

Keynote Address
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Thomas Graham
Distinguished Fellow
Council on Foreign Relations

I spent twenty years in the U.S. government working on Russian affairs between 1983 and 2007. The first part of my career was a rousing success. Along with my colleagues at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow in the late Soviet period, I brought down the Soviet Union—with some help from the Russian people, of course. The rest of my career was rather less successful. Working in Washington and Moscow, my task was to foster a strategic partnership with Russia, and we know how that turned out. Here too, of course, I had help from some Russian people.

I have spent the years since trying to understand why, and I want to share some of what I have learned with you. And I want to do that by reflecting on two well-known aphorisms that cut to the heart of the challenge of dealing with Russia today.

The first is Winston Churchill’s quip that Russia “is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” But I do not want to talk about the riddle of Russia. I want to build on what Churchill said next: “But perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.”

That, to my mind, is undoubtedly true, and I find it remarkable how little attention we pay to Russia’s national interests in our debate today.

In the United States, we demonize Putin as the evil genius behind Russia’s “malign” behavior, designed to undo the U.S.-led global order and disrupt the democratic system in the United States itself. And we characterize Russia as a pure kleptocracy, in which money and greed drive policy at both home and abroad. Such views do a grave injustice to a country that provides one of the greatest examples of geopolitical advance in the past 500 years—exceeded only by the British Empire—and saved Europe twice in little more than two centuries from domination by Napoleon and Hitler. And they do an injustice to Putin himself, who has restored Russian power in the traditional regions of Russian endeavor, especially in Europe and the Middle East. Something other than malicious intent and greed is at work.

Putin and his colleagues, we need to remember, operate in a strategic framework with deep roots in Russian history and tradition. In broad outline, their foreign policy bears a resemblance to that of the great tsars of the 18th and 19th centuries and to Stalin’s. It is a strategic framework shaped by Russia’s geography, historical experience, and autocratic spirit.

Russia, as we know, is located in the heart of Northern Eurasia, a vast region with few formidable physical barriers and easily defensible borders, a situation that allows for easy

movement of peoples and armies eastward and westward. And not surprisingly, Russian history has been one of both devastating invasion and rapid expansion.

Russian expansion, especially into Europe, but also in Central Asia, brought in diverse populations that did not share the culture or traditions of the ethnic Russians who formed the core of the Russian state.

And finally, the autocratic spirit militated against the formation of a strong national identity in a largely peasant country, at least up to the Second World War. Peasants gave their allegiance, to the extent they gave it at all, to the person of the tsar, not to any idea of Russia.

These circumstances—indefensible borders, a heterogeneous population lacking strong national identity—have throughout history created a deep sense of vulnerability, some would say paranoia, among Russian leaders. The great puzzle they faced was how to defend a sparsely-populated, multiethnic country located on a vast territory with few formidable physical barriers abutting powerful states or unstable regions. Historically, they sought security in strategic depth, buffer zones, regional hegemony, and strict internal control, as well as in disruption of the formation of powerful coalitions of hostile states along Russia's borders.

Russia today operates within this tradition. It seeks security in similar ways. What we see as Russia's aggression against Georgia and Ukraine, the Kremlin sees as justifiable actions to defend its periphery. What we see as a Russian effort to undermine American policy in Syria, or the Middle East more broadly, the Kremlin sees as actions designed to contain the instability that menaced Russia's southern reaches. Russian actions in Europe today—the effort to exacerbate internal divisions, to raise doubt about NATO's commitment to its Article V guarantee of collective defense, and to drive wedges between states—are in part intended to prevent the consolidation of a European entity that would dwarf Russia in population, wealth, and power potential as the United States does today. Recent Russian actions in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America may not fit neatly into this strategic framework and may bear elements of opportunism and mischievous exploitation of America's missteps. But they lie at the periphery of Russia's foreign policy, not at the core, which should be of most concern to us.

Now none of what I have said is intended to justify Russia's actions, or minimize the challenge that they pose. It is to argue that there is a logic behind Russian actions, which we need to understand both to deter Russia and to avoid needlessly provoking it, as we seek to advance our interests in Europe and elsewhere.

That logic also underscores a fundamental truth about relations between Russia, on the one hand, and Europe and the United States, on the other: As has been true since Russia emerged as a great power in Europe under Peter the Great three centuries ago, relations are inherently competitive; strategic partnership is unsustainable. In the light, it is the first two decades after the breakup of the Soviet Union that are the historical aberration, not today's Russia.

In short, the West faces the same Russia challenge today as it has faced for at least the past two centuries: How to manage relations with a huge, powerful country to the East that is alien in spirit in many ways yet essential to the West's security. And the answer today is probably the

same as it has been historically: finding the appropriate mix of resistance to Russia's insidious actions and accommodation of its interests, all in ways that do not jeopardize the advance of the West's own long-term goals.

