman Introduce »Advance Democracy Act«, available at: <http://lieberman.senate.gov>; Tom Lantos and Frank Wolf introduced the initiative in the House of Representatives.

20. In 2006 US exports already amounted to 4.7 billion US-Dollars and imports to as much as 19.7 billion US-Dollars – an increase since 2005 of 27 percent altogether. In 2002, in contrast, US exports amounted to 2.4 billion and imports to 6.8 billion US-Dollars. Russian investments in the USA amounted to 3 billion US-Dollars in 2006, with US investments in Russia totalling 11 billion US-Dollars.

21. »Congressional Record,« April 19, 2007 (Senate): S4746-S4748, available at: <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/crecord/index.html>.

the President, conjure up a forthcoming »golden era« of relations.²² In other areas things are even more sparse. Rather the Russian leadership, according to the Washington political class, had by 2006 accumulated a considerable list of sins. The fact that Moscow ignored the quarantine imposed on Hamas by Washington and Brussels after its election victory in Palestine was taken as an indication of a lack of cooperation, as were the cautious dealings with the new Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his nuclear ambitions. The closure of the US base in Karshi-Khanabad by the government of Uzbekistan on July 30, 2005, was perceived as a deliberate affront, which had been preceded on July 5 by the Shanghai Treaty Organization's demand, with Moscow's backing, for the drawing up of a schedule for American withdrawal. This prepared the ground for a broad Washington debate, whose crystallization point in the run up to the St. Petersburg summit in July 2006 was Russia's continued involvement in the G8 and exposed the Bush administration to considerable domestic political pressure.

Among all shades of political opinion this debate, both then and now, is grouped around the two classic antipodes »values« and »interests,« without reference to a party-political rationale. There is agreement on the diagnosis of the Russian divergence from American models, but not concerning its interpretation or consequences. To the exponents of a policy towards Russia that is committed to American interests and to that extent realistic, US unilateralism appears to be the problem, so that in their view the solution would be to return to cooperation with Moscow, regardless of how things stand there domestically. For the exponents of a value-orientated policy towards Russia, mainly gathered in the camp of liberal internationalists, it is Russia's authoritarian course that is the problem, the solution being – with confrontational under- and overtones – the democratic removal of the Putin regime.

While at the beginning of the Bush era there was still no question for Condoleezza Rice that a Great Power like Russia would necessarily always have divergent interests from the USA,²³ the protagonists of common values drew a line from the theorem of democratic peace to political practice that in its simplicity rivaled the President's emotional rhetoric. One result of this was the comprehensive report »Russia's Wrong Direction«

22. *The Moscow Times*, April 4, 2007, 1.

23. Rice, Condoleezza; Campaign 2000: »Promoting the National Interest,« in: *Foreign Affairs*, 79 (1), (2000): 59.

by the Council of Foreign Relations in March 2006. It was developed under the common chairmanship of the Democratic presidential candidate John Edwards and the Republican Jack Kemp, as well as under the editorial leadership of Madeleine Albright's former Russia expert Stephen Sestanovich.²⁴

The realistic protagonists of American interests, such as the Nixon Center, take the view, in contrast, that the USA and its security needs are served neither by »à la carte partnerships« such as the »selective cooperation« advocated by the Report, nor by a confrontational democratization policy, but only by cooperation on the basis of mutual interests.²⁵ In agreement with this was the second major report of 2006, »Engaging with Russia,« which was presented to the Trilateral Commission in the fall.²⁶ In fact, this report cannot see a sufficient basis for a »strategic partnership« with Russia at present since this would be linked to common values and a consequent »level of trust and agreement.« Both sides should therefore concentrate on »pragmatic engagement« and close cooperation in the sense of common interests, including terrorism and proliferation, as well as climate change and energy supply.

