
Obama and Russia: Facing the Heritage of the Bush Years



Thomas Gomart

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Summary

Barack Obama's recent overtures toward Russia show a desire to break away from the Bush years, which were characterized by a profound deterioration in American-Russian relations. To gauge the chances of success for this openness, we must reexamine the Bush legacy weighing on the resumption of relations, especially on their strategic dimension. Indeed, direct exchanges between the two countries over the course of the past eight years have increasingly turned towards head-on opposition. Indirect exchanges between the two states in Russia's neighborhood also display contradictory influences, with Iran and Georgia bringing to light deep-rooted differences fuelled by cold war-style rhetoric. In other words, even if Barack Obama appears to be imposing his own style by reorienting America's foreign policy, his scope for action is partly limited by the legacy of his predecessor.

Introduction

On 2 April 2009, Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev met for the first time on the sidelines of the G20 summit in London. The US President announced that he would go to Russia in July to speed up the resumption of relations. Indeed, from his arrival at the White House, he has pursued a diplomatic maneuver aiming to tie Moscow's support on stabilizing Afghanistan and the Iran dossier to issues of European security.¹ All of this still envisages extensive nuclear disarmament through the renegotiation of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START). The desire to break with the Bush years is obvious. Yet the fact remains that these years determine the majority of options available today. Indeed, it must be understood how Washington has perceived Russia's return to power during Vladimir Putin's double term (2000-2008), and how this perception has resulted in a considerable deterioration of Russo-American relations, which is now restricting the new President's scope for action. The weight of this legacy demands enthusiasm for a rapprochement be moderated, which could clash with the two administrations' different paces: the White House needs rapid results while the Kremlin often tends to favor the status quo.

In June 2001, on the occasion of his first meeting with Putin, George W. Bush declared that he had seen the "soul" of his interlocutor "in the depths of his eyes." In September 2001, the immediate support shown by the Kremlin to the White House was interpreted as a major break in Russian foreign policy, ready to open up to an era of cooperation. Relations between the two countries, however, were to stagnate rapidly before seriously deteriorating to a low point not seen since the cold war. In February 2007, Putin castigated US "unilateralism." In May 2008, Medvedev launched an initiative aiming to build a "new European security architecture" before expressing, three months later, the desire to defend his country's "sphere of privileged interest." The war in Georgia was a clear turning point and led George Bush to lambaste Russia at the United Nations (UN) in September 2008.

An analysis of the Bush legacy demands that two levels of analysis be distinguished:² the resumption of Russian power, its nature and strength, has been analyzed differently by the expert community and by the

Translated from French by Nicola Bigwood.

¹ For more on this maneuver and Moscow's attitude during the first quarter of 2009, see: T. Gomart, "Washington-Moscou: la nouvelle donne" [Washington-Moscow: the New Order], *Politique internationale*, No. 123, 2009.

² For a critical analysis, see: H.-J. Spanger, *Between Ground Zero and Square One, How George W. Bush Failed on Russia*, Frankfurt, PRIF Reports, No. 82, 2008. For a broader assessment, see: M. Zaborowski, *Bush's Legacy and America's Next Foreign Policy*, Paris, EUISS, Chaillot Paper, No. 111, 2008.

Bush administration.³ At the risk of oversimplification, this disconnection touches on a crucial point: Russia was progressively presented in White House terminology as a revisionist power, while the expert community worked on outlining possible areas of cooperation. Often missing from the analysis, the action/reaction dialectic is at the heart of the deterioration of Russian-American relations. In addition, analysis has clashed with the two protagonists' different essences. Focused on its object, the expert community does not always manage to locate Russia's position in the US administration's field of global priorities. However, over the course of these years, the US once more became Russia's strategic reference point as the latter regained power; while Moscow remained a low priority owing to the change of strategy imposed by Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and China. For the Bush administration, from a strategic perspective, Russia belonged to those countries at the "strategic crossroads" that could threaten the stability of their regional environment.⁴

America's confusion over Russia's return to power can undoubtedly be explained by the juxtaposition of two angles of approach. Firstly, political analysis did not succeed in cutting the Gordian knot between a Russia seen as an avatar of the USSR and a Russia seen as one of the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China), that is as an emerging power capable, eventually, of altering geo-strategic balances. Taking stock, Condoleezza Rice judged that Russia had been treated, not as "a vanquished enemy," but as "a partner in power."⁵ In reality, the Bush administration hesitated between a retrospective understanding—thinking in the terms of a "new cold war," requiring a new form of containment—and a prospective understanding—focusing on the profound transformation of Russian society and the return to the conduct of a traditional power.

