



Putin and Russia's Southern Belt Since the Iraq War¹

Michael Rywkin

Before the beginning of military operations in Iraq in March 2003, Russian activity in the former Soviet republics of the Southern Belt (Central Asia and the Caucasus) visibly accelerated. This development was clearly influenced by the shift of Washington's attention from Osama's to Saddam's neighborhood—that is, away from CIS southern borders and toward the Middle East—allowing Moscow to recuperate some of the influence it lost after the establishment of American bases in Central Asia.

The previous period—between September 11, 2001, and the end of 2002—was one of growing American influence. Faced with American determination, President Putin, against the advice of his own Security Council, opted to cooperate with Washington in Central Asia and to use more prudence in opposing American interests in the southern Caucasus. The required American concession was the acknowledgment of Chechen fighters as terrorists. Washington, however, was unwilling to extend its abandonment of the Chechen cause to areas south of Chechen borders. Thus the American military was dispatched last year to the Pankisi Gorge of Georgia as a presence designed to dissuade Russian threats to rid the area of Chechen infiltrators by force, and work continued on the Baku–Ceyhan pipeline.

The American involvement in Iraq changed Washington's priorities and provided Russia with a window of opportunity to recoup its post-September 2001 political losses in the republics of the “near abroad” in the Southern Belt in particular. The estrangement between Washington, on one side, and Paris and Berlin, on another, has been equally helpful to Russian goals. This time, however, Moscow has altered its post-1991 con-

flicting policies toward its Southern Belt. Those were aimed at maintaining Russian influence in the southern Caucasus by destabilizing the area through the support of separatist forces within the republics while, on the contrary, favoring stabilization in Central Asia by supporting existing regimes. This double approach was born during the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the republics of Central Asia remained under the rule of old-time *apparatchiki* generally open to Russian ties, whereas those of the southern Caucasus were led by popular fronts, which (with the exception of Armenia) tried to escape Moscow's embrace. But by 2003 Moscow appears to have realized that the time of popular fronts in the southern Caucasus had passed and that the existing regimes were ruled by persons not much different from their Central Asian counterparts. The time of fomenting ethnic conflicts in order to discipline former “younger brothers” and claim the role of the arbiter in cooling self-incited conflicts (as was the case in Nagorno–Karabakh, Abkhazia, Ossetia, and Transnistria) seems to be over. Moscow may have finally reached the conclusion that supporting all the existing regimes, while maintaining some reservations about Georgia (seen as the most anti-Russian of all) and Turkmenistan (too extreme even for conservative taste), is in its best interest.

Russian policy is now concentrated not on military but on economic and financial pressure designed to induce the republics of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to accept a Russian security umbrella under the label of collective security. This new and more subtle policy has been made feasible by the Russian economic recovery since 1998 and by growing cash reserves

of its world-size oil and gas companies, which are ready to invest in CIS countries. According to economist Anders Aslund, in line with the new reality, some Russian reformists advocate a policy of “liberal imperialism” for postcommunist countries. Such a policy would, on one hand, consist of active support for liberal ideas and, on another, of buying local assets, rebuilding pre-1991 common networks, and promoting Russian culture, all finally leading to political integration.²

Russian sources mention the former “privatization tsar” (and the current CEO of Unified Energy Systems [UES]), Anatoly Chubais, as the key proponent of affixing this new label to old Russian imperial schemes. “It is high time to call a spade a spade.” Russia is a “natural and unique leader” of the CIS. “Liberal imperialism should become Russia’s ideology and building up [a] liberal empire Russia’s mission.”

Chubais advocates a combination of economic and political expansion as the ultimate aim of Moscow’s foreign policy. It has to be pursued in order to allow Russia to “occupy its natural place alongside the United States, the European Union, and Japan, the place designated for it by history.”³

This idea is reminiscent of efforts to implement the standard “neocolonialist” agenda, a charge like that leveled against the former colonial powers by their third-world and Soviet detractors in the past.