Although the President rhetorically pushed his freedom agenda in the CFR Report's atmosphere of »selective cooperation,« in 2006 his policy ultimately followed the guidelines of »pragmatic engagement.« Certainly relations with Russia were subjected to a critical »policy review« by representatives of the Washington expert community under the influence of the intensified Washington debate and in view of the approaching G8 summit in St. Petersburg at the beginning of 2006.

24. Council on Foreign Relations (2006): *Russia's Wrong Direction. What the United States Can and Should Do* (Report of an Independent Task Force), New York. It was clearly conceived, by analogy with a report critical of Clinton by the Republican Majority in Congress in 2000, as a purportedly non-partisan attempt to attack the Republican administration's policy towards Russia by the Democrats. Hence the original – and used in the Council's press release – title: *US-Russia relations' wrong direction*, and hence also the involvement – and the acceptance of the results not disturbed by a diverging vote – of Clinton's »Russia hand,« Strobe Talbott, who only a few months later preached the very opposite as the co-author of another report.

25. Simes, Dimitri K.: »Priorities, Not Delusions«, *The National Interest* online, available at: <http://www.nationalinterest.org>.

26. Lyne, Roderic; Talbott, Strobe; Watanabe, Koji (2006): *Engaging with Russia. The Next Phase* (A Report to the Trilateral Commission), Washington D.C.

The results were limited to the extent that the Petersburg G8 summit largely followed the Russian script and Putin's guests avoided giving offence. In any case, that had already occurred in the form of a »comprehensive and blunt speech by a senior official« that had been recommended, among other things, to the administration within the framework of the »policy review.« Vice-President Cheney took up this role when on May 4, 2006, in Vilnius he reproached the Russian leadership with confrontational élan for its curtailment of democratic rights, intimidation, and blackmail by means of its energy resources, as well as the infringement of the territorial integrity of a neighboring country.²⁷ He opposed to it not only the new »community of democratic choice« as the »frontlines of freedom in the modern world,« but also the no less authoritarian Kazakhstan, which he exempted from criticism in his subsequent visit – taking »pride« in being able to describe Kazakhstan as a »friend« and »strategic partner« and with admiration for »what has transpired here in Kazakhstan over the last 15 years. Both in terms of economic development, as well as political development.«²⁸ For observers in Moscow this holier-than-thou attitude was the final proof that Bush's democracy crusade was pursuing one aim above all: territorial gains in Russia's geostrategic hinterland.

Damage Limitation

The official Russian reaction to Cheney came immediately and, although there was no explicit rebuke, was unambiguous. On May 10, Putin complained about the »wolf's« ravenous appetite and how quickly »one's own interests« could undermine the »pathos« of human rights and democracy.²⁹ In fact, Cheney's speech amounted to a turning point in American–Russian relations to the extent that it was followed by a »cold war« of words and symbolic gestures that became increasingly inflamed in the ensuing months and whose end is still not in sight. What began in 2005 as a public skirmish over the »D« word in this way became enlarged into

27. Vice President's Remarks at the 2006 Vilnius Conference, May 4, 2006, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov>.

28. From the joint press conference on the occasion of his visit to Astana, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov>.

29. »Annual Address to the Federal Assembly,« May 10, 2006, available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru>.

a frontal attack by Russia on the world order of the »unipolar moment,« to which the Bush administration regards itself as being committed, and not only since 9/11.

The real thunderbolt was Putin's speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy on February 10, 2007, in which he intensified what on the Russian side had been articulated again and again since the Iraq War, and especially since 2006, in terms of reservations concerning Western and, in particular, American policy. He came out not only against any kind of unilateralism but also directly against the USA, which »has overstepped its national borders in every way,« and condemned the accompanying »disdain for the basic principles of international law,« as well as the »almost uncontained hyper use of force,« with which the world was being plunged »into an abyss of permanent conflicts.« It was, however, clear – on an optimistic note for Russia – that »the economic potential of the new centers of global economic growth will be inevitably converted into political influence and will strengthen multipolarity.«³⁰