Secondly, US analysis of Russia remains, for the most part, tributary to the analysis of Russia's neighbors. It certainly seems as though the Bush administration favored action on Russia's doorstep at the cost of a steady relationship with Moscow. Prioritizing transformation over stability, the practical details of US presence were altered profoundly insofar as they became more militarized compared with the 1990s. Present at Russia's gateway, the US encouraged the enlargement of NATO for some countries in the area. Operation *Enduring Freedom* in Afghanistan, the invasion of Iraq, and the tension maintained with Iran indirectly affected several capitals in the "post-Soviet" space. Action on Russia's doorstep gradually caused relations with Russia to become tense without managing to develop them further. At the same time, Russia rediscovered an economic power that could be converted to political-military power and managed to benefit

³ This viewpoint deserves its own study.

⁴ Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, February 2006.

⁵ Condoleezza Rice, speech on American-Russian relations, Washington, GMF, 18 September 2008: "Since the end of the Cold War—spanning three administrations, both Democratic and Republican—the United States has sought to encourage the emergence of a strong, prosperous, and responsible Russia. We have treated Russia not as a vanquished enemy, but as an emerging partner. We have supported—politically and financially—Russia's transition to a modern, market-based economy and a free, peaceful society. And we have respected Russia as a great power, with which to work to solve common problems."

from the failures of America's extreme power, particularly in this area. The war with Georgia can be seen as an illustration of the intellectual confusion and the political impasse the Bush administration ultimately reached. The challenge is to grasp the reasons for this impasse in order to consider the elements of continuity that could affect Barack Obama's policy.

Direct Exchanges: the “Superiority Complex” vs. the “Inferiority Complex”

Interpretations of Russian power

Part of the Bush administration’s intellectual confusion vis-à-vis Russia undoubtedly stems from its conviction of being part of an indefinite “unipolar moment.” This formula, which came to prominence in the 1990s, described an American power dominating other powers on all levels, and in particular “a drastically weakened Russia.”⁶ After 11 September 2001, Russia allegedly “fundamentally realigned” its foreign policy to match that of the US owing to joint interests in combating radical Islam and to a desire to be integrated into the Western camp.⁷ However, driven by a strong desire for revenge for the so-called transition years, Russia gradually showed by mirror effect Washington’s deep-rooted reticence toward considering sharing global responsibilities.⁸ The Bush administration had difficulty accepting the demands of emerging countries eager to transform their economic weight into political influence. Conversely, some analyses were quick to highlight the fact that protest against the American order would, from the outset, be the driving force behind Putin’s foreign policy.⁹

The intellectual origins of neo-conservatism, combined with the professional careers of key members of the Bush administration, explain why Russia tended to be seen only as the loser of the cold war’s ideological combat.¹⁰ Conviction in the validity of the victor’s values resulted in cold war stereotypes being replayed and the revival of an underlying psychology

⁶ C. Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs*, 1990/91. For an updated thesis after 11 September 2001, see: “The Unipolar Moment Revisited,” *The National Interest*, 2002/03, p. 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8

⁸ M. Brawley, “Building Blocks or a BRIC Wall? Fitting US Foreign Policy to the Shifting Distribution of Power,” *Asian Perspective*, No. 4, 2007, p. 151-175.

⁹ On the first point, see: J. Bugajski, *Cold Peace, Russia’s New Imperialism*, Westport, Praeger/Csis, 2004. On the second point, see: T. Ambrosio, *Challenging America’s Global Preeminence, Russia’s Quest for Multipolarity*, Burlington, Ashgate, 2005.

¹⁰ J. Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush’s War Cabinet*, New York, Penguin Books, 2004.

of confrontation rather than cooperation.¹¹ A victim of its “superiority complex,” the Bush administration saw the enlargement of NATO as a natural process: the decline of Russia did not justify lingering over its demands.¹² A victim of its “inferiority complex,” the Kremlin tends to manipulate historical references recalling its Imperial and Soviet glory. At the same time, Washington’s interest is focused on Russia’s energy potential. Prospects for cooperation in this matter—opened up at the Houston summit (October 2002)—soon came up against the re-nationalization of Russia’s energy sector. In the second half of 2003, the Yukos affair led to the departure of the last stalwarts of the Yeltsin era still in favor of deepening Russian-American relations. A possible area for cooperation, the energy dossier thereby became a contentious issue, opening up a breach for the recurrent denunciation of Russian “energy imperialism.”¹³

Retrospectively, it is clear that Putin made use of three main levers: an energy policy based on the re-nationalization of assets, aimed at bringing wealth to the country quickly; the reconstruction of the military, aimed at wiping away the insult suffered in Chechnya; and, finally, a search for prestige—a real obsession for the regime, both internally and externally.¹⁴ When Putin was elected in March 2000, the barrel price was 31 US dollars. In July 2008, the barrel price reached 143 US dollars, before falling to half that level within three months. The return of Russian power orchestrated by Putin is therefore directly related to the price of oil. On this point, we must remember that Russian-American trade on energy, much like their commercial trade, remains very limited.¹⁵ This lack of substance causes Washington’s analysis of Russian energy power to be based on two criteria: the global functioning of energy markets and Europe’s “energy security.” The latter issue polarized debate during Bush’s second term owing to the rise in energy prices and political development in Ukraine, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

