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Historical Trajectory of the U.S.-Russia Relationship: Perception and Misperception

A Conversation with Professor Tatiana Shakleina

Interviewed by Ryan Rogers

Professor Tatiana Shakleina sat down with the *Fletcher Security Review* in November 2017 in conjunction with the Conference on U.S.-Russia Relations between The Fletcher School and Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO). In a detailed and engaging conversation that spanned over 25 years of history, Professor Shakleina traced the post-Cold War origins of the current tension between the United States and Russia. While personnel within the Trump Administration have moved on to new positions or left government altogether since the interview, Professor Shakleina's rich historical overview of post-Cold War U.S.-Russia relations remains extremely relevant in understanding the recent trajectory and current state of the bilateral relationship.

Fletcher Security Review: Professor Shakleina, thank you for sitting down with *FSR* today. You have written a lot recently on the state of U.S.-Russia relations, in many cases looking back to describe how we arrived at the current point in the bilateral relationship. I was hoping you could briefly trace the historical trajectory of the relationship since the Cold War? Were there missed opportunities for improved relations? What were the main turning points?

Tatiana Shakleina: What Russia expected from the United States after the Cold War was that NATO would not be enlarged. That Russia and the US would continue cooperation in arms control and security both internationally and regionally. The first disagreement came in 1994 when President Clinton first announced that NATO would be enlarged. President Yeltsin did not like it, but there were no steps taken at that time. What Russia also wanted was the United States not to interfere in its domestic policy or the so called 'post-Soviet Space,' giving Russia an opportunity to continue economic cooperation. You can imagine that after the Soviet Union we still had one system, meaning a unified transportation system, electricity system, economic and industrial system (for example, plants that produced parts of airplanes), citizenship, etc. There was no time to solve this problem of connection. Russia wanted all

these countries, at least those who signed up, to stay together in the Commonwealth of Independent States in order to coordinate on both economic and security issues. In 1992, nuclear weapons were not only in Russia, but also spread across Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine. It was necessary to solve this problem. Approximately at the same time, the beginning of 1994, Strobe Talbot signaled to Russia that "the post-Soviet space will not be this sphere of Russia's exclusive interest. All countries will be working there and the United States will be one of them." Russia did not like this, but it was clear that there would not be cooperation with the United States, rather competition. However, this was not the single event that radically changed the whole course of the bilateral relationship.

Already in 1995 in Washington, there was growing criticism of Russia; criticism for not developing democracy, for going in the wrong direction. Expectations that Russia would be similar to the United States and western countries were wrong. In 1996 Evgeniy Primakov was appointed the Foreign Minister. Immediately, there was a very critical campaign in American mass media concerning his appointment. It was said at the time that the appointment of Primakov was Russia returning to its imperialist/aggressive policy. But in fact what Primakov declared was the introduction of the Primakov doctrine: that Russia should act both to the east and to the west. Not only should the United States be a priority of Russian foreign policy, but also our allies from our previous life like India, China, and the Arabic countries. The Primakov doctrine said that we needed to reestablish relations with these countries because it was evident already that the American direction was not working well. It promised a lot of investment but it did not promise a quiet coexistence because of military and NATO enlargement. Primakov was one of those people who organized the whole process of signing the 1997 NATO-Russia document. The appointment of Primakov and the return of this great power stance was taken seriously by the American side.

In 1999, I was asked by an American colleague, “what do you consider to be the redline that the United States crossed?” My answer was Belgrade. My American colleague agreed with me. He had expected this answer. Belgrade in 1999 and then Pristina. We are not discussing here who was bad and who was good. But it was the precedent that NATO forces – and it was evident that it was Clinton’s decision as well – could bomb a European city in the absence of a general war and without the consent of the United Nations and without consulting anyone. Not even Russia. Civilians were under these strikes. It was, we may say, a redline for Russia concerning the behavior of the United States. For the United States, I think it was the realization that Russia will continue to behave as a great power. It will continue to disagree and oppose and criticize American policy when it considers it as a violation of Russian security interests and as counter to the norms of international order. The precedent was there. If the strongest country creates the precedent that “I can do whatever I want, wherever I want, whenever I want, unilaterally and without any permission or consulting,” then any country can follow that precedent. It is very dangerous for international norms and for the international order.

Just before President Putin came to power after President Yeltsin, he published an article in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* in December 1999 called “Russia at the turn of the millennium.” Here, he practically gave the program for the future of Russia. He said that Russia has a very long history and tradition of being one of the most influential powers in world politics and that Russia will continue this tradition. It was a manifestation that Russia has come back. Some of the American scholars got this message. For example, my very good colleague Andrew Kuchins wrote, a bit later, “look who’s back.” So Russia is back to world politics and we cannot ignore it. To me, the coming to power of President Putin was a turning point because the United States did not like the new president and Russia’s policies at the time. The deterioration continued and then President Bush announced that the United States was pulling out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972. They informed Russia in advance, observing the rules, but it was very important because it created an imbalance in the international system and in bilateral relations.