Putin had opened his speech with the wry remark that he wished to avoid »excessive politeness« and wished to express what he »really« thought about international security problems. It is an open question whether he always thought that way, which would mean that the turning towards the USA after 9/11 had been merely tactical. In any case, in this way his domestic »thermidor« was extended to foreign policy, and both for the same reason – Putin's abhorrence, which comes up in different guises again and again, of the period of turmoil – and of weakness – in the 1990s when Russia was subject to a thoroughgoing »heteronomy.«³¹ In terms of domestic policy, by contrast, under the slogan »sovereign democracy« what matters to him is self-determination as regards regulatory policy; in terms of foreign policy it is a matter of multipolar codetermination, beyond the »hierarchical vertical« with which the USA has imposed its »dictat« and »imperialism,« as Putin also complained in 2007.³²

In accordance with this newly acquired assertive self-consciousness the Russian leadership in turn presented the USA with a list of sins, which is even more extensive than the Washington list. It includes Western democ-

30. Available at: <http://www.securityconference.de>.

31. For example, in the interview with ZDF before the St. Petersburg G8 summit, available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru>.

32. Press statement and answers to journalists' questions following talks with Greek President Karolos Papoulias, May 31, 2007, available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru>.

ratization policy as a new form of »colonialism« for the purpose of plundering Russia.³³ It also includes above all the unilateral neglect of Russian interests in almost all international security questions, whether it is Kosovo or Iraq, missile defense, the planning stationing of American troops in Bulgaria and Romania, or the extension of the NATO into the CIS.

While these complaints are not new, their interpretation is. For example, in 2003 at Camp David, similar to 2001 with the termination of the ABM Treaty, Putin still stressed that, notwithstanding practical differences concerning the »essence« of the problems, there was agreement, and that the »fundamental interests« of the two countries »are much more solid«, and that »in our actions, we wish to be guided by these strategic interests of our two countries, without excessive emotions or ambitions.«³⁴ Since the once marginal differences concerning the essence of relations have been reassessed, clearly emotions and ambitions have got the upper hand – emotions because Russian good behavior did nothing to make the USA more sensitive towards Russian interests, and ambitions because Russia feels itself (semi-)strong sitting on its oil wells and is witnessing the USA sink into the quicksand of Iraq.

Since then the Cold War has dominated verbally, which the Russian press traces back to Cheney's speech in Vilnius, while the Western press dates it to Putin's speech in Munich. In fact, both sides deny resurrecting history since ideological antagonism is lacking, and the USA is not ready to take Russia seriously into account. But in its anger the Russian leadership in particular does nothing to smooth the rhetorical waves. The Bush administration, in contrast, has reacted rather perplexedly – with Secretary of State Rice's demand to refrain from »overheated rhetoric« and confirmation that it would pursue its previous course.

At any rate, Bush too has since then attempted damage limitation in this »complicated relationship« and so has sought »common ground to solve problems.« In this »spirit« he wishes to cooperate with Putin even after Munich.³⁵ The double strategy of articulating »strong disagreements« and pursuing »mutual interests,« however, does not become more coherent by virtue of the fact that it is held together by friendly relations

33. As Putin put it in his *poslanie* to the Federal Assembly at the end of April 2007, available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru>.

34. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov>.

35. For example, in his first reaction to Putin's Munich speech, Press Conference by the President, February 14, 2007, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov>.

between the two presidents. Even more so because agreement in many fields of international cooperation remains confused. For example, in the administration's view as a rule there are only two topics in respect of which their interests »quite nicely intersect«: terrorism and non-proliferation.³⁶ In all other cases, whether it be the CSCE, missile defense, the OSCE, or Russia's dealings with its neighbors, especially Georgia's NATO ambitions, the differences dominate and the need remains »to push back.«³⁷ But the Russian side too has difficulties implementing its new double strategy of conflict and cooperation in such a way that the rhetorical walls of its demands on the USA remain open to new approaches.

