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Testimony :: Rajan Menon

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Mr. Menon was not present at the hearing

Chairman Hastings and distinguished members of this Committee: Thank you for inviting me to share my assessment of the US-Russian relationship and of Russia's overall trajectory.

This is an opportune, though not particularly pleasant, time to address this topic given the barbed exchanges between Moscow and Washington in recent days, which in turn reflect a larger trend, one I will explain presently. We are now witnessing a low-point in our relationship with Russia, and while I would be happy to proven wrong, in my estimation the situation could get worse. I can make no firm prognosis, but there are many more reasons to expect deterioration rather than improvement.

A new pathway is not impossible. But if Moscow and Washington truly wish to take it, each must think strategically (as opposed to tactically), employ creative diplomacy to prevent short-term setbacks from defining the long-term relationship, and resist the temptation to engage in tit-for-tat exchanges. Only then can the US and Russia build a stable relationship that is sustained by robust cooperation in areas where there are converging interests.

Our current troubles with Russia are getting plenty of coverage these days. But they must be placed in perspective. Contrary to the intermittent attention-grabbing media hype, we are not embarking on a "new Cold War." That phase of history was defined by an ideologically-driven global competition between two mighty states who, like Athens and Sparta in the 5th century BCE, sought to reshape the world, assuming in the process that one side's gain was, by definition, the other's loss. But there was one big difference between the Peloponnesian War and the Cold War: During the latter, one could reasonable assume that if the titans clashed, especially using nuclear arms, civilization itself would be extinguished.

Whatever may be said of the prickly US-Russian relationship today, it has none of these characteristics. No serious American expert on Russia believes that it does; happily, the same is true of credible Russian experts on the United States.

Yet there is considerable antipathy toward the United States in Russia—not only within the Russian leadership, but among Russians more generally. In part this is because Russia has few effective means to assert its interests in what it sees as a unipolar world defined by unrivaled American primacy.

This amalgam of resentment and near-resignation was evident in President Vladimir Putin's 4,000-word attack on US policy, delivered on February 10th at the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy. So unexpected and bare-knuckled was Putin's speech that senior American political figures in the audience—among them Senator John McCain and the newly-appointed Defense Secretary, Robert Gates—were taken aback, with Gates being forced to revise the text of his speech to issue a rebuttal, albeit one with a far lighter touch than Putin's.

Putin's Munich speech summarizes every serious grievance that the Russian leadership and political establishment have toward the United States. If one reads between the lines, it is not the manifesto of a Russia on the ascendance; the frustration over the lack of means to counter what Russians see as high-handed American policies is also evident in the text. In both respects, Putin's address bore an uncanny similarity to the statements made by a Russian delegation with which I met, along with other Americans, not long before the Munich conference. The Munich speech, however much one may reject its content and tone, accurately represents Russia's current view of the world and, in particular, of the United States. Putin's bill of indictment contains several interconnected elements:

- The United States is a veritable rogue state. Intoxicated by its unprecedented military superiority, America is romping through the international landscape, acting unilaterally, heedless of international law and the United Nations, and full of hubris given the lack of centers of countervailing power. The result, as Putin put it, is a world with “one center of authority, one center of power, one center of decision making.”
- Because of its preponderance and lack of self-restraint, the United States is a constant threat to international peace and security, particularly given its unilateral use of force, or “hyper use of force,” in Putin's colorful words. Counterbalancing centers of power—including Russia—are emerging, but, in the meantime, the United States endangers global equilibrium.
- Washington continually lectures others on democratic niceties, but consistently and hypocritically flouts those same principles. Russia in particular receives sermons on democracy. But these are not well-meant; they represent an ideological offensive to discredit Russia and to interfere in its internal affairs, perhaps even an effort to spark the equivalent of Ukraine's Orange Revolution.
- Washington's willingness to use military power without international accountability “inevitably encourages a number of countries to acquire weapons of mass destruction” and contradicts its declared policy of checking the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).
- The United States (joined in instances by its allies) is backtracking on, or scrapping, important arms control agreements, among them the 1972 ABM Treaty; the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, as revised in 1999 (which only four parties, including Russia but excluding the US, have ratified), and the Bush-Putin framework agreement to cut each side's stock of operational strategic nuclear warheads to between 1700 and 2000 by the end of 2012.

