

A photograph of three U.S. Marines in camouflage uniforms and helmets, equipped with tactical gear and rifles, positioned in a forest. One Marine on the left is looking through a night vision device. The background shows a dense forest of thin trees.

U.S. foreign policy, with its interventionist approach based on the so-called ‘democratic promotion agenda,’ sometimes runs contrary to Russian interest and in some cases, from a Russian perspective, creates havoc

U.S. Marines from the Black Sea Rotational Force and Lithuanian troops conducting joint operations during Exercise Saber Strike at the Pabrade Training Area, Lithuania (Sgt. Paul Perterson / Public Domain)

In a World of War, Could it Be ‘From Russia with Love’

A Conversation with Igor Istomin

Interviewed by Akshobh Giridharadas

Fletcher Security Review: When the Cold War ended, no real peace treaty was signed. What did this mean for the next phase of U.S.-Russia relations?

Igor Istomin: Well, first of all, the Cold War was not a real war. There were no direct hostilities, no military clashes between the Soviet Union and the United States. That is why there was no peace treaty signed, unlike at the end of hot conflicts. Although there were some conflicts, we had a couple of important declarations and important statements by leaders. Like the summit in Malta in the late 1980s, at which Soviet and American leadership said that they do not see each other as adversaries. In the late 1980s, and early 1990s, there was cooperation between the Soviet Union and the United States. Obviously, however, everything did not reach a positive conclusion. Today, the process of disillusionment continues on both sides. From the Russian perspective, throughout the 1990s, the United States tried to take advantage of the economic hardships in Russia. To an extent, it did this through U.S.-led institutions by creating norms and enacting policies often at the expense of Russia. In the 2000s, the message that started to come from Russia was: “it’s not going to continue.”

From the U.S. perspective, the thought was that because there is no longer a communist regime, Russia will become similar to the United States. Increasingly, however, we have a process of mutual frustration. This did not start in 2016. We are now in a cycle where this frustration is supplemented by specific problems in the relationship. These problems are making it harder to negotiate, or even facilitate, some of the existing treaties between Russia and the United States.

FSR: What changes have you seen, if any in the U.S.-Russia relationship in the context of Trump and Putin, two very pugnacious, bold and confrontational individuals? It seems, Putin and the Russian establishment preferred Trump to his presidential rival Hilary Clinton?

Istomin: Well I would agree with you that [President Trump and President Putin] both are very strong characters. I am not necessarily sure that I agree they are both confrontational characters. There are several layers of the Russian attitude towards Mr. Trump and Mrs. Clinton. I do not think it is just about political leadership but also public opinion. Even before the elections,



Donald J. Trump's (left) and Hillary Clinton's (right) headshots from the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election Race (Rich Girard / CC BY-SA 2.0)



The Siege of Sevastopol During the Crimean War in 1855
(Adolphe Yvon / Public Domain)

Trump was seen more favorably than his rival. In fact, Russia was the only G20 country where Trump was seen favorably over Mrs. Clinton. The explanation for this is that, unlike the Democrats and Mrs. Clinton, who were speaking only negatively about U.S.-Russia relations, Trump was speaking about negotiating with Russia and trying to find solutions. That is why he was perceived positively. There are broader reasons for this as well. U.S. foreign policy, with its interventionist approach based on the so-called 'democratic promotion agenda,' sometimes runs contrary to Russian interest and in some cases, from a Russian perspective, creates havoc — like in Iraq and Libya. Trump was not very keen to tread along this path; unlike Clinton, who espoused the liberal agenda, and Obama, who was maybe more reserved towards the interventionist agenda than Clinton was. Hence, the preference towards Trump.

FSR: On the intelligence front, did the confrontation between the United States and Russia really end after the Cold War? Of course, cyber has become the new domain of warfare, and with cyber security a major concern - how do you see the allegations of Russian involvement in the 2016 U.S. election affecting the geopolitical relations between the two countries?

