Fear and Misunderstanding of Russia

Much of America’s recent demonization of Russia relates to deep cultural and even religious differences between the two countries, requiring a deeper understanding of the other’s strengths and weaknesses, writes Paul Grenier.

By Paul Grenier

Given the recent near-hysteria over Russia’s alleged hacking of U.S. political email traffic, it is difficult to imagine a U.S.-Russia relationship established upon a peaceful footing — or, to put it another way, a relationship so stable and constructive that it no longer would depend on the vagaries of changing political personalities.

Let’s look at it first through the prism of realism. If we are realists, we throw America’s habitual moralism out the window and offer the Russians a deal. The “normalization” negotiations between a realist America and the regional power of Russia might unfold along lines something like this:

The United States would propose a provisional alliance with Russia to thwart a rising China, which continues to grow inexorably in wealth and power. China’s ascendance naturally makes U.S. policymakers nervous, and thus does the United States (in the realist view) have a vested interest in a U.S.-Russian alliance.

According to this realist playbook, Russia would be flattered by these attentions but would want to know precisely what kind of provisional alliance the United States had in mind. Given that realists always seek to be open and honest, this particular realist government would explain that its attention is focused on China’s apparent expansionist ambitions in the South China Sea. After all, according to the realist outlook, nation-states not only usually do pursue constant expansion of their power whenever and wherever possible, as China seems to be doing now, but should pursue such hegemonic expansion whenever possible because, in an anarchic world, that is the way to survive.

Would Russia accept such an offer? It might. But if it did, it would be with a certain sense of bad faith to match that surrounding the U.S. proposition. It would not be a friendship but an alliance based on mutual interest. If circumstances were to change, as inevitably they would at some point, the underlying sentiments of national interest might well evaporate — as they should.

But such conditionality wouldn’t contradict the realist conception of international relations. Under the realist model, there simply is no basis for
a good faith long-term settlement. It is excluded by the power-political assumptions of the realist model, as is frankly acknowledged in such foundational realist texts, for example, as John Mearsheimer’s *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

And realists are correct, no doubt, in arguing that Americans should stop moralizing about Russia taking actions to defend its vital interests in its own neighborhood in exactly the same manner as the United States does in defense of its vital interests in its own region.

And yet realism’s dismissive attitude toward the moral dimension — as historian Matthew Dal Santo recently pointed out — contains a flaw. It requires that the United States renounce certain moral concerns that are foundational to what America is. Would a coldly rational America still be America? And would Russia itself ultimately even welcome such a “partner”?

The prominent Russian political philosopher Boris Mezhuev, in a recent essay (in Russian) about the history of the America First movement, mused that an isolationist United States during World War II would not at all have been welcomed, first and foremost by Russia itself. It might have led to the annihilation of Russia at the hands of the Nazi war machine. Mezhuev’s point is that it is not the rejection of universal ideals that we should seek in international relations, but the finding of the right ideal.

**Stop Being Russia**

According to the outlook that might be described as the democracy-idealism/neoconservative-interventionist school, the only way to achieve a lasting settlement is for Russia to cease being what it is at the moment and to become instead much more like the United States. Russia should become a liberal democracy. Only then — because, as many Wilsonian idealists have argued, “liberal democracies don’t fight one another” — can the relationship be stabilized for the long term.

The theory is not entirely implausible. There are indeed forces within Russia that strongly identify with American liberal democratic values. American diplomats and journalists frequently run into people who hold such sentiments. They pop up among one’s well-traveled Russian-intelligentsia friends and are widely quoted in the articles written by prominent journalists who happen to be imbued themselves with the Wilsonian sensibility.

The problem with this line of thought — aside from the impossibility of imposing it from the outside — is that the Russian version of liberal democracy differs fundamentally from the American version.
The fact is that Russia today is already in many ways liberal. But its liberalism is of a peculiarly Russian sort. It does not deny rights and freedom, but it grounds them not negatively (in terms of what government shall not do), as does the Enlightenment liberalism of Locke and Hobbes, but rather in terms of Eastern Christianity’s image of what man is. As a result, there is no Russian liberalism, or Russian politics of any other sort – including its standard semi-authoritarianism – that separates the state from religion in the way that the United States does today.

