

Russia and America: The Next Phase

A Speech by Bill Bradley Before the National Press Club - June 11, 1992

I am a child of the cold war. I remember as a 12 year old drawing the design of my own bomb shelter with specific places for my cot, my books, my favorite foods, and my basketball. In 1962, I can remember going to be during the Cuban missile crisis not knowing whether I'd be alive in the morning. For 45 years, the prospect of nuclear war haunted our collective imagination. Now all that is over. The threat has disappeared.

When Boris Yeltsin arrives in Washington next week, it should signal the beginning of a new era of friendly, cooperative Russo-American relations. The new reality is that Russia and the other republics are not the Soviet Union. They are new countries, distinct from each other and from their common predecessor. We must stop talking about them as if they carry the taint of the old Union.

The old system was controlled by a few who had power but no legitimacy. Now forces that are democratic, market-oriented, national, and spiritual seek an institutional arrangement through which they can build a better tomorrow. Congress and the American people should help make this positive change irreversible. A new beginning is at hand.

The question is, what kind of beginning? What will the next 45 years of U.S.-Russian relations look like? What are the opportunities for each of us? For the world? What must each of us do to seize this movement?

Let's begin with a clear understanding of what 70 years of totalitarian communism has done to Russia and the other republics.

The economy is in shambles. Deficits reached 25% of GNP. Hidden inflation grew. Shortages increased. Prices rose. Poverty spread. In an atmosphere of gross waste and vast inefficiency, corruption flourished. Command and terror ruled, not law and markets. The only way to justify your success was to get more from the central bureaucracy, even if that meant lying about cotton production in Uzbekistan or steel production in Ukraine; even if it meant showing up for work but not worrying about productivity, since, as the old slogan said about the value of work and reward, "You pretend to work, and we pretend to pay". The economic system lacked any internal discipline.

The natural environment of the former Soviet Union is a catastrophe. One hundred cities with more than 50,000 people have air pollution ten times the permitted level. Rivers like the Dnieper, in which I swam in 1966, have turned into mammoth sewers of chemicals. There are 15-20 more Chernobyls waiting to happen. The Aral Sea is drying up with cities that were once ports now 30 miles from the water because the rivers that feed them were diverted for wasteful irrigation. A steel plant on the Sea of Azov drains toxic green chemicals into a toxic lake three times bigger than the Jefferson memorial reflecting pool, and now the quantity of fish caught in the Aral Sea is less than one tenth what it was 30 years ago. In Siberia, the oil fields, the coal mines, the asbestos mines pollute lethally but with impunity. Bird species are disappearing. Along the northern coast where radioactive wastes were dumped in the 1960s, life expectancy has fallen to 32 years. Mindless industrial production has created health hazards beyond belief. Talk with those who live amidst the poison. See their sallow faces, their bloodshot eyes. Hear their coughs. Smell their sooted clothes, and weep in anger and sadness. There is no money for clean up, even if there were a sense of urgency. No one gave any thought to tomorrow – least of all the ideologues or Moscow bureaucrats – so what Russia, Ukraine, and others face today is a form of "ecocide".

Ethnic conflicts spring up anew, revealing that class enthusiasm never displaced ethnic consciousness, even after 70 years of communist repression. Russian minorities in Ukraine, Moldova, Kazakhstan, and other Central Asian republics fear for their future. In countless other places, arbitrary borders put other minorities, such as Armenians in Nagorno Karabakh, Abkhazians and Ossetians in Georgia, at the mercy of the majority. Now the way may be open for all sorts of extremism: Russian chauvinism, virulent nationalism, xenophobia, and, above all, the temptation to settle old scores. The climate of fear has taken a new turn.

With the fall of the Party and the invalidation of all Soviet laws, there is also a crisis in political institutions. The Congress was elected during the old communist era. The executive pushes reform; the legislature resists. The bureaucracy needs to be controlled by the people's representatives, but how to give people real control has yet to be determined. Getting people to take control is also problematic. In a society never reached by the Enlightenment and burdened by centuries of autocracy, the habits of democracy do not come naturally. The authoritarian impulse is real, and so is the danger of further fragmentation. Within Russia, there are autonomous republics which assert political independence and claim sovereignty. If they succeed, the map of Russia will look like Swiss cheese. It will take a generation to purge the system of the "old thinking", the "old habits", and the "old politicians".

All of these problems confront the present leadership just as they try to figure how to reduce their military expenditures, pullback their forces, and rewrite their military doctrine to reflect the security needs of a nation focused on internal development. As Russia makes these decisions, the attitude and action of the United States are critical.

