



Department of International Relations and Regional Studies  
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# **The Mental Maps of American Decision Makers and Their Impact on U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Russia, 1992-1994**

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“We’ve got to remember that Yeltsin’s got his problems, but he’s a good man... We can’t ever forget that Yeltsin drunk is better than most of the alternatives sober.”

— *U.S. President Bill Clinton*

“Clinton’s indulgence of Yeltsin’s misbehavior seemed to go deeper still. I suspected there was more to his affinity with Yeltsin than being approximately the same height and shape and shoe size, or being the leaders of two countries that could blow up the world, or being fellow politicians who had to contend with obstreperous legislatures and hostile media. The key, as I saw it, might be that Yeltsin combined prodigious determination and fortitude with grotesque indiscipline and a kind of genius for self-abasement. He was both a very big man and a very bad boy, a natural leader and an incurable screw-up. All this Clinton recognized, found easy to forgive and wanted others to join him in forgiving.”

— *Strobe Talbott, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State, in his memoir ‘The Russia Hand’*

“The United States had made no decision on NATO enlargement at that point, but all matters associated with NATO were met by the Russians with skepticism, resentment, and concern. In particular, I was asked, ‘When will your NATO ships be in our port of Riga?’ I answered, ‘I don’t know, but the more you ask that question, the sooner they will come.’”

— *U.S. General Wesley Clark describing an exchange with a Russian military official during a 1994 visit to Moscow*

## Abstract

As the Soviet Union disintegrated, the United States—now the sole superpower on the world stage—faced the unprecedented challenge of redefining its relationship with a Russia that was undergoing economic crises and political reforms. Through thematic analysis of over one hundred declassified documents and oral histories, this research examines the cognitive frameworks—or “mental maps”—held by key U.S. policymakers in the Bush 41 and Clinton administrations, focusing on how “end of history” narratives combined to shape strategic U.S. decisions around critical issues such as nuclear non-proliferation, economic assistance, democracy promotion, and NATO enlargement. This research identifies five recurring mental maps in U.S. policymaker discourse: (1) faith in the liberal international order, (2) belief in the market-democracy “double-helix”, (3) an emphasis on the personal relationship between Clinton and Yeltsin, (4) the dual-track strategy of NATO enlargement and Russian engagement, and (5) cognitive dissonance among American policymakers trying to square the circle on policy toward the Kremlin. This study addresses a central puzzle: *Why did U.S. policymakers maintain unwavering support for Boris Yeltsin and optimism about Russian democratic transition from 1992-1994, despite mounting evidence of authoritarian consolidation, economic failure, and rising nationalism?* My hypothesis is that the mental maps of U.S. officials were heavily shaped by the presence of democracy promotion and market reform narratives following the end-of-history moment in the immediate post-Cold War period, as well as the warm personal relationship between Clinton and Yeltsin that undergirded U.S. support for Russia even as the latter started to dismantle Russia’s nascent democracy. This analysis demonstrates the prevalence and persistence of these mental maps across different policy domains, showing how these cognitive frameworks shaped policy discourse and outcomes even as Russian realities diverged from American expectations.

# CHAPTER ONE

## Introduction

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“Russia was never ours to lose. Domestically, Russians had lost trust and confidence in themselves, and they would eventually have to remake their state and their economy... None of it could be fixed by outsiders, even a United States at the peak of its post-Cold War dominance.”

— *William J. Burns, former U.S. Ambassador to Russia (2005-2008)*

The great ideological struggle had ended at the creation of a new era of cooperation in Europe. The disappointment that soon followed stemmed from the collapse of such grand hopes. Across the continent, free nations emerged after years of tumult and conflict. Finally, there was a chance at realizing a Europe whole and free spanning from Vancouver to Vladivostok. One priority at the time would be to give countries in Europe economic and security guarantees so they can rebuild their societies and protect and promote democracy. Another priority would be to try to integrate Moscow into this new pan-European security framework; increasing economic and political links to shape Kremlin thinking, strengthen ties, and decrease the chance of future confrontation.

At the dawn of this new age, however, the American President’s advisors were split; some urged for cooperation with Moscow while others advised a tougher stance. The more savvy among them seized on the President’s inexperience and opportune domestic political conditions to promote a tougher line than the previous President would have likely pursued. Meanwhile, aggressive actions by the Kremlin did not make the prospects of cooperation any more likely, instead convincing Washington of the need for the enlargement of the Atlantic Alliance.

A new dividing line had emerged in Europe. Almost as soon as it started, the narrow window of opportunity for cooperation between two powers had all but closed. The hopes of inclusion gave way to a strategy of containment. By April 4, 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) had been born after the signing of the Washington Treaty, formalizing a Western alliance that excluded the Soviet Union. Then President of the United States, Harry Truman, called on the alliance to become “a shield against aggression and fear of aggression.”<sup>1</sup>

If instead you thought I was referring to the post-Cold War era, you would also be correct. The parallels between the two time periods are uncanny. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had died before he could see peace after WWII, and before he could share his plans with his then Vice President Harry Truman. Similarly, George H.W. Bush had left the scene after his 1992 election loss to a young and inexperienced governor from Arkansas, Bill Clinton, prematurely ending his administration’s efforts at realizing a Europe “whole and free.”<sup>2</sup> Truman took a tougher approach against the Soviet Union, leading to the creation of NATO. But would Roosevelt have done the same? The idealistic and inexperienced Clinton, compared to the more pragmatic, realist Bush, similarly sided with advisors in his administration in favor of full-Article 5-guarantee enlargement of NATO instead of the more vague but inclusive Partnership for Peace initiative, leading to the intake of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary into the alliance. Would Bush have done the same? History, however, does not offer us control variables, controlled experiments, or counterfactual testing to definitively answer such hypotheticals. We can only work with the evidence, patterns, and historical tendencies available to us.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Elise Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel S. Hamilton and Sławomir Dębski, eds., *Europe Whole and Free: Vision and Reality* (Washington, DC: Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2019).

To understand the logic of U.S.-Russia relations at the time and the NATO enlargement debates, we must ask the question: What were the conditions that made it justified? Clearly, Moscow's actions in both periods warranted a U.S. response to focus on strengthening the Atlantic Alliance. Post-WWII, the Kremlin's aggression toward Central and East European countries merited the creation of NATO. Post-Cold War, Moscow's decision to use violence against its own parliament in 1993, its brutal war in Chechnya in 1994, and the rise of extreme nationalist forces throughout the decade merited the start of NATO enlargement talks and the subsequent inclusion of Central and East European states. No less important is the reaction of those very countries to events in Russia, who had their own moral, sovereign, and strategic right to seek membership in NATO that would protect them from an aggressive, revanchist Russia in the future. Indeed, as early as May 6, 1992, the leaders of then Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland declared their goal of full-fledged NATO membership.<sup>3</sup>

Russia's decline into a *times of trouble (smuta)* in the 1990s wasn't always inevitable; there was a glimmer of hope at the destruction of one unwieldy, dysfunctional imperial project and at the creation of independent nation. The hope of an open, democratic Russian Federation started in the late Soviet Union, with Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost* reforms in 1985. It continued when the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, and an independent Russia emerged, along with fourteen other sovereign countries. The hope continued under President Boris Yeltsin. But while the rise of autocracy in Russia is often attributed to the dawn of Putin in 1999, it came much earlier—in 1993—during Russia's constitutional crisis.

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<sup>3</sup>Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 89.

While Yeltsin defended democracy by making an emphatic speech on top of a tank in 1991, he used those same tanks to shell the Russia Supreme Soviet on October 4th, 1993, killing an estimated 145 people and wounding 800 more.<sup>4</sup> For all intents and purposes, this was the death knell of democracy in Russia. In a U.S. Embassy Moscow cable, however, then Secretary of State Warren Christopher praised Yeltsin’s “superb handling” of the crisis.<sup>5</sup>

Fast forward to 1997—seven years after Jim Baker’s alleged “not one inch” statement<sup>6</sup> to Gorbachev over NATO's presence in East Germany<sup>7</sup>—NATO enlargement talks were underway with Poland, Hungary, and Czechia. ‘Not one inch’ eastward became ‘not one inch of territory is off limits to NATO enlargement.’<sup>8</sup> Former Deputy Secretary of State, Strobe Talbott, wrote that “a strong, new NATO, operating in partnership with a strong, democratic, new Russia, will give the Russian people something they have not had for over two hundred years: a genuine, sustainable peace with the nations to their west.”<sup>9</sup> He was replying to George F. Kennan, a U.S. diplomat and the architect of the Cold War containment doctrine—and later a critic of NATO enlargement—

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<sup>4</sup> Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 103.

<sup>5</sup> Secretary Christopher's Meeting with President Yeltsin, October 22, 1993, Moscow, U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, George Washington University, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2023-10-04/yeltsin-shelled-russian-parliament-30-years-ago-us-praised>.

<sup>6</sup> Note: For their own self-interest, Russia has for a long time conveniently manipulated the discourse to suggest that a “promise” was made to Gorbachev that NATO would expand “not one inch” to the East if the Soviet Union agreed to German reunification in NATO. No such promise was made, verbally or in writing. Baker was merely stating a hypothetical during dynamic and ongoing diplomatic negotiations. Gorbachev later agreed with Chancellor Kohl that Germany has a right to decide its own foreign policy and agreed to the Helsinki Principles during a summit in Washington in 1990. More on this topic in the Analysis & Discussion chapter.

<sup>7</sup> Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 32.

<sup>8</sup> Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 151.

<sup>9</sup> Kaarel Piirimäe, "Geopolitics of Sympathy": George F. Kennan and NATO Enlargement," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 35, no. 1 (2024): 182-205.

who called enlargement a “strategic blunder of epic proportions”<sup>10</sup> and the “most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold War era.”<sup>11</sup>

This divergence of views epitomizes the tensions within U.S. foreign policy in the 1990s, where proponents of NATO enlargement collided with those in favor of further investment in the more loose, inclusive initiative called NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PfP). These tensions also underscore a broader “ratchet effect”, as described by scholars like Sarotte, in which initial attempts at cooperation gave way to hardened divides.<sup>12</sup> A ratchet is a tool that allows motion in only one direction. American policymakers turn the ratchet and Russia responds and vice versa, but “each turn forecloses other possibilities, making it impossible to reverse course and choose a different direction.”<sup>13</sup> By the time Talbott and Kennan exchanged their now-famous letters in 1997,<sup>14</sup> the opportunity to construct a post-Cold War security framework that included Russia was fast beginning to close.

My research will mainly focus on the Clinton administration’s promotion of democracy and market reforms in Russia as well as its two-track policy of NATO enlargement and Russian engagement, analyzing how ideas of post-Cold War liberal triumphalism and personal dynamics between decision makers—both inside the U.S. government and between American and Russian counterparts—shaped U.S. foreign policy.

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<sup>10</sup> George F. Kennan Papers, Public Policy Papers, Department of Special Collections, Princeton University Library (hereafter GFK-PUL), Diaries, October 31, 1996; Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2002), 220.

<sup>11</sup> George F. Kennan, *A Fateful Error*, New York Times, February 5, 1997

<sup>12</sup> Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 20.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Piirimäe, *Geopolitics of Sympathy*.

## **Research Puzzle**

I propose an empirical, contra expectations and variation over time puzzle that examines how these mental maps influenced U.S. foreign policy toward the Kremlin between 1992-1994. The start of this period saw a strengthening of bilateral ties, optimism over economic reforms, and strong support for Yeltsin by the Clinton administration. However, a frost had set in by 1995 in U.S.-Russia relations after failed economic reforms and strengthening of an oligarchic class in Russia, the rise of extremist factions in Russian politics, Moscow's brutal campaign against Chechnya, and the final decision to proceed with NATO enlargement from Washington. The central research question is: Why did U.S. policymakers maintain unwavering support for Boris Yeltsin and optimism about Russia's democratic transition from 1992-1994, despite mounting evidence of authoritarian consolidation, economic failure, and rising nationalism? My thesis addresses a gap in the literature and builds on past research by examining mental maps of democracy promotion and market reform, adding a much-needed approach from political psychology to aid in examining U.S. policymaking choices. Sarotte has acknowledged that during the 1990s, the U.S. and Russia struggled to capitalize on the thaw in their relations, with missteps on both sides leading to a downward spiral. I aim to identify some of these missteps and the potential causes behind them to better inform decision makers today and in the future on how to better understand Russia and formulate more effective policy solutions.

## Research Questions

My **main research question** is:

- Why did U.S. policymakers maintain unwavering support for Boris Yeltsin and optimism about Russian democratic transition from 1992-1994, despite mounting evidence of authoritarian consolidation, economic failure, and rising nationalism?

My **sub-questions** are:

- How did the Clinton-Yeltsin personal relationship shape U.S. perceptions of Russia's internal domestic and economic situation, and inform policy priorities toward Russia?
- What role did "end of history" narratives play in U.S. officials' interpretations of setbacks in Russian democratization and transition to market capitalism?
- How did American policymakers reconcile support for Yeltsin and engagement with Moscow with the simultaneous pursuit of NATO enlargement?