An authentically Russian liberalism, in other words, is hardly less starkly different from our secular, liberationist order than is Russia’s present political arrangement under Vladimir Putin. The fact is that there simply is not available to Russia a political order that is aligned with the present-day American version of secular liberal democracy. Both its history and its mores exclude it. And if we try to impose it anyway, in defiance of Russian history and self-understanding, then we will find ourselves repulsed in the same way Napoleon was.

As Henry Kissinger wrote, “No power will submit to a settlement, however well-balanced and however ‘secure,’ which seems totally to deny its vision of itself.”

So where does that leave us? It leaves us precisely in the relationship in which the two countries currently languish. The realists, in such meager numbers as they exist, have little to offer beyond a temporary reprieve. As for the democracy idealists, they have witnessed Russia’s rejection of U.S.-style liberal democracy and secularism, and they have drawn the only possible conclusion: Russia is incorrigibly evil.

To prove their point, the idealists and neoconservatives point to Russian acts of violence, such as its bombardments in Syria or Chechnya or its support for the separatists in Eastern Ukraine. The Russians, for their part, cast back at America and its Western allies the West’s own acts of aggression and accompanying untruths.

Rejecting Lectures
It’s instructive, in this regard, to recall British Foreign Secretary David Miliband’s famous phone conversation with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, in which the latter, after pointedly reminding the former about the Anglo-U.S. invasion of Iraq, demanded of Miliband, “Who are you to f***ing lecture me?”

Critics of Russia likewise point to various lies that Russian politicians have told in defense of their foreign-policy aims. But telling lies is in the very
nature of international relations and certainly the waging of wars, as is reflected in the familiar accusation that “the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy.”

And yet, though nations often tell lies as part of their self-defense, it doesn’t follow that what they are defending is therefore essentially a lie. It may be in some cases — Nazi Germany, for example, or ISIS. But such cases are rare.

In short, both the United States and Russia have used lots of violence against their enemies. In both cases, this violence has no doubt exceeded ethical norms. Both have told lies. So which side is the more evil? How does one prove such a thing?

Robert Kaplan, who generally belongs to America’s democracy-idealistic camp, suggested in a recent essay that we can answer this question by means of a close reading of Russian literature.

Kaplan’s “The Real War of Ideas,” published in The National Interest in September, stakes its claim about Russia by reference to Anton Chekhov’s fictional My Life: A Provincial’s Story. A careful reading of this work, Kaplan tells us, allows us to “realiz[e] the utter impossibility of any good ever coming out of Russia.”

This remarkable story, Kaplan believes, holds the key to understanding Russia as a whole. “[E]verything from the czar, to Lenin and Stalin, to Putin, is connected in some indirect way to the Russian social reality” described by Chekhov. Here, for Kaplan, is the story’s money quote:

“They [the peasant muzhiks] were mostly nervous, irritated, insulted people; they were people of suppressed imagination, ignorant, with a poor, dull outlook, with ever the same thoughts about the gray earth, gray days, black bread, people who were sly but, like birds, only hid their heads behind a tree — who didn’t know how to count. They wouldn’t go to your haymaking for twenty roubles, but they would go for a half-bucket of vodka, though for twenty roubles they could buy four buckets. ... [As for their masters, their money] had been acquired by a whole series of brazen, shameless deceptions.”

Here’s an interesting question: why, out of all the tremendous variety of Russian literature, has Kaplan chosen precisely this short story focusing on ignorant peasants, instead of, say, War and Peace? Answer: to demonstrate that Chekhov’s Russia is the same as Putin’s Russia — in the double sense that Russia has never successfully become modern and liberal and, for Kaplan, never will.

The peasantry symbolizes what is pre-modern and illiberal. These particular
peasants, furthermore, are incapable of acting as a rational liberal should — maximizing their own advantage and thereby increasing wealth for society as a whole. Chekhov’s peasants cannot even properly calculate how to maximize their consumption of vodka!

