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A 3-Pronged Russia Policy

By Richard Lourie

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On the grounds of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, there is a statue of John Quincy Adams looking as young, energetic and optimistic as the America that sent him as its first official representative to Russia in 1809. The statue reminds us that U.S.-Russian relations are more than two centuries old, and over this period they have certainly had their ups and down.

That's good to remember at moments like the present one, when relations have reached a nasty impasse. The U.S. has made some mistakes, but those mistakes have only fed into, not caused, President Vladimir Putin's program of anti-Americanism.

In the new three-pronged policy toward Russia, Prong No. 1 is a timeout. The U.S. should simply opt out of tit-for-tat tactics, seize the moral high ground and refuse to respond to provocation or at least take its time in doing so. This should be the policy until the September G20 summit in St. Petersburg, where some kind of breakthrough just might occur between Putin and Obama.

Prong No. 2 concerns ongoing efforts too important to abandon because of a sour mood, chief among them Syria and Iran. Russia should continue to be nudged on its position on Syria,

even though it's probably hopeless. From Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic to Libya's Moammar Gadhafi, the specter of dictators driven from power by Western bombs has haunted the Kremlin. That is especially true now, when Putin seems to sincerely believe that the U.S. is using government agencies, nongovernmental organizations and weapons inspectors to infiltrate, spy on and weaken Russia.

Russia has less of a mania about Iran because no Western leaders are calling for the ayatollahs' overthrow. Moreover, Moscow has not been given enough credit for canceling the sale of the S-300 anti-missile defense system to Iran, which would have rendered any attack on Iranian nuclear facilities extremely hazardous — and in the case of Israel, probably impossible. What's more, the Kremlin suffered an $800 loss million in canceling the sale. In a delicious irony, the Iranians are now suing Russia in the International Court of Arbitration in Geneva for breach of contract.

NATO's use of the Russian air base in Ulyanovsk and of Russian rail lines and airspace will only become more important as the 2014 deadline for withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan approaches. There's big money involved here: about $1 billion for the Russian air cargo companies and billions more for the shipments along the Northern Distribution Network at the going rate of $17,500 a container. Any breakdown of this working relationship would constitute a genuine crisis.

The same is true of space, where the U.S. and Russia must continue to quietly cooperate. The end of the U.S. space shuttle program makes Washington dependent on Moscow for lifts to the space station. The price per ride recently increased from $56 million to $63 million. (There is no free launch.)

Prong No. 3 of a new Russia policy requires long-term thinking about China and the Arctic. The U.S. policy toward China is now committed to balance, not containment, but things could change. For example, Central Asia's two main powers, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, are ruled by aging strongmen with no obvious heirs or successors. If they die, are incapacitated or are overthrown, a power vacuum will form, and radical Islamists could seize power or even be freely elected. This turmoil could easily spill over into China's western borders, which would endanger the supplies of raw materials and energy that China receives overland. This will make Beijing all the more dependent on its sea routes and more aggressive about protecting them. This will make it more difficult to balance China without Russia's help on the Central Asia side, assuming that Moscow has continued to project its influence there in the meantime.

The Russians have made it clear how serious they are about the Arctic since 2007, when a Russian mini-sub descended 4,200 meters and planted a titanium flag on the sea floor. Since then, Rosneft has partnered with ExxonMobil to do major drilling in the region. Russia continues to press for its undersea continental shelf to be recognized as its actual border, adding immensely to its Arctic control. The Kremlin announced that by 2020, the Arctic will be considered a vital interest. The Federal Security Service created a special Arctic directorate. The Russian army is building a new advanced infantry-fighting vehicle called "the Knight," whose gas turbine engine is designed for Arctic conditions. Russia, which already has the world's largest number of icebreakers, 18, is busily building more. The U.S. has one.

There are three main likely outcomes for the Arctic. It may prove a flashpoint, an area of environmental disaster or a bonanza for shipping and energy. Whatever the case, the Arctic is an area of impending importance that requires the U.S. to make advances on many fronts: diplomatic, economic, military and intelligence. If the fight over the Arctic becomes a global crisis, it is one the U.S. could have prepared for well ahead of time.

Relations with Russia will never equal what they were at their inception, when Tsar Alexander I and John Quincy Adams talked for hours. The Moscow Embassy statue reminds us of both the length and the possibilities of the U.S.-Russian relationship. And by the way, that youthful, energetic and quintessentially American monument is the work of a Russian sculptor, Alexander Burganov.

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