## Arguments

### 1. Faith in the Liberal International Order

U.S. policymakers' discourse consistently reflected "end of history" mental maps that assumed the inevitability of liberal democracy and market capitalism in Russia. U.S. foreign policy was shaped by the triumph of liberal democracy and market capitalism triumphed, marking the so-called "end of history." This narrative was popularized by academics like Francis Fukuyama and had real

world consequences and policy implications.<sup>15</sup> Hence, American officials' language and interpretations throughout 1992-1994 demonstrated persistent faith in integrating Russia into international institutions like the G7, WTO, and IMF through multilateral cooperation. Talbott later wrote that:

“Clinton was diametrically opposed to Charles Krauthammer’s concept of the “unipolar moment,” which held that the United States had a several-decade window of opportunity to get its way unilaterally—unencumbered by the need for consensus-building and compromises—before the world became multipolar. Clinton just believed the opposite: what we had in the wake of the Cold War was a multipolar moment—and an opportunity to shape the world through active leadership by the institutions Clinton admired and Krauthammer disdained.”<sup>16</sup>

## **2. The Market-Democracy Double Helix**

The “double helix” assumption—that economic liberalization and democratization were mutually reinforcing—pervaded policy discourse and led to the belief that economic assistance can be used as a transformational tool, even as empirical evidence contradicted this mental map. U.S. officials justified economic assistance and support of shock therapy because they believed that by promoting privatization, deregulation, and liberalization of Russia’s economy, then political liberalization would follow. However, this assumption proved unrealistic and deeply flawed. In reality, rapid economic reforms undermined the public’s trust in democracy, fueled inequality and

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<sup>15</sup> Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," in *The New Social Theory Reader* (London: Routledge, 2020), 298-304.

<sup>16</sup> Strobe Talbott, *The Great Experiment: The Story of Ancient Empires, Modern States, and the Quest for a Global Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008), 330.

hyperinflation of 2,500 percent, created mass impoverishment, and led to the rise of the oligarchs. Still, American officials remained wedded to the idea that economic assistance would positively shape Russian political institutions, instead of understanding Russia's unique history, culture, and social context, and focusing more on helping reform the judicial system and promoting better governance practices first, or at least with more emphasis alongside market reforms.

### **3. The Clinton-Yeltsin Personal Relationship**

The personal relationship between Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin became front and center of the U.S.-Russia relationship more broadly, creating mental maps that personalized institutional challenges and limited alternative thinking. This became central to how American officials interpreted Russian developments, leading to binary interpretations of Russian politics as 'Yeltsin versus communists' rather than recognizing the complex political landscape that included other democratic alternatives. By 1993, it was evident Yeltsin wasn't governing as the democratic reformer he portrayed himself to be in 1991—marginalizing the legislature, consolidating executive power and ruling by decree, and using force to suppress dissent. At times, the strong personal relationship led to misplaced optimism on Clinton's part about Yeltsin's ability to implement reforms. Officials developed language that excused Yeltsin's authoritarian actions as personally necessary. When Clinton's advisors saw early warning signs of Yeltsin's brinkmanship with the parliament, they worried whether this was "sufficiently within the bounds of democratic and constitutional rule to justify our continued support" and urged him to stick to "principles and process."<sup>17</sup> Clinton replied:

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<sup>17</sup> Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, 72.

“I agree with that, but principles and process don’t exist in a vacuum. What’s going on over there is about people, in this case, some people versus other people. This is zero-sum thinking. They’re not splitting the difference. That’s why we’ve got to take sides.”<sup>18</sup>

#### **4. The Dual-Track Policy of NATO Enlargement and Russian Engagement**

The decision to enlarge NATO in 1994 also involved intensely engaging with Yeltsin on NATO-Russia cooperation—in other words, American policymakers tried to ‘square-the-triangle.’ This dual strategy emerged as a mental map aimed at the intake of Central and East European states into NATO while at the same time offering Russia integration and partnership in multilateral institutions, including NATO. As the 1990s developed, particularly after the First Chechen war and Yeltsin’s increasingly erratic and incompetent governance, disillusionment with Russia’s trajectory began to surface in Washington. While the rhetoric of liberal democracy and free markets remained, U.S. policy began to focus more on NATO enlargement in Central and Eastern Europe as well as NATO-Russia cooperation through NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PfP), reflecting a growing concern about Russian revanchism in the future. However, NATO enlargement was couched in the language of democracy promotion, helping consolidate democratic and market reforms in Eastern Europe, thus helping Russia as well by having stable, prosperous neighbors. As evidence mounted of Russian resistance to Western policies, American policymakers developed discourse that simultaneously promoted NATO enlargement and Russian partnership. The 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act exemplified this approach, with officials like Strobe Talbott describing it as creating “a strong, new NATO, operating in partnership with a

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

strong, democratic, new Russia.”<sup>19</sup> Policy discourse consistently justified NATO enlargement as benefiting Russian security as well, but American policymakers makers seemed to underestimate just to what extent Russian officials perceived NATO enlargement as “nothing but humiliation” for Russia, according to Yeltsin, that represented a “new encirclement.”<sup>20</sup>

## 5. Cognitive Dissonance

American policymakers exhibited a fair amount of cognitive dissonance where officials increasingly rationalized their policy toward Russia to maintain core assumptions about NATO enlargement, Russia’s path to democratization, and faith in the liberal international order. According to Kieninger, who interviewed Bill Clinton for an upcoming book on the historiography of U.S.-Russia relations in the 1990s, Clinton told him his policy toward Russia was about “maximizing the positives and minimizing the negatives.”<sup>21</sup> As a result, Yeltsin’s use of violence against his own parliament, the rise of hardline, nationalist forces in Russian politics, and the brutal Chechen War were often seen as temporary setbacks instead of that they were: clear alarm bells about Russia’s democratic trajectory.

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<sup>19</sup> Piirimäe, *Geopolitics of Sympathy*.

<sup>20</sup> Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin, "Summary report on One-on-One meeting between Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin, May 10, 1995, Kremlin," memorandum of conversation, William J. Clinton Presidential Library, Document 19 in National Security Archive, "NATO Expansion: What Yeltsin Heard," March 16, 2018, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2018-03-16/nato-expansion-what-yeltsin-heard>.

<sup>21</sup> Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute, "Navigating U.S.-Russia Relations: The Legacy of Strobe Talbot with Dr. Stephan Kieninger," YouTube video, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9F211wo\\_UY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9F211wo_UY).

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

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In 1993, Kennan was invited by the Clinton team to act as an advisor on Russia policy.<sup>22</sup> Kaarel Piirimäe, in his article *'Geopolitics of Sympathy': George F. Kennan and NATO Enlargement*, notes how “the 1992 election of Bill Clinton and his team of experts sympathizing with Russia presented a unique moment when [Kennan’s] feelings towards Russia matched with those of powerful actors within the administration”.<sup>23</sup> At first, however, Piirimäe explains how Kennan supported NATO enlargement as a method for uniting Europe, as was noted in Kennan’s May 1989 speech at NATO headquarters in Mons.<sup>24</sup> However, he would later oppose it based on the assumption that it was directed against Russia.<sup>25</sup>

Piirimäe argues that Kennan’s views are an example of “geopolitics of sympathy” informed by his “real love for the Russian people”, Russian high culture, and a nineteenth century framework of a world divided into empires and spheres of influence.<sup>26</sup> This is combined with an ignorance of Central and Eastern European countries, with Kennan himself writing later in his life that “the entire thrust of my activity as an official and a publicist must be regarded as misguided and useless. With that recognition my entire view of myself, my work, and my life collapses.”<sup>27</sup> In the end, Clinton dismissed Kennan’s advice. But this was not because of Kennan’s sympathies toward

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<sup>22</sup> Piirimäe, *Geopolitics of Sympathy*, 186.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 197-198.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 196.

Russia, which “probably did not bother the American public or the administration of President Clinton”, but due to Kennan’s long-standing opposition to NATO.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, Piirimäe noted that the Clinton administration is a curious case of both alleged “sympathizers” for Russia and pro-NATO enlargement policymakers that informed the administration’s two-track policy of both NATO enlargement and Russian engagement. Talbott’s quote about NATO helping build a “strong, democratic, new Russia”<sup>29</sup> highlights a key tenet of U.S. foreign policy during Clinton’s presidency—the Wilsonian focus on democracy, human rights, and human security. This two-track approach held out hope that Russia would democratize and integrate with multilateral institutions, while also hedging against potential Russian revanchism in the future.

My research will examine these two domains—the personal and ideational drivers of policy toward Russia. Therefore, constructivist international relations theory sets the foundation to examine the influence of ideas, norms, and identities<sup>30</sup> and determine what lenses U.S. decision makers viewed Russia and how that affected U.S. foreign policy. Also, literature from political psychology<sup>31</sup> will inform my study and aim to further unpack agent-centric mental maps of how cognitive frameworks influenced Russia policy. While existing research has explored the geopolitical and domestic motivations of U.S. assistance and the challenges and opportunities of economic reform in Russia, relatively few studies investigate how aid policy was shaped by cognitive frameworks or evolving “mental maps” within the American foreign policy community throughout the entire period of the 1990s, informed by both personal interactions with Russian counterparts and

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>29</sup> Kydd, *Trust Building, Trust Breaking: The dilemma of NATO enlargement*; Piirimäe, “Geopolitics of Sympathy”.

<sup>30</sup> Wendt, Alexander. *Constructing international politics*. *International security* 20, no. 1 (1995): 71-81.

<sup>31</sup> McDermott, Rose. *Political psychology in international relations*. University of Michigan Press, 2004.

ideological beliefs of various policymakers. Before establishing the theoretical foundations for this study, however, it is important to examine why alternative approaches are insufficient for explaining the persistence of U.S. support policies for Boris Yeltsin during the Clinton administration.

### **The Realist School of Thought**

The realist approach is grounded in the assumption that international politics is characterized by anarchy and competition among self-interested states to maximize their power in the international system.<sup>32</sup> Foreign aid is therefore not a charitable or altruistic policy, but a self-interested and calculated instrument designed to advance national interests, extend spheres of influence, and maintain balances of power. Hans Morgenthau's seminal essay, *A Political Theory of Foreign Aid*<sup>33</sup>, describes aid as a traditional foreign policy tool serving to advance political, military, and economic interests. Morgenthau distinguishes between “humanitarian” aid and “political” aid, arguing that humanitarian aid is a mere guise for political aid.<sup>34</sup> Realist theory also explains the crude geopolitical lines of U.S. aid during the Cold War—most apparent in the skewed provision of aid to anti-communist, authoritarian dictatorships such as Egypt, South Korea, or Zaire (the Democratic Republic of Congo today).

Realists contend that the aid calculus did not substantially shift in the post-Cold War period as the U.S. was seeking to gain influence in the post-Soviet space. However, the realist theory has been accused of negating the crucial influence of ideas, institutions, and agency of recipient states.

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<sup>32</sup> Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of International Politics*. McGraw-Hill.

<sup>33</sup> Morgenthau, Hans. "A political theory of foreign aid." *American political science review* 56, no. 2 (1962): 301-309.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

Critics argue that it makes aid recipients passive objects of donor strategy rather than active agents in shaping aid agendas and outcomes. Democracy promotion scholarship intersects with this school but adds an ideological twist. Thomas Carothers,<sup>35</sup> for example, discusses how U.S. aid has been used to promote liberal institutions and electoral procedures abroad, especially in the post-Cold War period.<sup>35</sup> Burnell and Schraeder et al. further note the variety of donor motivations, showing that democracy promotion has often coexisted with commercial or strategic interests as well.<sup>3637</sup>

### **The Developmentalist School of Thought**

The school of developmentalists reacts to foreign aid with a problem-solving, technocratic approach, which is a useful framework in explaining U.S. assistance policies to Russia and the influence of economic advisors and consultants in the 1990s, but it doesn't go so far as to explaining the ideological underpinnings of economic assistance policy to Russia. The concept of developmentalism lies in modernization theory and development economics where assistance has a utilitarian purpose to channel capital, know-how, and best practices from rich to poor nations and accelerate their progress along a presumed linear path through five stages of development.<sup>38</sup>

This approach gained traction in the post-World War II era, when the Marshall Plan was extolled as a model of reconstruction and development. Developmentalist ideology shaped much of the aid architecture during the Cold War years, most notably the activities of multilateral organizations

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<sup>35</sup> Carothers, Thomas. *Aiding democracy abroad: The learning curve*. Carnegie Endowment, 2011.

<sup>36</sup> Burnell, Peter. "Democracy promotion: the elusive quest for grand strategies." *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft* (2004): 100-116.

<sup>37</sup> Schraeder, Peter J., Steven W. Hook, and Bruce Taylor. "Clarifying the foreign aid puzzle: A comparison of American, Japanese, French, and Swedish aid flows." *World politics* 50, no. 2 (1998): 294-323.

