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Opportunities Presented by 9/11 Lost 13 Years On

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A little more than two hours after the first passenger airliner flew into the World Trade Center towers in New York City 13 years ago, President Vladimir Putin called his U.S. counterpart George W. Bush to offer his and Russia's complete and unconditional support on one of the most tragic days in U.S. history.

Ramping up international support for his own fight against terrorism in Chechnya at the time, Putin used the Sept. 11 attacks to forge a firm alliance between Russia and the West. He was the first foreign leader to call Bush on that day.

"Russia knows well what terrorism is, so we understand and hear very well what the American people feel today. I am addressing the American people on behalf of all Russians to say that we are with you. We feel your pain and we support you," Putin said in a televised statement

on the day of the attacks.

The expression of support was followed up by Russia with concrete steps to facilitate the war on terror declared by the U.S.

Russia lobbied for the deployment of U.S. military bases in the former Soviet states of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, its traditional sphere of influence, and assisted the Northern Alliance in its initial victories against the Taliban.

Moreover, Russia gave a silent nod to the U.S. withdrawal from the 1972 Ballistic Missile Treaty, one of the cornerstones of nuclear deterrence, and was relatively restrained in its resistance to NATO's further expansion into Eastern Europe and the Baltic states in 2004, which brought a former adversary up to its frontiers.

In a 2000 interview with the BBC, Putin — who is often accused today of having secret designs to restore the Soviet Union — did not rule out Russia's eventual accession to NATO.

In a joint statement in November 2001, Putin and Bush said that the two countries had "overcome the legacy of the Cold War. Neither country regards the other as an enemy or threat."

"Reaffirming our commitment to advance common values, the United States and Russia will continue to work together to protect and advance human rights, tolerance, religious freedom, free speech and independent media," the statement solemnly declared.

Despite these apparently noble intentions, something went very wrong.

Today NATO once again sees Moscow as a potential threat and is seeking to deploy new military bases on its doorstep, while the U.S. has returned to its Cold War policy of containing Russia, according to U.S. officials.

Tough Talk

With the boiling Ukraine conflict that has already been formalized by mutual sanctions, it seems unlikely that Russia and the U.S. will unite their efforts to curb the threat of radical Islamism that has manifested itself in the establishment of the Islamic State caliphate across the borders of Syria and Iraq this year.

The deputy secretary of Russia's Security Council, Mikhail Popov, said last week that Russia might update its 2010 military doctrine to take account of new threats coming from the West.

"If nothing had happened in Crimea and southeastern Ukraine, the West would have invented something else. The goal was set to unbalance Russia at any price," Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told TASS state news agency in an interview published Thursday.

Both Russia and the West have accused each other of being the true conspirator and belligerent in the ongoing political crisis in Ukraine. But according to analysts questioned by The Moscow Times, the recent events in Ukraine were more of a result than reason for the present standoff.

Containment and Consolidation

"The policy of containing Russia was already in force in 1993, when NATO introduced its Partnership for Peace program, soliciting new members," said Pavel Zolotarev, deputy director of the Institute of U.S. and Canada of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

As Putin was consolidating his own power within the country, the failure to build an equal and productive relationship with Washington allowed the government to use the U.S. as an enemy that society could consolidate itself against, analysts said.

"The U.S. embarked on an ambitious project to remake the world in accordance with its interests and values, starting with the Middle East. The U.S. hoped to prolong its post-Soviet hegemony through the unilateral use of force," Dmitry Suslov, deputy director for research at the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy wrote in an article back in 2011.

In the mid-2000s, Russia — with its ongoing war against insurgents in the North Caucasus, the Kremlin's crackdown on critical media and Putin's personal fight against the political influence of the country's oligarchs — did not fit into the U.S. values model.

In addition, as the Russian government asserted its authority at home, the U.S. went with the coalition of the willing to assert itself in Iraq and the Middle East. As a result, while in 2000, 66 percent of Russians viewed the U.S. either very favorably or favorably, in 2007 this number had decreased to 44 percent and in March this year it had collapsed further to 34 percent. The polls were conducted among 1,603 respondents with a margin of error not exceeding 3.4 percent.

Points of No Return

"There were at least two turning points in the history of Russia-U.S. relations: One in 2003-2005 when the U.S. supported so-called color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, and then in 2011-2012, when the Russian government believed that the West was behind the mass anti-Putin protests in Moscow," Ivan Kurilla, a professor at Volgograd State University, told The Moscow Times.

"In Washington, nobody realized that by integrating Russia, the U.S. could contribute to strengthening its political institutions. So I believe that the bulk of guilt lays with Washington, which has contributed to Russia's current national isolationism," he said in emailed comments.

According to Yevgeny Buzhinsky, senior deputy president of the PIR Center, a high-profile Moscow think tank, the problem was that the U.S. was absorbed by triumphalism after the Cold War, resulting in Washington wanting to prolong its dominant role for as long as possible.

"Russia's confrontation with the West was a gradual process in which the Kremlin gradually stopped taking what the U.S. was saying seriously. If there is ever to be an improvement, that will be gradual too," Buzhinsky, a retired army lieutenant general, said in a phone interview.

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