The Russian Economic and Energy Offensive

During the period of April, May, and June 2003, Russia undertook several initiatives aimed at extending its influence in key strategic domains of the former Soviet republics. Most Russian moves were directed toward the Southern Belt, where the United States has made substantial inroads since September 11, but some were directed at Ukraine and the Baltic States. The flare-up over the sovereignty of the passage from the Black Sea to the Sea of Azov near the Tuzla is-

land off the Crimean Coast did not prevent joint Russian–Ukrainian naval exercises from taking place in April. Russia and Ukraine reached an agreement extending the Russian electric grid to Ukrainian territory before the war in Iraq. In May, new negotiations between Presidents Putin and Kuchma led to closer cooperation between the Russian and Ukrainian defense industries, an initiative followed in June by a Russian offer to the members of the CIS Collective Security Treaty to sell arms at the Russian domestic price. To some observers, Ukraine appears to be maneuvering among Russia, the European Union, and the United States as if trying to emulate some third-world countries of the cold-war period, which tried to obtain subsidies from both the West and the Soviet bloc by threatening to tilt toward the more generous side.

In April the Baltic region was subjected to new economic pressures as well when the Russian oil company Transneft demanded shares of the Ventspilis oil terminal in Latvia, threatening otherwise to reroute its oil shipments to the newly built oil terminal at the Russian Baltic harbor of Primorsk, specifically constructed to reduce Russian dependence on transit through the Baltic countries, candidates for membership in both NATO and the European Union. At the same time, hints were made that Moscow might consider quoting its oil prices in euros instead of dollars, but no further clarification of that matter was forthcoming.

Georgia, for its part, was subjected to a Russian energy offensive. In October, the Russian company UES bought the Tbilisi-based Telasi Company, which controls Georgia’s main power plants and capital grid, from its former American owner. UES is heavily invested in Armenia and Kazakhstan and plans further acquisitions. On September 30, a 25-year contract was signed between Georgia and Russia’s Gazexport (a subsidiary of the state gas monopoly, Gazprom) covering Russian gas deliveries to Georgia and allowing for the possibility of transporting Iranian gas to Europe through Georgian territory. Unpaid Georgian debts to Russia, as well as prom-

ises of a more balanced Russian stand on the Abkhazian issue, have undoubtedly influenced the transaction. The situation in Azerbaijan also played a role. Thus the United States supposedly consented to this transaction in exchange for a tacit Russian agreement involving more American oil concessions in neighboring Azerbaijan. Even though both Moscow and Washington gave their backing to Heidar Aliev's son and heir, Ilham, Baku, and Tbilisi remain the centers of Russian–American rivalry in the region. Anyone who would like to see a visual image of this rivalry should visit Baku and observe the headquarters of the two rival powers in the area—the two walled compounds of the American and Russian embassies, both so different from the hospitable appearances of other foreign missions—and watch the diplomatic dance going on in the capital.

Central Asia became an area for the strong activation of new Russian post-Iraq initiatives, starting with the Russian claim that it has the right to keep full control of CIS pipelines built during the Soviet past. Thus speaking on October 9 at a joint press conference with Chancellor Schroeder, President Putin specifically underlined that point, arguing that only Russia among the CIS countries has the ability to keep itself in working order. This specifically concerns the pipelines running through the territory of the oil-producing Central Asian republics. It is worth noting that in order to put forward an argument hardly acceptable to Washington, Putin chose to do so in front of the German chancellor, who owes gratitude to Russia for siding with Paris and Berlin during the recent confrontation with Washington over Iraq.

Common Economic Space

A major element of the Russian economic offensive is the Common Economic Space project for the four “core” CIS countries: Russia, Ukraine, Belorussia, and Kazakhstan, the original signatories of the dissolution of the Soviet

Union and of the creation of CIS in 1991. Although the process of integration eventually could include other CIS countries, the current initiative bears an uncanny resemblance to the Franco–German attempt to create a similar “hard core” of four countries (Germany, France, Belgium, Luxemburg) within the European Union. In each case the “hard core” is supposed to accomplish a similar task: namely, to ensure the leadership of the initiators (Russia, in one case; Germany and France, in the other) within their respective “communities” (the Commonwealth of Independent States, in one case, and the European Union, in the other) and at the same time counterbalance American influence. There is another strong motivation behind Russian moves: namely, to prevent Ukraine from “moving to Europe,” parallel to American determination to keep Kiev from regaining entry into Moscow's fold.