Iran and its atomic program still offer the greatest potential for cooperation. Here Moscow has so far acted in concert with the USA and the EU, and despite all its reservations has held to the UN sanctions regime agreed on at the G8 summit in St. Petersburg. Moreover, the Kremlin provided a rare example of seeking a solution on its own initiative when in January 2006 it commenced negotiations with the Iranian leadership on IAEA monitored nuclear enrichment in Russia. Neither have succeeded, so that the fragile consensus is constantly being put to the test.

In contrast, the consensus concerning Kosovo was only temporary and purely procedural. The breakdown of the troika comprising the EU, Russia, and the USA has shown that for the time being aims remain diametrically opposed. While Moscow insists on the invulnerability of borders and Serbian sovereignty, the USA insists that Kosovo can »never again« be ruled from Belgrade, and that what already exists *de facto* should be codified *de jure*. And while Russia with an eye to »frozen conflicts« in the CIS warns of setting a dangerous precedent, the USA emphasizes the »special circumstances« of the genesis and course of the conflict.³⁸ A solely unilateral solution outside the UN framework would be for Russia not only a new example of American »opportunism« outside international law, but also on this occasion possible grounds to reciprocate. At any rate, in 2006 Transnistria and South Ossetia conducted dubious referendums with active Russian participation.

36. For example, Nicholas Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs, and so No. 3 in the State Department, February 21, 2007, available at: <http://www.state.gov>.

37. David Kramer, Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, The U.S. and Russia (Remarks to the Baltimore Council on Foreign Affairs), 2007, available at: <http://www.state.gov>.

38. For example, Condoleezza Rice in May 2007 in Moscow, available at: <http://www.state.gov>.

The two sides remain equally far apart as regards the formerly co-operative area of arms control. In this respect the »suspension« of the CSCE Treaty, which came into force on December 12, 2007, has given rise to only minor problems. The Treaty is not militarily significant, and the risks as regards the balance of power are clearly greater for Russia than for NATO. But in the wake of the ABM Treaty this represents the loss of a further building block from treaty-based arms control and so of predictability as regards security policy.

This applies all the more to US plans to install, after Alaska, components of its missile defense system in Poland, with 10 interception missiles, and in the Czech Republic, with a radar station, cited by Putin as further grounds for his withdrawal from the Treaty. Since from a purely numerical perspective Russia is unlikely to be defeated by 10 anti-aircraft missiles from Poland the military threat remains manageable. But this deployment represents a realignment of American power in Europe, which could be followed by other measures, as clearly evidenced by NATO expansion.

Russia has reacted to this in two ways. A whole series of threatening military gestures followed, from the possible termination of the INF Treaty, through the possible stationing of medium range nuclear missiles in the Kaliningrad region, to suspension of the CSCE Treaty. There were also concrete proposals for negotiations, however, which gave rise to some surprise not only in the USA, but also in Moscow's security policy community. For example, at the G8 summit in Heiligendamm Putin proposed joint utilization of the Soviet radar leased by Russia in Gabala in Azerbaijan, and increased this offer with further measures at the meeting with Bush on July 1 at Kennebunkport: (a) the joint modernization of Gabala, (b) the inclusion of radar under construction in Southern Russia, and (c) the establishment of a joint early warning center, which had been agreed as early as 2002, but had been forgotten in the meantime. In Putin's words, these offers provided an opportunity to rise »to an entirely new level in the quality of cooperation« between the two countries.³⁹ However, such a test of its unilateral arms policy between the certainty of Eastern European loyalty and the prospect of multipolar compromises may for the time being be asking too much of the Bush administration.

39. For example, at the joint press conference at Kennebunkport, July 2, 2007, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov>.

What Next?

