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## Dissuasion in America's Russia Policy

*Strategic Insights*, Volume III, Issue 10 (October 2004)

By [James M. Goldgeier](#)

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### Introduction

There's no better place to start—for developing a framework for a U.S. policy of dissuasion—than with post-World War II US-Russia relations. During the Cold War, the U.S. sought above all to prevent Russia from dominating Eurasia, and from surpassing the U.S. as the world's leading power. Since the end of the Cold War, the goal has been two-fold: to dissuade Russia from reconstituting its imperial presence in Eurasia, and to dissuade Russia from facilitating the ambitions of anti-Western countries to enhance their WMD capabilities.

From the Truman through the Johnson administrations, the U.S. chose containment as its policy toward Moscow. Then, under Presidents Nixon, Ford and Carter, the U.S. tried a détente policy of carrots and sticks. And by the end of the Carter administration and into the Reagan years, Washington was back to containment. But with the end of ideological struggle during Mikhail Gorbachev's reign, and even more so in Boris Yeltsin's new Russia, carrots and sticks were back in vogue—with the emphasis decidedly on the carrots—a policy that has largely remained unchanged in U.S. dealings with President Vladimir Putin. Each of these policies has met with both successes and failures—depending on the overall goals of the Russian regime; the ability to target the groups within the Moscow political, economic and scientific elite responsible for the unwanted behavior; the ability of U.S. executive branch officials to carry out a policy that has support in Congress; and the overall goals of the U.S. in its dealings with Moscow.

### Containment: Deterring Attacks, but not Ambition

As conceptualized by George F. Kennan, containment was designed as a holding pattern: to keep the Soviet Union boxed in until the ideological underpinnings of the regime changed and its foreign policy "mellowed." Containment was successful at keeping the USSR from conquering American allies in Western Europe and Northeast Asia. Since the U.S. was not able to dissuade Russia from its military ambition, its policy centered on deterrence—signaling that the costs of the unwanted Soviet behavior would be so prohibitive as to outweigh any potential gains. In some cases, most notably in Cuba in 1962, a policy of compellence was required, and in this instance the U.S. was successful in getting the nuclear delivery vehicles that had been deployed on the

island returned to the Soviet Union. But containment did not dissuade Moscow from pursuing its military ambition or competition with the U.S. By the late 1960s, the Soviets had achieved nuclear parity, developed significant conventional capabilities, expanded their reach throughout the Third World, and sought to surpass the U.S. as the world's leading power. A central feature of U.S. dissuasion policy today is to prevent any country from even contemplating the military path followed by the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

### Détente: Trying the Use of Carrots

Concerns with Soviet military gains and fear of a U.S. decline amidst the Vietnam war led President Richard Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger to pursue a new approach that relied on finding the right carrots to induce bounds to the competition, temper Soviet ambition, and thereby help the U.S. maintain its preeminent position.<sup>[1]</sup> This was the first real effort to dissuade—through arms control agreements that would forestall Soviet efforts in missile defense and limit the development of certain offensive capabilities. But the overall policy of trying to keep the Soviets boxed in continued as well, and this meant not just keeping Europe and Japan firmly in the American camp but reaching out to China for the first time since the 1949 revolution.

Détente did little to slow down Soviet ambitions. Columbia University Professor Jack Snyder has written that Brezhnev's need to satisfy the hard-core ideologues and the military by maintaining global competition with the U.S. while at the same time trying to placate the economic technocrats through developing cooperative relations with Washington drove a Politburo policy of "offensive détente."<sup>[2]</sup> Given Brezhnev's desire to avoid Khrushchev's fate, coalition politics meant Soviet expansionism would continue, no matter what carrots were dangled in front of the Kremlin.