There was an interval between 2001 and 2006 where relations remained unchanged. Of course, the reason was the terrorist attacks on the United States and the Rus-

sian desire to help. Russia really helped in this situation. We signed, in 2002, the [Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty- a nuclear arms control deal]. Although Strobe Talbot’s memoirs said that Condoleezza Rice mentioned that the United States was ready for a confrontation with Russia, it did not happen in the near term. However, in 2006 we had the CFR report “Russia’s Wrong Direction,” where Russia was criticized for wrong doings. All the negative features of Russian domestic and foreign policy were enumerated in this report. The only spheres of U.S.-Russia interaction that were mentioned were terrorism and nuclear weapons. And then the Munich Speech in 2007. Americans said that it was very arrogant – a bad speech by President Putin. I advise those who criticize this speech to look at these two documents. The report “Russia’s Wrong Direction” and then the Munich speech and compare both documents. The Munich speech was the answer to all the positions mentioned in the 2006 report. There should not have been surprise on the American side. The only difference, as many mention, was that the report came from the expert community (although the supervisors were members of Congress). Russia answered officially, that was the difference. The contents absolutely coincided and the answer was correct.

In 2008, we had the Caucasus. What was the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, who were never a part of the Georgian state as a Georgian state? Abkhazia declared independence long before this 2008 conflict. The situation was not so simple and a lot of people were killed by the Georgian army in South Ossetia. A lot of absolutely peaceful people and Russian peacekeepers were attacked. It is a separate question that should be discussed. Of course it was negatively taken by the U.S. President Bush, who was finishing his term, and President Obama who was in his election year. Now, we have mentioned these points of deterioration, but we need to go into detail about what were the Russian and American arguments when Obama came. It is a long song. *Dolgaya pesnya* as we say in Russia.

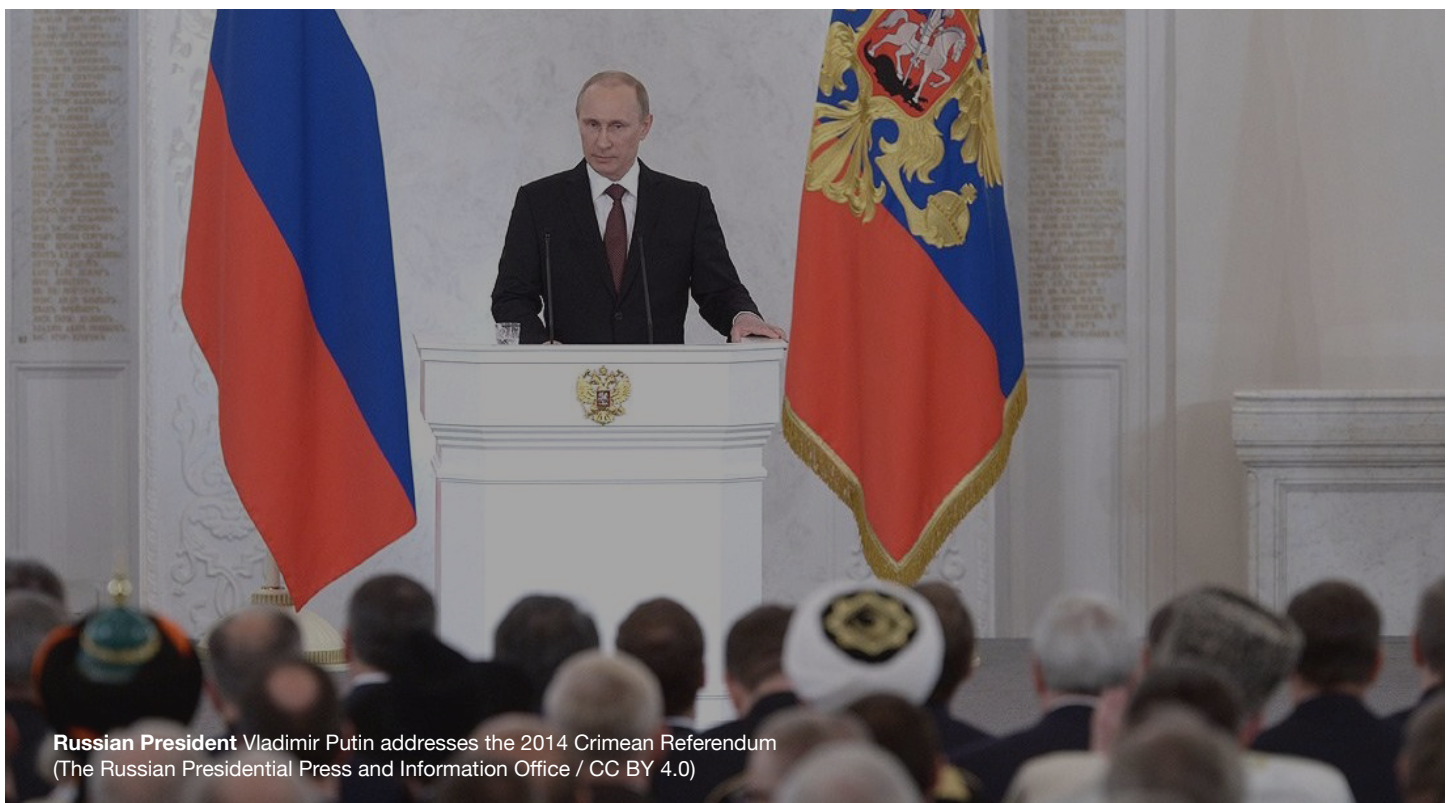
Speaking about the Obama administration, as I wrote in the conclusion of my book [*Russia and the United States in World Politics*], I compare President Obama to President Truman. I do it because President Truman gave the order to bomb two Japanese cities when it was unnecessary. The war was practically over and the Japanese imperial army was all but defeated. President Obama received the Nobel Peace Prize as a peacekeeper,