Both presidents find themselves at the end of their eight-year terms, but the similarities end there, since their respective political situations could hardly be more different. While the USA has been put on the defensive, Russia has gone on the offensive. While George W. Bush stands before the ruins of his unilateral policy of hegemony, dashed to pieces on the rocks of the Iraq War, Putin has put Russia's post-Soviet remnants back together again in the form of a new international self-confidence. And while Bush's period of office constitutes an erratic episode that his successors must put right, Putin leaves behind a restorative mission that not only binds his successor as merely a hand-picked clone, but also is the substantive expression of the mood of Moscow's political class and beyond.

The fact that mutual mistrust is now greater than at any time since the end of the Soviet Union has deeply scarred relations between Washington and Moscow. This mistrust is being stirred up by the fundamental differences in perception at the center of which are the Russian divergence from the democratic path of American virtue, and the USA's inability to come to terms with Russia's regained self-confidence. According to the democratic peace approach there is a narrow nexus between Putin's authoritarian course in domestic policy and his noticeably confrontational foreign policy. For Moscow, in turn, this defensive stance against Putinism merely underlines the fact that, in contrast to the official rhetoric, the USA has no interest in a strong Russian partner, but only in a weak vassal.

The key to these varying narratives lies in the perception of the 1990s. While for Russia the period after what Putin has called the »greatest geo-strategic catastrophe« of the last century resembled balancing on the edge of an abyss, in US eyes it represented the emergence of completely new situation. And while in Moscow's view with Putin began Russia's re-assertion and emancipation from Western attempts at colonization, for Washington it was the beginning of democratic decline and the restoration of Soviet great-power ambitions. This also fans out into other narrative dissonances in respect of which the end of the Cold War – American victory versus Russian offers of cooperation – and »double standards« in the implementation of George W. Bush's freedom agenda play the most prominent role in the media.⁴⁰

40. Legvold, Robert: »U.S.–Russian Relations: An American Perspective,« in: *Russia in Global Affairs*, 4 (4) (2006): 160.

These differences in mutual perception are so fundamental that nothing will be achieved by means of cosmetic adjustments. Rather the coordinates of American policy towards Russia must be realigned. Neither the therapeutic condescension with which Clinton treated Yeltsin's Russia, and still less the amalgam of ideological crusade and power-political indifference that Bush has cultivated towards Putin have been able to get Moscow to sign up to Washington's agenda. The aim of making Russia a reliable partner of the West has been fundamentally unsuccessful. In any case, it was an aim that got lost in the rhetorical fog and in practical terms remained confined to compensating Russia, as the object of Western ambitions, with the crumbs that remained after other problems had been dealt with.

The real challenge therefore consists of Washington coming to regard Russia as a subject – beyond the transformative triumphalism released by »victory« in the Cold War, and beyond the hegemonic unilateralism that guides coalition formation in the global war on terrorism. On both sides there are both conjunctural and structural obstacles to this. For example, Bush will not now initiate such a change of course, while on the Russian side for the time being there is no sense of the risks entailed by the confrontational determination with which the national interest is being pursued.

Among the structural obstacles what stands out is the fact that Russia is now a long way from the West in terms of the standards of a democratic society, without at the same time having increased its international weight by way of compensation – notwithstanding Moscow's dreams of a »world without the West.«⁴¹ The »Russian factor« is rampant above all in the heads of the Moscow political class, intoxicated by their natural gas resource wealth, manifest in a still notable gap between demonstrative demands and practical solutions. However, this will only work well while no contributions are required because of the unilateral ignorance of other actors. In connection with the necessary integration of a possible disruptive potential this justifies the need for a policy of »engaging [with] Russia.« Only this will make it possible to test what Russia really represents beyond its status claims in current areas of conflict.

Even if Russia's desire for self-assertion is limited for the time being to winning international status and in that respect remains fixed on the

41. Barma, Naazneen, Ratner, Ely and Weber, Steven: »A World without the West,« in: *The National Interest*, 90 (2007): 23–30.