The key feature of détente was the notion of linkage. As Kissinger later wrote in his memoirs, "Events in different parts of the world, in our view, were related to each other; even more so, Soviet conduct in different parts of the world. We proceeded from the premise that to separate issues into distinct compartments would encourage the Soviet leaders to believe that they could use cooperation in one area as a safety valve while striving for unilateral advantages elsewhere. This was unacceptable."<sup>[3]</sup> Or as Harvard professor Stanley Hoffmann has described the approach: "The bear would be treated like one of B.F. Skinner's pigeons: there would be incentives for good behavior, rewards if such behavior occurred, and punishments if not. It may have been a bit pedantic, or a bit arrogant; it certainly was rather theoretical."<sup>[4]</sup>

The Nixon/Kissinger linkage strategy suggests that to combine carrots and sticks effectively across issue areas, policymakers need to both have something to offer and be able to deliver on what is being offered. What the Soviets wanted most was an American-Soviet alliance against China, something the U.S. was not prepared to pursue. One of Kissinger's chief aides, William Hyland, has written that "at one point [Soviet ambassador Anatoly] Dobrynin bluntly asked what was in it for Moscow if the Vietnam War ended. And Kissinger rather lamely suggested trade and a summit meeting."<sup>[5]</sup> You cannot dissuade another country with carrots if the prospective benefits don't outweigh the benefits the target state already receives from the unwanted behavior.

Even if the carrots are "lame," you have to be able to deliver them, and Kissinger was hamstrung by domestic opponents in Congress. Kissinger's idea of linkage was to dangle economic incentives in front of the Soviets to encourage cooperation on Vietnam and arms control, and the major economic carrot was the possibility of Most Favored Nation trade status for the Soviet Union. But Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson (D-WA) had a different view of linkage, believing that MFN should be tied to Soviet *internal* behavior. He and Representative Charles Vanik (D-OH)

succeeded in gaining approval for an amendment to the trade act of 1974 linking MFN status with Soviet emigration practices. As Kissinger had to confess to Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev at a meeting in Moscow, "On MFN, it was in this room, or a similar room, that we agreed on MFN in 1972. I had never heard of the Jackson amendment at that time. The Administration, under extremely difficult circumstances, attempted to fulfill a promise to the Soviet Union, and I regret the behavior of Senator Jackson."<sup>[6]</sup>

## **The End of the Cold War: Ideology Matters**

Under Gorbachev, the Soviet Union abandoned its ideological competition with the U.S.—and thus its military ambition—because it could no longer afford to keep up. At a Politburo session in October 1986, Gorbachev told his colleagues that a new arms race would be "beyond our capabilities, and we will lose it, because we are at the limit of our capabilities. Moreover, we can expect that Japan and the FRG could very soon join the American potential. If the new round begins, the pressure on our economy will be unbelievable."<sup>[7]</sup>

Once the Soviet Union abandoned its efforts to compete with the U.S. and gave up the ideological struggle, the Cold War was over. Trying to dissuade the Soviet Union from pursuing its anti-Western objectives in Eastern Europe, Afghanistan, the Middle East, Cuba and Africa became much easier. Gorbachev needed good relations with the West to pursue his domestic reforms. The U.S. conditioned those relations on his willingness to change Soviet behavior. He might have changed his foreign policy in most of these areas anyway given his domestic agenda, but the U.S. made it more difficult for him to pursue the kind of "offensive détente" practiced by Brezhnev.

Then in 1991, the Soviet Union itself disappeared. The new Russia was led by Boris Yeltsin, who wanted to destroy communism at home and become an ally of the U.S. abroad. But even the Yeltsin regime was doing things (or could potentially do things) that led to new efforts by the U.S. to dissuade Russia.

## **After the Cold War: The Transformation and Integration Agenda**

The U.S. understood it had a huge opportunity after the collapse of the Soviet Union to build a new relationship with the new Russia. The Bush, Clinton and Bush administrations each placed differing emphases on whether encourage Russia's internal transition to democracy and a market economy or to develop cooperative relations with Moscow regardless of internal trends, and their different policies reflect different views on the importance of the internal composition of states in shaping foreign policy.<sup>[8]</sup> But despite their differences in orientation, all three administrations have had to confront two broad categories of problems requiring policies of dissuasion since 1991.