Numerous voices doubtful of prospects for the common economic space are being heard. Many leading Russian proponents of this initiative acknowledge that the construction of such an “economic community” could take years. The Ukrainian minister of the economy, Valery Khodoshkovsky, is equally skeptical: He thinks that as far as Ukraine is concerned, the simultaneous pursuit of two contradictory moves (toward the European Union and toward the Russian-dominated CIS “hard core”) would founder within the same time span.

Moves on the Military Chessboard

The current Russian emphasis on economic incentives does not suggest that Moscow abandoned the military side of the equation. The situation in Georgia and Georgian–American military cooperation attracted the most attention in Moscow. Thus in May the Russian deputy foreign minister expressed opposition to “military formations” in the Caspian Sea Basin, a veiled reference to the American military presence. His

comment was in line with concern expressed in April by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs about Georgian–American defense cooperation.

Similar Russian concerns were voiced about American military cooperation with Central Asia. On May 23, the secretary general of the CIS Collective Security Council, Nikolay Bordyuzha, expressed the hope that American bases would not stay in Central Asia beyond the duration of anti-terrorist activities in Afghanistan. On June 18, Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov divulged Russian plans to create military bases in Central Asia; and on June 25, discussion started about a new Russian air base at the Kant airfield in Kyrgyzstan, a republic that houses a large NATO base established at the Manas airfield after the events of September 11, 2001.

The inauguration of the Kant base took place before the facility became fully operational. Located 25 kilometers from the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek, it is supposed to house about 20 Russian military aircraft. Although small in size, it is the first new air base opened by Russia outside its territory since the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. Speaking at the inauguration, President Putin stressed that Russian forces in Kant would be deployed on a permanent basis (the agreement was concluded for 15 years), whereas American forces in Manas are “to deal with the specific task of fighting against international terrorism in Afghanistan and only while the operation lasts.”⁴ President Akaev, for his part, reminded of Kyrgyz’s friendship with Russia, asserted that “Russia’s power is continually growing, and it can afford an air base that will protect its friends from any threats.” The Kant air base deal was accompanied by several economic incentives given by Moscow to Bishkek: \$3 million in arms supplies and equipment, an agreement to buy electricity from Kyrgyz, and the opening of an investment forum bringing together Russian firms interested in investing in Kyrgyzstan.⁵ According to rumors, bribes to Bishkek legislators played a role as well.

Although Russia appears to have made inroads in Kyrgyzstan, mixed signals are coming

from Tajikistan. An optical tracking facility has been built for monitoring objects in space,⁶ hardly a useful object for watching the border and an obvious concession to Russian demands. President Putin’s visit in April to discuss the establishment of military bases for the reorganized 201st mechanized division that has been deployed on Tajik–Afghan borders since 1991, however, brought no immediate results. The Tajik side aired the idea of replacing Russian border guards with their own, who occupy the “second line” of control aimed at stopping infiltrators who manage to pass through the Russian military guarding the Tajik–Afghan border. The Tajik side even expressed dissatisfaction at the way the Russian military perform their duties, especially in stopping narco-traffickers (a veiled allusion to the corruption of the Russian military). Dushambe also would like to diminish its share of covering the cost of the Russian border guards, a burden divided equally with Russia at the moment. Moreover, Tajik authorities are dissatisfied with the treatment of half-a-million Tajik *gastarbeiters* (guest workers) in Russia, who send home almost the equivalent of Tajikistan’s budget.⁷ One gets the impression that during this year, each of the two smaller republics of post-Soviet Central Asia went its own way: Kyrgyzstan opted for closer ties with Moscow, whereas Tajikistan was trying to loosen its ties.