In 2003, Russia’s opposition to the invasion of Iraq further reinforced the interpretation of it as a country challenging US unilateralism. However, the expression attributed to Condoleezza Rice—*punish France, ignore Germany, forgive Russia*—clearly shows Washington’s concern not to make Iraq an irritating dossier in its relation with Moscow, insofar as it is not a member of NATO and given that Moscow has a number of handholds in the Near and Middle East (relations with Israel, Syria and Iran). With hindsight, it certainly seems as though the Iraq episode was not the key factor in the deterioration of relations.

¹¹ T. Graham, *US-Russia Relations, Facing Reality Pragmatically*, Washington, CSIS/IFRI, July 2008, p. 2.

¹² A. Tsygankov, “Obstacles to US-Russian Cooperation in the Caucasus and Ukraine,” in S. Blank (ed.), *Prospects for US-Russian Security Cooperation*, Carlisle, Strategic Studies Institute, March 2009, p. 320-321.

¹³ F. Hill, *Russia’s Energy Empire*, London, FPC, 2004.

¹⁴ P. Baev, *Russian Energy Policy and Military Power*, London, Routledge, 2008, p. 2-3.

¹⁵ A. Kuchins, A. Beavin, A. Bryndzn, *Russia’s 2020 Strategic Economic Goals and the Role of International Integration*, Washington, CSIS/IFRI, July 2008, p. 10-12.

The real turning point in perception came in the second half of 2004. In September 2004, the hostage taking in Beslan was a real trauma for the Russian regime—a trauma largely underestimated by its partners, even though it resulted in a form of state of war. Following the example of the US, Russia considered itself to be at war with terrorism, which justified a reduction in public liberties and a tightening of the regime.¹⁶ The terrorist threat was also exploited by the Kremlin in domestic as well as foreign policy.¹⁷ The “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine was part of this sequence, insofar as Moscow’s interference in the electoral campaign was regarded as the expression of Russian neo-imperialism. The international impact of the event was completely underestimated by the Kremlin, which thought it could use traditional methods of influence. In addition, the “Orange Revolution” touched on the heart of American strategic thought on the post-Soviet space, and particularly on the place reserved for Ukraine.

Putin’s re-election (March 2004) went hand in hand with an affirmation of Russia’s stance on the international level—an affirmation favored by political stability, economic improvements and US difficulties in Iraq. At the same time, the double enlargement of NATO and the EU worried Moscow, which was becoming aware of the force of attraction of these two centers and, by reflection, its fundamental incapacity to produce attractive integration procedures.

Despite being marked by different trends and sensibilities, the American expert community announced a toughening of official positions. Supported by the Council on Foreign Relations, a task force co-headed by John Edwards and Jack Kemp rejected the notion of “strategic partnership” and induced the White House to “selective cooperation.”¹⁸ A second report, prepared by the Trilateral Commission, recommended a more pragmatic approach to the following dossiers: terrorism, non-proliferation, climate change, drug trafficking, energy provision and the stabilization of the Middle East. This exchange phase aimed, in time, to promote a “convergence of values.”¹⁹

This development in expert debate was accompanied by an escalation in *Russia bashing* from both Democrats and Republicans. By way of example, Tom Lantos, the then Democrat President of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the House of Representatives, denounced the control of the intelligence services over executive power in Russia. Generally, the influence of the *siloviki*, that is officers from force structures (intelligence services, armed forces, police, etc.), served to sum up the running of the Russian system, even though the latter is, in reality, far more complex than a simple, systematic exploitation of the country by these

¹⁶ D. Lynch, “The Enemy is at the Gate: Russia after Beslan”, *International Affairs*, No. 1, 2005, p. 141-161.

¹⁷ T. Gomart, *Russian Civil-Military Relations: Putin’s Legacy*, Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008.

¹⁸ S. Sestanovich (ed.), *Russia’s Wrong Direction, What the United States Can and Should Do*, Washington, CFR, Independent Task Force, Report No. 57, March 2006.

¹⁹ R. Lyne, S. Talbott, K. Watanabe, *Engaging with Russia, The Next Phase*, Washington, Paris, Tokyo, Report to The Trilateral Commission, 2006.

groups.²⁰ The Republican nomination candidate, John McCain, castigated Russian autocracy which, according to him, represented a threat to the security of the US. Together with Democrat Senator Joseph Lieberman, he tried, from November 2003 onward, to keep Russia out of G8 in the name of respect for democracy and the market.