Istomin: Well firstly on the official level, the Russian government never agreed to the allegations of Russian involvement in the U.S. 2016 elections. Russian officials

stated multiple times that they were not satisfied by any American intel showing conclusive involvement. I cannot comment on these allegations beyond what is in the public sphere. On cyber, we need to accept the fact that the militarization of cyber was started by the United States. The Americans were the first to create a cyber military command through the Pentagon. The NSA has some of the most sophisticated cyber programs, which came to light after the Snowden confessions. The United States has all kinds of capabilities, so it would be naïve to think that Russia or China would not try to catch up. If you look at budgets, the United States has more investment in this area. The second thing is, the perception we have now that cyber is so important is because it is a new sphere. I feel cyber capabilities are oversold. Yes, cyber is important. Since it is new, however, the rules of engagement are nebulous. Unfortunately, the rules of engagement cannot be discussed in the current political climate. There were talks from 2000-2010 to set the rules of engagement in the cyber sphere, but it did not go much further than setting a rule of not targeting critical infrastructure. There is a similar agreement that the United States signed with China. However, these are limited. Overall cyber is an instrument. It is important to understand the real political differences between the two countries, that is the critical question.

FSR: When it comes to U.S.-Russia relations, it has been said by many that Russia has simply outmatched

the United States in its use of 'information warfare' or propaganda. Would you agree with this? How has Russia done this? Is this a conscious policy decision?

Istomin: That is old propaganda. Information warfare has existed for ages. The first example of this kind of hybrid warfare is from the Crimean War. British journalists on the ground were spreading information against Russia throughout Europe. There are different instruments through which states want to project a positive image. There are also instruments used to demonize their opponents. Of course, today this is not the telegraph, it is digital news across multiple platforms. The United States spends more money on international media than Russia. It is a great argument played up on both sides that we are losing the information war, hence we need to spend more. In the English-speaking world, U.S. media is dominant, causing the U.S. viewpoint to spread extensively. Because Russian as a language is not intelligible to many outside Europe, the Russian media cannot influence the rest of the world in the same

way. This results in a disproportionate representation of American views, since you cannot create Russian media in the English-speaking world the way the Americans can. Due to these factors, it is hard to compare. Russia has started to pay more attention to the international media since the mid 2000s. It has started to invest more in these media that will present the Russian perspective on the international stage. From my point view, it is far-fetched to assume the Russian perspective can be so powerful that it influences the American media.

FSR: Moving to NATO now, how does Russia view U.S. reinforcement of NATO members bordering Russia?

Istomin: Russia does not like NATO on its doorstep. With NATO, we have had major developments in recent years. In the Russia-NATO founding act of 1997, it was stipulated, among other things, that there should be no permanent presence of NATO combat forces in the new member states that joined since 1999.



Brussels, Belgium. NATO Ministers of Defense convene (Glenn Fawcett / Public Domain)

But we have seen, since 2014, the presence of NATO forces in Eastern Europe growing. There are American troops as well. Strengthened forces of both NATO and the United States create all sorts of concerns for Russia — concerns around trust-building and prevention and unexpected collisions. Not that NATO will start a real offensive on the border, but this force strengthening could create incidents. Look at how NATO planes flew closer to the Russian border a few years ago. On the broader level, there should be dialogue that would prevent any chance of conflict.

FSR: Most of the western world was caught off guard with Russia's annexation of Crimea. What was Putin's psyche and philosophy behind Crimea?

Istomin: Reintegration of Crimea [laughs]! Frankly, I do not think Crimea was important in the change of relationship between Russia and the West. If you look at actions, steps, and events, there were restrictions and negative reactions by the West. The real sanctions started much later, not related to Crimea but primarily related to the situation in Eastern Ukraine. It seems that on an official level, the western powers will not

recognize Crimea, ignoring the warning signs. On the issue side, Crimea is important from a Russian identity position. It was perceived by the majority of the Russian population as an injustice that Crimea was taken from Russia in 1954 by Nikita Khrushchev. It was done as part of rearranging Soviet borders internally. It was perceived badly after 1991 and the referendum in Crimea was resounding, to join Russia. The majority of Crimeans are not just Russian speaking, they are Russians who were stationed there during the era of Soviet borders. Reintegration of Crimea was a movement supported by the Russian people. Of course politically it was a tough decision. It was done under circumstances where there was complete unpredictability about what would happen in Ukraine.