Uzbekistan, the most populated republic in Central Asia and an aspiring regional leader, presents a difficult problem for both Russia and the United States. For Moscow, it is Tashkent’s balancing act between Russia and the United States; for Washington, it is the autocratic and corrupt nature of the existing regime. Moscow has chosen an indirect way to entice Tashkent into closer cooperation by trying to revive the moribund “Shanghai Cooperation Organization” (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Russia, and China). Both Moscow and Peking are attempting to limit American influence in the area. Uzbekistan, for its part, is trying to balance its commitments to both the United States and Russia. Thus in July of 2003 Uzbekistan con-

ducted military exercises with CIS countries (“Military Commonwealth 2003”), involving Russian, Belorussian, and Uzbek troops and a command-staff exercise with the GUUAM group. But it also conducted joint exercises with Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Tashkent consented to the establishment of an antiterrorist center under the sponsorship of the Shanghai Organization located in the city. President Putin put a great deal of pressure on Karimov during the “summit” in Samarkand, forcing the latter to justify his cooperation with the United States by sheer economic necessity. Soon thereafter, however, Islam Karimov went on a “damage-control” course, assuring Washington that the American air base at Hanabad in southwestern Uzbekistan was not a subject of Russian–Uzbek discussions. Furthermore, Uzbekistan did not participate in the Shanghai Organization’s military maneuvers in Kazakhstan and China, emphasizing instead the primacy of economic cooperation.

The richest republic of the region, Kazakhstan, although more inclined than Uzbekistan to closer cooperation with Moscow, is also trying to keep a balancing act—this time among Russia, China, and the United States—by playing down the military aspects of the Shanghai Organization’s initiatives. Showing evenhandedness, Kazakh forces took part in joint exercises with British and American troops near Almaty in July and with Chinese, Russian, Tajik, and Kyrgyz forces in August.⁸

Despite its conflict with Turkmenistan concerning the problem of Russian nationals who have double Russian and Turkmen citizenship, Russia has not excluded Ashgabat from its Central Asian offensive. An agreement has been reached between the Russian state monopoly Gazprom and Turkmen authorities concerning pumping Turkmen gas northward through the Uzbek and Kazakh pipeline systems. At this moment Turkmenistan also is selling its gas to Iran, to the Ukrainian Naftohaz, and to Gazprom’s rival, Itera. Gazprom has offered to rehabilitate the Turkmen hydrocarbon industry and invest in Turkmen infrastructure as an inducement for

setting a joint Russian–Turkmen monopoly capable of handling all Turkmen gas exports.⁹

What is undeniable is that both Moscow and Beijing are busy using the time when Washington is occupied elsewhere to try to undermine American positions in Central Asia. This time, however, their efforts are backed more by economic and trade incentives and offers of anti-terrorist and antinarco-traffic cooperation than by military pressures.

The New Russian Military Doctrine

Since the demise of the Soviet Union and changing geopolitical circumstances, the Russian military doctrine has been revised more than once. This time, through the mouth of Minister of Defense Sergei Ivanov, we learn of the latest (post–Iraq War) version. The key elements of the approach are as follows.

1. Russia discards the hypothetical possibility of a nuclear exchange with NATO and consequently renounces the idea of a “first strike.”
2. Following the American approach used by Washington to justify the intervention in Iraq, Russia reserves the right of “preventive strike” to counter potential “instability in countries along its borders.” If it comes to stopping production of the means of mass destruction, the right of a preventive nuclear strike seems to be included.

Both points are contradictory. The first ignores the recent Russian deployment of new ICBMs and air defense systems still aimed against potential Western aggression, the existence of which is theoretically denied. The second evokes the right of direct intervention (including nuclear) in the case of a “trans-border threat” that may

threaten Russia's security. The extent of the danger is to be judged by Moscow itself. The threat of a nuclear strike against a CIS member seeking to acquire weapons of mass destruction, although excluding the possibility of a nuclear confrontation with NATO or any other U.S.-led coalition, is absolutely absurd. Ukraine, Belorussia, and Kazakhstan voluntarily gave up the nuclear arsenals left on their territories by the Soviet Union, and no other CIS country has shown even the slightest intention to acquire any. Thus the statement can be conceived only as a bluff or blackmail or as empty words destined purely for internal consumption.¹⁰