- The United States has violated the 1990 commitment that NATO forces would not be stationed east of Germany. Indeed, Washington has led the charge to expand NATO, a symbol of the very Cold War it claims is over, by admitting not only states from Central Europe, but former Soviet republics as well. This has brought NATO to Russia's doorstep, and for no compelling reason.

- Washington invokes the nuclear threat posed by Iran and North Korea to emplace ballistic missile defenses in the Czech Republic and Poland. Yet neither the Iranians nor the North Koreans are able to strike these NATO members; nor, Putin implied, do they have reason to. The bottom line is that this initiative is a gratuitous provocation aimed at Russia.

- Moscow and Washington, face common problems despite the dangers posed by these American policies and must act in concert. Among these problems is the spread of WMD, especially into the hands of terrorists. Russia stands ready to cooperate.

There is no monochrome view of Russia within the United States. Still, there is an overwhelming consensus that the euphoria of the 1990s—hope abounded then about the rise of a democratic Russian polity and of a US-Russian partnership of solidarity and cooperation—has dissipated.

Regardless of how they apportion blame for the state of the US-Russian relations, American experts agree that it is bad and that any improvement in the near term is unlikely. Most also believe that democracy in Putin's Russia is eroding steadily and that a bellicose, even xenophobic, nationalism is gaining ground. This tends to be the assessment of even those who believe that the United States shares most of the blame for the poor condition of US-Russian relations. The evidence is simply too obvious and ample to dismiss.

The Bush administration's assessment has also become pessimistic and those within it who have always been wary of Russia now have the upper hand. This is in sharp contrast to the days when Presidents Bush and Putin seemed to have struck a friendship, with Bush claiming to have seen good in Putin's soul. Secretary of State Rice's public characterization of Russia's claims that the deployment of ballistic missiles on NATO's eastern flank constituted a threat to its security as "preposterous" is emblematic of the change and was also notable because, while it waved off Moscow's concerns, it failed to give any credence to Russia's skepticism about the alleged threats posed to the alliance by the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs.

So what where does this leave us? A look back at Weimar Germany helps answer the question. While no two periods in history are identical, there are some parallels between Russia today and Germany after 1918. Both lost a war and were humiliated as a result: World War I in German's case, the Cold War in Russia's. What followed was a loss of prestige and the forfeiture of great power status. Both states were preoccupied by their co-ethnics and their fate in nearby countries. Both suffered a catastrophe economic collapse (Germany in the 1930s, Russia in the 1990s). Both experienced bouts of political instability, which were followed the emergence of a strong leader.

My point is not that Russia today bears any resemblance to Nazi Germany. But the wounded nationalism that followed the loss of prestige and great power status is striking, the yearning for order, the erosion of democracy, and the growing salience of ideologies that scapegoat ethnic and religious minorities is evident in both cases. Putin's Russia is certainly not an expansionist power, but it is determined to regain lost respect, secure predominance in its neighborhood, and—with high oil prices having filled its coffers and spurred rapid economic growth—confident enough to stake its claims.

It would be mistaken to attribute the political trends in Russia principally to Putin's tough personality, KGB background, or control over television (and, recent events would suggest, also to an extent over radio programming); they reflect Russian public opinion, which is why Putin has sky-high approval ratings. Portrayals of Putin in the American press these days focus nowadays on his authoritarianism, but Russians applaud him as a strong leader who stands up to their country's adversaries and has restored national dignity. They see this as a welcome contrast to the Yeltsin years, which featured a leader with a penchant for buffoonish and inebriated behavior, a political order marked by cronyism and instability, and an economy crisis that pushed millions into penury.