<sup>38</sup> Rostow, Walt Whitman. *The stages of economic growth: A non-communist manifesto*. Cambridge university press, 1990.

like the World Bank and bilateral programs run by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Scholars of this tradition concentrate on aid's role in the provision of public goods, infrastructure development, and human capital creation. The basic theorists, like Walt W. Rostow, assumed that aid would be utilized to propel countries into “age of high mass consumption” from “traditional societies.”<sup>39</sup>

Developmentalists operate on the assumption that underdevelopment is a technical problem that will be resolved by technical means—more aid, better project design, more monitoring and evaluation. Aid effectiveness studies in this school of thought, for example, Burnside and Dollar in *Aid, Policies, and Growth*,<sup>40</sup> attempt to identify macroeconomic conditions under which aid will spur growth and reach the conclusion that proper policy conditions, for example, low inflation, free trade, political stability, are crucial to success. But one critique of developmentalist thought is that it has always been charged with being apolitical and imposing of economic models upon socially and politically nuanced context, as in the case of Western “copy-and-paste” style implementation of economic reform on to a Russia with a vastly different cultural, social, and political context during the immediate post-Cold War period.

## **Combining Constructivism and Political Psychology**

This thesis employs a dual theoretical approach that combines research from constructivism with political psychology. This integration allows for analysis of both the broad ideational structures

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<sup>39</sup> Rostow, “*The stages of economic growth*,” 1990.

<sup>40</sup> Burnside, Craig, and David Dollar. "Aid, policies, and growth." *American economic review* 90, no. 4 (2000): 847-868.

that shaped American policy discourse and the individual cognitive processes and context that influenced specific decision-makers.

Taking the constructivist approach, systemic-level “end of history” narratives influenced American decision makers to the inevitability of democratization and economic liberalization, contributing to an idealistic if not naïve belief that Russia would eventually democratize and integrate with the West. Here, “end of history” narratives clashed with different realities on the ground in Russia, such as Russia’s skepticism toward Western motives, lack of experience with democratic governance, and its drift toward authoritarianism throughout the 1990s. NATO enlargement was viewed as institutionalizing democratic governance in Central and Eastern Europe while also benefiting Russia. In turn, Sarotte’s “ratchet effect” led to the inability or unwillingness of the West to formulate alternative security arrangements that could have more effectively integrated Russia into a post-Cold War security architecture.<sup>41</sup>

However, sympathy also played a role, especially when it came to the personal relationship between Clinton and Yeltsin—leading the Clinton administration to be overoptimistic about Russia’s reforms and overlook its flaws. Indeed, Clinton would go on to say “we can’t ever forget that Yeltsin drunk is better than most of the alternatives sober,”<sup>42</sup> underlying the administration’s unwavering support for Yeltsin. Talbott made an insightful comment in his memoir, *The Russia Hand*<sup>43</sup>, that “the key, as I saw it, might be that Yeltsin combined prodigious determination and fortitude with grotesque indiscipline and a kind of genius for self-abasement. He was both a very

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<sup>41</sup> Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 20.

<sup>42</sup> Keller, Bill. *Bubba and Ol’ Boris*. The New York Times, 9 June 2002; Talbott, *The Russia Hand*.

<sup>43</sup> Talbott, Strobe. *The Russia hand: A memoir of presidential diplomacy*. Random House, 2007.

big man and a very bad boy, a natural leader and an incurable screw-up. All this Clinton recognized, found easy to forgive and wanted others to join him in forgiving.”<sup>44</sup>

Scholars such as Lumsdaine<sup>45</sup>, Hopf,<sup>46</sup> and Sending and Neumann<sup>47</sup> argue that donor behavior is shaped not only by interests, but by identity, norms, and shared understandings of world order. Within this view, foreign aid is a reflection of how states envision their roles in the world—as a benign hegemon, moral leader, the world's policeman, or a defender of the liberal order. In Alexander Wendt's *Anarchy Is What States Make of It*, there is an emphasis on the importance of collective ideas in international relations.<sup>48</sup>

Wendt's argument is that “identities and interests are endogenous to interaction, rather than a rationalist-behavioral one in which they are exogenous.”<sup>49</sup> In fact, the theory gained prominence at the end of the Cold War and in the 1990s when scholars and practitioners had to go back to the mainstream theories of realism and liberalism in explaining world events, and take a harder look at social construction rather than material construction.<sup>50</sup> Initial constructivist scholarship in the field of foreign aid, for example, Lumsdaine's *Moral Vision in International Politics*, focused on the cultural and historical roots of aid-giving within Christian and liberal humanitarian traditions.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, 230.

<sup>45</sup> Lumsdaine, David Halloran. *Moral vision in international politics: the foreign aid regime, 1949-1989*. Princeton University Press, 1993.

<sup>46</sup> Hopf, Ted. *Social construction of international politics: identities & foreign policies, Moscow, 1955 and 1999*. Cornell University Press, 2002.

<sup>47</sup> Sending, Ole Jacob, and Iver B. Neumann. "Governance to governmentality: Analyzing NGOs, states, and power." *International studies quarterly* 50, no. 3 (2006): 651-672.

<sup>48</sup> Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 391-425.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Zheng Mengshu, "A brief overview of Alexander Wendt's constructivism," *E-International Relations*, no. 19 (2020).

<sup>51</sup> Lumsdaine, *Moral vision in international politics*, 1993.

Lumsdaine argued that democratic decision-makers and publics were often motivated by moral imperatives to alleviate poverty, if not solely strategic interests.<sup>52</sup>

Subsequent researchers, such as Hopf<sup>53</sup> and Sending and Neumann<sup>54</sup>, have gone a step further in arguing that foreign aid occurs within a field of shared meaning and social expectation. They analyze how development, modernity, and civilization discourses shape donor and recipient identities and both the content and form of aid. Constructivists emphasize the performative dimension of aid: through giving aid and assistance, states construct and reaffirm their identity as liberal democracies, good global citizens, or enlightened hegemons. For example, the United States' post-Cold War focus on the promotion of market democracy in its support of Russian reform efforts can be understood not only as an attempt to integrate Russia into the Western-led, liberal and rules-based order, but as a step that reaffirmed its self-image, which was based on a vision of American moral leadership.

Jennifer Mitzen's research on ontological security in international relations is also relevant in understanding how states establish enduring identities, and how they subsequently attempt to maintain them even when the prevailing conditions are changed.<sup>55</sup> In this case, such constructs help us understand how recurring metaphors and narratives supported the felt continuity and legitimacy of U.S. engagement despite Russia's course diverging further from democratic, free market norms.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Hopf, *Social construction of international politics*, 2002.

<sup>54</sup> Sending and Neumann, *Governance to governmentality*, 2006.

<sup>55</sup> Mitzen, Jennifer. "Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma." *European journal of international relations* 12, no. 3 (2006): 341-370.

To examine the influence of elite policymaker rhetoric more closely, this thesis employs insights from political psychology, particularly focusing on how individual cognitive biases and organizational dynamics shaped policy persistence. Frank Schimmelfennig's concept of rhetorical entrapment, while discussed in the context of EU enlargement, also applied to NATO enlargement debates. Schimmelfennig argues that actors who commit to norms such as democracy, human rights, and market liberalism can be accountable for their rhetoric.<sup>56</sup> Actors may find themselves compelled to act in accordance with their normative rhetoric, because in "the institutional environment of the EU, the supporters of enlargement were able to justify their preferences on the grounds of the Community's traditional pan-European orientation and its liberal constitutive values and norms and to shame the "brakemen" into acquiescing in enlargement."<sup>57</sup> Actors for EU enlargement entrapped opponents and brought about a collective outcome that would not have been expected given the power and interests at stake. We saw this when Clinton signaled his support for NATO enlargement in 1994, giving a handful of individuals in the administrations, like Anthony Lake and Richard Holbrooke, "enough help to outmaneuver the overwhelming opposition inside the executive branch." Afterward, these so-called "policy entrepreneurs" would drive the enlargement process "not through a series of decision meetings but through presidential language."<sup>58</sup>

To study personal interactions in U.S.-Russia relations in this period, Yarhi-Milo's selective attention framework is particularly useful for analyzing how U.S. policymakers processed

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<sup>56</sup> Schimmelfennig, Frank. "The community trap: Liberal norms, rhetorical action, and the eastern enlargement of the European Union." *International organization* 55, no. 1 (2001): 47-80.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> James M. Goldgeier, *Not Whether but When: The US Decision to Enlarge NATO* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 153.

information about Russian developments.<sup>59</sup> This framework posits that decision-makers' attention is shaped by cognitive biases and organizational factors rather than purely rational cost-benefit calculations.

The selective attention thesis posits that “individual perceptual biases and organizational interests and practices are likely to shape what types of indicators are regarded as informative signals of the adversary’s intentions as well as how these actors interpret such information about intentions.”<sup>60</sup>

Decision makers will often use their own theories, expectations, and needs, and ignore costly signals, to interpret the intentions of another state. The selective attention thesis further provides three hypotheses that capture these biases: vividness, subjective credibility, and organizational expertise.

Vividness means that decision makers will focus on information that is vivid, such as the personal impressions acquired from private interaction between two heads of state like Clinton and Yeltsin, even if it does not cost the other state much to signal this information.<sup>61</sup>

Subjective credibility states that decision makers will “perceive what they expect to be there.”<sup>62</sup>

They will often debate or ignore what scholars consider credible indicators of intention because of their own theories and preexisting beliefs. Therefore, decision-makers are likely to not pay attention to costly or uncostly signals that do not fit their worldview and instead will pay more attention to signals that are consistent with their beliefs. Changing the beliefs of decision-makers

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<sup>59</sup> Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>60</sup> Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary*, 3.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Jervis, *Perception and misperception in international politics*, 2017.

is difficult, as they will be unresponsive to signals that go against their beliefs. However, this is not impossible, as in the case when a certain signal is too vivid and unambiguous to ignore.<sup>63</sup>

The organization expertise thesis uses insights from information processing in organizations. The thesis posits that different government departments, such as the U.S. Department of Defense and the U.S. Department of State for example, will pay attention to different indicators to assess intentions, such as military capabilities or personal interactions with counterparts.<sup>64</sup> This is exemplified in the divergence of beliefs between figures in the Defense Department who were against full Article-5 NATO enlargement due to the cost and credibility of American commitment, versus individuals like Richard Holbrooke and Anthony Lake at the State Department and National Security Council who pushed for full-guarantee enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe, ultimately winning that bureaucratic battle and significantly shaping the Clinton administration's choice to enlarge NATO in 1994.

### **The Liberal Roots of American Mental Maps**

The definition of “mental maps” that I utilize refers to the cognitive frameworks through which policymakers interpret information, assess threats and opportunities, and guide policy choices. These mental maps are constructed from ideological beliefs, historical analogies, professional experiences, and personal relationships that create interpretive lenses through which policymakers see the world and filter information.

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<sup>63</sup> Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary*, 4.

<sup>64</sup> Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary*, 4-6.

The persistence of these “end-of-history” mental maps explains a policy rigidity in the 1990s, where policymakers repeatedly explained Russian developments in terms of liberal convergence, routinely downplaying signals that suggested Russia was backsliding democratically. As tension between Russian political realities and American aspirations grew—particularly following the 1993 constitutional crisis and the First Chechen War—U.S. policymakers were eventually compelled to modify their assistance policies. The adjustment was not a complete rejection of the promotion of democracy and market reforms, rather it was more of a hedge against potential Russian revanchism in the future, as well as a failure to identify any viable alternatives to Yeltsin. Scholars such as Robert Jervis<sup>65</sup> and Yuen Foong Khong<sup>66</sup> have ably demonstrated the extent to which foreign policymakers rely on mental maps in perceiving information and guiding action, particularly when faced with uncertainty and outcomes that contradict their expectations.

In *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Jervis applies psychological principles to foreign policy, demonstrating that leaders perceive the world by preconceptions and analogies. His cognitive consistency theory is especially helpful in explaining how U.S. decision-makers maintained some preconceptions regarding Russia despite mounting evidence that contradicted initial assumptions.<sup>67</sup> In *Analogies at War*, Yuen Foong Khong examines how decision-makers use historical analogies to not only make sense of novel and new circumstances, but also to legitimate and justify policy choices. His account of American intervention in Vietnam reveals

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<sup>65</sup> Jervis, Robert. *Perception and misperception in international politics: New edition*. Princeton University Press, 2017.

<sup>66</sup> Khong, Yuen Foong. *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965*. Princeton University Press, 2020.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

that policymakers made extensive use of the analogy of appeasement at Munich in 1938 to frame communism as an existential threat to be confronted, selectively ignoring disconfirming evidence.

Analogical thinking between the past and present offers a powerful explanatory tool for perceiving how American officials managed the post-Soviet Russian transition. In the context of U.S.–Russian relations during the 1990s, the same was true of U.S. policymakers, who also relied on analogies from the past to inform their expectations and responses. The most common reference was the post-World War II Marshall Plan, a policy model and moral blueprint for how economic assistance could be used to promote stability and prosperity in Russia, the newly independent states, and Central and Eastern Europe. By evoking the success of American assistance to Western Europe, policymakers implicitly assumed Russia would also follow a path of liberal convergence, blinding themselves to the very different historical, institutional, and social contexts that existed in Russia at the time.