Georgian Concerns

Tbilisi perceives the Russian preventive strike doctrine as aimed specifically at Georgia. It makes sense, given the fact that Russia's relations with Georgia are worse than those it has with any other CIS republic. Based on Russia's history of interventions in Georgian affairs (the latest being the attempt to use the right of "hot pursuit" against Chechen fighters in the Pankisi Gorge), Tbilisi is justified in its search for American protection. The recent visit to Tbilisi by a high-ranking American delegation, which included Senator John McCain (R.-Arizona) and the former chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the retired American four-star general of Georgian origin, Shalikašvili, officially to investigate the pre-electoral situation in Georgia, is a clear sign of continued American involvement.¹¹

An interview with the secretary of the Georgian National Security Council, Teo Japaridze,¹² sheds some light on current tensions in Georgian-Russian relations. Japaridze believes that Russia must "overcome the nostalgia for the past" and that Georgia should "tune down its political romanticism." He accuses Russia of lacking a policy of cooperation and partnership toward the South Caucasus. Russia must make a choice between seeking "control and influence" and "involvement in important regional projects, oil and

energy development." According to Japaridze, the old Russian policy of destabilizing Abkhazia boomeranged by bringing about the Chechen crisis. He sees no reason for Russia's resentment of the Georgian preference for "Western values" and the "Euro-Atlantic orientation" of the country, something Putin claims as inherent for Russia itself.

President Shevardnadze of Georgia was not less outspoken than his aide. Speaking of justifications for preventive strikes, he reminded his audience that Hitler used similar language in regard to Germany's neighbors. The bitterness of Shevardnadze's remarks may be connected with the fact that Georgia, after ceding to Russia almost all its strategic energy installations in payment for old debts, expected a more favorable attitude instead of threats from Moscow. Assurances from Sergei Shoigu, one of the leaders of the official "One Russia" party, stating that as long as people live poorly in Russia, it is too early to "reconquer the Soviet republics," contain too much double meaning to calm the atmosphere.¹³ Still, despite strains in Russian-Georgian relations, it was Russia's Foreign Affairs Minister Ivanov who mediated Shevardnadze's departure from office during the November 2003 mass protests against his regime.

A Russian-American Alliance as an Option?

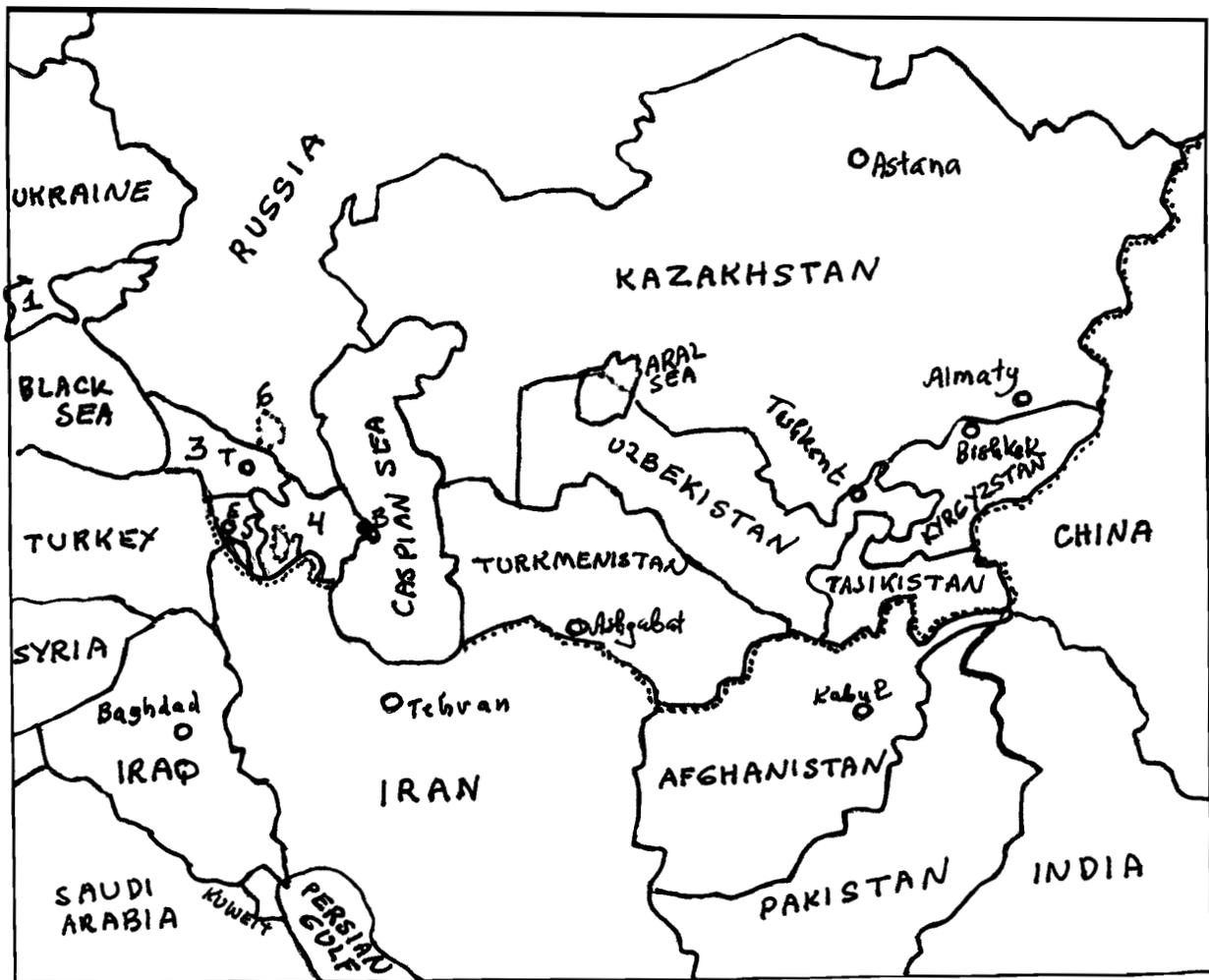
Despite the acceleration of Russian political initiatives since the war in Iraq, many Russian political analysts still see a rationale for pursuing the post-September 11 rapprochement between Moscow and Washington.

