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Op-Ed

“Russia Redux”

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Call it Russia Redux, the Return of the Cold War, or From Russia Without Love, but make no mistake: it’s time to start worrying about Russia again.

While the focus of seemingly all foreign policy discussion has been on countries in the Middle East and Asia, Russia has slowly been repositioning itself as a major threat to U.S. security.

Consider these facts.

First, let’s look at nuclear weapons. Despite all the press surrounding North Korea and Iran’s nuclear programs, it is Russia that at this very moment has the world’s second most potent nuclear arsenal. It’s true that arms control agreements are in place, and that the nuclear warehouse isn’t as stocked as it one was. But that may not be the case for long.

The future is scary because Russia appears to be regaining its swagger. In their 2006 annual evaluation of Russian nuclear forces for the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Robert Norris and Hans Kristensen report that Russia has “plans for new weapon systems and upgrades of existing one[s] and that the “Russian government appears to be attempting to reassert its nuclear strength after years of decline in order to underscore its status as a powerful nation.” Russia is on the nuclear comeback trail.

Second, let’s examine Russia so-called democracy. Russian “democracy” is nearly extinct (if it ever existed to begin with). In a book coming out this year called *An Inside View of the Demise of Democracy in Russia*, a group of scholars who have studied Russia extensively over the past decade present much evidence that democracy has not described Russia for several years.

The elections that are held are not genuine elections. A recent study by political scientists Alexei Sitnikov and Dmitry Shakin on Russian elections concludes that President Vladimir Putin’s Kremlin has rigged the voting system in such a way that it is “doomed to collapse.” It may be more accurate to describe Russia as a dictatorship than a democracy.

If a nuclear arsenal and failing democracy weren’t enough, the knock-out blow is that Russia is marked by corruption, the failure of law, and rising anti-American sentiment. A number of business leaders, as well as a recent report by the Organisation

for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), have criticized Russia's economy for a lack of transparency and too much state involvement. In its relations with the powerful Group of Eight (G8), Russia has increasingly attempted to stake out more independent positions. The United States and its European allies have not been able to force Russia to implement the sorts of political and economic reforms expected of trusted trading and military partners.

So with all these concerns on the table, why don't we talk more about Russia? One reason is that we're preoccupied with Iraq. But another, more troubling reason, is that we mistakenly believe that Russia is no longer a threat.

Don't get me wrong. We won the Cold War. It has been sixteen years since the fall of the former Soviet Union in 1991, and the USSR isn't about to recreate itself.

But that doesn't mean we should forget about Russia. In a way, this is life imitating sequels in the movies. You know the plot: At the end of the first movie, the bad guy is defeated ... but not all the way. He's still breathing. Or he goes into hiding. Hidden from the world, he slowly regains his power. And what does he wake up thinking about every day? Getting back at the people who did this to him.

Life, and especially global politics, are not as simple an action movie. But fundamental human motivations should not be forgotten.

Because of the fallout of Joe McCarthy's over-zealous pursuit of communists in the 1950s, talking about a Russian threat today is sometimes seen as crying wolf. Especially amongst the intellectual elite, it is seen as silly, backwards, or just plain stupid to raise the Russia question. This is unfortunate because the threat is real.

It may be up to regular citizens to keep up the watch. It won't take long to see the indicators. Just in the last few months, Russia has been involved in arms deals with Iran, a mysterious poisoning of a former spy, and the halting of oil to some European countries. Eventually we should be able to do the math:

Weapons of mass destruction? Check.
Leader with authoritarian bent? Check.
Perceived threat from EU and US? Check.
Signs of domestic instability and chaos? Check.

Americans should ask their elected officials what steps are being taken to prepare for this renewed rivalry.

It may take some time, but the threat your children have to worry about most may just be the threat your parents did.

FOR VERIFICATION: CITATIONS NOTED IN OP-ED

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