The geopolitics of the 21st century will be shaped by the U.S.-Russian relationship. Russia sits between Asia and Europe – a vast continental nation – a bridge bringing East and West together and a hedge against adverse changes in Europe or Asia. A good relation with Russia enhances America's flexibility in international politics.

Although Russia worries about renewed German intervention, its main concerns lie in the East and to the South. Russia's longest border is with China, an emerging colossus with a booming economy, a modernizing military, and an unpredictable politics. China openly and straightforwardly rejects the present border as the product of unequal treaties between the Chinese and Russian empires. The Russian population is only one eighth the size of China's. Most Russians live in Europe, making the Siberian border with China a frail, sparsely populated barrier against Chinese challenge or migration.

To the south, forming another land bridge between East and West, lie the peoples of Islam, full of religious fervor and yearning for greatness. The former Soviet republics of Central Asia have birthrates more than double Russia's. Iran and Turkey will vie for influence with these governments, while the people remain susceptible to the fanaticism of militant Islam. The spread of missile and nuclear technology makes this prospect even more ominous.

Russia has no reliable allies to protect its interests in these areas of potential tension. The Commonwealth of Independent States is an unproven alliance, and China has a veto at the U.N. While Russians might look to Europe for assurance and accept it when offered, they will increasingly look to the United States for guidance and support, which we should give.

America's interests are to see Russia become a democracy with a market-based economy that raises living standards, with a much smaller defense establishment, and with an acceptance of free flowing capital, trade, and ideas. In other words, the U.S. objective should be to normalize our relations with Russia and the other states and bring them into the international system as full members.

The United States should be guided by three principles. First, we need to think more of the long term. When Thomas Jefferson bought Louisiana making America a continental nation, he was thinking of the long term. When Lincoln bought Alaska, he was thinking of the long term. When Wilson advocated the League of Nations, he was thinking of the long term. When Eisenhower said no to direct U.S. involvement in Vietnam, he was thinking of the long term. Each of these Presidents saw beyond the moment and conceived their actions in the context of our national destiny. With Russia the time for red alert is over. We need to see the U.S.-Russia relation beyond tomorrow's headline and without regard for the next election. But our national leadership has failed to tell us what values we stand for, where we're headed, and how we'll get there.

Second, we need to recognize our interdependence. We share the same planet with Russia. We have many Americans with roots in the newly independent states. Russian markets and U.S. technology offer us economic opportunity and could bind us for generations ahead. That bond is further reflected in the political opportunity that a democratic Russia offers to us in an uncertain world. The last 45 years' rivalry and our triumph make Russia interested in us just as the Japanese and Germans were after 1945. But things will never remain unchanged. If we fail to act, if we reject their hand of friendship, the tide could turn against our interests.

Third, U.S. policy toward Russia ultimately has to affect human beings for the better. The fact is that the oppression of totalitarianism has tested Russians more deeply than the race of materialism has tested Americans. We can share our values of individual liberty and democracy, but our genuine solidarity with them could rest on finding a deeper meaning to life than consumerism and on understanding the suffering of others. Above all, we should keep our focus on people as much as on economic projections; on the human spirit as much as on military hardware.

This is not a time for ambiguity. The United States must be explicit about our political and military intentions. With the defeat of communism, there remains no ideological conflict between the United States and Russia. The system that sought worldwide revolution and was supposed to "bury" us, in Khrushchev's words, has instead destroyed itself. We have no territorial design on Russia, and we no longer consider Russia a military threat.

Yeltsin told a group of U.S. Senators in 1991 that he was going to cut defense drastically because 40 percent of the people in Russia live in poverty. Earlier this year, the Russians cut defense spending by 50%, and their withdrawals from Eastern Germany continues on schedule. Russia needs to see deeper cuts in our defense expenditures and larger redeployments of our forces, not continued submarine operations off their northern coast and reluctance to cut long-range bombers and missiles. We must reject those who argue that we cannot cut defense much because we have to retain the ability for a quick return to the arms race if things change in Russia. These are people who yearn for the old ideological certainties that 1991 washed away. If we listen to them, our defense spending will send the wrong message to Russia and waste billions of taxpayers' dollars.

Beyond intentions, we must assure Russia that we recognize its current borders, including its control of autonomous republics, that we will not foster anti-Russian feeling in the name of ethnic self-determination, and that we will not support sovereign independence for separatist movements in Siberia or the Far East. In addition, we should encourage Ukraine and the Baltics not to militarize their borders with Russia; Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan to give up all their nuclear weapons quickly; and all former republics to minimize the size and number of their military forces. This should include leading the international community to support their legitimate security interests and non-nuclear states. Russia should know that there is no threat from the West – no prospect of a two-front war for its military strategists to worry about or prepare for.

