The Dynamics of Russian-American Ties

Pretentions of cooperation or taking Russia for granted?

If anyone thought that the end of the Cold War would also bring to an end the antagonistic and highly competitive relationship between the United States (US) and Russia – the largest succeeding state to the Soviet Union – that conclusion was dead wrong. The seeds of US-Russia competition were sown in the way that the Soviet Union disappeared. From the very beginning of the post-Cold War era, Russia regarded itself as heir apparent to superpowerdom. But Russia, unlike the Soviet Union that it replaced, could not have automatically become a superpower. Decades of misplaced spending priorities – that forced the Soviet Union to invest in building its defense arsenal at the expense of economic development – left Russia as a state with a shattered economy. The Soviet Union devoted at least one-fifth of its economic wealth to military competition with the US That fact contributed greatly to ‘the disintegration of its economy and the Soviet state itself’. Russia, on the contrary, has continued a pattern of spending only 3–5 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP).

The loss of superpower status created a strong sense of disillusionment inside Russia regarding the implosion of the Soviet Union, and a longing on the part of a great number of Russians for the ‘good old days’ of the Cold War years, when their country was at the apex of power, clout, and global attention.

The United States did not make things easier for Russia either. Even though it was quite unequivocal that, with the implosion of the Soviet Union, the Cold War was over and Russia and the United States were no longer enemies; it refused to dismantle NATO, whose raison d’être was containment of the Soviet Union during the Cold War years. Then there was an enormous hoopla and bragging in the West that the
United States and the West emerged as ‘victors’ and the Soviet Union as a vanquished state.

So, the sense of ‘defeat’ that was associated with the non-existent Soviet Union was also a predominant feeling that Russia inherited. As Richard Pipes, a Russian specialist at Harvard, writes:

Russians crave the status of being a *velikaya derzhava* (great power). They feel that they are entitled to this status since Russia has the largest landmass in the world, one that covers most of Eurasia and stretches from the Baltic to the Pacific. The other component of Russia’s great power status is the country’s grand accomplishments, such as breaking the back of the German army in World War II and sending the first man into space. The astonishing popularity of a monster like Josef Stalin is primarily due to the fact that he had made Russia a power that was universally respected because it was feared. This craving assumes obsessive forms, particularly because Russians suspect deep in their hearts that their claim to this status is dubious – that they are not really a great power in economic, political or military terms. This obsession compensates for the inferiority complex that a majority of Russians feel when they compare themselves with genuine great powers, notably the United States.2

This schizophrenia or ambivalence toward their country’s status as a superpower notwithstanding, it was natural for that country to strive, sooner rather than later, to recover that status. However, all Russian actions for the pursuit of that objective were bound to create criticism from the United States that it never grew out of the ‘Cold War mentality’. The irony of this situation is that the Russian leaders themselves were convinced that the Cold War frame of mind drove the foreign policy of every American president toward their country, even after the end of the Cold War. This action-and-reaction is at the root of US-Russia relations, which have experienced more periods of tension than normal in the post-Cold War years.

Russia has known since its re-emergence in 1991 that it would remain a second (or even a third) banana in the global hierarchy of great powers for at least well into the second decade of the twenty-first century. It is also aware that the unipolar global system has to transform into a multipolar system before it is able to enjoy prestige within the FSU. However, that transformation has to be brought about peacefully, on a piecemeal basis, and without alienating or antagonizing the lone superpower that presides over the unipolar order.