The weakness of direct dialogue and rhetorical inflation

The Bush administration's conduct toward Russia cannot be understood without remembering that the stalwarts of the US security system—the National Security Council (NSC), the Pentagon and the CIA—were fashioned by the cold war, not only in terms of threat definition but also organization. This legacy of the cold war is even more accentuated in the organization of Russia's security system. The fact that Russia was no longer the priority of US foreign policy led the White House to entrust the management of sustaining relations with Moscow to officials of intermediary ranking, without political weight.²¹ Thus it is striking to note that the decisions taken on a presidential level struggled to be relayed to lower-ranking officials and to be adapted to Russia's domestic upheavals.

In addition to this were the inherent divides in each political system, on both the American and Russian sides. By way of example, the classic approach embodied by Thomas Graham (Senior Director for Russia on the NSC until February 2007 and Special Assistant to the President) recommending a “tough realism” clashed with the transformational vision of Daniel Fried (Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs) that proposed a more ideological understanding of Russia. For the first trend, cooperation with Russia was imaginable on certain, defined subjects, particularly matters of security. For the second, Russia is seen first and foremost as a neo-imperialist power seeking to dominate its “near abroad” and to extinguish any aspiration to democratize countries such as Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. A true connoisseur of Russian history, its rhythms and its deep-rooted motivations, Thomas Graham viewed “democracy promotion” with a certain amount of caution. He judged that US efforts toward the countries of the Community of Independent States (CIS) could not evade their relations with Moscow. For Thomas Graham, cooperation—even tense cooperation—is possible and, ultimately, is desirable. For Daniel Fried, support for Saakashvili mattered more than the relationship with Moscow. These two people embody the two extremities of the Bush administration: on the one hand, an obsession with “democracy promotion” and on the other, a “targeted partnership.” Dick Cheney was one of the most passionate defenders of the first approach. Condoleezza Rice, for her part, sought to reconcile the two approaches without managing to really

²⁰ T. Gomart, *op. cit.* [17], p. 42-70.

²¹ T. Graham, *op. cit.* [11].

make a mark on this dossier. These divides explain in part the lack of a clear policy line and lack of consistency on the part of George Bush.²²

Bush seems to have hesitated over Russia throughout both his terms in office. In March 2006, he declared that he had not given up on convincing Russia to act in unison with the West. He opposed a possible eviction of Russia from G8, regarding the summits as a favorable framework for direct exchanges. Dick Cheney, for his part, expressed particularly strongly the commitment to supporting democracy and the need to isolate Russia. In May 2006, his speech at Vilnius marked a step in the ideologists' domination over the realists and, incidentally, the escalation in rhetoric between the two countries. In reality, this speech undoubtedly was aimed less at Moscow than at the other capitals of the post-Soviet space. It provoked a fierce reaction from Putin in Munich (February 2007), during which he castigated US unilateralism in the context of a general rejection of the Bush administration by public opinion.

A highly significant development in the strategic paradigm of the Bush administration was the speech given by George Bush at Prague (June 2007), which was felt by Moscow to be a head-on assault. This speech takes the two following angles of attack: the denunciation of energy imperialism and the denunciation of Russia's hardening domestic policy with its inevitable repercussions on foreign policy. Added to this is an increasingly systematic comparison between the Russian and Chinese regimes in order to bring to light common aspects and, above all, their willingness to go back to the conduct of traditional powers—potentially destabilizing for regional and global balances. This understanding is part of a strategic trend that does not exclude the constitution “of an anti-hegemonic bloc headed by a Russian-Chinese axis.”²³

“Democracy promotion” and “sovereign democracy”

The general lack of substance in Russian-American relations leads to a game of discourse. Gradually, exchanges between the two capitals became ideological and clashed over the question of models. This is an essential point to grasp. Noticing the moral crisis of US leadership, Russia worked to openly challenge the universality of the US model, presenting it as a warmongering and the generator of economic nonsense. After the so-called transition years—experienced as political, economic and also intellectual humiliation—comes the time of a form of revenge for Russia, made possible by better economic wellbeing and the improvement of its relatively effective public diplomacy in the post-Soviet space. The Black-vs.-White vision and the contradictions of the Bush administration promoted this

²² H.-J. Spanger, *op. cit.* [2], p. 25.

²³ C. Gray, *La Guerre au XXI^e siècle [War in the 21st century]*, Paris, Economica, 2007, p. 54.

reaction: the Kremlin progressively drew up a counter-discourse that gained in effectiveness as the Bush administration got caught up in negating reality.

