

THE
AMBASSADOR
PARTNERSHIP

13 October 2016

Time to return to the Spirit of Reykjavik (1986)

Ambassador Sergey Batsanov

In recent days, news of the US presidential campaign, Brexit dilemmas, and the wars in Syria and Yemen have distracted attention from a quiet event in the capital of Iceland. There, on 10-11 October, took place an international commemoration of the October 1986 summit meeting between the Soviet leader, Michael Gorbachev, and US President Ronald Reagan.

The purpose of the commemoration, which took the form of a conference, sponsored by the Government of Iceland and the New York based International Peace Institute, was to explore why it proved possible, 30 years ago, to reverse the most dangerous trends and manifestations of the Cold War, and what should be done today to address a new set of risks that are capable of igniting conflict between nuclear weapons states.

The discussion in Reykjavik this week prompted the author to ask himself why, from a Russian perspective, relations between Russia and the West are now, arguably, at their lowest point and in their worst shape for more than 30 years

Unfulfilled expectations have played a part. Immediately after the dissolution of the USSR, there were expectations that Russia would become a democracy, and would be at peace with the West forever more. Neither expectation was fulfilled. Instead of becoming a democracy, the Russia of the early 1990s became a kleptocracy, in which criminals thrived. Many disgruntled and impoverished Russians put most of the blame for that on the West, since during those years much Western advice proved to be poorly judged or ill-intended.

Then, instead of respecting oral assurances given to President Gorbachev, NATO embarked on a continuing expansion to the East that created a perception in Russia of lasting hostility and potential for the emergence of threats to Russian security.

Of course, disillusionment also affected Western attitudes to Russia. In the early 90s there was a hope, maybe even a belief, that Russia would henceforth become a mid-sized democracy and would be content to accept US leadership. Neither happened. Understandably, perhaps, the West was reluctant to concede that such hope had been unrealistic, symptomatic of a “winner takes all” mentality.

Another big factor has been the West’s growing reluctance to listen to Russia, to take account of Russian concerns. As a Russian diplomat in the late 80s and early 90s, I felt that US counterparts were paying attention to whatever I was under instructions to say. And whenever I was proposing something really reasonable, I was quite confident the proposal would be accepted. But by the mid-90s this was no longer the case. US officials had come to see putting direct pressure on the Kremlin to conform to US wishes as preferable to making an effort to adjust US positions to accommodate Russian views.

THE
AMBASSADOR
PARTNERSHIP

Over time this has convinced many Russian politicians that, to be heard, Russia must stop talking softly and start supporting its words with military power.

A third factor has been a Western inclination to ignore the rules of the game whenever the rules constitute an obstacle to achieving political ends. The bombing of Serbia in 1999, without UN Security Council authorisation, and the de facto occupation of Kosovo, a Serbian province, were an early instance of that. Then came the invasion of Iraq in 2003 on the falsified pretext of a WMD threat, the abuse of UN authorisation for a no-fly-zone in Libya in 2011, the covert supply of weapons to terrorists in Syria, and support for the overthrow of a democratically-elected president in Ukraine in 2014.

God forbid, however, that Russia should ever ignore the rules! It is hardly surprising, therefore, that US lectures about the rules-based nature of the world order cause irritation, if not worse, in the Russian foreign policy and security communities.

A more recent factor has been the demonization of President Vladimir Putin. Western politicians have compared him explicitly to Adolf Hitler. That is both absurd and no basis for constructive relations between sovereign states.

The upshot of all these factors is not just that relations are in poor shape; they are in dangerous shape. I am not suggesting that either Russia or the West is harbouring an intent to commit an act of aggression against the other. But there is a risk of miscalculation, of hostilities being triggered inadvertently.

This risk is all the greater in that the West's attitude to war has evolved since the end of the Cold War. Armed conflict used to be seen as something to be avoided at all costs. Now it is often seen as a practical option.

The risk is also greater for a near-total absence of trust between Russia and the United States. This absence of trust has bedevilled this year's attempts by Sergey Lavrov and John Kerry to achieve a cessation of hostilities in Syria and the launch of a Syrian-led political process.

On the other hand, cooperation between Russia and the West to resolve concerns triggered by covert nuclear activities in Iran between the mid-80s and 2003 is a counter-example. It suggests that Russia and the West should seek to re-build mutual trust and repair as much damage as possible by focussing on areas where their interests overlap or coincide.

Counter-terrorism and conflict resolution are two such areas. Trade and investment are a third. Russia has turned towards China for both in recent years, spurred on in that direction by Western economic sanctions, but remains open to doing business with the West.

I am optimistic that relations can and will recover over time. But the short-run outlook is troubling. So prudence and the avoidance of hasty decisions must be the order of the day – and the leaders of the five nuclear weapon states would do well to gather in a quiet place like Reykjavik to reason together on a rule-based framework for their future relations.

For further information please contact:
Caroline de Lisle - Business Development Manager
caroline.delisle@ambassadorllp.com