CHATHAM HOUSE
Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org.uk
F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org.uk
Charity Registration Number: 208223

REP Programme Paper PP 01/08

Reflections on Russia and the West

Andrew Wood
Associate Fellow, Russia and Eurasia Programme
Former UK Ambassador to Russia

21 November 2008

Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to government or to any political body. It does not hold opinions of its own; the views expressed in this text are the responsibility of the author(s)/speaker(s). This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s)/speaker(s) and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication/event.

Main Points

- Those concerned with policy-making towards Russia must determine how best to listen to the country's changing conversation with itself, keeping in mind the fact that the West should not suppose itself to have more influence on that inner dialogue than is really the case.
- Western policies towards Russia have been a contributory rather than determining factor in the country's development since Gorbachev. The main aim of Western policies in the late 1980s and early 1990s was to manage a peaceful transition in Europe as a whole. Policy towards Russia fitted into this wider picture, but could not be, for the West, its sole or determining preoccupation.
- In the early post-Soviet period, the West pursued two main aims: to work with Russia – and other successor states – to enable the construction of market economies, and to promote democracy. However, the speed of transition could only be set by the Russian leadership.
- After 2000, Western policy consensus started to dissipate. The West failed early-on to articulate its concerns over the direction the new Russian administration was heading. Putin drew the relevant conclusions from this, and his confidence in his ability to manage his Western counterparts has grown over time.
- Russia's politics of grievance, its increasing belief that all international resistance is the result of the West's enmity, undermine efforts to build a constructive relationship. The West must avoid being drawn into the myth that Russia was humiliated by the West in the early nineties, and now deserves recompense in the form of spheres of privileged interests.
- This does not, however, imply a policy of containment. The West should continue to try to engage with as broad a range of Russian actors as it can, whilst treating with profound skepticism the idea that Russia can better determine the interests of its neighbours than their own governments.

The essential problem for all of those concerned with policy-making towards Russia has been in determining over the years how best to listen in to Russia's changing conversation with itself. Like any such internal dialogue, it has included seductive delusions, tenacious memories and the personal hopes of the leading actors mingled into a generalized idea of the national interest. Outsiders are often misled into thinking that they have a good grasp of what the country's national interests may objectively be, and to sympathize with, or reject, more than they should some of the shifting emotional baggage that lies behind Russian policies.

Russia, in short, is very much the main actor here, and Western policies towards the country have been a contributory rather than a principal factor in determining what has happened in that country. That said, it was and remains a key determinant of Western policies that the post-Soviet space should not dissolve into a state of conflict. That seemed a real possibility in the 1980s and for at least part of the 1990s. Both Gorbachev and maybe particularly Yeltsin deserve much of the credit, and the honour which goes with it, for the peaceful outcome to the crisis of the Soviet Union, and the collapse of the Soviet position in Eastern Europe. Contrary to what many now affect to believe, the West did not seek to break up the USSR. Indeed, it feared the consequences. The views of then President George H. Bush and Secretary of State James Baker were accurately conveyed in the famous 'Chicken Kiev' speech urging Ukraine to avoid rash moves towards independence. The West was slow to recognize that the end of the Soviet Union was inevitable. It cannot be said too often that the Soviet Union collapsed because of its inherent and accumulated failings, not because of outside pressure or plots. There are those who prefer to believe otherwise now, and one can try to understand why there might be Russians who want to place the blame for what they see as the humiliation of that collapse on to domestic traitors or foreign conspirators. The objective evidence is against them.

Nor, just to close that circle, does the idea bear scrutiny that the Soviet hold over Eastern Europe would have been maintained but for Gorbachev's weakness or his foolishness in submitting to Western blandishments. Violence might have delayed the inevitable, but not for long. Moscow's grip on East Germany was critical, but not sustainable in the face of dissent elsewhere, not least in Poland. It was in its way ironic that major Western politicians like Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and President François Mitterrand should have supported beyond any realistic assessment the idea that two Germanies could survive the tumult in Soviet-dominated Europe, but they did. This was, in fact, further evidence that a process was under way

there and in the USSR which had to be managed by all those involved as best they could, and that there was no malign Western conspiracy. There are those in Moscow who prefer the dangerous comfort of believing otherwise, some in whole, and others in part.