- The first is the goal of dissuading Russia from seeking to recreate its empire on the Eurasian landmass. After the Soviet collapse, Russia's Western border was much further from Europe's center than either the Soviet or Tsarist Russian border had been. Were Russia to re-occupy territory to its West, particularly the territory of Ukraine, the overall American policy of fulfilling its post-Cold War agenda of a Europe whole and free would be thrown into turmoil. Similarly, Russian control of now independent territories in the Caucasus and Central Asia would have enormous geo-strategic implications for U.S. policy in the arc of crisis.
- The second goal is to dissuade Russia from assisting the military ambitions of anti-Western countries, most notably Iran. Its ability to help other nations develop missile

programs or WMD capacity is the biggest threat that Russia poses to U.S. interests globally. This requires not simply dissuading the Russian government from supporting these military ambitions but also dissuading scientists or others with know-how and access from selling their knowledge and/or sensitive materials to rogue states.

Preventing Russia from seeking to recreate empire has not been particularly difficult since 1991, largely because of the lack of Russian capabilities. In the early 1990s, the U.S. was also assisted by Boris Yeltsin's desire to defeat Gorbachev politically and emerge as the ruler of Russia. To achieve his objective, Yeltsin supported the independence of the non-Russian Republics of the USSR, thus undermining Gorbachev's political position. But also important has been U.S. support for the independence of key states such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Uzbekistan, making it more difficult for Russia to contemplate overt territorial grabs (any questions regarding the Baltic countries were put to rest with their accession to NATO and the European Union).

The second goal—that of dissuading Russia from supporting the military ambitions of countries opposed to American interests—has been achieved in some cases, but not others. In the early 1990s, for example, the U.S. was determined to stop Russian sales of cryogenic engine technology to India that violated the missile technology control regime and threatened to exacerbate the threat of military instability between India and Pakistan. In 1993, the U.S. succeeded in putting an end to Russian sales. Soon, however, an even more threatening issue arose: Russia's decision to help Iran complete its nuclear reactor at Bushehr. To date, the U.S. has failed to dissuade Russia from providing this assistance. Why was the U.S. able to succeed in dissuading Russia in the first instance, but not the second?

#### **India Rocket Deal: The Price is Right[9]**

Russian sales of cryogenic engine technology to the Indian Space Rocket Organization (ISRO) was one of the first issues confronting the Clinton administration in 1993 and threatened to lead to sanctions. To avoid this outcome (which would have jeopardized Clinton's effort to boost Yeltsin at home), the U.S. offered Russia participation on the International Space Station. The U.S. never publicly linked the participation in the Space Station with canceling the contract with India, but privately the message was clear. Russia was being offered deals potentially worth billions of dollars in a consortium with G-7 countries in exchange for canceling a deal worth millions of dollars with India. And Yeltsin, along with his Russian Space Agency, took it.

#### **Iran: No Deal**

Iran was a different story. In January 1995, Russia and Iran publicly announced a deal worth nearly \$1 billion to complete a nuclear reactor at Bushehr. Both nations insisted the reactor was designed for peaceful uses of atomic energy. But there were also lingering reports that the Russian Ministry of Atomic Energy (Minatom) was selling gas centrifuge equipment that could lead to an Iranian uranium enrichment program. While the Russian government agreed to halt this activity, work on the reactor has continued, and Bushehr is now scheduled to be operational by 2006. Russia and Iran have agreed that spent fuel from the reactor will go back to Russia, but spent fuel is only part of the problem. What Russia is transferring to Iran is also sensitive technology and scientific know-how. And once the reactor is operational, what is to stop Iran from ending its agreement with Russia on the spent fuel?[10]