Over the course of these years, the Kremlin's communication policy has been modified by the concern to break away psychologically from the so-called transition years and to create the image of a country on the way to economic modernization.²⁴ This communication is used to highlight, amongst other things, Putin's pragmatism, his anxiety to appear like a "Russian de Gaulle" concerned above all about national independence and order.²⁵ At the same time, the Russian regime acquired an ideological corpus based on the principle of "Russian specificity" and "sovereign democracy," which served as an antibody to inroads made by US influence, and then played a viral role in the surrounding neighborhood to foil Washington's efforts there. In addition, from April 2006 onward, the Kremlin began to draw up a monetary policy based on the accumulation of significant currency reserves, aiming to make the ruble an alternative currency to the dollar in countries such as Armenia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan.²⁶

Very explicitly, for the Kremlin it was also a matter of responding to US efforts regarding the "democracy promotion" by appealing directly to the countries concerned, while issuing a strong reminder—and this is one of the implicit challenges of the "succession" to Putin—that Russia had no intention of becoming a zone of promotion and thus facilitating operations carried out by foreign foundations and NGOs financed to this end. The Kremlin drew up an ideological corpus with the aim of convincing public opinion that all attempts to change the regime were supported by the US in order to reinforce patriotic and nationalistic reflexes.²⁷

Moreover, economic growth goes hand in hand with a strong increase in confidence on the part of Russian decision-makers—a return of confidence most often regarded in the US as arrogance. The Kremlin still systematically exploits the moral deterioration of US leadership: *How do you spell Guantanamo?* Has become the mantra of Kremlin emissaries in Europe, in the US and particularly in the countries of the former USSR. Determined to occupy the field of values, the Kremlin checks off the contradictions between the Bush administration's discourse and conduct. This political work not only has a domestic objective, but also a foreign objective vis-à-vis the autocracies of Central Asia and the hybrid regimes of

²⁴ V. Feklyunina, "Battle for Perceptions: Projecting Russia in the West," *Europe-Asia Studies*, No. 4, 2008, p. 605-629.

²⁵ T. Gomart, "La politique russe de la France : fin de cycle?", [France's Russian Policy: The End of the Cycle?], *Politique étrangère*, No. 1, 2007, p. 125-126.

²⁶ J. Johnson, "Forbidden Fruit: Russia's Uneasy Relationship with the US Dollar," *Review of International Political Economy*, No. 3, 2008, p. 394.

²⁷ V. Shlapentokh, "Are Today's Authoritarian Leaders Doomed to Be Indicted When They Leave Office? The Russian and Other Post-Soviet Cases," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, No. 2, 2006, p. 462-463.

the Caucasus. It results in new forms of anti-Americanism arising in Russian society.²⁸

The year 2005 marked a turning point; it was also the peak of the democracy promotion efforts (“Tulip Revolution” and the creation of the Community for Democratic Choice upon the initiative of Poland, Ukraine and Georgia) and the start of the decline with events in Andijan in Uzbekistan (May 2005). The euphoria of the color revolutions died away owing to the deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also to the practice of power of the new Georgian and Ukrainian leaders. The difficulties encountered led Washington to draw up the concept of *transformational diplomacy*, which appeared officially in January 2006. As the Bush administration became ensnared in the fight against terrorism (torture and direct support of authoritarian regimes), the “democracy promotion” became a sensitive issue among experts as well as diplomats. This offsetting weakened the impact of US action and, paradoxically, weakened the ethical foundations of US democracy. There is no need to point out that this change in perception was strongly encouraged by Moscow, which combined ideological work and the restoration of its traditional vehicles of influence, particularly with the opening of the Kant base in Kyrgyzstan (June 2006) to counterbalance the US presence in Manas.

²⁸ S. Mendelson, T. Gerber, “Us and Them: Anti-American Views of the Putin Generation,” *Washington Quarterly*, No. 2, 2008, p. 131-150.

Indirect Exchanges: Battles for Influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia

US priorities

With the war against “international terrorism,” the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus found themselves on the edge of three main theaters: Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran. These three theaters relate back to the representation the US authorities have of Eurasia. Zbigniew Brzezinski’s theories popularized the notion of *Eurasian Balkans* to highlight the risks of instability in these countries.²⁹ Moreover, Brzezinski drew up an argument that is still current on the nature of the link between Ukraine and Russia—a link that the US should help break.³⁰ This idea was to become policy: Russia’s close links with Ukraine perpetuate its imperial identity; disassociating Ukraine and Russia would enable the two countries to each turn toward democracy. In other words, it is a matter of setting a clear limit on Russian foreign policy to encourage its domestic development and to quiet it down. As far as the Caucasus and Central Asia are concerned, an understanding focused on energy stakes has largely been propagated. In reality, the understanding of these zones must go through the understanding of the strategy of access—the theater engagement strategy—developed by the Pentagon. From 2000 onward, military engagement has been associated with the effort to democratize, which is not an end in itself but a means to offer a stable environment that is favorable to relations between US armed forces and the armed forces of the countries concerned.³¹ American presence clearly aims to prevent any form of Russian imperialism and to limit Iranian influence. At that time, despite its temporary weakness, Russia was seen as the main troublemaker in countries on its doorstep, owing to the weight of its Imperial-Soviet legacy.