Another, more implicit reference was the post-communist transition of Central and Eastern European countries. The relative success of democratization in Poland and the Czech Republic only served to reinforce the view that Russia too was ready for liberal change, provided it was given the right technical guidance and economic aid. But as Khong's model warns, analogical thinking ignores fundamental dissimilarities and leads to policy errors. In Russia's case, comparison to previous successful transitions in the past served to plant excessive optimism in the universality and inevitability of privatization and democratization, leading officials to interpret early warning signs of authoritarian resurgence as mere temporary setbacks.

U.S. policy toward Russia would shift from an emphasis on PfP to a support for NATO enlargement in 1994—most notably after crises like the 1993 October conflict and the First

Chechen War. Meanwhile, American policymakers still tried institutionalizing Russia into NATO through PfP and other means such as the NATO-Russia Founding Act. For assistance policy, the U.S. continued with support for the double-helix assumption. In Michael Mandelbaum's, *The Ideas That Conquered the World*<sup>68</sup>, he posits the post-Cold War American assumption that democracy, free markets, and peace were not only a wish but a necessary part of the international order. This could also explain the policy rigidity and endurance of these mental maps in the face of contrary expectations.

Mandelbaum further argues that the 1990s were marked by an era of liberal triumphalism, during which U.S. foreign policy was guided by a conception of historical determinism rooted in liberal ideology. This understanding served to confirm the notion of Russian convergence with the West and integration with Western institutions. Tony Smith provides a critical counterpoint in *America's Mission*<sup>69</sup>, tracing intellectual and institutional sources of American promotion of democracy across the twentieth century, not just the post-Cold War period. He contends that promotion of democracy was a recurring feature of U.S. strategic thinking, embedded in the American foreign policy tradition since the early twentieth century. Smith shows us how U.S. leaders repeatedly linked the other nation's domestic political structure to broader issues of international order and American security.

Therefore, U.S. aid programs such as the Freedom Support Act and technical assistance via USAID and Treasury-sponsored advisors presumed that Russia was “transitioning” to a liberal democratic

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<sup>68</sup> Mandelbaum, Michael. *The ideas that conquered the world: Peace, democracy, and free markets in the twenty-first century*. Public Affairs, 2002.

<sup>69</sup> Smith, Tony. *America's mission: the United States and the worldwide struggle for democracy*. Vol. 139. Princeton University Press, 2012.

future and that U.S. aid could accelerate and guide the process. In this sense, assistance became a tool not just of economic reform but an export of America's governance model.

### **Differences Between Bush 41 and Clinton**

Understanding the ideational foundations of Clinton's Russia policy requires examining how it differed from the more cautious approach of the preceding Bush administration. This comparison reveals how changes in leadership brought different mental maps and priorities to U.S.-Russia relations. Scholars such as John Ikenberry<sup>70</sup> and Stephen Walt<sup>71</sup> have analyzed how the Clinton administration navigated this moment, articulating a grand strategy that blended democracy promotion and free-market integration.

This vision marked a shift from the more cautious and restrained approach of George H.W. Bush's administration, particularly on assistance to former Soviet republics. As detailed in Goldgeier and McFaul's *Power and Purpose*<sup>72</sup>, Bush's team prioritized geopolitical stability over domestic transformation with other states, extending only limited economic assistance to Russia and other former Soviet countries. They feared the perception of interventionism and worried about being drawn too deeply into Russia's internal affairs. Aid was provided using a cautious, measured approach, and while there was rhetorical support for reform, the focus on multilateral cooperation, particularly regarding arms control and denuclearization. Overall, the Bush 41 administration's

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<sup>70</sup> Ikenberry, G. John. *After victory: Institutions, strategic restraint, and the rebuilding of order after major wars*. (2019): 1-336.

<sup>71</sup> Walt, Stephen M. *Taming American power: the global response to US primacy*. WW Norton & Company, 2006.

<sup>72</sup> Goldgeier, James M., and Michael McFaul. *Power and purpose: US policy toward Russia after the Cold War*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.

approach was shaped by a realist mindset that emphasized nuclear non-proliferation and regional stability over domestic transformation.

In contrast, the Clinton administration adopted a more activist and ideologically driven approach, seeking to offer Russia integration and partnership in various economic and security arrangements. With this came a surge in economic assistance, whole-hearted support for Yeltsin's government, and strong backing for Washington Consensus-based market reforms. This change in policy was rooted in the belief that U.S. engagement could guide Russia toward a Western-style political and economic model. Yet, as later chapters in *Power and Purpose* reveal, this optimism often clouded the judgement of American policymakers and glossed over Russia's political realities on the ground.

Wilsonian ideals of liberal internationalism and Kant's democratic peace theory infused the Clinton administration. As a result, Clinton's Russia policy was shaped by two dominant imperatives: to prevent post-Soviet instability and to promote democratic and capitalist reform based on the predominant Washington Consensus and "end of history" narrative at the time. As Chapter 5 highlights, in the wake of the Soviet collapse, the Clinton administration viewed Russia not just as a former adversary but as a pivotal state whose trajectory could determine the future of the entire post-Cold War international system.<sup>73</sup>

On the eve of Clinton's first trip abroad to meet Yeltsin, he argued, "Think of it—land wars in Europe cost hundreds of thousands of American lives in the twentieth century. The rise of a democratic Russia, satisfied within its own boundaries, bordered by other peaceful democracies,

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

could ensure that our nation never needs to pay that kind of price again. I know and you know that, ultimately, the history of Russia will be written by Russians and the future of Russia must be charted by Russians. But I would argue that we must do what we can and we must act now. Not out of charity but because it is a wise investment....While our efforts will entail new costs, we can reap even larger dividends for our safety and our prosperity if we act now.”<sup>74</sup> As a result, the administration channeled billions of dollars in aid to support macroeconomic stabilization, privatization, and civil society development, most of it distributed through the newly created Support for East European Democracy (SEED) and Freedom Support Act (FSA).

However, Goldgeier and McFaul stress that the assistance policy—particularly under Vice President Al Gore’s leadership in the U.S.-Russia Commission—was tightly bound to support for Boris Yeltsin.<sup>75</sup> Aid was designed not only to advance reform but to shore up Yeltsin’s political position as the most viable pro-Western reformer. This led the U.S. to overlook troubling trends in governance, such as crony capitalism, repression of dissent, and the centralization of power—especially during and after the 1993 constitutional crisis.

## **Opportunities for Contribution**

Recent scholarship has started to revisit the 1990s with a fine-tooth comb, especially in the framework of Russia's authoritarian turn, the deterioration of U.S.-Russia relations in the 2000s and 2010s, and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Scholars such as Michael

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<sup>74</sup> Goldgeier and McFaul, *Power and Purpose*, 90.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 119.

McFaul<sup>76</sup> and Angela Stent<sup>77</sup> have pondered lost opportunities, overreach, and the limits of liberal internationalism. In the meantime, volumes such as M.E. Sarotte's *Not One Inch*<sup>78</sup> positions the 1990s as an anchor decade whose consequences still underpin the geopolitical crises of the present. These writings emphasize path dependency and the importance of early post-Cold War choices, suggesting that we must look at the narratives of policymakers in the 1990s to more fully comprehend where we are today in U.S.-Russia relations.

Sarotte's volume presents a massive archival study of NATO enlargement diplomacy. The title cites the by-now-infamous phrase supposedly promised to Mikhail Gorbachev in 1990 by then-Secretary of State James Baker—that NATO would move “not one inch eastward”—and traces how ambiguity, misunderstanding, and competing perceptions of post-Cold War settlement evolved into long-term mistrust between the United States and Russia.

Sarotte reveals that as NATO enlargement was seen by U.S. policymakers as a way to stabilize Eastern Europe and lock in liberal order, Russian elites increasingly saw it as encroachment and betrayal of what they viewed as their privileged sphere of influence, or “near-abroad.” Sarotte argues that this widening perception gap was not inevitable, but instead, was shaped by cumulative decisions made throughout the 1990s.<sup>79</sup>

In particular, Sarotte also highlights the role of ideas, memory, and identity in shaping foreign policy agendas on both sides—showing how Western triumphalism and Russian grievance narratives became more entrenched as the 1990s progressed. *Not One Inch* identifies a leitmotif of

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<sup>76</sup> McFaul, Michael. *From cold war to hot peace: The inside story of Russia and America*. Penguin UK, 2018.

<sup>77</sup> Stent, Angela E. *The limits of partnership: US-Russian relations in the twenty-first century*. Princeton University Press, 2015.

<sup>78</sup> Sarotte, *Not One Inch*.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

this thesis: the constitutive role of ideas, and the narratives that states tell themselves about order, responsibility, and legitimacy. By demonstrating how post-Cold War policies, and particularly toward NATO expansion, were not only strategic choices but also expressions of self-understanding, Sarotte's book invites consideration of other areas of policy like American assistance policy, where discourse and ideology also shaped action.

For now, the specific field of economic and democratic assistance discourse, particularly when it was couched in the language of NATO enlargement, remains understudied. Most accounts assume coherence in policymaker beliefs rather than investigating how those beliefs were constructed, challenged, and revised over time, and why. By exploring the narratives, personal relationships, and differing opinions of U.S. assistance inside the Clinton administration and highlighting the various debates surrounding the opportunities and pitfalls of America's approach, this thesis seeks to positively contribute to the literature on U.S.-Russia relations in the 1990s.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methodology

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My thesis adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research design utilizing thematic analysis to assess how the evolution of U.S. economic assistance and dual-track NATO enlargement policy vis-à-vis the Russian Federation from 1992 to 1994 reflected the mental maps of American policymakers. I situate the research in the field of political psychology where I explore how different identity narratives and belief systems shaped political and economic decisions, particularly regarding democracy promotion and market reform in Russia throughout the 1990s. My study's central aim is to uncover how underlying "end-of-history" narratives and the personal relationship between Clinton and Yeltsin influenced U.S. foreign policy and how they evolved in response to mounting differences between American expectations versus real outcomes in Russia's society, economy, and democracy.

Through my approach, I have identified five mental maps that guided American policymaking:

- (1) Faith in the liberal international order and Russia's integration with Western institutions
- (2) The "double helix" of democracy and market reform
- (3) The dual-track policy of NATO enlargement and Russian engagement
- (4) The personal relationship between Yeltsin and Clinton
- (5) Expressions of cognitive dissonance

My analysis focuses on the formative years of U.S-Russian relations, a period that established the mental maps that would guide American policy throughout the entire decade. This timeframe encompasses the Bush administration's initial response to the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the transition to the Clinton administration who sought to build on Bush's legacy, and the pivotal decision regarding economic assistance programs and NATO enlargement. I use thematic analysis of events and conversations by focusing on a selection of over one-hundred declassified cables, memos, letters, and oral history interviews from the Digital National Security Archives, under the project *U.S.-Russia Relations: From the Fall of the Soviet Union to the Rise of Putin, 1991-2000*.<sup>80</sup> I also utilize secondary sources such as memoirs from policymakers, academic papers, and news articles. This triangulated base of sources allows me to gain insight into the broader historiography of the period as well as the logic of assistance programs and the subjective meaning-making processes of individual actors.

## Research Design

Hence, I am concerned less with the quantitative effectiveness of U.S. aid than with the subjective meanings attributed to it by those who designed and implemented foreign policy. A qualitative approach is best suited to address the central research questions: *Why did U.S. policymakers maintain unwavering support for Boris Yeltsin and optimism about Russian democratic transition from 1992-1994, despite mounting evidence of authoritarian consolidation, economic failure, and rising nationalism?*

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<sup>80</sup> Digital National Security Archive, "U.S.-Russia Relations: From the Fall of the Soviet Union to the Rise of Putin, 1991-2000," digital collection, ProQuest, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/dnsa-collections>.

My study is informed by a constructivist approach that emphasizes the role of ideas, norms, and identity in shaping state behavior. My analysis views policy as embedded in discourse and situated in a broader context of narratives about the U.S. role in a post-Cold War world, the transition from communism to capitalism, and the anticipated integration of Russia into multilateral governance institutions.

I operationalize this approach through systematic thematic analysis that reveals how policymakers framed Russia's transformation, justified assistance programs, tried squaring the triangle on NATO enlargement, and ultimately how they managed contradictions between their expectations and Russian realities on the ground. By identifying recurring themes in policy discourse from 1992-1994, I offer insight into the mental maps through which American policymakers interpreted Russian developments.

### **Source Selection**

**Primary archival documents** come from the Digital National Security Archive collection *U.S.-Russia Relations: From the Fall of the Soviet Union to the Rise of Putin, 1991-2000*. Included in this archive are declassified cables, memoranda, policy papers, letters, and briefings. I analyzed each entry manually and operationalized my theoretical framework by identifying themes to highlight the evolution of mental maps.

