

Slate

FOREIGNERS

"The Russians Moved Because They Know You Are Weak"

The last two weeks have been a disaster for U.S. foreign policy.

By Daniel Benjamin

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Through the first days of the crisis in the Caucasus, all eyes have been on the suffering of the Georgians and barbarism of the Russians. Both are indisputable. But now it is also time to recognize that the events of the last two weeks have been a disaster for U.S. foreign policy.

Russia's invasion of its neighbor is a clear demonstration that the United States-led effort to integrate post-Soviet Russia into the West has failed. Whether the process can be restarted remains to be seen, but in light of the events since Aug. 8, doing so soon would be indecent.

Some will say that failure was inevitable. Great empires, the argument goes, cannot suffer historic calamities, as the Soviet Union did, and then quietly settle into the second rank of world powers without further spasms of misbehavior. But three successive U.S. administrations clearly maintained it was possible.

Others will also argue that failure was due to a chronic inability to recognize that America's post-Cold War aims and Russian integration were irreconcilable. Specifically, the Russians could never live with a post-Soviet settlement that saw most of their satellite nations and many of the USSR's former republics enter NATO and the European Union, and no amount of engagement with Russia was going to make this pill digestible.

This is debatable but not provable. What is indisputably true is that both the George H.W. Bush and Clinton administrations worked to give the Russians a place at the table. The first President Bush pledged no more NATO enlargement after a reunified Germany took its place in the alliance and went to great lengths to avoid any post-Cold War triumphalism. Clinton may have caused damage by renegeing on the assurance of no further NATO enlargement, but he more than made up for it with the NATO-Russia Founding Act; the denuclearization of Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus; the creation of the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission, which created a forum for ongoing close government cooperation; the invitation to join the G-7; and vast amounts of time in close consultation with Boris Yeltsin.

Helping Russia in the 1990s was no easy task given the country's internal chaos. There was also estrangement as the Kosovo crisis unfolded in 1999. But that was nothing compared with the anger that Moscow developed over its treatment at the hands of the current Bush administration, which has long seemed to be sending the message that Russian interests were simply of no importance in Washington. To be fair, Russia wasn't being singled out. The treatment of Russia was a piece of U.S. foreign policy that appeared to be based on the notion that we would reap better outcomes by pursuing what might be called the diplomacy of no diplomacy.



With Russia, the story had its own distinctive twist, in which the administration's remarkable [inability ever to follow through](#) on anything was in high relief. There were numerous contacts at the highest levels—Bush and Putin have met at least 25 times—but the results were quite obviously nugatory. (What other conclusion can one draw from the television images of Bush chummily securing "assurances" from Putin at the Beijing Olympics, only to have the Russian prime minister then show up to direct the forces in Vladikavkaz?) The relationship commenced with a blizzard of promises of ambitious common effort, beginning with Bush's June 2001 first meeting with Putin. There would be joint work on missile defense, energy, and economic cooperation, and that would just be the start.

But as U.S. diplomats sought to put flesh on Bush's words and build a better United States-Russia relationship, they found a White House that could not be moved to do even the smallest things. A case in point, they thought, was making good on the promise to exempt Russia from the Cold War Jackson-Vanik legislation.

Jackson-Vanik requires the government to certify to Congress that Russia is allowing people to emigrate freely; in return, Russia enjoys "most favored nation" trade status. The issue had been all but a dead letter for years, since Moscow had long since stopped regulating emigration, but the Cold War relic still irritated the Kremlin. With no domestic opposition to removing the annoyance of annual certification, all that was needed, State Department and NSC officials determined in 2002, was four phone calls to congressional leaders to make it happen. But they found that getting the president to schedule the calls was impossible, no matter how hard they tried. Now, 17 years after the death of the Soviet Union—and 12 years after a wave of 750,000 Russian Jews moved to Israel—Jackson-Vanik lives, and, extraordinarily, U.S. officials talk about it as something that will be left in place to punish the Russians.

The Jackson-Vanik story is small and symbolic but typical of the Bush administration's treatment of Russia. The landmarks were a series of blows that convinced the Russians that their mighty country was of piddling significance to Washington. When the Bush administration unilaterally withdrew from the Antiballistic Missile Treaty in 2001, the message to the Russians was that their concerns were of no concern. When the United States went ahead and, in the view of most of the world, invaded Iraq without the endorsement of U.N. Security Council, the Russians had to take this as a sign that the administration didn't give a damn about the Security Council or Russia's status as a permanent, veto-wielding member. The politicking over independence for Kosovo, in which Russia demonstrated an increasing cussedness in its refusal to deal with this obvious inevitability, underscored that Russia's role in the global security architecture was derisory.