²⁹ Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard, American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, New York, Basic Books, 1997.

³⁰ J. Bugajski, S. Pifer, K. Smith, C. Wallander, *Ukraine, A Net Assessment of 16 Years of Independence*, Washington, CSIS, February 2008.

³¹ S. Blank, *US Military Engagement with Transcaucasia and Central Asia*, Carlisle, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, June 2000, p. 1.

Very quickly, the Caucasus and central Asia stopped being considered solely from the energy perspective, but were inserted into the strategies for theater access, an inclusion that corresponded with a moment of doctrinal euphoria. The operational successes of the US armed forces in Afghanistan (2001-2002) and in Iraq (2003) in the initial phase of the conflict, which highlighted the mastery of projection on faraway theaters, the failure of their political exploitation in terms of stabilization and reconstruction was not yet raised as an issue. After 2004, this hiatus continued to develop, voiding the legitimacy of this type of insertion and reinforcing Russia's regional weight.

However, US authorities seek to avoid all forms of domination in these zones by a regional power. To this end, concepts such as the *Greater Central Asia Partnership* were popularized for political ends. The US had to apply itself to opening commercial channels destroyed by the USSR by proposing a regional approach including Afghanistan and Pakistan (which could also be a means of encouraging moderate forces in Iran) as well as the five countries of Central Asia, and making Afghanistan the heart of the operation.³² The deterioration of the military situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan soon invalidated these projects. However, Central Asia remains crucial for the US administration, owing to its central position in Eurasia and the ability of US forces to intervene from this zone.³³

Quite clearly, the intellectual carving up of the map entails a political dimension. It is not only a matter of framing an access strategy for regions such as *Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia* but also of imposing this division on others. This would be the only pertinent geographical division and would explicitly aim to reject the notion of the "post-Soviet space" with its historical connotations. It would be a matter of encouraging the countries concerned, as well as the powers involved, to break definitively with the Soviet heritage. However, as the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated, the expert community changed its approach, emphasizing the need to take into account the balance of power and influence in Central Asia while avoiding direct confrontation with Russia.³⁴ In the Caucasus, the war in Georgia has deeply disturbed the most established certainties of the power of US influence.

These interpretation games also have two types of administrative consequences. Firstly, the US authorities found themselves lacking in expertise on these countries upon the fall of the USSR, expertise that the State Department had to build up as it went along.³⁵ Secondly, an administrative reshuffle within the State Department was carried out

³² F. Starr, "A Partnership for Central Asia", *Foreign Affairs*, No. 4, 2005, p. 164-165.

³³ E. Rumer, "The United States and Central Asia: In Search of a Strategy," in E. Rumer, D. Trenin and H. Zhao, *Central Asia, Views from Washington, Moscow, and Beijing*, London, ME Sharpe, 2007, p. 62.

³⁴ R. Weitz, "Averting a New Great Game in Central Asia," *The Washington Quarterly*, No. 3, 2006, p. 164-165.

³⁵ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "Russia, China, and the United States: From the Great Game to Cooperation in Central Asia?", speech by James Collins, 6 February 2007.

following the rationale of division into theaters, and the same applied for the reorganization of the Pentagon. In February 2006, the Department of State regrouped the following countries into its Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan. Following the example of other geographical departments, this bureau was placed under the authority of the Under Secretary for Political Affairs. This reorganization showed the taking into account of three strong trends: China's rise in power, the destabilizing role of Iran, and developments in the Middle East.

US actions and Russian reactions

As far as Central Asia is concerned, Washington—unlike Moscow—openly pursued the following interests: the curbing of terrorism and radical Islam; the development of economic stability; securing access to energy resources; the protection of countries in the zone (that is the fight against Russia's return to influence); and the promotion of human and civil rights.³⁶ As far as the Caucasus is concerned, US policy has long since been based on one principle, namely to discourage all forms of cooperation with Iran. However, after the election of George Bush (2000), this dogma was given a pounding by different circles anxious to improve relations with Iran and cooperate with Russia in the name of efficiency and energy diversification. Work carried out by the Baker Institute on energy, for example, went in this direction—arguing that it was difficult to retain the principle of diversification of export routes while ruling out the opportunities offered by Russia and Iran. US action instigated in the 1990s in the Caucasus culminated with the inauguration of the BTC (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan) oil pipeline in May 2005. Similar interests to those described for Central Asia are also grafted onto US action. The two theaters' approaches are not carried out under the same conditions, insofar as the "Rose Revolution" in Georgia (2003)—supposed to open up the Caucasus—came at a time of US ideological certainty, fresh from success in Iraq. In contrast, the "Tulip Revolution" in Kyrgyzstan—supposed to open up Central Asia—came at a time of weakness in US influence, which would end with its withdrawal from Uzbekistan. Between the Georgian success and the Uzbek failure, US action has come up against conceptual and practical difficulties in transformation.