but he gave orders to bomb Libya and continue wars in the Arab countries. Not very peaceful. If you read publications on the Obama team written by Americans, for them, ideology was first and foremost, and peace and security was second. For me as a political scientist and a citizen of the world, the first issue is peace. For Russian-American relations, the main issue for everyone is the issue of peace and war. When people say we may achieve peace through war, it does not make me happy. It clearly has not made for happy people in Libya, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Afghanistan, and even in Ukraine now. President Obama had the chance to stop fighting. His predecessor Bush was criticized heavily for his very militant policy. Obama had the chance to suggest some alternatives, not only towards Russia, but in general. Instead, he suggested a very militant and ideologically-driven policy. For this reason, the two Obama administrations were an escalation of instability in the world. In this period, the declaration of Gorbachev and his American colleagues at that time 'that we do not need military force to solve world problems' was forgotten completely.

President Obama declared nuclear zero' and never mentioned that he was not the first one to declare such an initiative. Further, in declaring 'nuclear zero' he should have been more responsible. He knew Russia would be

accused immediately. "Russia doesn't want to discuss nuclear zero." Of course, nobody mentioned China, India, and Pakistan as nuclear states. India and Pakistan still do not observe the NPT [Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons] and their nuclear arsenals are growing. Nobody was really supporting this nuclear global zero idea but only Russia was blamed. We should be realistic about 'nuclear zero' and should be responsible for what we suggest to the world community. To me it was kind of a propaganda trick. A very good idea. Very good for the future and we maybe need to strive for it, but it needs discussion. I know the discussion because I have two dissertations now written on the issue. I know it is not so simple. But when you declare that, you should be responsible for what you are saying.

Criticism of Russia also grew during the Obama administration. Reading publications from the main think tanks during that time, some things were really insulting for Russia, some things were not true. Sometimes the criticisms were valid, but the criticisms should have been more constructive and balanced. The threat from Russia was exaggerated. The Crimea issue of 2014 was a turning point for the United States. At this time, Obama declared a psychological, informational, and economic war on Russia with sanctions introduced by the United States and European countries and Japan in



Russian President Vladimir Putin addresses the 2014 Crimean Referendum
(The Russian Presidential Press and Information Office / CC BY 4.0)



A Handley Page Victor Bomber, of which was used during the Cold War
(Steve Bryant / Public Domain)

response. Should use sanctions as a tool for the dissolution of world problems? It is a discussion in general who suffers most from sanctions and whether they correspond to the humane attitude of American administrations? Sanctions in different countries are very bad for the population. The people suffer from sanctions. Russia is a completely self-sufficient country. It can survive sanctions even though it is incorporated, by the way willingly, into the world financial and economic system that was established and controlled by the United States and agencies in the United States. It became a victim of this system. We do not get some products [because of sanctions], that is fine. Russia is viewed like an enemy that should be isolated. I think this is dangerous, and not just for Russia.

That is why I defined the Obama administration as more damaging for world security and U.S.-Russia relations than any other administration. That is why I compare him to Harry Truman. I came to this conclusion absolutely unwillingly. I did it because I was reading and listening to American academics and politicians and they pushed me to this conclusion. I had a conversation with Robert Legvald in 2016 and I wrote an article in English in the journal *International Trends* titled “Cold War as Part of American Global Strategy.”