**Oral history interviews** from the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training (ADST) and PBS Frontline's *The Rise of Putin* series provide first-hand accounts from U.S. officials including ambassadors, State Department diplomats, and NSC advisors. These include first-hand testimonies

from U.S. officials such as ambassadors, State Department diplomats, and NSC advisors, and offer insight into the thinking processes and assumptions that guided policy decisions.

**Memoirs and key secondary sources** such as Strobe Talbott's *The Russia Hand*, Mary Sarotte's *Not One Inch*, and James Goldgeier's *Not Whether But When* provide additional perspectives on elite thinking and policy rationales. These sources allow me to triangulate findings from official documents and identify recurring patterns in how policymakers understood and justified their approaches to Russia.

### **Thematic Analysis**

The first step involves identifying recurring themes throughout 1992-1994 in my primary source archive that served to justify and structure U.S. foreign policy toward Russia. To assess the shift in policy, attitude, and approach—as well as to identify the mental maps that undergirded U.S. optimism in Russia's reform process and support for Yeltsin even when domestic developments in Russia contradicted U.S. expectations—I employ thematic analysis as a principal qualitative method.

According to Braun and Clarke, “thematic analysis is a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set.”<sup>81</sup> It facilitates both inductive exploration of emergent themes and deductive examination of theory-informed categories.<sup>82</sup> In accordance with Braun and Clarke's six-stage model of analysis, the study

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<sup>81</sup> Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*.

incorporates familiarization with data, coding systematically, creating initial themes, reviewing and developing those potential themes, defining and naming themes, and eventual synthesis and writing of analysis.<sup>83</sup>

Following Braun and Clarke's systematic approach, my analysis proceeded through six stages. The first stage involved familiarization with the data through close reading of the declassified documents present in the DNSA collection, taking initial notes and annotating the materials on recurring language, patterns, and justifications that appeared across the different time periods. During the second stage, I conducted manual, systemic coding by identifying specific concepts and rhetorical frameworks that appeared in policymaker discourse, creating an inventory of segments. Third, I searched for themes in the data to see broader patterns, such as language about the personal relationship, the market-democracy linkage, or faith in the liberal order. Stage four of my analysis involved reviewing and refining these initial themes by checking them against the coded extracts and the entire dataset to ensure that themes accurately represented the patterns I identified. The fifth stage involved defining and naming the final themes, developing clear definitions for the mental maps and determining how they relate to one another and how they fit into my arguments. Finally, the sixth stage consisted of producing the analysis by selecting compelling examples of the coded data that effectively illustrated each theme, and weaving these into a coherent narrative that address the research questions of this study. By illustrating how these themes first arise, develop, or are disproven during the period of 1992–1994, the research recaptures the developing ideational environment that informed American engagement with Russia.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

## **Limitations**

There are a number of limitations that must be mentioned. First, the study's reliance on declassified documents and memoirs inevitably favors elite perceptions only from the American side and potentially neglects the influence of public opinion or bureaucratic processes in both the Kremlin and the White House. In this case, Clinton faced pressure from constituents of Eastern European ancestry who strongly favored NATO enlargement, which played a crucial role in formulating enlargement policy. Nevertheless, I did not focus extensively on this issue as it falls outside this thesis's primary objective of analyzing elite policymaker mental maps. The study is also focused solely on thematic analysis in U.S.-Russia relations, specifically from the American side, and does not explore in detail the agency of Central and East European states on the issue of NATO enlargement, which is a key topic to fully understand NATO enlargement policy.

Second, memoirs and retrospective interviews are susceptible to hindsight bias, selective memory, or self-justification. However, my constructivist approach treats these sources as valuable windows into how elite policymakers have constructed meaning from their experiences and justified their actions over time. I also triangulate claims across sources and bring inconsistencies to the forefront of the analysis where it is relevant.

Third, the thesis does not include quantitative measurements of aid effectiveness or broad Russian-language press coverage or analysis of Russian-language archival material, which could provide a more comprehensive sense of how aid was perceived by Russian actors. While such an expansion is beyond the scope and timeline of this project, it could be a fruitful avenue for further research.

Moreover, the scope is limited to studying the 1992-1994 period due to time and resource constraints, leaving the later development of U.S.-Russia relations for future investigation.

Finally, I acknowledge my own positionality as a researcher with his personal values, opinions, and beliefs about U.S.-Russia relations. As someone writing with the benefit of hindsight about a highly contentious period in U.S.-Russia relations, I recognize the risk of retrospectively judging 1990s policies through the lens of subsequent developments, including the deterioration of U.S.-Russia relations and Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. To mitigate this, I attempt to engage critically with primary and secondary sources, and provide detailed, accurate analysis of my source material to best explain the mental maps of American policymakers. Therefore, I employ a systematic approach such as: coding across the entire dataset rather than cherry-picking supportive evidence in line with my views, paying attention to disconfirming cases where policymaker discourse contradicts my analytical themes, providing a detailed citation of primary sources to allow readers to evaluate my interpretations for themselves, and employing a conscious effort to present policymaker reasoning within their historical context. Moreover, the iterative nature of thematic analysis made sure that I could constantly refine my themes as I read through and analyzed my dataset, helping ensure that the patterns I've identified through the five mental maps emerged from a system reading of the materials.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Analysis & Discussion

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#### First Impressions Last, 1992-1993

“Aid to Russia and the other former communist nations is not charity. We must recognize that what helps us abroad helps us at home. If, for example, Yeltsin is replaced by a new aggressive Russian nationalist we can kiss the peace dividend good-bye.”

— *Richard Nixon in a secret memo to Bush, 1992*

In February 1992, Yeltsin received an invitation to Camp David to meet with U.S. President George H.W. Bush. Both declared that the U.S. and Russia were no longer adversaries and that the Cold War was over.<sup>84</sup> The Russian side were so confident and optimistic of partnership with the U.S. that after Vice President Dan Quayle’s comment about space cooperation in a meeting Yeltsin ambitiously replied, “I think you omitted one point—a joint mission to Mars... We should not compete to get there first. We should cooperate. We don’t care about competition.”<sup>85</sup>

This short exchange offers a window into the optimism and ambition the early 1990s, specifically Russia’s eagerness to cooperate. Yeltsin's Mars proposal represents more than diplomatic

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<sup>84</sup> Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 88.

<sup>85</sup> Boris Yeltsin, Letter from Yeltsin to Bush (Unofficial Embassy Translation), January 29, 1992, National Security Archive, George Washington University, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2023-01-30/first-months-us-relations-new-russia-1992>.

enthusiasm—it reveals a Russian mental map that envisioned equal partnership rather than junior partnership in a U.S.-led order, something the Russian side would crave throughout the decade on the issue of building a new security architecture in Europe.

According to multiple declassified files, the George H.W. Bush administration was reluctant to embrace the “relations of deep mutual trust and alliance” that was proposed by Boris Yeltsin.<sup>86</sup> The first six months of U.S.-Russia relations shows how American officials operated under pragmatic, cautious mental maps still shaped by Cold War logic, strategic and realist considerations, and hesitancy toward deep cooperation with what was seen as still an unstable Russian Federation.

From the start, Yeltsin sought to make Russia an equal partner of the United States. In his letter to Bush dated January 27, 1992, Yeltsin even went so far as to envision a world “freed from the burden of nuclear weapons by our common efforts.”<sup>87</sup> Yet these wishes were met with restraint by the Bush team. Bush had already told Gorbachev that he was not a nuclear abolitionist<sup>88</sup>, unlike Reagan, highlighting his more realist, pragmatic approach to international diplomacy. Yeltsin’s letter aimed to eliminate all MIRVed (Multiple Independently-targetable Reentry Vehicles) nuclear warheads directly addressed long-standing U.S. arms control objectives.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> National Security Archive, commentary on "Letter from Yeltsin to Bush (Unofficial Embassy Translation)," January 29, 1992, National Security Archive, George Washington University, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/29664-document-2-letter-yeltsin-bush-unofficial-embassy-translation>.

<sup>89</sup> Boris Yeltsin, Letter from Yeltsin to Bush (Unofficial Embassy Translation), January 29, 1992, National Security Archive, George Washington University, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2023-01-30/first-months-us-relations-new-russia-1992>.

However, there was internal opposition in the Pentagon and among the Joint Chiefs of Staff because if implemented, the total numbers of American warheads would be fewer than their excessive list of targets. Then Secretary of State, James A. Baker III, later upbraided his colleagues then Defense Secretary Dick Cheney and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Colin Powell in his memoir, “They have offered us what we want, and what no one else has ever come close to: zero MIRVed ICBMs [Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles], and without eliminating MIRVed SLBMs [Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles]. We can’t let this slip through our fingers because we think we need a higher total number. That is not sustainable with the public or with Congress.”<sup>90</sup>

The reluctance to eliminate these weapons further reflected a strategic, pragmatic mental map of the Bush administration that prioritized a worldview underscored by the international relations theory of realism. Baker's frustration reveals competing mental maps within the administration—while he recognized an unprecedented opportunity for nuclear reductions, Pentagon officials remained trapped in Cold War targeting assumptions that required maintaining massive arsenals against a partner who was willing to cooperate, at least through initial conversations, but could not yet be trusted. This tension in policy approaches within the U.S. government would characterize much of the decade. Consequently, this realist logic combined with a hesitancy to provide large amounts of economic assistance to Russia by the Bush team.<sup>91</sup>

During the conference at Camp David in February 1992, Yeltsin reaffirmed his commitment to “stay with democracy” and observe “the principles of a market economy”, but noted that “we need

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<sup>90</sup> James A. Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy*, 669.

<sup>91</sup> James M. Goldgeier and Michael McFaul, *Power and Purpose: US Policy toward Russia after the Cold War* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 60-62.

help, not aid.”<sup>92</sup> While he remained committed to democratic and market reforms, he warned that the United States must provide more aid to Russia otherwise there would be a political reversal that could see the introduction of more hawkish conservative forces, “If reform fails, the current forces in power will be replaced by conservative, hawks, who will reject reforms. We will have a police state, repression and the arms race will recommence. It will be a waste of billions of dollars for the U.S. and involve all the world.”<sup>93</sup> Yeltsin's warning about potential political reversal demonstrates his own understanding that economic reform and democratic consolidation were fragile and interdependent—a nuance that American officials would later ignore when supporting Yeltsin’s increasingly authoritarian measures in service of maintaining and managing the relationship with Russia.

However, the response from the Bush administration was rhetorical encouragement and limited support for economic assistance and democratic reforms, whilst maintaining an emphasis on strategic concerns like denuclearization mainly through the Nunn-Lugar Act. Some explanations include the fact that Bush faced both domestic political constraints and a sluggish economy at home before his re-election campaign that explains the cautious rollout of aid to Russia. Goldgeier and McFaul argue that even more so, what explains this cautiousness was Bush’s worldview that “managing relations between states was the business of world statesmen. Trying to influence the affairs within other states was not.” Therefore, Bush had little inclination to push for

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<sup>92</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, Subject: Meeting with Boris Yeltsin, President of Russia, Document 8, National Security Archive, George Washington University, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2023-01-30/first-months-us-relations-new-russia-1992>.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

democratization in the Soviet Union and then Russia, and “aspired to play only a limited role in Russia’s transformation from a command economy to a market system.”<sup>94</sup>

Although the Bush administration was more cautious, they still believed in the mutually reinforcing nature of market and democratic reforms, evident when Bush announced a \$24 billion aid plan to Russia in April 1992.<sup>95</sup> This belief would later become even more entrenched under the Clinton administration. In the *Memorandum of the Conversation with Yegor Gaydar, First Deputy Prime Minister of Russia*, U.S. Ambassador to Russia, Rober Strauss, noted that according to a recent opinion poll of the Russian population, “after a five- to ten-fold increase in prices people support the reform program of Yeltsin (designed by Gaidar) by 70 percent.” President Bush continued supporting these reforms, despite major price increases in Russia’s domestic economy, saying “Keep pushing. We’ll work to get what we want out of Congress... We’re on your side.”<sup>96</sup>

Bush's encouragement to “keep pushing” despite obvious economic devastation reveals the power of the market-democracy linkage assumption—the administration interpreted widespread economic hardship in Russia as a temporary but necessary price for eventual democratic transformation and future prosperity. Ambassador Strauss's citation of polling data showing 70 percent support “after a five- to ten-fold increase in prices” demonstrates how this mental framework allowed officials to reinterpret economic hardship as a temporary setback and further justify pursuing Washington-consensus style reforms.

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<sup>94</sup> Goldgeier and McFaul, *Power and Purpose*, 84-85.

<sup>95</sup> Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 89.

<sup>96</sup> Memorandum of Conversation with Yegor Gaydar, First Deputy Prime Minister of Russia, National Security Archive, George Washington University, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2023-01-30/first-months-us-relations-new-russia-1992>.