The re-election of George Bush allowed hope for a turn toward Realism and a less ideological approach to US action. This was the Kremlin's reaction to the nomination of Condoleezza Rice to the State

³⁶ On Russian policy, see: P. Baev, "Assessing Russia's Cards: Three Petty Games in Central Asia," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, No. 2, July 2004, p. 269-281; L. Jonson, *Vladimir Putin and Central Asia, The Shaping of Russian Foreign Policy*, London, Tauris, 2004. On US policy, see: O. Olikier and D. Shlapak, *US Interests in Central Asia*, Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, 2005.

Department. With the concept of transformational diplomacy, which appeared officially in January 2006, the State Department sought to reconcile a new understanding of international reality, compatible with the doctrine of Bush's first term. To this understanding, the development of less rudimentary tools for foreign operations on the ideological level must be added: nation-building became the object of a more detailed methodology; elections were seen as a necessary condition but not necessarily sufficient for democratization, which was no longer considered the solution to all security problems. However, the long term objective remained: "It is still a matter, ideally, of democratizing authoritarian regimes."³⁷

This approach had direct repercussions on Russia and its neighbors. It accentuated the misunderstandings between Washington and Russia, insofar as it seemed to anticipate a general bargain influenced by three factors. Firstly, Russia considered that it had not been repaid for its support after 11 September 2001, while Washington believed it had done so with the establishment of the Russia-NATO Council in May 2002.³⁸ Secondly, Russia had room for maneuver owing to energy income and to the reorganization of its internal power, enabling it to exist on the international stage. Thirdly, Russia desired a tacit discussion with Washington over zones of influence in Eurasia, judging that Washington would have an objective interest in seeing vectors of influence emerge that contributed to the general stabilization of the region. Debated in expert circles, this idea of bargaining did not translate diplomatically during the Bush years. The war in Georgia clearly played a part in consolidating positions further.

American action clearly provokes reactions from Moscow. Up until the summer of 2008, Russia sought to maintain the status quo by directly influencing Ossetia and Abkhazia and weakening Georgia whenever necessary. The recognition of Kosovo (February 2008) and the NATO Bucharest summit (April 2008) give rise to a twofold fracture. An open perspective for Ukrainian and Georgian NATO membership appeared as a provocation in the eyes of Russia, which considered Washington to be openly scorning its demands. The debate over anti-missile systems in Poland and the Czech Republic only aggravated relations, insofar as it touches on one of the foundations of Russian power, namely the credibility of its strategic nuclear capability.

Iran and Georgia

The deterioration of Russian-American relations underwent a dangerous acceleration during the first half of 2008. With the end of the Bush

³⁷ J. Vaïsse, *États-Unis : le temps de la diplomatie transformationnelle* [The United States: the Time of Transformational Diplomacy], Paris, EUIES Cahiers de Chaillot, No. 95, December 2006, p. 11.

³⁸ C. Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment Revisited," *art. cit.* [6], p. 8.

administration and Putin's succession, uncertainty was fuelled by factors domestic political concerns. The two presidents met for the last time at Sochi (April 2008) with three difficult dossiers in the background: NATO enlargement, the US anti-missile system, and Iran. For Moscow, these three dossiers are connected and threaten to break the fragile balance in European security. On numerous occasions, Russia has indicated its deep opposition to another enlargement of NATO. Well known and finely tuned, the arguments of both parties revived cold war rhetoric. However, on the Russian side sought to highlight that this escalation was not the result of conflict between Russia and the West, but rather a general security crisis.³⁹ Moreover, Moscow deplored NATO's penetration of the Caucasus and Central Asia, even though these regions are outside its zone of responsibility. This vision of encirclement doubled with a denunciation of US unilateralism and its destabilizing effects in the Middle East. In this respect, the Iranian dossier alone demonstrates the growing incomprehension of the two countries during the Bush years. The Bush administration deplored the logic of ambiguity that prevails in Russian policy with regard to Iran. Conversely, the Kremlin considers Iran to have become a regional power capable of exercising its influence in the Middle East, but also in the Caucasus and Central Asia—and that in this capacity, realism demands it be integrated in efforts for regional stabilization.

On this dossier, Moscow favors a purely legal approach in the framework anticipated by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), while Washington bases its evaluation on the combination of the Tehran's political project, its declarations concerning Israel, and recorded technological advances, without being limited solely to the nuclear (and ballistic) field, strictly speaking. In other words, the two countries do not have the same perspective and therefore define the risk threshold differently.⁴⁰ The Iranian dossier is directly related to that of the anti-missile systems to be deployed in Poland and the Czech Republic. For Washington, these systems should enable it to protect itself against an upcoming Iranian ballistic threat. For Moscow, they call into question the Russian-American strategic balance. In addition, Moscow denounces the following contradiction: how can it be claimed that the Iranian dossier is to be resolved by the isolation of Iran, destined to prepare possible military operations to disarm it, while planning a defense system based on the hypothesis of a nuclear Iran?⁴¹ In reality, the Iranian dossier shows the disjunction of the two countries' schedules, as well as a different perception of the imminence of a threat.