What did the U.S. do to try to dissuade Russia from fulfilling the contract? U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher publicly offered \$100 million to help Minatom build more reactors in Russia. But this was a paltry sum in comparison with what was at stake for Minatom in Iran. Even with promises of higher stakes (namely satellite launch quotas), Russia had limited incentives to

cancel its contract. Because U.S. corporations were profiting from joint ventures, they constrained the Clinton team's ability to tie the carrots to a change in Russia's Iran policy. The Bush administration put forward the prospect of removing restrictions that have limited Russia's ability to reprocess and store spent nuclear fuel from elsewhere in the world; this too has been insufficient to move the Russians. And neither the Clinton nor Bush administration has wanted to sanction the Russian government because of larger issues in U.S.-Russian relations, particularly after 9/11—though the Clinton administration reached agreement with Congress to sanction certain Russian companies rather than the Yeltsin government.

To date, the U.S. has been unable to stop Russian work on the reactor, even with occasional threats of sanctions from both the Clinton and Bush administrations. There are a number of possible reasons for American failure in this case. One, of course, was the money at stake. A second was the possibility, especially in the 1990s, that Minatom's pursuits were not controlled by the Russian central government. Third, Russia was furious in 1995-96 at the U.S. decision not to be dissuaded from pushing the expansion of NATO into Central Europe and was in no mood to compromise. Finally, there have long been rumors that the Russian deal with Iran came with a promise that Tehran would not assist the Chechens. If true, then it would be hard to imagine any carrot from the U.S. that would be sufficient to dissuade Russia.

Of course, in managing the Iran nuclear issue, the U.S. can work not only the supply side of the equation but also the demand side. It has enlisted European help in offering carrots for Iran to abide by IAEA demands. It has threatened UN Security Council action. And there were the threats implied by the 2002 National Security Strategy of the U.S. If there was no demand for nuclear assistance from Iran, then the issue of dissuading Russia would be moot. Unfortunately, Iran's nuclear ambition is on the verge of precipitating a major international crisis.

## Conclusion

A comparison of U.S. dissuasion efforts vis-à-vis Russia since the late 1940s provides a number of key lessons for developing dissuasion policies designed to get international actors to contain their own military ambitions or to stop assisting other actors with their military ambitions:

- With ideological foes, the best one can likely do is deterrence rather than dissuasion, and thus reliance on threats to prevent the target from moving against one's interests—even if it proves impossible to alter their overall military ambition. In the Soviet case, only after Moscow gave up its ideological struggle did carrots play any useful role.
- When offering carrots, policymakers need to keep in mind several potential problems:
  - The carrots have to be ones that are larger than the benefits the target is getting from the unwanted behavior. In the India rocket deal, Russia was clearly getting more from the U.S. than it would be getting from India, and it did what Washington desired.
  - The carrots have to be acceptable not just to any actors in the target state/group but to those responsible for the behavior in question. Economic technocrats in the USSR were eager for cooperation with the U.S. but the groups responsible for expansionist policies—the military and the ideologues—were the ones who needed to be moved. On Iran, Russian defense analyst Pavel Felgenhauer wrote in 2003, "In the last year the building of the Bushehr reactor has been legally taken over by one of Russia's oligarchs, and the [Atomic Energy] Ministry is not in charge anymore. The Iranians are paying

very generously, in cash, for work done. If the U.S. wants to stop the nuclear cooperation promptly, it should talk compensation with the real people in charge, not irrelevant officials, including President Vladimir Putin."<sup>[11]</sup>

- Policymakers must be able to deliver the carrots, as Kissinger was unable to do with respect to MFN.
- Sticks (e.g., sanctions) must be credible to be effective. Presidents Clinton and Bush have not wanted to sanction Russia over Iran because they have other goals at stake in the relationship—in particular since 9/11, when the overriding goal has been cooperation in the war on terrorism—and Russia knows it. Remember, the target may be playing its own game of linkage with the U.S., and doing so successfully.

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