If we are to get this mix right, one requirement will be an accurate assessment of Russian power. And this brings me to the second aphorism, at times attributed to Churchill, but also to Bismarck and Talleyrand: "Russia is never as strong or as weak as it appears."

The West has tended to extrapolate inappropriately trends after Russia's great victories of 1814 and 1945 and its devastating collapses in 1917 and 1991, seeing continuing strength or weakness well into the future. It is now clear, for example, that we underestimated Russian power and resilience after the breakup of the Soviet Union at least until the eruption of the Ukraine crisis in 2014. That is not to say that Russia was not weak in the immediate years after the breakup. It was. The 1990s were a decade of profound socio-economic and political crisis. The economy plunged by 40 percent between 1991 and 1998. The Red Army became a shadow of its former self. The central state structures collapsed, as regional barons and rapacious oligarchs seized their functions and carved up the lucrative assets of a once almost totally nationalized economy. Political order was undone by a raging battle between Soviet patriots and communists and pro-Western forces. Our mistake, then, was not so much exaggerating Russia's weakness as it was basing our Russia policy on the assumption that that weakness would continue for years to come.

I do not absolve myself of error in this regard. In 1999, I wrote an essay entitled "A World without Russia?" Granted, I put a question mark at the end, but nevertheless. The essay may have been, if I might say so myself, an insightful analysis of the previous 25 years of Soviet/Russian history, but it was without doubt an abject failure at prognostication.

We were to pay dearly for underestimating Russia during the Bush Administration, in which I served, when Russia crushed Georgia, an American proxy, in a brief war in August 2008. That put the lie to our mantra that Russia did not have a veto over NATO's decisions. It did—in the guise of the use of force. The Obama administration paid dearly as well, when Russia attacked Ukraine in 2014 and intervened in Syria in 2015. What we failed to appreciate was how central the idea of being a great power was to Russian identity, what costs Russia—both the elites and the people—was prepared to endure to restore its role on the world stage. And we failed to appreciate the great capacity of the Russian state, restored in its fundamental characteristics under Putin, to mobilize the resources of Russian society for state purposes. If power is to some degree a measure of state capacity multiplied by political will, what Russia lacks in capacity is more than compensated by a preternatural political will. As a result, Russia punches far above its weight on the global stage.

Caught off-guard by Russia's seizure of Crimea and instigation of rebellion in eastern Ukraine, and outraged by Russia's interference in our domestic politics, we in the West now tend to exaggerate Russian power and influence. We talk as if Russia can decide the outcomes of elections in mature democratic societies, as if Putin is now the master of the Middle East, as if a planeload of Russian officers could save Venezuelan strongman Nicolas Maduro from imminent demise. To listen to many voices in the United States, you would think that we now live in Putin's world.

The reality is less alarming. Russia, we should remember, does not sow societal divisions in Europe and the United States; it exploits divisions that are largely of our own making and which are in our power to overcome if approached calmly and pragmatically. Russia's profile may have risen sharply in the Middle East, but the sectarian strife and interstate rivalries are well beyond Moscow's ability to master, as they were indeed beyond the ability of the United States. The fate of the Middle East will be largely determined by the regional powers—Egypt, Israel, Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia—and other indigenous forces. Moreover, with the exception of Iran, all those countries are still more closely tied to the United States than they are to Russia. And the American effort to topple Maduro had run into unforeseen (if not unforeseeable) obstacles long before Moscow sent a planeload of officers.

This exaggeration of Russian power, to my mind, is to a large degree a reflection of the West's loss of confidence in its own abilities, the dysfunction of our national governments, especially in the United States, and the neglect of our own sources of strength that have produced the most prosperous societies in the world. In this light, putting our own houses in order is perhaps the first step in mastering the Russia challenge.

But as we restore our own power, we must guard against the temptation to exaggerate Russia's weakness once again. Russia will continue to play a major role on the global stage thanks to its nuclear arsenal, vast natural endowment, geographical location in the heart of Eurasia, veto at the UN Security Council, and its scientific prowess, which enables it to develop the military applications of new technologies, especially in the cyber realm. Our task will be to fashion a relationship with Russia that reduces the risk of nuclear conflict, manages with restraint the inevitable competition, and creates opportunities for cooperation against transnational threats, such as international terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and climate change—or, to repeat, a mix of resistance and accommodation, competition and cooperation, that advances our interests.

In the end, we can master the Russia challenge if we approach Russia without fear or arrogance, respect both Russian power and its limits, and proceed with confidence in our own abilities and awareness of the limits of our own power. We will never achieve the strategic partnership we aspired to at the end of the Cold War—objective and subjective conditions have put that beyond reach. But we can build relations with Russia that advance our security and prosperity, in part by helping Russia to feel more secure itself.