To examine the extent of the consequences of economic reforms, in *The Russia Hand*<sup>97</sup>, Talbott notes that Gaidar's shock therapy unleashed hyperinflation of 2,500 percent a year, resulting in devastating effects for pensioners and consumers as well as extreme inequality. While Yeltsin was part of the solution as he was seen as a "master demolitionist" of the old Soviet system, he was also part of the problem because he was not much of an architect of a new system that Russia could build on.<sup>98</sup> Talbott's "master demolitionist" observation reveals early recognition that destruction of old systems didn't automatically produce functional new ones—yet this insight failed to modify policy because it challenged the fundamental assumption that market forces would lead to the creation of democratic institutions. As a result, the U.S. kept pushing reforms.

While Clinton's team saw Yeltsin's flaws, they also viewed him as irreplaceable, similar to Ambassador Strauss during the Bush years when he stated that "Yeltsin's popular mandate is real," and that he "see[s] no credible substitutes."<sup>99</sup> In early March of 1992, former President Nixon even sent President Bush a memo calling Yeltsin "the most pro-Western leader of Russia in history...whatever his flaws, the alternative of a new despotism would be infinitely worse."<sup>100</sup> Nixon further compared Russia then to China in the 1950s where the question of 'Who lost China?' became relevant. To avoid similar debates, Nixon suggested "a Western response comparable to the Marshall Plan for Europe after World War II, or else the West and the U.S. would "risk

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<sup>97</sup> Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2002), 42.

<sup>98</sup> Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, 42.

<sup>99</sup> Cable from U.S. Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State, "Boris Nikolayevich Yel'tsin: A Mid-Range Political Assessment," January 30, 1992, National Security Archive, George Washington University, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2023-01-30/first-months-us-relations-new-russia-1992>.

<sup>100</sup> Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, 45.

snatching defeat in the cold war from the jaws of victory,”<sup>101</sup> because if Yeltsin goes down, “the question of ‘who lost Russia?’ will be an infinitely more devastating issue in the 1990s.” While Nixon wasn’t in government at the time, this memo gives a window into the thinking of the Clinton administration later when Bush is voted out of office.

Later on in the year, and under pressure from presidential candidate Bill Clinton who advocated for larger sums of aid to be sent to Russia, Bush announced that the G7 would provide \$24 billion to support Russia’s economic and political transition.<sup>102</sup> The Bush team also worked with German Chancellor Helmut Kohl to bring the resources of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to address Russia’s economic problems.<sup>103</sup> During the 1992 U.S. Presidential campaign, Clinton, the challenger to Bush, gave a speech saying that Bush was “overly cautious on the issue of aid to Russia.”<sup>104</sup> This showed that even though there were consistencies in the approach, Clinton was willing to be more bullish and hopeful on aid to Russia than Bush. As the decade progressed, this proved to be true. Clinton's optimism and idealism reveals how the mental maps that would define his presidency were already forming—the faith in Russia’s integration to the liberal order and the belief that greater American involvement could overcome the contradictions already emerging in Russian reform. This optimism would prove both Clinton's greatest asset and his greatest liability in managing the relationship.

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 89.

<sup>103</sup> Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, 46.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 45

The implementation of the Clinton administration's Russia policy in 1993 both demonstrates a striking consistency with the Bush administration's mental maps and includes a number of important changes of tone, emphasis, and scope that underlined a more optimistic approach to Russia's reform process. Policymakers within both administrations shared an abiding faith in the transformative power of economic liberalization and democratization, assuming Russia, with proper support in the form of adequate aid and engagement, could be fully integrated into a U.S.-led liberal international order. This continuity reveals how faith in the liberal international order transcended partisan differences, suggesting that these mental maps reflected deeper ideological consensus within the American foreign policy establishment. But Clinton's early approach reflected a resetting of priorities based on the new administration's more Wilsonian worldview, compared to Bush's Hamiltonian pragmatism.

A memo from departing Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger to incoming Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, written in January 1993 most accurately reflects the Bush administration's mental map. Eagleburger emphasized three priorities of great American concern: blocking nuclear proliferation, promoting economic reform, and to respond with sensitivity to what happens on Russia's periphery, saying that "we do not want to see turmoil on the outside and threats to Russian minorities cause more problems for democrats in Russia; nor do we want to see a reassertion of Russian imperial control. He also wrote that "history will not judge the United States kindly if we fail to offer generous assistance."<sup>105</sup> However, the emphasis remained on "locking in" arms

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<sup>105</sup> Memorandum for Secretary of State-Designate Warren Christopher from Lawrence S. Eagleburger, Subject: Parting Thoughts: U.S. Foreign Policy in the Years Ahead, January 5, 1993, U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, George Washington University, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2023-02-07/launching-clinton-administration-russia-policy-1993>.

reductions and “further stabilizing reductions of nuclear weapons” by making sure Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan do not renege on their nuclear non-proliferation commitments. Eagleburger's warning that “history will not judge the United States kindly” reveals how historical vindication had already become psychologically central to policy formation—creating the sunk cost mentality that would later make policy recalibration so difficult when Russian reforms failed to meet American expectations.

Clinton's mental map—constructed through his campaign promises, early high-level personnel decisions, and face-to-face diplomacy with Boris Yeltsin—promised a broader and more hopeful vision based on the premise of democratic enlargement that would promote democracy, self-determination, and international law.<sup>106</sup> As Clinton's National Security Advisor, Anthony Lake, argues in a famous September 1993 memo titled *From Containment to Enlargement*, “The successor to a doctrine of... containment must be a strategy of enlargement of the world's free community of market democracies.”<sup>107</sup>

Talbott also wanted the U.S. to be constructively engaged in the world, saying, “if the United States leads, the world will be a safer place for Americans to live, work, travel, and trade.”<sup>108</sup>

Clinton did not want to miss a “historic opportunity” for the backing of Russian reform that would

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<sup>106</sup> Stephan Kieninger, "Strobe Talbott and the Rise of the Liberal Post-Cold War Order," American German Institute, July 2025, <https://americangerman.institute/2025/07/strobe-talbott-and-the-rise-of-the-liberal-post-cold-war-order/>.

<sup>107</sup> Anthony Lake, "From Containment to Enlargement," remarks delivered at Johns Hopkins University, School of Advanced International Studies, Washington, D.C., September 21, 1993, Clinton Digital Library, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/9013>.

<sup>108</sup> Strobe Talbott, "Strengthening American Security Through World Leadership -- Bosnia and Beyond," remarks delivered at the Dean Acheson Auditorium, U.S. Department of State, <https://1997-2001.state.gov/regions/eur/bosnia/bostal.html>.

help transform Russia into a democratic capitalist state.<sup>109</sup> His first telephone call to Yeltsin on 23 January, 1993 voiced a personal, moral commitment to partnership: “I am determined that, together, we can create the closest possible U.S.-Russia partnership...we are determined to do whatever we can to help Russia’s democratic reforms to succeed,” and “make our economic aid as beneficial as possible,” including support for “rescheduling Russia’s debt in the Paris Club.”<sup>110</sup> The language of “closest possible partnership” and personal determination demonstrates the early formation of the famous personal relationship—Clinton was already transforming bilateral relations into a matter of individual commitment rather than institutional process. The rhetoric of “partnership” was a departure from Bush's pragmatic caution to Clinton's liberal internationalism. Clinton appointed Strobe Talbott to oversee “all of our assistance programs in Russia and Eastern Europe”, saying that Talbott’s appointment “will ensure that I can maintain a high level of personal involvement on this important issue.”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> National Security Archive, "Launching the Clinton Administration Russia Policy in 1993," February 7, 2023, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2023-02-07/launching-clinton-administration-russia-policy-1993>.

<sup>110</sup> Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, "Telcon with President Boris Yeltsin of Russia," National Security Archive, George Washington University, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2023-02-07/launching-clinton-administration-russia-policy-1993>.

<sup>111</sup> Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, Subject: Telcon with President Boris Yeltsin of Russia, January 23, 1993, U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, George Washington University, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2023-02-07/launching-clinton-administration-russia-policy-1993>.

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THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

RELEASE IN FULL

REVIEW AUTHORITY: Marvin Russell, Senior Reviewer

MEMORANDUM OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Telcon with President Boris Yeltsin of Russia  
on January 23, 1993 (U)

PARTICIPANTS The President  
President Boris Yeltsin  
Interpreter: Dmitri Zarechnak  
Notetaker: Nicholas Burns, NSC staff

DATE, TIME January 23, 1993, 10:45 - 11:17am  
AND PLACE Oval Office

The President: Mr. President, this is President Clinton. Good morning, Mr. President. (U)

Now that I have become President, I want to reemphasize with you my commitment that Russia be a top priority for U.S. foreign policy during my Administration. Thank you very much for your congratulatory message to me. I am determined that, together, we create the closest possible U.S.-Russia partnership. This is a complex time in Europe and in Asia and we will need to work together effectively to use the power of our two countries for the good. And I want our governments to get off to a fast start. I am looking forward to an early meeting between us. Secretary of State Christopher will contact Foreign Minister Kozyrev to schedule an early meeting between them and to begin discussions about our meeting. I know how vitally important their relationship will be to us both. (S)

I am also determined to find the best possible person as my Ambassador to Moscow. At the present time, I want you to know that we are determined to do whatever we can to help Russia's democratic reforms to succeed. We will try to make our economic aid as beneficial as possible. I have appointed a very close friend and expert on Russia, Strobe Talbott, to oversee all of our assistance programs in Russia and in Eastern Europe. His appointment will ensure that I can maintain a high level of personal involvement on this important issue. This will be good for both you and me. (S)

*Excerpt from "Telcon with President Boris Yeltsin of Russia on January 23, 1993"*

Talbott's appointment further underscores this change in policy from the Bush administration. Talbott, a close friend and Russia expert, called Russia's domestic transformation "the greatest political miracle of our time."<sup>112</sup> This is a description that is essential: it reflects a mental map with a foundation not in strategic caution or managing relations, like in the previous Bush administration, but in historical convergence—an expectation that Russia's transformation might be the dawn of a new and democratic Russia.

During his February 6 briefing to Secretary Christopher, Talbott dismissed more skeptical voices on U.S. policy toward Russia such as Peter Reddaway as having "pessimism," calling it "Reddaway syndrome", and arguing instead that if there was sufficient U.S. support, Russian democracy could succeed, even having "the potential of matching in positive significance the birth of our own country."<sup>113</sup> Talbott's dismissal of skeptical voices as "Reddaway syndrome" demonstrates early signs of cognitive dissonance; rather than engaging with contrary evidence or alternative interpretations, officials failed to heed early warning signs in favor of a more optimistic view. His comparison of Russia's independence from the Soviet Union to America's own founding reveals the market-democracy and faith in the liberal order mental map, where Russian democratization was seen as historically inevitable rather than politically contingent.

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<sup>112</sup> Strobe Talbott Briefing for Secretary of State Warren Christopher: Russia, February 6, 1993, U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, George Washington University, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2023-02-07/launching-clinton-administration-russia-policy-1993>.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

While Clinton was a lot more optimistic and engaged with Russia's internal transformation, one similarity he shared with Bush was that he remained fixated on Yeltsin as the reformer and wasn't sufficiently attuned, or chose to ignore, other political developments inside Russia. The fixation ignored the possibility that successful democratic transition might require moving beyond any single individual and focus on building democratic institutions and the rule of law in Russia. Going forward, this would create cognitive dissonance when Yeltsin's conduct strayed from democratic norms. Still, at this early juncture, optimism and Wilsonian idealism dominated the mental maps of the Clinton administration.

## Playing the Man Not the Ball, 1993-1994

“I want you to know that we’re in this with you for the long haul.”

— *Clinton to Yeltsin during the April 1993 Vancouver Summit*

The ultimate test of American commitment to democratic principles versus personal loyalty to Yeltsin came on October 4, 1993, when the Russian President ordered tanks to shell the parliament building during a constitutional crisis with the legislative branch. Rather than viewing this as an assault on democratic norms and principles, Clinton stood firmly by Yeltsin’s side during his standoff with the legislative branch, which opposed shock-therapy economic reforms and sought to check Yeltsin’s power.

At the heart of the Clinton administration’s thinking was a belief that Yeltsin is the only hope for Russia’s political and economic transformation. This belief exemplifies the personal relationship in its most extreme form—American policy had become so focused on individual leadership that democratic institutions themselves were undermined to preserve support for Yeltsin. The U.S. Embassy in Moscow at the time even praised Yeltsin’s “superb handling” of the events.<sup>114</sup> Clinton personally praised him in a telephone conversation the next day.<sup>115</sup> However, both outside the U.S. government, and inside, there were still competing voices that warned of the dangers ahead.

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<sup>114</sup> Secretary Christopher’s Meeting with President Yeltsin, October 22, 1993, Moscow, U.S. Department of State, National Security Archive, George Washington University, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2023-10-04/yeltsin-shelled-russian-parliament-30-years-ago-us-praised>.