USA one should not deceive oneself into thinking that Moscow, as in the past, will ultimately pursue Washington's course or at least tolerate it. Subjectively, today it feels strong enough to pose, via international law, as the advocate of the international order against global American power and regime projections. This increases the costs of American unilateralism, although its fate will not be decided in this way. For the time being Russia will not be able to exercise such influence in Washington. On the contrary, Moscow's image is currently situated once more, after temporarily brightening up in the wake of 9/11, »somewhere deep in the salt-mines,« as one American politician once put it.⁴² And the most vociferous (anti-)Russian lobby is that front of liberal critics who in association with Polish, Ukrainian, and Baltic interest groups has identified in Putinism a worthwhile object of its Russia bashing, which is nourished by a number of motives. In Germany this is kept under control by the very robust interests of a trading state in the center of Europe in stability and open borders in the eastern part of the continent, as well as by a less robust discourse of reconciliation. Such safeguards do not exist in Washington, so that under official pressure the tendency present in both parties is strong to subordinate relations with Russia to conditions in Russia. However, this benefits neither the one nor the other.

The task is currently not only to hold together relations that are collapsing due to diverging values by means of residual common interests; it is rather to close the increasing gaps in the core sphere of mutual foreign and security policy interests. This will constitute a considerable challenge to the coherence of the double strategy if both these – legitimate and rational – aims are to be pursued jointly: to influence conditions in Russia in a democratic direction and to use relations with Russia to solve common problems, beyond the tendency to »push back.« What is needed for this purpose is, on the one hand, a de-ideologization of democratic peace in the official discourse of the US administration. The fact that American foreign policy not only serves legitimate national interests, but also produces their legitimation from a universal mission blinds it to divergent interests, makes it impervious to compromise, and exposes democracy to accusations that it is a geostrategic conspiracy. Such a de-ideologization has already set in with the decline of neoconservative ideas about an imperial order; however, Russia's image problem has checked its fall.

42. Trenin, Dmitrij B.: »Vašingtonskoe tango moskvy. Rossii neobchodima novaja strategija v otnošenijach s sšA,« in: *Kommersant*, November 15, 2006.

On the other hand, what is needed is a »decontamination« of democracy promotion; its disconnection from American geostrategy and its military instruments of regime change.⁴³ This concerns, on the one hand, the American concept of democratization. What is called for here is less model-orientated Platonism and more historical sensitivity in the sense of a modernization-theory based gradualism. On the other hand, it concerns the operational embedding of democracy promotion, which, on the short leash of the State Department and US embassies nourishes suspicions that it is above all a foreign policy instrument, and not only since the advent of »transformational diplomacy«.

This does nothing to diminish the distance from Putinism, which remains a challenge for democratic values. The resulting tensions have therefore not been reduced. And as long as bashing Russia makes more of an impression in respect of both American and Western public opinion than engaging Russia these tensions will remain virulent. This can ultimately be combated only by an articulate lobby, but in the short term by clearly communicated cooperation goals. In this respect, a readiness to cooperate will emerge – in particular under the current conditions of a basic disposition towards confrontation – at the earliest inspired by challenges which are considered by both sides as such. The list of these challenges is familiar and long; their consensual interpretation, however, requires the ability to deal productively with disagreement. Something would therefore have been achieved if American policy were to reconsider the certainties of the beginning of Bush's term of office, that great powers can have different interests regardless of their internal make up. More still would be achieved by recognizing that for the »indispensable nation« too global partnerships and procedures established by international law are unavoidable.

This recognition must clearly mature further, in particular because it demands not only the end of Bush's unilateral legacy, but also something like a cultural transformation in the USA. In the current election campaign almost every candidate is promising both; the two well-known Russia bashers, McCain and Edwards, however, are conspicuously holding back from applying it to Russia. No wonder, yet a change depends, in contrast to only a few years ago, no longer solely on the USA, but also on Russia.

43. This notion was introduced by Thomas Carothers in 2007 in: »U.S. Democracy Promotion During and After Bush.« Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.