There is no question that the demographic weakening of Russia stemming from its decreasing population constitutes an essential argument for seeking American and West European friendship. A recent Russian study¹⁴ compares the size of the population on the Russian side of the Russo-Chinese border with that on the Chinese

side: 8 million versus 320 million. The title of the article in question, "Who Are Russia's Allies?" speaks for itself: Russia needs the West in order to fend off the looming menace to Siberia.

The view that in the long run Russia's interest requires an alliance with the West found an echo in many declarations made by President Putin himself, albeit much less in Russian foreign policy moves on the ground. This contradiction led to a recent meeting of the cream of Russian political analysts at the Alexander House in Moscow. The dominant conclusion at the conference was that the Bush-Putin efforts to cre-

ate a new post-September 11 relationship have not received due coverage in either the American or the Russian media, both of which are still mired in "outdated concepts." In a postconference interview, Sergei Karaganov, chairman of the Council for Foreign and Defense Policies, suggested that Russia needs American cooperation in order to counter the threat of weapons of mass destruction and terrorism coming across CIS southern borders, whereas America needs Russian cooperation to face challenges in the Middle East. The latter is especially important because many of America's West European allies are in no rush to



Russia's Southern Belt

- 1. Crimea
- 2. Abkhazia
- 3. Georgia
- 4. Azerbaijan

- 5. Armenia
- 6. Chechnia
- 7. Nagorno-Karabagh
- T - Tbilisi

- B - Baku
- E - Erevan
- former Soviet border

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leave their “golden cocoon” of inaction. Another participant in the conference, Nikita Ivanov, director of the National Foreign Policy Laboratory, suggested that “Russia desperately needs a partnership with the United States” but conducts a chaotic foreign policy, turning to America as a “partner of last resort” after other choices have failed. As far as America is concerned, Ivanov thinks Washington needs Russia for the war against terrorism, for dealing with CIS countries, and for balancing its relations with Europe. Russia’s energy resources obviously are an asset as well.¹⁵