<sup>115</sup> Memorandum of Telephone Conversation: Telcon with President Boris Yeltsin of Russian Federation, October 5, 1993, William J. Clinton Presidential Library, National Security Archive, George Washington University,

One such voice was former British Ambassador to the Soviet Union and later to the Russian Federation, Sir Rodric Quentin Braithwaite. In a personal memo to Clinton in January 1993,<sup>116</sup> ten months before the shelling of the parliament, he noted the parallels between the Russian parliament in the present day and the English parliament when they tried to rein in royal power. Only after did England manage to have political parties. He also warned about Yeltsin's characteristics like his "bullying, impetuous, autocratic" tendencies.<sup>117</sup> And yet, he says that "ordinary Russians loved him precisely because he got drunk, fell into rivers, and hated the Communists—just like they did."<sup>118</sup> He criticizes Russia's reforms and Western advisors over the failure to come up with any credible plan to deal with the "rustbowl" defense industry in Russia.<sup>119</sup> His final advice, however, was that there isn't much that the West could do for Russia, it is up to Russia to make their future. All that the West could do was treat Russia as a great power (even if not a superpower anymore).<sup>120</sup> Braithwaite's warning about Yeltsin's "bullying, impetuous, autocratic" tendencies directly contradicted the American mental map that saw him as a democratic reformer.<sup>121</sup> His observation that Russians loved Yeltsin for his flaws rather than his virtues should have challenged the double-helix assumption by suggesting that popular appeal and democratic governance were not naturally linked. The dismissal of such warnings demonstrates how mental maps filtered out inconvenient information, highlighting the cognitive dissonance at play.

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<https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2023-10-04/yeltsin-shelled-russian-parliament-30-years-ago-us-praised>.

<sup>116</sup> Sir Rodric Quentin Braithwaite, "Yeltsin and the Style of Russian Politics" (Confidential memorandum), National Security Archive, George Washington University, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2023-10-04/yeltsin-shelled-russian-parliament-30-years-ago-us-praised>.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

To understand why American policymakers provided Yeltsin an almost blank check, we must go back to the leadup to the events of the constitutional crisis. First, Yeltsin's framing of the crisis as “communist” versus “reformist” perfectly aligned with American Cold War mental maps, making it psychologically easy for Clinton to support Yeltsin in what was essentially a constitutional coup. This demonstrates Clinton’s optimism in Russia’s eventual liberal transformation as well as the cognitive dissonance it took to continue operating under such assumptions in light of evidence contradicting American expectations. Rather than questioning whether dissolving parliament was democratic, and whether they should consider alternative policy priorities, officials accepted Yeltsin's binary framing that made the choice seem obvious. Second, Clinton’s personal relationship and affinity for Yeltsin could have blinded him to the reality of Russia’s domestic political and economic situation.

As frictions increased between Yeltsin and the parliament in the spring of 1993, Clinton’s senior advisors even worried that he would “support Yeltsin no matter what, even if he went off the rails of democracy.”<sup>122</sup> In Talbott’s memoir, he states:

“Clinton’s senior advisers who had assembled at the White House that day—Vice President Gore, Secretary Christopher, Tony Lake, Sandy Berger and Madeleine Albright, the ambassador to the UN—were all worried that Clinton would stand by Yeltsin no matter what, even if he went off the rails of democracy. I had that concern myself. Chris spoke for the rest of us in warning the president not to let himself get drawn into “color commentary

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<sup>122</sup> Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, 72.

and judgment calls” on the legality or constitutionality of Yeltsin’s position; we should limit ourselves to support for “principles and process,” not Yeltsin himself.”<sup>123</sup>

By summer 1993, as tensions further mounted between Yeltsin and the parliament, Clinton regarded the Russian president as a necessary ally. During a September 7 telephone conversation, Clinton reaffirmed his support, assuring Yeltsin that “we will be pulling for you.”<sup>124</sup> When Yeltsin issued Presidential Decree 1400, disbanding Parliament and calling new elections, Clinton was again quick to register his support. In their September 21 phone conversation, Clinton told Yeltsin, “you will have my support and the support of the American people.”<sup>125</sup> During the call, Yeltsin painted a black-and-white picture of the situation, saying that the Supreme Soviet “has totally gone out of control. It no longer supports the reform process. They have become communist.” According to Talbott, however, he had advised Clinton back in April 1993 to focus on “principles and process” when certain members of the team were concerned about Yeltsin’s behavior and worried about his unwillingness to consult and compromise with the Russian parliament.<sup>126</sup> In turn, Clinton responded through a binary lens mental map of ‘Yeltsin versus the communists’, characterizing the situation as “zero-sum” and recommitting to supporting Yeltsin, saying:

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> "Memorandum of Telephone Conversation: Telcon with President Boris Yeltsin of the Russian Federation," October 5, 1993, William J. Clinton Presidential Library declassification 2015-0782-M-1, Document 5, in "Yeltsin Shelled Russian Parliament 25 Years Ago, U.S. Praised 'Superb Handling'," National Security Archive, October 4, 2018, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2018-10-04/yeltsin-shelled-russian-parliament-25-years-ago-us-praised-superb-handling>.

<sup>125</sup> "Memorandum of Telephone Conversation: Telcon with President Boris Yeltsin of Russian Federation," September 21, 1993, U.S. Department of State declassification M-2006-01499, Document 3, in "Yeltsin Shelled Russian Parliament 25 Years Ago, U.S. Praised 'Superb Handling'," National Security Archive, October 4, 2018, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2018-10-04/yeltsin-shelled-russian-parliament-25-years-ago-us-praised-superb-handling>.

<sup>126</sup> The Russia Hand, 72.

“I agree with that, but principles and process don’t exist in a vacuum. What’s going on over there is about people, in this case, some people versus other people. This is a zero-sum thing. They’re not splitting the difference. That’s why we’ve got to take sides. We can’t dance around for too long. Let’s get our minds into more than just what we’re going to say to the press today. We’ve got to start thinking about what we’re going to do when we meet with Yeltsin, and how we can use that meeting to keep his spirits up and keep him moving in the right direction.”<sup>127</sup>

This wholesale backing of Yeltsin by the Clinton administration endured even after the violent confrontation of October 1993, when Yeltsin ordered the storming of the White House by the army. Clinton called the next day, saying: “You did everything just as you had to and I congratulate you for the way you handled it.”<sup>128</sup> Yeltsin responded warmly: “Thank you for everything. I embrace you with all my heart.”<sup>129</sup> The warm personal exchange shows the personal relationship in action, becoming central to policy formation instead of “principles and process.”

The Clinton administration’s response assumed that Yeltsin was the last best hope for an anti-communist, pro-Western Russia—a perspective that aligned with the liberal institutionalist framework’s emphasis on supporting democratic leaders who could anchor Russia within Western institutional structures. As U.S. Ambassador to the Russian Federation, Thomas Pickering, later

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<sup>127</sup> Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, 72-73.

<sup>128</sup> "Memorandum of Telephone Conversation: Telcon with President Boris Yeltsin of the Russian Federation," October 5, 1993, William J. Clinton Presidential Library declassification 2015-0782-M-1, Document 5, in "Yeltsin Shelled Russian Parliament 25 Years Ago, U.S. Praised 'Superb Handling'," National Security Archive, October 4, 2018, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2018-10-04/yeltsin-shelled-russian-parliament-25-years-ago-us-praised-superb-handling>.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

noted in hindsight, “were Yeltsin to have failed to do what he did, there was a good chance that there would have been another effort at the top to return Russia to communism. I cannot but believe that would have resulted in greater bloodshed and a long civil conflict.”<sup>130</sup>

This retrospective assessment, however, contrasts sharply with scholarly analyses both at the time and since, which have questioned whether the crisis truly presented such binary outcomes and have highlighted the availability of negotiated solutions that the administration overlooked. Vladimir Gelman, a prominent scholar of Russian domestic politics, argues that Yeltsin had “room for maneuver”, saying he could:

“Revise a list of priorities, opt for political and policy compromise, drop the pursuit of a radical drive for economic reforms, and instead propose a major government reshuffle, returning to the agenda of political reforms, including the adoption of a new constitution and holding of new elections. Most probably, such a solution could make Russia’s path to financial stabilization even more painful and protracted, but it could have avoided major conflict and helped to build democratic political institutions. Such a road was not taken because it did not suit the interests of Yeltsin and his camp. Instead of searching for compromise, Yeltsin preferred an alternative: he shifted the blame for the hardships of economic reforms onto the shoulders of his political rivals.”<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Thomas Pickering, "Ambassador Thomas Pickering Oral History Excerpt," Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Arlington, Virginia, December 15, 2006 and February 19, 2007, pp. 357-362, 386-391, Document 4, in "Yeltsin Shelled Russian Parliament 25 Years Ago, U.S. Praised 'Superb Handling'," National Security Archive, October 4, 2018, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2018-10-04/yeltsin-shelled-russian-parliament-25-years-ago-us-praised-superb-handling>.

<sup>131</sup> Vladimir Gel'man, "Paving the Way for Violence: The Constitutional Crisis of 1993 and Russia's Political Trajectory," *Verfassungsblog*, February 7, 2024, <https://verfassungsblog.de/paving-the-way-for-violence/>.

His analysis continues by claiming that the salience of market reforms after the 1993 October conflict had greatly diminished,<sup>132</sup> and that only through the influence of Russia's *siloviki*, meaning certain individuals in the Kremlin's power ministries like the secret service and defense department, could Yeltsin have defeated his rivals. As a result, the *siloviki* came to the forefront of Russian politics<sup>133</sup> and increased their influence over time, with the 1993 constitutional crisis sowing the seeds of future authoritarianism.<sup>134</sup>

While it is most definitely advantageous to have the benefit of hindsight, elite policymakers in the U.S. government did not heed the warning signs present at the time and significantly alter their policy of supporting Yeltsin after the October conflict. While the possibility of a negotiated resolution was discussed between Yeltsin and the parliament, Pickering stated that the Kremlin had made up its mind to "take back the White House [Russian parliament]. They had the troops and the capability of doing that." Here is the full quote:

“[T]here were talks back and forth, not very fruitful ones because the Russian government then was in a position of deciding whether it was going to treat with these people and deal with compromises or take back the White House. They decided that they were going to take back the White House. They had the troops and the capability of doing that.”<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Brian D. Taylor, "The Russian Siloviki & Political Change," *Daedalus* 146, no. 2 (2017): 53-63.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Thomas Pickering, "Ambassador Thomas Pickering Oral History Excerpt," Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Arlington, Virginia, December 15, 2006 and February 19, 2007, pp. 357-362, 386-391, Document 4, in "Yeltsin Shelled Russian Parliament 25 Years Ago, U.S. Praised 'Superb Handling'," National Security Archive, October 4, 2018, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2018-10-04/yeltsin-shelled-russian-parliament-25-years-ago-us-praised-superb-handling>.

In the end, Pickering recounts his strong advice to Washington that there was “no choice” other than to back Yeltsin.<sup>136</sup> Pickering's retrospective justification reveals cognitive dissonance again in action—officials constructed counterfactual scenarios, such as a communist return to Russia or a civil war, to rationalize supporting the destruction of democratic norms and institutions. The persistence of these mental maps even in hindsight demonstrates their deeply embedded nature within Clinton administration's decision-making processes. The assumption that only force could resolve the crisis ignored diplomatic alternatives and reflected Russian politics in binary terms.

Again, not all individuals in the U.S. government saw this crisis in black-and-white terms. Chargé d'Affaires at U.S. Embassy Moscow, James Collins, in his cable to Secretary Christopher on October 19, 1993, criticized Yeltsin's new constitution as “half-baked” which concentrates the “preponderance of authority in the hands of the chief executive.”<sup>137</sup> Collins was also unhappy about racial profiling against migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus, the silencing of opposition parties, and the “democratic content of the entire electoral process.”<sup>138</sup> These concerns from the U.S. Chargé d'Affaires challenged the Clinton administration's mental map that equated Yeltsin with democratic progress, highlighting fundamental contradictions in their liberal institutionalist framework. His warnings about concentrated executive power proved prescient, as subsequent scholarship has validated these concerns—studies by Gelman, for example, have

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> "Cable from American Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State: Secretary's Visit to Moscow: Domestic Political Dynamics," October 20, 1993, Department of State Declassification, Date/Case ID: 6 MAR 2003 200001030, Document 7, in "Yeltsin Shelled Russian Parliament 25 Years Ago, U.S. Praised 'Superb Handling'," National Security Archive, October 4, 2018, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2018-10-04/yeltsin-shelled-russian-parliament-25-years-ago-us-praised-superb-handling>.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

demonstrated that the 1993 constitution indeed established the institutional foundations for Russia's drift toward authoritarianism, contradicting the administration's narrative that supporting Yeltsin was essential for democratization.<sup>139</sup>

However, these problems and concerns did not shape high-level U.S. policy. When Secretary of State Warren Christopher met with Yeltsin on October 22, he expressed Clinton's "high appreciation" for the way Yeltsin had handled the crisis and congratulated him on his "restraint," attributing the action to "the least loss of life."<sup>140</sup> That hundreds of people might have been killed in the attack, as acknowledged by Russian Defense Minister Grachev in his oral history<sup>141</sup> was not mentioned by the Secretary. Grachev also recounted that he personally ordered tanks to fire inert rounds into the White House, famously declaring, "A fire started. It was beautiful." Christopher's praise for Yeltsin's "restraint" while ignoring the death toll shows how Clinton's emphasis on the personal relationship required constant rationalization of increasingly violent, anti-democratic behavior.