The Iranian dossier also led the Bush administration to favor presence in the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Killing two birds with one stone, it sought both to protect itself against an emerging threat from Iran and to contain the persistent threat from Russia. From a European point of view, this threat analysis is often misunderstood and explains the frequent allusions to a "new cold war," as if the confrontation with Moscow had a structuring and global nature. However, this must be

³⁹ Speech by Igor Ivanov, 14th Ifri/Mgimo seminar on security issues, 1 December 2008.

⁴⁰ T. Graham, "The Friend of My Enemy," *The National Interest*, May-June 2008, p. 38.

⁴¹ Meeting with a high-ranking official for Russian diplomacy, December 2008.

understood in means of a strategy of access to regional theaters over which Russian influence is felt to varying degrees. With hindsight, the war in Georgia fixed positions insofar as Washington had probably underestimated Russia's capacity for influence in the Caucasus, as well as the fragility of Saakashvili's regime. In addition, the Bush administration focused on Central Asia during its second term owing to the deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the increasing Chinese presence.

The war in Georgia had many causes, one of which was the security dilemma between the US and Russia: the pursuit of their security interests without consultation resulted in serious appreciation errors on both sides.⁴² It is still the case that this war constitutes the most heated crisis in Russian-American relations since the cold war.⁴³ For Dick Cheney, "Russian aggression" could not remain without a response and should result in a re-think of relations between the two countries.⁴⁴ In reality, the diplomatic treatment of the crisis on the EU's initiative shows, as a counterpoint, the impasse at which the Bush administration had arrived. The Georgian crisis showed its inability to choose between European stability, support for a "little country" and ally, inevitable dialogue with Moscow, access to regional theaters and the promotion of democracy. It also demonstrated a lack of anticipation of the possible conduct of countries "at the crossroads" like Russia.

⁴² E. Wishnick, *Russia, China, and the United States in Central Asia : Prospects for Great Power Competition and Cooperation in the Shadow of the Georgian Crisis*, Carlisle, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, February 2009, p. 2.

⁴³ For an on-the-spot analysis, see: A. Monaghan, *The Russo-Georgian Conflict*, Rome, NATO Defense College, Immediate Report, August 2008.

⁴⁴ G. Jahn, "Oil Falls Despite Conflict," *Associated Press*, 11 August 2008.

Conclusion

To the intellectual confusion of the Bush administration on the nature of Russian power between 2000 and 2008, a fundamental political hesitation over the nature of the relationship to be forged was added. On the Russian side, the toughening of the regime and the improvement of the economic situation enabled a more offensive foreign policy to be conducted, driven by a search for prestige. Through ideological blindness, the Bush administration was unable to detect the levers of action that this search offered. Victims of their respective “superiority complex” and “inferiority complex,” the two countries retain relations that are still haunted by the memories of the cold war.

The Bush administration wavered between two trends. The first—a unilateral one—involved promoting the values and interests of the US without being concerned in the slightest about Moscow’s objections. The second—more cooperative trend—involved reserving a supporting role for Moscow, aimed at backing US positions in matters of non-proliferation and counterterrorism. In both cases, the Bush administration ignored two essential points: the general state of Russian-American relations and the psychology of the Russian elite. Indeed, Washington did not grasp the importance of the bilateral framework for Moscow and was unable to exploit the fundamental paradox in Vladimir Putin’s foreign policy, namely the fact that the increase in its anti-US nature was directly related to its quest for recognition from Washington. It sought in vain to have Russia’s return to power sanctioned by Washington: the war in Georgia can thus be understood as the desire to finally make itself heard by inspiring fear.

In the end, it seems that the Bush administration regarded Russia as an insignificant quantity. The cost of this disdain is high and weighs heavily on the capacities of the Obama administration. Despite the change in discourse and the will to resume the course of Russian-American relations, the Obama administration remains tributary to a considerably deteriorated framework of exchange. Aside from the major bilateral (weakness of economic trade), multilateral (Russia’s accession to the WTO) and security dossiers (Iran, European security architecture and stabilization of Afghanistan), it must deal with a kind of Russophobia orchestrated in the US by powerful lobbies, while the Russian elite have come together once more thanks to anti-Americanism. This development is seen in different levels of Russian society. In other words, the Obama administration will have to allocate considerable resources to change the atmosphere of relations with Russia and to change the image of its country if it really wants to alter the foundations of these relations. The Bush years will not be overcome in one summit.