The disputes between Russia and its former republics will be bitter. They will be territorial, political, and especially economic. Our interest is seeing that they not become explosive. Since we are trusted by both sides, we should offer our good offices to mediate disputes. Our credibility and detachment give us a unique opportunity to defuse tensions and to encourage focus on the long term. We did that after World War II by encouraging Jean Monnet and the concept of European unity, and today we can use a similar influence to bring Russia and its neighbors into a harmonious future.

Next, we need to be explicit about the political and economic changes we think Russia must make to be a full member of the international system. Much deeper democratization is necessary to give legitimacy to whatever the government does and, in particular, to absorb the reaction that will come from the hard choices necessary to transform Russian into a modern market-based economy. To minimize the risk of state oppression reemerging under the guise of reform, a constitutional bill of individual rights and a viable legal structure would help. A new constitution and new elections could also provide a better basis for legislating reforms that represent and serve the people.

Several more steps should be taken to support democratic and market reforms now. First, full membership in the IMF and the World Bank, gives Russia access to project loans, sectoral loans, balance of payments loans, as well as advice on radical market reforms. Second, the markets of the West should be open to raw materials, goods, and services from the East. Removing barriers will encourage foreign investment. Third, the West must be willing to restructure and to reduce Russia's international debt – at least exchange shorter loans for longer bonds. Fourth, the United States should send teams of advisers to help restructure the monetary, financial, and distribution systems – all three being quintessential elements of market efficiency. Fifth, we should lead an international effort to establish an emergency nuclear safety program – to destroy nuclear weapons and to make nuclear reactors safe. Cooperation in countering nuclear proliferation should be a part of that effort.

But, aid must be more than financial assistance. Nothing short of a massive exchange and sharing of ideas, people, and training will accomplish our broader long-term goals of economic prosperity and political security for Russia, for her neighbors, and for ourselves.

President Bush should not miss this opportunity. To date he has failed to provide leadership, preferring instead to react to – rather than shape – events. What the world needs in an American President who recognizes that leadership is no longer based only on military strength, but on the power of our example as a pluralistic democracy whose growing economy takes everyone to the higher ground – an American president who will encourage all the American people to reach out toward the people of Russia and the newly independent states in an act of generosity and pride in America.

We need to get beyond the politics of the moment, the deficit of the hour, the military count of the day. We need to get beyond the numbers that rarely shape events. Our long-term investment must be in people and in the values of democracy and individual liberty.

At the end of World War II, the Germans and the French, who had fought each other three times in 70 years, sought a way to prevent future conflict by knitting a web of human relationships between their two peoples. Every year for the last 40 years, between 40,000 and 60,000 German and French young people have lived in the other's country. This massive exchange program led to a deeper understanding and a bond of common experience. At the end of World War II, the United States also began exchange programs with Germany and Japan. At one point, it was said over half the Bundestag had been to the United States in an exchange program. Once people had experienced America by living here, they never forgot it. Americans in their everyday life were the best ever teachers of American values. That is why now at the end of another war in which we have triumphed, the whole American people should be called to service again.

America has a unique opportunity to build a foundation for change in Russia and for lasting friendships between our two peoples. I propose that we mount a massive Freedom Exchange program beginning in January 1993 and building over five years to 70,000 people per year: 50,000 high school kids from Russia and other republics, 10,000 college students and 1,000 graduate students. In addition, we should invite 10,000 small businessmen to live and to learn basic business in communities across America.

More Chinese study in America every year than Russians have studied here since World War II. Last year, 1991, while there were 177,000 college students from Taiwan, China, Japan, India, and Singapore studying in U.S. colleges, there were only 1,200 Russians.

Last year, there were only 814 Russians in U.S. high schools. A young Russian who is 16 today was nine when Gorbachev took over and perestroika began to bring change. In five years, she or he will be 21. Now is the time to let them experience America, learning what life in a market democracy with a heart is all about. They will see the openness, generosity, pride and democratic reality of America. Their experience would bring our peoples together in countless ways, creating bonds that would last a lifetime.

For example, in 1989 I visited a group of high school students in Alma-Ata in Kazakhstan. They had just returned from America on a high school exchange with Central High School in Phoenix, Arizona. I asked them what they remembered most vividly. One girl raised her hand and said, "the farewell". I looked around and many had tears in their eyes. "What do you mean," I asked. "Well," the girl continued, "when we were at the airport, the girl I stayed with came up to me, put a key in my hand, and said, 'Here, this is the key to our home. If you're ever in Phoenix again and we're not home, use it and make yourself comfortable. You know where the icebox is.'" It's that kind of bond and experience multiplied by thousands that the Freedom Exchange will create. Combined with the skills and awareness that the young people and small businessmen will acquire, it will promote the long-term interest of America.

