

# Back in the USSR

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Sep 11, 2007

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

**W**hen surveying the challenges we face internationally, it is easy to put Russia on the back burner. Consider what the next president is likely to inherit internationally. In Iraq, disengaging in a way that contains the turmoil from spilling over into the region and still preserves some prospect of a political transition will be the new administration's first priority. Iran is also likely to be a major preoccupation, both because of its influence on what happens in Iraq and because it will likely be able to enrich uranium to weapons grade by some time next year, putting the country in a position to generate fissile material for nuclear warheads. In its last year, the Bush administration will have to choose either to live with a nuclear Iran or to militarily act to prevent this eventuality; whichever option it chooses will have profound consequences for its successors. Then, of course, there will be other challenges that demand our attention in the Middle East, from Hamas's consolidation of power in Gaza, to Hezbollah and Syria's positioning themselves for more conflict with Israel. And, if all this were not enough, China's rise will continue to affect the international landscape on issues as diverse as climate change, the world economy, and Darfur.

Russia tends to pale in comparison to these other concerns, and the tendency will be to pay it little heed. That would be a mistake. The less attention we pay to Russia, the more incentive we give Vladimir Putin and his successors to demonstrate that they are a power to be reckoned with and to act in ways that will be increasingly problematic. Already we see Russia staking out claims to the Arctic and its riches; manipulating its oil and gas supplies for political purposes; supporting separatist movements in neighboring states or what it calls the "near abroad"; and selling arms to rogue regimes like Iran and Syria. (The Russians are in the process of upgrading significantly Iran's air defense and have also been providing Syria large numbers advanced anti-air and anti-tank missiles; when the Syrians turned over some of these weapons to Hezbollah, the Russians looked the other way.)

To understand Russia's behavior and develop the right strategies for dealing with it, we need to appreciate the impact that lost status has had on the Russian psyche and the imperative it has created to restore the country's standing as a world power. Few non-Russians mourned the passing of the Soviet Union, but within the country, there is deep resentment of the United States for winning the cold war. Putin has called the collapse of the USSR one of the greatest geopolitical "tragedies of the twentieth century."

Today, the perception in Russia is not only that the United States sought to exploit Russian weakness but also to keep it weak. Expanding NATO into Eastern Europe might have been one thing but to extend it to include the Baltic states was something else. And President Bush's decision to abrogate the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty at the beginning of his administration was one final crushing blow. Here was a pillar that had established the Russians as the strategic equal of the United States, and we dismissed it -- and the Russians were powerless to do anything about it.

But they are not powerless any more. They are an energy super-power, and they can throw their weight around. They can oppose U.S. initiatives whether in Europe or elsewhere. They can suspend arms treaties. And they can flout all the democratic norms domestically -- with Putin re-establishing the Kremlin as the only source of power and law. Now it is we who appear to be able to do little about it.

But are we really so powerless when it comes to dealing with Russia -- particularly given our other preoccupations? Russia's strength is actually deceptive. The ex-KGB cronies who now run Russia, including the large oil and gas conglomerates, seem better at seizing assets than at knowing how to use them. While the government is accruing enormous reserves given the high price of oil and natural gas -- estimates run at over \$460 billion -- the money is not being invested in building new infrastructure to extract these hydro-carbons or transport them. Nor is it being invested domestically in education to build a knowledge-based society that does not depend only on extracting natural resources. Rather it is enriching the small Kremlin-based elite. Within the next few years, the Russians will face declining oil and natural gas outputs and will need help from the outside to preserve their current economic growth -- which, of course, is also preserving public support for the Kremlin.

That help should not be provided cost free. We need to strike a balance that recognizes the Russian psychology but also requires adjustment in Russian behavior. Without transparency and laws that are not revoked when it suits the Kremlin power structure, there won't be necessary foreign investments. Similarly, if the Russians want to be seen as playing a leading role on the world stage, they have to be responsible. The Russian role need not be a given. We have no interest in humiliating the Russians, but if they want to be obstructionist on issues like Kosovo or Iran or Hamas or Syria, it will have consequences for how we will treat Russia and its interests.

Coordinating closely with the Europeans on the approach to the Russians will be essential for convincing the Russians that they have much to gain from cooperation and much to lose from staking out competitive positions. The desire for standing and global recognition can be a double-edged sword; it gives us something both to hold out to the Russians and also to deny. While the Bush administration may be either too preoccupied or too damaged internationally to approach Russia this way, the next administration will need to do so.

Dennis Ross is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of **Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World** (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=270>).

Read this op-ed at **New Republic Online**. (<http://www.tnr.com/doc.mhtml?i=w070910&s=ross091107>)

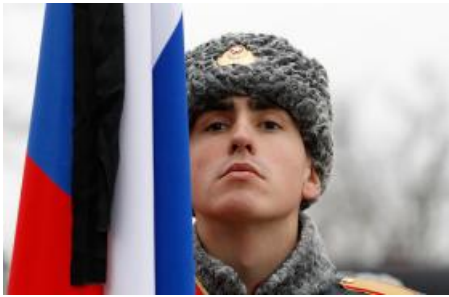
**Subscribe** (<https://ssl.tnr.com/sumo/0405suboffer>) to the New Republic. ❖

New Republic Online

---

**RECOMMENDED**

---



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

## [The Ukraine Crisis Isn't Over: Russia Has Lied About Troop Withdrawals Before](#)

Feb 16, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/ukraine-crisis-isnt-over-russia-has-lied-about-troop-withdrawals\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

## [As China Thrives in the Post-9/11 Middle East, the US Must Counter](#)

Feb 16, 2022



Jay Solomon

[\(/policy-analysis/china-thrives-post-911-middle-east-us-must-counter\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)

### TOPICS

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)