Another point that is often ignored – and hard for those in the West to recognize – is that the West comes in various forms, but has a particular integrity in the Russian imagination. That is not in the least to decry Moscow's skill in exploiting differences between the countries of the EU, within NATO, or between the United States and its allies. It is intended simply as a reminder of the complexity of Russia's feelings towards the idea of the West as a whole, including, for example, those expressed in the claim that Russia is a separate and even self-sufficient civilization, or that Moscow is - or at any rate should be - a centre of power on a par with Washington. This obvious point is made here to confirm that it is the way in which Russia's conversation with itself has evolved over the past couple of decades or more which has been the principal determinant of its relations with the institutions and countries of the West. There are ideas which have rooted themselves in Moscow which are now political facts of weight, never mind how much they may seem to outsiders like me to be more mythic than objectively true.

The main aim of Western policies in the late 1980s and early 1990s was to manage a peaceful transition in Europe as a whole. Policy towards Russia fitted into this wider picture, but could not be, for the West, its sole or determining preoccupation. The reunification of Germany was agreed with the USSR at a time when it was assumed in Washington and elsewhere that the USSR would remain in being. The next years brought different challenges; the most urgent tasks after the dissolution of the Soviet Union are considered to be the adoption of agreed borders between the new republics, and the safe disposition between them of military resources, especially nuclear weapons. Russia came out of this comparatively well. The alternative of violence would have been unbearably damaging to all concerned, and particularly to those living in the former Soviet space – as the break-up of Yugoslavia demonstrated. It remains a guiding principle of Western policy that borders should not be altered without consent. It is worth remembering that no Western government supported Chechnya's claims to independence, or objected to the establishment of the Belarus-Russia union.

The same principle, of course, applied, and still applies, to Eastern Europe and the Baltic states. Suspicion of Russia and its long-term intentions was and is higher in these countries than in Western Europe or the United States. The historical reasons for that are obvious, if painful for Russians to

acknowledge. The desire of Russia's neighbours and near neighbours to be included in the main Western institutions was a political reality, and one linked to their development as stable democratic polities. In theory it might well have been better for Western relations with Russia if such countries had progressed towards membership of the EU before the question of their joining NATO were posed, but political realities determined otherwise. The risks of their joining for the effectiveness and cohesion of NATO were clear, along with the risks for the relationship between Moscow and Western powers. The dangers of refusing them entry, or of allowing Moscow a right of veto over their policies, were also clear. Western policy-makers tried to square the circle by improving the machinery for Russian/NATO coordination, but were not prepared, understandably enough, to allow Russia to secure a right of veto over NATO policies.

It has been argued that if Russia had been offered the prospect of eventual NATO and/or EU membership, then Moscow might have looked more kindly on the idea of others joining those bodies before it. It is doubtful, however, if the question would have survived if it had been tested in practice. It cannot, in any event, plausibly be denied that both EU entry and NATO membership have helped to ensure the cohesion and stability of Eastern Europe, as well as the Baltics, better than leaving them unanchored would have done, any more than it can be denied that there has been a price to pay for the expansion of NATO in the relationship between Russia and the West. Russia has not, structurally speaking, been shut out by EU or NATO expansion, and instability in these areas is not in Russia's true interest, if one considers the issues dispassionately. But Moscow's hopes of a new relationship with NATO which would have given Russia a right to control important aspects of the alliance's policies have not been realized, and events have served to increase its suspicions of NATO even as Russia's own self-understanding has shifted.

The Yugoslav crisis crystallized the inherited suppositions of the Russian foreign policy elite, particularly about NATO, into something close to a certainty. I confess to some sympathy for that. The effect, moreover, built on a growing feeling that Russia had been more generally let down by the West, exacerbated or even provoked by disappointment at the difficulties of transition to a market economy let alone a structured democracy. The wish to have others at least to share the blame for those difficulties, not least after the 1998 crash, was again understandable. Transition exhaustion developed along with an increasing reluctance to look clearly into the dark aspects of the Soviet past, and spreading amnesia as to the depth of the crisis that overwhelmed the Soviet system. The espousal of the multipolar thesis

advanced by Former Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov and others implied an obligation to diminish the putative dominance of the United States, with malign results we see today. It was Primakov, too, who made the recovery of Tsarist Russia after its defeat in the Crimean War into a lodestar of Russia's diplomatic policy aims from the mid-1990s on – without of course wishing to remind others of the disaster that befell the Russian Empire not so long afterwards. The recovery of diplomatic weight was seen as a good in itself, without necessarily considering quite what that weight would be used for – a precursor of the claim to be a 'Great Power' today. One can understand why that may be balm to some spirits, but in itself it lacks content.