I started to think that maybe the Cold War mentality is not just against Russia but is a part of the American mentality more generally. The Cold War with Russia, a cold war with somebody else. I started to doubt whether American policy is peaceful or humane. Maybe by nature it is very militant. I put a question to myself. I knew an American political scientist, Charles Maynes, who was the chief editor of *Foreign Policy* in the 90s. He wrote in one of his articles in 1998 that he saw the United States as a country with a rising beast. It was not me who said this, it was Maynes. I remembered his words in 2016 and I thought maybe the United States is this country with the beast. Then I read the book by Andrew Bacevich, the retired colonel and professor. In his book *Washington Rules* he referred to the sayings of George Kennan – a citation from one of his publications – where George Kennan said that the United States thinks of itself as if it has been given a mission by God to punish with a sword in its hand. George Kennan said this is very dangerous. I started to think again maybe it is really this way. I do not believe it. I know a lot of Americans who are very peaceful people. Very humane, very thoughtful, they do a lot of social work and do not want war. My question: is there any cohesion between the elite and the population of the United States? Or do they think differently and the people who

think peacefully do not influence the official policy? My experience tells me that whenever I go and speak [in the United States], they do not seem very militant, they do not want any war. The question is, how does it happen? How do we have this image of the United States as a very militant country?

FSR: You touched on an anecdote with Robert Legvold from 2010 about a discussion of whether or not we were in a new Cold War at the time. You did not necessarily see a Cold War in 2010, but you do see the elements for a Cold War in 2016 and today. You write about this. What changed?

TS: You see I am, in general, a very peaceful person so I do not want to believe in bad things. I want to push them aside as long as possible and think the situation may improve. What disturbed me at that time, [we were speaking to] young diplomats, 30-50 of them, from different, mainly European countries, and only 3 people believed the Cold War was over. The majority still lived in this mentality of the Cold War. At that time, I just took notice of it. But later I realized that if people still think this way, if the ruling elite still thinks this way, maybe this Cold War mentality is part of the ideology, part of the official American ideology. To tell you frankly, when I visit, I come every year, I no longer go to some conferences and seminars, because people there were saying the same things – clichés and stereotypes about Russia. It was not interesting. It was not analytical and it was kind of emotional. I stopped going because I saw it was a hopeless situation. No one raises their voice.

We need to think about the future. We have so many global problems requiring cooperation, but very few people talking about this. Some people just retired from the programs because they did not want this kind of

discussion anymore. It makes people distressed. Robert Legvold already felt this. He lived here and maybe he knew better. Maybe he is more realistic. I am more utopian maybe, more idealistic in general, but he is right. This Cold War, if it is a new Cold War, is crueler than it was previously. It uses very ruthless methods.

FSR: You mean information warfare?

TS: Yes. There is a lot of lying and manipulation of information. Even if criticism is valid, it is delivered in too negative a context. [Commentators, politicians, and academics] criticize each other, and Russia should be criticized, but we need to make it a constructive dialogue and discussion; not make it so destructive that it cuts the ways for retreat and negation. There are some who are willing to have this more constructive dialogue. Such groups as the former Nixon Center and now its National Interest Center, Tuft's Fletcher School, Georgetown and Angela Stent, and we also have people like Sheryl Cross from St Edwards University, and the University of Texas. People at the International Studies ISA convention. They are concerned and willing to have a dialogue; to sit together to ask unpleasant questions and give unpleasant answers, but not interrupt the development of interconnections and negotiations. There are a lot of people in the United States who are willing to improve the situation, despite the possible existence of the ideology we discussed. To tell you frankly, I am not sure President Trump and Secretary Tillerson are against any dialogue with Russia. I think they would like to improve the dialogue but they are not permitted. I do not know why people are so unwilling to have a dialogue with Russia but I do not have much context for the perspectives of those in the U.S. Congress.

Professor Tatiana Shakleina

Professor Tatiana Shakleina is the Head of the Department of Applied International Analysis and is a specialist in international studies, American and Russian foreign policy, Russian-American relations. She previously worked for the Institute of the USA and Canada Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, where she was the Head of the Department of Foreign Policy Studies. In 2006 she received the Academician E. Tarle Award in History from the Russian Academy of Sciences as a coauthor of a 4-volume monograph *Systemic History of International Relations* (ed. by A. Bogaturov). She is the author of numerous books and articles on international relations, Russian foreign policy, and Russian-American relations and has participated in multilateral research projects at Georgetown University, the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, and the University of Maryland.