Now Russia seems to be on the comeback trail—with a strong economy and a decisive leader. Russians like that. They have paid a price to be sure. Television is now controlled by the state, radio news stations are now coming under pressure, and print journalists work in a more restrictive environment. There are restrictions on rallies and demonstrations, which risk being broken up by police using rough tactics. Former KGB officers occupy high position in the political system. The toothless parliament is dominated by the pro-Putin United Russia party and does his bidding. There is no political opposition to speak of from opposition political parties and civic organizations.

But Russians seem to quite willing to pay this price, seems not to matter terribly much. Even were the regime to cease unleashing Interior Ministry troops against meetings supporting opposition leader Gary Kasparov—which do not draw many Russians in any event—his political message would gain little resonance within Russian society.

But just how strong is Putin's Russia? The commonplace view is that Russia has reemerging as a great power. But I believe this interpretation skates over many continuing sources of Russia's weakness and conflates Russia's rising rhetoric with reality.

In fact, Russia's anger derives substantially from the gap between its aspirations and self image on the one hand and the power it possesses on the other. Despite all that one hears these days about Russian resurgence, Russia continues to be encumbered by a number of weaknesses, which, moreover, will not be overcome for the foreseeable future. Consider some examples:

- Political weakness lies beneath the façade of a strong authoritarian state. The 1993 Yeltsin constitution paved the way for a super-presidency which overshadowed the parliament and the judiciary, which now have little independent power. Putin has used the 1993 political design to concentrate power in his hands. As a result, the polity is over-personalized and under-

institutionalized. Too much depends on one man; hence the anxiety created by the next presidential election and the speculation over whether the constitution will be amended to give Putin a third term or, if not, whom he will anoint as his successor. Despite the lack of any organized political opposition, the regime is insecure and uses force to disband marches by Kasparov's supporters, who are completely ineffectual as a political force. These are not signs of a consolidated and stable political system.

- Russia remains economically weak. True, economic growth that has averaged 6 percent per annum since 2000. A sizeable middle class has emerged; malls, fancy restaurants, and foreign cars are a common sight in Russia's big cities; and high oil prices have produced foreign exchange reserves in excess of \$250 billion. Nevertheless, the Russian economy, calculated using exchange rates, is the size of that of the Netherlands. Its per capita income is comparable to Botswana's. Russia is the odd man out in the G-8, the club of the world's largest economies (which excludes China and India, both of which have much larger economies than Russia's).

- Standard measures used to compare countries' economic strength highlight Russia's weakness. Its economy is the world's 10th largest—about the size of the Netherlands'—but it is much smaller than those of the leading Western and Asian economies with which Russia hopes to compete in the global marketplace. Russia places 13th in a list of 50 countries ranked by the value of their exports, trailing Belgium, which has a population only one-tenth as large as Russia's and GDP with half the value. Moreover, energy, other raw materials, and arms account for over 70 percent of Russia's exports—energy alone for two-thirds. Russia's share of global exports is 2.4 percent and imports 1.2 percent. Of the \$648 billion in worldwide foreign direct investment in 2004, only 1.7 percent went to Russia. An annual ranking of 62 countries on key indices of globalization by a well known consultancy placed Russia in 47th place for 2005.

- The Russian army is a shadow of its mighty Soviet Union counterpart. The main weapons platforms are aging, 40 percent of draftees were declared physically or mentally unfit, the frequency and scale of major exercises is down, and draft evasion is pervasive given the terrible life of the enlisted man, who is subjected to deep-rooted and brutal hazing. The government has increased defense spending massively since 2004, but the military's problems are so severe that it will take years to overcome them.