The Bush administration may have thought the relationship with Russia was important, but it never seemed to think that letting the Russians win an issue, or even achieve a real compromise, was a price worth paying. The final straws, it appears, were last spring's headlong rush to offer Georgia and Ukraine each a Membership Action Plan for NATO and the agreement to put anti-missile-system components in the Czech Republic and Poland, which Russia took to mean that it also had no say in the evolution of the European security system. The NATO effort, in particular, was hastily conceived, involved little consultation, and was carried out without any thought for Russia's reaction. The entirely justifiable rule that no outside party should have a veto over another sovereign country's decision to join NATO had morphed into a belief that no other nation's concerns (or at least not Russia's) should receive a hearing or play any role in the deliberations.

NATO enlargement has had a powerful, positive impact on Europe's new democracies. But as one round has succeeded another with seemingly diminishing forethought, it has also become the crack cocaine of White House politics: There is nothing like presiding over the entry of a new batch of young republics into the world's most successful alliance to make a chief executive look again like the Leader of the Free World. The architects of the process in the Clinton administration understood that each step forward required deeper engagement with Russia—and Clinton himself spent long hours with Boris Yeltsin, explaining, reassuring, and finding compensatory avenues of cooperation.

Since 2001, that recognition has melted entirely. The White House's effort to get the action plan for Georgia and Ukraine started in earnest just three weeks before the Bucharest Summit began.

The whole affair was so hastily concocted that it resulted in a showdown between Germany and France on one side and the United States and a bevy of eastern European countries on the other. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who felt that Bush had reneged on a pledge not to push for MAPs at Bucharest, ultimately signed onto a communiqué that bizarrely specified that the two applicants would not get MAP now but that "these countries will become members of NATO." (A MAP, NATO has always been at pains to emphasize, does not necessarily mean that a country will become a member.) So the document sent two messages. American officials delighted in this stronger-than-expected signal to Georgia and Ukraine. Yet two months ago in Moscow, Russian officials told me that they saw the communiqué as demonstrating that their pressure on the Europeans had worked and NATO had backed off.

As others have pointed out, the sad fact is that the administration haphazardly started discovering the virtues of diplomacy in the last two years—think of the turnarounds on Iran, North Korea, and the Middle East peace process. In the relationship with Russia, that has also been evident in the efforts to ameliorate concerns over the Central European missile-defense program. But the last quarter of an administration is the wrong time to discover statecraft. And we are very far from the foreign policy envisioned by Condoleezza Rice in her 2000 *Foreign Affairs* [manifesto](#) for candidate Bush's foreign policy, which promised a new focus on "comprehensive relationships with the big powers, particularly Russia and China, that can and will mold the character of the international political system." As Rice wrote then but quickly seems to have forgotten, "These states are capable of disruption on a grand scale, and their fits of anger or acts of beneficence affect hundreds of millions of people."

There is another aspect of the current crisis that is made in America. It was summed up by a European diplomat who told me last week, "The Russians moved because they know you are weak." He hardly needed to explain. With the U.S. military overstretched and publicly complaining about not having enough troops for Afghanistan, Moscow knew it had a propitious moment. Had we not been so bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan, the White House—which has been watching this crisis build for months—might have left a thousand or so troops in Georgia after our last joint exercise or sent more warships for a visit to the Black Sea. Few would argue that we should get into a shooting match with the Russians over Georgia. But the presence of U.S. forces on the ground, or even the knowledge that there was a significant reserve available in Europe, might have given the Russians pause or at least a healthy fear of miscalculation. As it was, they had a perfect set of circumstances for their strike.

Chalk it up as another indirect cost of the U.S. engagement in Iraq—of the fact that for most of Bush's tenure in office, we have had an Iraq policy, not a foreign policy. Dick Cheney often repeats the platitude that "[t]errorist attacks are not caused by the use of strength. They are invited by the perception of weakness." Too bad that Cheney and the administration could only think about terrorists—of whom there were virtually none in Iraq—and not all the other American interests that would be undermined by palpable evidence of our weakness.

Now it will be left to Bush's successor to pick up the pieces. This will be a challenge of contradictory imperatives. On the one hand, the solution for a Russia that is insufficiently integrated into the global system is one that is more integrated. On the other, what Russia has done is obscene and cannot go unpunished. Reconciling those two needs or handling them in a sequence in which the first step doesn't doom the second will require enormous deftness and diplomacy, if it is at all possible.

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