The Chekhov passage has, furthermore, far-going implications for Russia’s place within the international order. If Russia were smart enough to become part of the Western order, if it played according to American rules, Russia would earn more than it does now! And yet Russia stubbornly, stupidly, and in contradiction of its own interest refuses this reasonable tradeoff. Russia’s rulers and oligarchs of today, like its peasant masters of yesteryear, prefer to practice deceit, because such is their nature. That, for Kaplan, is what Chekhov’s story tells us.

Selective Reading
Kaplan’s reading of the Chekhov story, however, is incomplete. On the very same page of Chekhov’s text, between the word “buckets” and the closing words about the masters’ “brazen, shameless deceptions,” there are the following lines:

“In fact, there was filth, and drunkenness, and stupidity, and deceit, but with all that you could feel, nevertheless, that the muzhiks’ life was generally upheld by some strong, healthy core. However much the muzhik looks like a clumsy beast as he follows his plow, and however much he befuddles himself with vodka, still, on looking closer, you feel that there is in him something necessary and very important that is lacking, for instance, in Masha and the doctor — namely, he believes that the chief thing on earth is truth [pravda], and that his salvation and that of all people lies in truth alone, and therefore he loves justice more than anything else in the world.”

Had he quoted the Russian author in full, I would be in agreement with Mr. Kaplan about the importance of this story for understanding Russia. To be sure, modern Russia, with its impeccable metro systems and fashionable cafes, has little in common with the peasant world here described (though in the provinces, something of that peasant world — fortunately to my mind — still remains). Modern Russians, furthermore, know how to count very well.

What then remains constant? First, the centrality of truth and justice. We have already, above, briefly discussed the role of lies. They are, sadly, something of a constant in foreign relations. What needs stressing here is something else. The attempt to lure or to force Russia into a world that requires that it “deny its vision of itself” by forcing it to be liberal — and thereby to interpret everything exclusively in terms of advantage, rights, losses, and profits — will not work.
This is confirmed not only by Russian behavior but also by the explicit words of its foreign minister, who in a recent interview insisted that “Russia’s only role in the world is to stand up for the truth [pravda] together with other powers, but exclusively on equal terms.”

The second constant is Christianity. The text’s reference to “salvation” and the word pravda itself have clearly Christian overtones. Russian Christianity differs from American Christianity. American Protestant Christianity embraces individualism and is open to change; in many ways, it has hitched its cart to the modernization project.

Russian Orthodox Christianity uses virtually the same liturgy today as it has for hundreds of years. Its standard of perfection in iconography is the same as it has been for hundreds of years. Russian spirituality is oriented to what is timeless and to beauty. American spirituality is oriented to the future and to rights. Both Russia and America can be very tough. But that toughness defends two very different ideals.

Kaplan’s selective quotation of the Chekhov story quite likely was unintentional. He may genuinely have found unimportant the passage about truth and justice and salvation, because these things fall outside the realm of modern American liberalism. His inability to notice the good in Russia when that good falls outside of the specifically liberal framework is something very common in recent Western reporting on Russia.

No Junior Partner
An accommodation with Russia will never be reached by ignoring what Russia is, still less by attempting to transform it into a junior United States. Nor is there any need to do so. An accommodation between Russia and the United States can be reached by applying what is healthy in the realist and idealist traditions, and jettisoning what is false.

Realism is right to the extent that it teaches that one’s own nation’s ideals do not necessarily embrace the whole of the human good. It teaches a salutary humility. Realism is wrong, however, when it dismisses moral considerations altogether, among other reasons because such a dismissal eliminates the only possible foundation of long-term trust.

The idealist school clings to the United States’ longstanding vision of itself as a force for good in the world. There is no need for the United States to abandon this vision. All that is needed is for the United States to expand its notion of the good.

For my money, a good place to start would be with the writings of Semyon Frank,
one of the most respected Russian philosophers in Russia today. “In all that is human as such,” Frank wrote, “… there is nothing sacred; ‘the will of the people’ can be just as stupid and criminal as the will of an individual man. Neither the rights of man nor the will of the people are sacred in themselves. Only the truth as such, only the absolute good which is independent of man, is primordially sacred.”

Russia, for its part, needs to guard against the temptation of identifying this good, this absolute, with Russia itself.

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