Could the West have done more to help Russia's transition? Former MP Yegor Gaidar maintains that prompt and generous financial assistance in 1992 would have made a difference. Arguably, it could have given the first reform effort more time to complete its work, and there could have been dividends in trust. Or of course the opponents of reform could have argued that changes were being made only at the insistence of the West. From the perspective of the West, there were two main aims to be pursued here: to work with Russia – and other successor states – to enable the construction of market economies, and to promote democracy. Those aims could only be realized in collaboration with Russia's leaders, and at a pace set by Russian (or of course Ukrainian and other) political realities.

Anders Aslund has suggested in a recent book (*Russia's Capitalist Revolution*[1]) that the transition to a market economy was a far greater success of the 1990s than the establishment of viable democratic institutions. Privatization had its raw and certainly contentious aspects. The determined opposition of the Duma dragged out the necessary adoption of responsible budgets, and the passage of necessary legislation, until the 1998 crisis compelled the Primakov government to hold to the first, and the Duma was prepared early in Putin's first term to enact a reform package, in a form largely inherited from the Yeltsin era. The West tried to encourage the reform process by means of the IMF, and by gestures designed to pay Russia in advance for changes yet to be made such as membership of the G8. The West also provided technical help and advice, not all of which was welcome or effectively deployed. But it was Russia that made the running, and the eventual success of a return to growth, from early 1999 on, vindicated the

[1] Anders Aslund, *Russia's Capitalist Revolution*. Washington DC: Peter G. Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2007.

deep and painful process of economic reconstruction initiated by the Gaidar government. The subsequent oil price bonanza built on respectably firm, though not of course perfect, economic foundations.

The political foundations were far weaker. It is fashionable now to speak of the 'chaos under Yeltsin'. I do not think that is just, not least because it appears to lay the blame on Yeltsin personally, when it should be shared more widely, not least with the Duma. It seemed to me at the time that by the end of the Yeltsin era there were grounds for hope that the institutional underpinnings of a pluralist system could be strengthened from 2000 on. The 1998 crash had brought in a conservative-minded government which found itself constrained to follow responsible policies, with political lessons being learned as a result even by determined nay-sayers. There was a respectable number of candidates for President by mid-1999, the Duma elections of that year produced a majority disposed to work with the Kremlin, and many of the Governors were coming to the end of their terms (as then laid down), thereby giving some prospect of the federal system being re-energized. And of course the press was free. But none of these factors were enough to ensure that pluralist democracy would necessarily be consolidated.

Could the West have done more to hasten Russia's evolution in a pluralist and democratic direction? If there was more, it would have been early on, though the trial of strength between Yeltsin and the Supreme Soviet made that problematic. As time went on, advice from the West inevitably became less compelling than it might have been in the early years of Russia's reincarnation. And the countries of the West were anyway neither of one mind as to the need to work on Russia's democratic transition nor agreed as to what that might mean. There was more consensus on the sorts of economic reform that were needed. The Americans, Germans and French made particular efforts to build personal relationships with Yeltsin, the British less so under Prime Minister John Major. The UK concentrated more on scholarship, commercial exchanges and targeted assistance. The British Council played an invaluable role in helping people to people ties. But overall, the countries of the West sought to encourage Russia to move in a hazily defined direction, buttressed, it would seem, by the assumption that things would work themselves out as Russia moved towards their ideas of normality.

The Putin era began with violence. The West was duly critical of Russian actions in Chechnya, but that had little traction in Moscow, after what NATO had done over Kosovo. And Western leaders quickly reverted to type, in assuming that their best means of influence was to develop personal relationships with the new President. Prime Minister Tony Blair led the way,

and President Putin conducted a successful charm blitz at the 2000 G8 Summit. Russia became an economic growth story, and Western leaders were encouraged by the passage of reform legislation. There was no criticism of substance of the way that the new Kremlin administration dealt with Boris Berezovsky, Vladimir Gusinsky or even, later, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, or the way in which the Governors were slowly brought to heel. Even the taming of the media was passed over as unfortunate but understandable. The West, in short, bought into the foundation myth of the Putin era, that the new President had brought stability and prosperity after the troubles of the Yeltsin era. Western business interests urged them to continue to believe in the idea that Russia would continue to develop in its own way into a responsible and economically integrated member of the international community.