America's effort to leave the cold war behind and to join Russia in building a better world for the 21st century must be matched by Russian action. In fact, the most difficult job ahead lies with Russians and Ukrainians and Balts. They are the ones who have to live through the transition and build the new society. It is their leaders who must lead and their people who must follow. It will not be easy, but the path is clear.

Russia must redefine its military strategy, moving to a totally defensive posture. It must reduce spending on weapons and redeploy forces. There must be a clear, short timetable for withdrawing Russian troops and weapons from Ukraine, the Baltics, and Moldova, as well as Eastern Europe; Russia should recognize the independence of its neighbors, exchange Ambassadors, and forswear any future territorial designs. Removing troops is the first test of such commitments.

Russia and the former republics need to proceed at the same time with the massive job of restructuring the economy. The runaway deficit of 25 percent of GNP must be reduced and eliminated, and hyperinflation must be avoided. Subsidies to inefficient enterprises must be cut, bureaucracies shrunk, property privatized, a banking system and financial infrastructure built, effective tax laws passed, clear rules and laws enacted governing development, foreign investment, and repatriation of profits, and finally a clear policy on labor and a social safety net for the poor.

This agenda will bring pain and will require political leadership. On the street corner in Kazan, I asked a young man who was a champion karate athlete what the thought of the reforms so far. He said, "They're okay. Prices are higher, but if you take the initiative, you can make more." And he said, smiling, "Athletes always seize opportunity." His optimism is countered by the anger of women on the streets in Moscow calling Yeltsin a criminal and reforms a foreign conspiracy. As a friend in the government confided to me,

“I can't walk on the streets anymore. The people are too angry.”

Reform will bring higher prices, unemployment, dislocation of workers, and lower standards of living -- for a while. Politics will have to zig and zag forward, making reforms but pulling back from time to time to defuse political reaction that endangers all the reforms. But, the direction must never change. The key is to keep the social momentum moving toward reform and democracy.

For 45 years, we were locked in a global strategic competition with the Soviet Union that concentrated on ideology and arms, but pervaded everything from music to sports – remember how you felt when the U.S. hockey team won the gold in the 1980 Olympics. Since the competition ended abruptly and without war, many people have been disoriented. Although the ideological triumph, peaceful as it was, is a monumental achievement, people still wonder what it all meant to them and why the victory feels slightly hollow. We need a deeper understanding of our circumstance.

As we normalize our relations, escaping the distorting lens of the cold war, we will find affinities and similarities we never thought possible. We recognize that neither of us alone can solve many of our problems – such as the environment, terrorism, drugs, economic migration, disarmament. All require international cooperation. Each of us must give up some sovereignty in order to have a voice in an international effort that could succeed. That idea of giving up something to gain something has a deep appeal, and it is the essential insight of not only a new U.S. -Russian relation but of the new age.

Giving up the desire for more of everything is the key to having more of something in our future. We will consume away our planet if we can't find the discipline to say “enough.” Individualism will degenerate into greed without commonly agreed limits. On an international scale, that means the gap between rich and poor nations will increase even as all of us live on borrowed environmental time.

The Soviet Union respected few limits in its disregard and destruction of our common environmental heritage. We see all our futures in Russia's “ecocide.” In the Russian movie, “Raspad,” the little boy who, in the wake of the Chernobyl disaster, gets left behind in a contaminated housing project – his hair already falling out – writes with chalk in the large letters on the playground, “Mother, I'm here waiting for you to return.” Mother won't return, the boy will die, and the tragedy will deepen. Let that warning give us all pause not only about the environment, but about relations between people – parents to children, Russians to Americans, citizens to citizens. Let us reflect on the absence of meaning in millions of consumer lives in the West, whose identity is shaped by the products they buy. Let us reflect on a world whose slogan is “Nothing lasts; nothing endures” – not products, politicians, jobs, homes. Each of us unthinkingly does what Russia did on a national scale – not worry about our obligations to each other, not worry about anything but our own material circumstance today. Such a world is not sustainable.

Let us build a new relationship with Russia and the other former republics – one based on two peoples coming together in a common commitment to make the tough choices for the long-term health of each country and the world; two peoples aware that having stared each other to the brink of nuclear holocaust, we now have a special responsibility to find in each other and within ourselves the capacity to reorder, to begin anew, to reconceive our possibilities as two nations, two peoples, one world.