The Alexander House conference is in line with Putin’s post–September 11 openings toward Washington. Although recognizing that such a policy is in the best long-term interests of both countries, Russia’s willingness to translate theoretical conclusions into facts remains open. This is especially true given the mixed signals emitted by Russia since the U.S. campaign in Iraq. We are also aware that the same Karaganov who advocates rapprochement with the United States has been for years an ardent “empire restorer,” calling for rebuilding Russian influence over the lost lands.¹⁶ Nikita Ivanov’s argument that America needs Russia as an intermediary in dealing with CIS countries is equally questionable. Washington is not less interested than Moscow in mutual cooperation, but conceding CIS countries to Russian domination is too high a price to pay for it. Although this was precisely the initial U.S.–Russian understanding after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it has since been repudiated by Washington as no longer reflecting the reality of the balance of power or the national interests of the concerned post-Soviet republics. The question remains whether the participants in the Alexander House conference realize that Russian cooperation with the United States, however desirable for both sides, cannot be offered by Moscow with a 10-year-old price tag. The fact that the twenty-first century requires the final abandonment of Russian imperial dreams, which are still harbored by too many Russian politicians, cannot possibly be ignored.

About the Author

Michael Rywkin, a member of the National Committee’s Board of Advisers and a frequent contributor to this publication, is professor emeritus at City College of the City University of New York (CUNY) and the president emeritus and chairman of the Policy Advisory Board, Association for the Study of Nationalities (the former Soviet Union and East Europe). He has written extensively on Soviet and Central Asian affairs and on matters that affect the post-Soviet republics.

Notes

1. This article continues the discussion of President Putin’s policies toward the Near Abroad, which appeared in *American Foreign Policy Interests* in February of 2003 and was reprinted in *Passages* (Paris) in March/April 2002 and in *Obóz* (Warsaw) in no. 42, 2003.

2. Anders Aslund, “Moscow Economic Boom But Authoritarian Drive,” unpublished paper, September 28–October 4, 2003.

3. Igor Torbakov, “Russian Policymakers Air Notion of ‘Liberal Empire’ in Caucasus, Central Asia” (October 27, 2003), *Eurasianet* (November 4, 2003).

4. There is a version that President Putin spent two days in the fall of 2001 calling Central Asian presidents to persuade them not to allow U.S. bases on their territory. However, I lack supporting evidence to present this as a fact. (Presentation by Professor Frederick Starr at the Roundtable on U.S.–Russia–Central Asia at Columbia University, November 18, 2003.)

5. *Central Asia Report*, vol.3, no. 36 (October 24, 2003).

6. *Central Asia Report*, vol. 3, no. 26 (August 3, 2003).

7. *Central Asia Report*, vol. 3, no. 34 (October 10, 2003).

8. *Central Asia Report*, vol. 3, no. 14 (April 3, 2003).

9. Ibid.

10. Based on three Internet articles: The first by Pavel Felgenhauer, a well-known commentator on military affairs, "Ivanov's Military Manifesto," *Moscow Times* (October 20, 2003); the second by Yevgeni Krutikov, "The Ivanov Doctrine: Russia Is Changing Its System of Military Response," *Versia* (October 7, 2003); the third by Viktor Litovkin, a military analyst from an official Russian news agency who underlines the peaceful aspects of the "New Russian Military Doctrine for the Globalized World," *RIA Novosti* (October 3, 2003).

11. Eteri Kakabadze, "Zapad daet Shevernadze poslednii shans," *Nezavisimaia gazeta* (October 8, 2003).

12. Eteri Kakabadze, Anatolii Gordienko, "President Gruzii sdelaet rezkoe zaiavlenie v adres Moskvu," *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* (October 13, 2003).

13. "Outcome of Georgian-Russian Dialogue Unpredictable," *Eurasianet* (October 17, 2003).

14. W. Makareno, "Kto soiuzniki Rossii," Moscow 2000, quoted by Piotr Eberhardt, *Geografia ludnosci Rosji* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 2002), 291.

15. Igor Shatrov, "Russian Foreign Policy Elite Urge U.S.-Russian Alliance," *Rosbalt* (September 28, 2003).

16. Michael Rywkin, "Restoring the Empire. Dreams, Demagoguery, and Reality," *American Foreign Policy Interests*, vol. 22, no. 3 (June 2000).

