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There's a Glimmer of Hope in U.S.-Russia Relations (Op-ed)

The world is looking to Russia and America for a new kind of INF Treaty: Interdict North-Korean Fiasco

By Justin Lifflander

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President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev signing the INF Treaty in the East Room of the White House / The Ronald Reagan Library / Public Domain

I moved to Moscow 30 years ago because of a diplomatic staffing spat between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev. I'm still here. And we have again found ourselves at a low point in Russian-American relations, with consulates crippled and communications between Moscow and Washington almost non-existent.

But I see a glimmer of hope.

In 1987-88, as a driver at the U.S. Embassy, I chauffeured negotiators working on the

Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. The INF treaty marks its 30th anniversary this week, even though it is now gasping for life.

But its gestation serves as a model for diplomacy between adversaries. And its birth was followed by two decades of unprecedented cooperation between Russian and American military, diplomats and business people.

That treaty brought me to Votkinsk — Tchaikovsky's birthplace and home to a nuclear missile factory. I fell in love with a factory worker, her family and the country. So, I made a life here.

Although now a Russian citizen, I will always be a "former foreigner." It's an incongruous status, like "former KGB officer." That said, I have become rather plausibly Russian. And by our nature, we Russians love to give advice. Understanding our take on recent history, along with our current sentiments and frustrations, is essential for improving relations with the West.

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The dissolution of the USSR was economically and psychologically traumatic. Once revered industrial giants paid salaries in frying pans and stuffed animals. Life became a daily struggle to maintain security and sanity.

As the Soviet republics broke away, sanity itself was further imperiled by the humiliating loss of 25 percent of the nation's territory. As a friend put it, "In 1991, I lost my sense of country."

Three-quarters of a century has elapsed since the Nazi invasion of World War II – which is to Russians what the Holocaust is to Jews. The devastation it wrecked is part of every family's consciousness. These factors are fundamental to understanding Russia's obsession with encroachment on its borders.

The Soviet Union isn't being resurrected, but some characteristics of the old system are reemerging.

Massive state corporations dominate the economy. Young people aspire to careers in these companies instead of pursuing innovation and value creation. Nepotism exacerbates this trend: businesses controlled by relatives of the elite sprout like mushrooms under a spruce tree after a fall rain, limiting economic opportunity and access to top jobs.

Malfeasance is worse now. The Soviet Union's code of ethics included accountability. In 1987, a young German landed his plane on Red Square. The defense minister was sacked. Now, the defense minister at the center of an embezzlement scandal gets amnesty and a seat on the board of a state corporation.

The free exchange of ideas that began in the '90s – which included new publications, broadcasts and foreign travel – is choking thanks to state-controlled media, a weak ruble, and increasing visa restrictions, imposed by all sides. Civil servants are discouraged from traveling abroad. Sochi and Crimea are the new Phuket and Miami.

A virtual Iron Curtain constricts communication. Understandably, many American internet

service providers block Russian IP-addresses from accessing their email and website customers.

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Domestic controls have added to Russia's isolation. Laws against promoting terrorism, suicide, public gatherings and homosexuality give the authorities sweeping powers. Stricter data handling rules have made LinkedIn inaccessible. Facebook faces a shutdown if it doesn't comply.

Sadly, as information flows narrow, so do perceptions of history. A recent poll reveals that 24 percent of 1,200 adult respondents had never heard of Stalin-era repressions.

Our self-respect has returned, helped by petrodollar prosperity and the perception that we project power abroad. Yet, we feel victimized by the West. We resent the insensitivity of NATO encroachment, are angered by the futility of so-called color revolutions and disdain liberal values that tolerate punk rockers who defile churches.

Meanwhile, a revived external enemy boosts our leadership's popularity. But officials take themselves too seriously. The caricature puppets of bumbling politicians, which appeared on primetime television in the 90s, have vanished. Fortunately, our sense of humor hasn't. Instead of going underground, it's gone online.

A recent meme showed our security ministers debating which Western metropolis to bomb. They realized each had a friend, relative or property in the proposed targets. They agreed the safest place to attack would be the Russian provincial city of Voronezh, where none had any interests. I felt an odd sense of relief when I saw this.

We just need the cycle of history to peak. The world looks to Russia and America — with support from China — for a new kind of INF Treaty: Interdict North-Korean Fiasco.

Another Kremlin-ordered reduction of U.S. diplomatic staff could cause the State Department to again send in college graduates. They will come to flip burgers, drive cars and build informal bridges — as I did 30 years ago.

When this happens, I'll know the pendulum is swinging back and that better times are coming. Until then, I'll count on my friends and family to share the latest jokes and continue helping me peel the intriguing onion that is life in Russia.

Justin Lifflander is a dual U.S.-Russian citizen. He worked as an inspector on the INF Treaty, is a former business editor at The Moscow Times and author of "How Not to Become a Spy: a memoir of love at the end of the Cold War." The views and opinions expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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