There are two points to be made here. First, if Western countries had their questions about the way that the new administration was headed, then the time to make them was at the outset, while Putin was learning how to lead his country. Second, the optimistic assessment of the prospects that comforted the West was not in itself stupid. It is unlikely that Putin would have responded positively to early advice about, for instance, the virtues of press freedom. What is clear, however, is that he quickly took the measure of his Western colleagues, and that his confidence in his ability to manage them has grown over time. Had they been less accommodating at the start, perhaps he would have been less ready now to see their reactions to Russia's most recent adventure in the Caucasus as the ineffectual bleatings of Washington-led hostile sheep.

One can also sympathize with the proposition that Russia will evolve in its own way in its own time, and that outsiders must work as best they can within that framework. It is, after all, an essential theme of this paper that the others have to try to understand and work with Russia's conversation with itself, with the corollary that we should not suppose ourselves to have more influence on that inner dialogue than is really the case. The interaction of Russian and outside business interests is in principle beneficent, quite apart from the fact that there is money to be made. Stability in a prosperous Russia would be a good thing for the West.

But all this depends on the assumption that Russia and its foreign partners are working on the basis of understood and predictable rules, as is by and large the case with China. The present mood in Russia suggests that its leadership has come increasingly to believe that all resistance to its policies flows from the enmity of the West, and the United States in particular. This is foolish self-pity, buttressed by the myth of Russia's humiliation at the hands of

its alleged enemies. The end result will be to make Russia in practice as isolated as it now already feels itself to be.

What could the West do to help? There have been enough sensible calls for restraint and reflection, a constructive dialogue and so on. The difficulty has been to move on from these to real content, for two reasons: to concentrate on the bilateral relationship is to distort the wider context; and to skirt around the question of where Moscow is headed is to compound the problem. Values matter. An experienced British observer (John Kampfner) is recorded as having concluded from his participation in the Valdai discussions this September, "in my 30 years of visiting this place I have never seen the politics of grievance as strong as it is now." Russian values and positions, to judge for example from President Medvedev's speech to the Assembly on 5 November 2008, have shifted markedly from those the West tried to work with in the 1990s.

It is hard for the countries of the West to have a constructive relationship with a leadership determined to believe, or even to affect to believe, in the West's committed hostility. The leaders of Western Europe would be particularly ill advised to buy into the idea that Russia has been somehow – and it is never specified just how – humiliated by the United States, and the West in general, so that it is now owed recompense. The right that Moscow asserts of intercession in Russia's self-proclaimed region of interest is a pernicious doctrine. The bilateral Western relationship with Russia cannot override wider regional interests and obligations just because the Kremlin would prefer that it did. It is not anti-Russian to wish to work with countries like Ukraine, including on defence questions. Nor is it anti-Russian to treat with profound scepticism the idea that Moscow knows better than Kiev or Tbilisi how Ukraine or Georgia should develop. There is no reason why the West should be much agitated by Russian military posturing in areas beyond the reach of effective Russia power. Nor is the 'energy weapon' greatly to be feared. The first thing, in short, is for the countries of the West to be strong and of a good courage, and to speak truth to power wherever it lies in Russia.

Refusing to accept the present Russia narrative is not, however, to suggest a policy of containment, just to indicate that placatory behaviour will not answer. The countries of the West will and should continue to try to engage with as broad a range of Russian actors as they can. Russia is not limited to the current political elite. Business, cultural, and other personal contacts remain vital. The narrow and suspicious world of the political elite is not the sole reality. Better and more liberal visa policies by both Western countries and Russia would be welcome. Russia's entry into the WTO remains desirable, of

course on condition that it would be faithful to the rules. A new agreement with the EU would have no tangible benefit without that entry.

Andrew Wood is an Associate Fellow of the Russia and Eurasia Programme, Chatham House, and former UK Ambassador to Russia.

aslpwood@aol.com