- Russia's human capital is being eroded by cardiovascular disease, rising HIV/AIDS infection rates, high levels of suicide, and alcoholism and drug addiction. Russia is the only industrialized country in which male life expectancy is declining. (Russia was the sole European country in a recent WHO list of countries with the highest incidence of tuberculosis per 100,00 people; and it topped the WHO's list for suicide rates.) The population shrinking by 750,000 annually; it stands at 148 million now, but is expected to be 121 million by 2050. Moreover, it is graying as it shrinks, making for a less productive workforce and increasing costs to support the aged. There were six people of working age for every retiree in 1995; by 2010 the ratio is expected to be 2:1.

- Oil and gas are Russia's strong suits, but the wealth they bring have strengthened the state's political power, weakened democracy, increased governmental control over the energy sector,

and boosted already rampant corruption. Russia is, in this respect, similar to many hydrocarbon economies. But there are problems even in the energy sector. The pipeline system is shoddy and existing levels of investments are insufficient to keep oil production rising.

- The lands of the former Soviet Union aside, it is hard to find a place where Russia exercises major influence. For its poor and weak neighbors, Russia is a power to be reckoned with. In Georgia and Moldova, Russian support sustains breakaway statelets. Moscow has used energy supplies to exert pressure on Belarus, Georgia, and Ukraine. But the result has been to increase anti-Russian sentiment in these countries.

- Russia is not looked upon by other states as a model, the use of the Russian language in science, technology, and commerce is on the decline (even within the states of the former Soviet Union), and China and India are the emerging new centers of global power.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, allow me to specify the implications of my analysis for American policy toward Russia:

1) There is no alternative to engaging Russia, a country with 148 million people, 11 time zones, a landmass larger than the US and Canada combined, vast deposits of oil and gas, and thousands of nuclear weapons. Yet we must not let alarmist ideas about the resurgence of Russian power shape our policies. The best way to make Russia an adversary is to treat it as one.

2) We may certainly wish for a democratic Russia and must use our soft power (trade, student exchanges, cultural contact, and the like) to that end. But we must not delude ourselves into thinking that we can play a substantial role in determining what sort of society emerges in Russia. We cannot, and efforts to do so will only make bilateral relations worse, while making anti-democratic forces stronger by allowing them to play the ultranationalist card. Moreover, it will make cooperation on matters of common interest even harder by creating a backlash against what will be perceived as arrogant American meddling in Russia's internal affairs.

3) We must identify key areas of common interest—terrorism, Islamic radicalism, the drug trade, the proliferation of WMD, and nuclear arms control—and insulate them from the ups and downs in bilateral relations. The way to do so is by ensuring that day-to-day institutionalized cooperation between our two countries proceeds on these fronts so that each side gets used to the process of cooperation and keeps in mind that, our differences notwithstanding, we have important interests in common.

4) We must never concede Russia's primacy in the former Soviet states and must engage them on all fronts (political, economic, and cultural) or make our policies toward them a function of our relationship with Russia. But we must also not—however inadvertently—encourage recklessness in their leaders by leading to believe that their close relationship with us absolves them of responsibility of forge a stable relationship with Russia. To do so would be to increase the risk of conflict and to assume responsibilities we cannot shoulder.

5) While Russia cannot be allowed to decide NATO's policies, we must ask ourselves whether the plans to enlarge it further and to build anti-ballistic missile defenses in countries on NATO's eastern flank are worth the price of alienating Russia. The expansion of NATO has already cost us a high political price in Russia and additional decisions concerning NATO cannot be separated from the likely consequences for our relationship with Russia.

6) We must encourage our allies to reduce their dependence on Russian energy and continue to help oil- and gas-producing states in Central Asia and the Caspian Sea zone to find pipeline routes that bypass Russia.

7) We must look at Putin's Munich performance as an example of how not to conduct diplomacy. No matter how troubled our relationship with Russia, no matter how hard it is to win Russian cooperation on important global problems, public hectoring and posturing will only strengthen the forces within Russia that oppose democracy, civil liberties, and openness toward the outside world. That is not in the American interest.

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of this committee, thank you for your time and attention.