FSR: What is Russia's position in Syria?

Istomin: As you know, the conflict started in 2011 but the major changes in dynamics started a few years after that when it became clear that the forces fighting the government represent radical groups. From the Russian perspective, the existing government structures are the guarantee to bring Syria back together. Russian strategy



Pyongyang, Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Façade of the Russian Embassy in the DPRK (Lazyhawk / CC BY-SA 3.0)

in 2015, when Russian forces started to conduct operations, was to help the Syrian government deal with the jihadists. This was important for Russia, because Russia and Syria have common enemies. Radical jihadists are a major threat to Russia. Earlier this year, there was a major terrorist attack in St. Petersburg for example, and many other such attacks in Russia. There are famous commanders in ISIS from Central Asia, which is a direct threat to Russia. Russia wants to empower the Syrian government to defeat these forces. The major problem in Syria is not chemical weapons but rather finding political stability. Since the government controls the majority of territory, Russia is trying to convince the government to get to a solution. It is hard to talk about this issue with the United States, since it becomes a domestic political issue here.

FSR: What role, if any, do you see Russia playing today, as tension mounts most visibly on the Korean peninsula, in the counter-nuclear proliferation movement?

Istomin: Frankly speaking, Russia is not the central player at this stage. That said, the Russian approach is that the United States is playing a counter-productive role in this. The United States wants more sanctions over the DPRK regime, which is not viable in the long run. Sanctions put DPRK more and more in a corner from which there are no exits. Continuing this means they will be forced to jump at you. The Russian approach is that sanctions itself will not work, but what is needed is to have a positive agenda for the North Koreans. Hence, Russia and China support the double prison approach where the North Koreans stop their nuclear activities and the South Koreans stop missile testing, and they and the United States stop their military drills. Twice a year both South Korea and the

United States train for how they will fight a war against North Korea; how they will destroy North Korea. If you are DPRK, you are seeing aggressive forces training on how they will destroy you. The idea is to have positive movements on both sides: North Korea stops its nuclear activities, while South Korea and the United States need to scale back their military drills. It is not rational to expect a reunification anytime soon, and not rational to expect North Korea to become a de-nuclearized state in the immediate future.

FSR: How do your students (the leaders of tomorrow) view the United States' and Russia's relationship? What is their cultural perception of the United States? Hollywood for many years portrayed Russian characters as antagonists. Do you see a new people to people chapter?

Istomin: Russian students watch Hollywood movies. They are quite familiar with American pop culture. The American culture is very acceptable in Russia. Whether U.S. policies are acceptable in Russia, well that creates a lot of controversy with the Russian public and there are not very positive views of this. There was an American popularity surge post Trump coming into power. There was a notion that Trump and Putin would get along. The social capital between the two countries is not very high. Russia does not always look at the United States positively, but the United States is a good reference point for them to look at and find their own identity. Attention to the United States is higher in Russia, than attention to Russia is in the United States.

FSR: Thank you for your time Professor Istomin.

Igor A. Istomin

Igor A. Istomin is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Applied Analysis of International Issues at MGIMO University. He holds Ph.D. and M.A. degrees from MGIMO University as well as an undergraduate degree from Saint Petersburg State University. Istomin teaches undergraduate and graduate classes in methods of applied analysis of international affairs. He is an executive editor at *International Trends*, a leading Russian academic journal. He is also a visiting fellow at the School of International and Public Affairs at Jilin University in China. Istomin is the author of more than 50 publications on U.S. foreign policy, relations in the Euro-Atlantic space, and international security. His most recent book is *The Logic of State Behavior in International Politics* (2017). He has also prepared policy reports and papers for the Russian International Affairs Council, the Valdai Discussion Club, the Center for Strategic Research in Moscow, and the European Leadership Network.