Even Clinton's national security advisor, Anthony Lake, clarifies two items in the October 5 call, noting in a memo that Yeltsin had evaded questions from Clinton on press freedom and had

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<sup>139</sup> Tobias Rupprecht, "The tomb of the Soviet Union, or the womb of Putinism? The 1993 Russian constitutional crisis, 30 years after," H-Soz-Kult, <https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/fdkn-141267>.

<sup>140</sup> "Secretary Christopher's Meeting with President Yeltsin, 10/22/1993, Moscow," October 22, 1993, U.S. Department of State, Date/Case ID: 08 MAY 2000 200000982, Document 10, in "Yeltsin Shelled Russian Parliament 25 Years Ago, U.S. Praised 'Superb Handling'," National Security Archive, October 4, 2018, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2018-10-04/yeltsin-shelled-russian-parliament-25-years-ago-us-praised-superb-handling>.

<sup>141</sup> "Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev Oral History Excerpt," interview conducted by Petr Aven and Alfred Kokh, in Gaidar's Revolution: The Inside Account of the Economic Transformation of Russia (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), pp. 297-333, Document 12, in "Yeltsin Shelled Russian Parliament 25 Years Ago, U.S. Praised 'Superb Handling'," National Security Archive, October 4, 2018, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2018-10-04/yeltsin-shelled-russian-parliament-25-years-ago-us-praised-superb-handling>.

misrepresented the origin of security forces from Riga and Moldova.<sup>142</sup> On the banning of opposition newspapers, Clinton's own handwriting on the memo asserted: "OK-but it wasn't the time for me to raise the newspaper issue on the 5th."<sup>143</sup> Clinton's handwritten note again captures cognitive dissonance. He acknowledged the problem of press freedom while simultaneously rationalizing why it shouldn't be addressed, demonstrating how personal relationship considerations consistently trumped democratic principles.

After the December 1993 elections, when the nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's party won a plurality and Yeltsin's party took third place, Clinton called Yeltsin again to reaffirm his support. During the elections, the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy finished with 23 percent, the Communist Party of Gennady Zyuganov with 12 percent and Yeltsin's party, Russia's Choice, headed by Yegor Gaidar, only won 15 percent of the vote.<sup>144</sup> Yeltsin downplayed the results, asserting that "there is no room for extremism or fascism in the new parliament," and requested that Clinton not invite any opposition leaders to welcome Clinton when he visited Moscow later.<sup>145</sup> The election results directly contradicted the market-democracy double helix mental map by showing that economic reform had not generated popular support for democratic parties. Yeltsin's request that Clinton avoid opposition leaders, and Clinton's apparent acceptance,

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<sup>142</sup> "Memorandum for the President from Anthony Lake: Clarification on Your October 5 Telephone Conversation with President Yeltsin," October 6, 1993, William J. Clinton Presidential Library declassification 2015-0782-M-1, Document 6, in "Yeltsin Shelled Russian Parliament 25 Years Ago, U.S. Praised 'Superb Handling'," National Security Archive, October 4, 2018, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2018-10-04/yeltsin-shelled-russian-parliament-25-years-ago-us-praised-superb-handling>.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> "Memorandum of Telephone Conversation: Telcon with President Boris Yeltsin of the Russian Federation," National Security Archive, George Washington University, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2018-10-04/yeltsin-shelled-russian-parliament-25-years-ago-us-praised-superb-handling>.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

demonstrates how the personal relationship was already undermining normal diplomatic practice and democratic engagement.

Despite the ominous signs—the shelling of the parliament, democratic backsliding, the concentration of authority in the presidency, and the silencing of opposition voices—the U.S. continued to view Yeltsin through the lens of being the last best hope for Russia. The persistence of binary thinking despite clear evidence of a more complex political landscape exemplifies how mental maps became rigid, resisting any change in policy in response to events in Russia. The rise of nationalism as a response to economic shock therapy should have challenged the double helix assumption, as well as faith in integrating Russian in the liberal order, yet officials maintained their frameworks by ignoring inconvenient evidence.

The Wayne Merry dissent cable, “*Whose Russia Is it Anyway? Toward a Policy of Benign Respect*,” is a sharp critique of U.S. policy toward promoting Russia’s economic shock therapy reforms.<sup>146</sup> Written in March 1994 by the head of the political internal section at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, the cable contradicted the established policy consensus for radical market reform, arguing that American policymakers misread Russian political realities because of their ideologically driven assumptions about the inevitability of shock therapy success and democratic reforms. Merry's cable represents a serious systematic challenge to the mental maps guiding U.S.

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<sup>146</sup> Wayne Merry, "Whose Russia is it Anyway? Toward a Policy of Benign Respect" (Dissent Channel Cable from American Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State), National Security Archive, George Washington University, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32704-document-1-wayne-merry-dissent-channel-cable-american-embassy-moscow>.

policy, directly confronting the mental maps showing faith in the liberal international order and the double helix assumption with empirical evidence from the ground in Russia.

However, this critique was never published as an official cable because Merry could not get it cleared due to objections from the Treasury department, as “it would give Larry Summers a heart attack.”<sup>147</sup> Instead, it was published as a dissent cable, and only publicly released in December 2024.<sup>148</sup> Merry argued that shock therapy reforms were economically crippling and politically destabilizing, and that the December 1993 parliamentary defeat of Yeltsin’s party was legitimate and expressed widespread public disillusionment, saying that the radical reformers in government, like Yegor Gaidar, “lost it badly, and lost it fair and square.”<sup>149</sup> The suppression of Merry's cable by Treasury demonstrates how institutional structures reinforced mental maps—when field reports contradicted core assumptions, they were marginalized rather than integrated into policy analysis, exemplifying cognitive dissonance at the bureaucratic level. Merry further warned that the shock therapy reforms would “recreate an adversarial relationship between Russia and the West.”<sup>150</sup> He also wrote that if the current U.S. policy continues, then it will “assist Russian extremists to undermine the country’s nascent democracy and will encourage a renewal of Russia’s adversarial stance toward the outside world.”<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> "The Long Telegram of the 1990s: 'Whose Russia Is It Anyway? Toward a Policy of Benign Respect,'" National Security Archive, George Washington University, December 18, 2024, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nato-75-russia-programs/2024-12-18/long-telegram-1990s-whose-russia-it-anyway-toward>.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Wayne Merry, "Whose Russia is it Anyway? Toward a Policy of Benign Respect" (Dissent Channel Cable from American Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State), National Security Archive, George Washington University, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32704-document-1-wayne-merry-dissent-channel-cable-american-embassy-moscow>.

Item Subject: WHOSE RUSSIA IS IT ANYWAY? TOWARD A POLICY OF BENIGN RESPECT

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FILE

SUBJECT: WHOSE RUSSIA IS IT ANYWAY?  
TOWARD A POLICY OF BENIGN RESPECT

SECTION 01 OF 15 MOSCOW 8427

1. ~~CONFIDENTIAL~~ - ENTIRE TEXT.

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INTRODUCTION  
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2. THE FOLLOWING ESSAY IS SUBMITTED UNDER THE PROVISIONS OF DISSENT CHANNEL (5 FAM 212.3C AND 11 FAM 243.3). THE AUTHOR IS FS-01 E. WAYNE MERRY, CHIEF OF EMBASSY MOSCOW'S INTERNAL POLITICS SECTION. THE AUTHOR PSES NO OBJECTION TO DISSEMINATION OF THIS ESSAY, INCLUDING TO S/NIS, D, P, C, E, S/E, INR, EUR/ISCA.

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SUMMARY  
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3. DEMOCRATIC FORCES IN RUSSIA ARE IN SERIOUS TROUBLE WE ARE NOT HELPING WITH A MISGUIDED OVER-EMPHASIS ON MARKET ECONOMICS. THERE IS NO REASON TO BELIEVE THE RUSSIAN ECONOMY IS CAPABLE OF RAPID MARKET REFORM. THERE IS REASON TO FEAR THAT AN INTRUSIVE WESTERN EFFORT TO ALTER THE ECONOMY AGAINST THE WISHES OF THE RUSSIAN PEOPLE CAN EXHAUST THE ALREADY DIMINISHING RESERVOIR OF GOODWILL TOWARD AMERICA, ASSIST ANTI-DEMOCRATIC FORCES, AND HELP RECREATE AN ADVERSARIAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE WEST. THE LEGACY OF SOVIET MISMANAGEMENT HAS INVERTED THE NORMAL DIRECTION OF SOCIAL CHANGE, WITH THE POLITICAL REALM DRIVING THE ECONOMIC. REFORM IN RUSSIA WILL TAKE DIFFERENT FORMS FROM THOSE WE FAVOR: FORMS OF STATIST DIRECTION OF THE ECONOMY AND OF COMMUNITARIAN SOCIAL PRIORITIES DERIVED FROM RUSSIA'S OBJECTIVE NEEDS AND LONG TRADITIONS. THE UNITED STATES SHOULD SEEK A NON-AGGRESSIVE RUSSIAN EXTERNAL POLICY AND DEVELOPMENT OF WORKABLE DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS, EVEN (PERHAPS ESPECIALLY) WHEN THE ECONOMIC CHOICES OF THAT DEMOCRACY DO NOT ACHIEVE AN AMERICAN STANDARD OF "SUCCESS".

END SUMMARY  
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I

Excerpt from Wayne Merry's Dissent Cable "Whose Russia Is It Anyway?"

Merry conceptualized U.S. policy as following the logic of a “double helix” where free markets and democracy constantly reinforce each other. However, in Russia’s case, he argues that markets were instead linked with corruption and criminality, saying “Very, very few Russians impart positive ethical content to market forces, and unfortunately more of these are Mafia than economists.”<sup>152</sup> Merry's observation directly challenged the double helix by showing that in Russia's specific context, markets had become associated with criminality rather than democratic values. His analysis suggested that the theoretical connection between economic and political liberalization was culturally and historically contingent, not universal as American mental maps assumed. He also criticized the “assistance tourists” from the West, revealing how the market-democracy linkage had become so embedded in policy formulation that American officials believed it could work in an entirely different local context that was Russia:

“Sadly, very few of the multitudes of American ‘advisors’ in Russia since the Bolshevik demise acquainted themselves with even the most basic facts of the country whose destiny they proposed to shape... Even the most progressive and sympathetic of Russian officials have lost patience with the endless procession of what they call ‘assistance tourists’ who rarely bother to ask their hosts for an appraisal of Russian needs...” Moreover, most of them “never left our shores or ever entered Russian hands”, and instead they “are often of benefit mostly to domestic contractors.”<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> "The Long Telegram of the 1990s: 'Whose Russia Is It Anyway? Toward a Policy of Benign Respect,'" National Security Archive, George Washington University, December 18, 2024, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nato-75-russia-programs/2024-12-18/long-telegram-1990s-whose-russia-it-anyway-toward>.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

The State Department's belated response to Merry's dissent cable admitted to challenges in the implementation of economic reforms, but still stood by the broader idea of the double helix assumption, telling him "he was wrong t separate markets from democracy as policy goals, because the former were essential to the latter."<sup>154</sup> In his contextual essay upon the release of the dissent cable to the public in 2024, Merry says that "in my experience, Washington seeks to understand other countries by looking in the mirror (a common human failing)," saying that emphasis on market reforms instead of building democratic institutions and the rule of law in Russia was an "especially virulent case of Washington institutions trying to ram a foreign square peg into an American round hole."<sup>155</sup> As Goldgeier and McFaul note, "of the \$5.45 billion in direct U.S. assistance to Russia between 1992 and 1998, only \$130 million or 2.3 percent was devoted to programs involved directly in democratic reform."<sup>156</sup> This response perfectly illustrates cognitive dissonance, faith in the liberal order, as well as the double helix assumption. When confronted with systematic evidence of policy failure, officials acknowledged problems while maintaining core beliefs, suggesting that implementation rather than conception was flawed.

By the time Clinton went to Moscow for the January 1994 summit, it was becoming clearer in the administration that the initial assumptions behind U.S. assistance to Russia needed careful reexamination. The visit came against the backdrop of foreboding trends in Russian internal politics. As mentioned, the December 1993 Duma elections had indicated broad disillusionment with the Yeltsin government, with ultranationalist and communist parties making significant gains,

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Wayne Merry, "1994 Moscow Embassy Dissent Channel Message: Background and Context," National Security Archive, George Washington University, December 18, 2024, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nato-75-russia-programs/2024-12-18/long-telegram-1990s-whose-russia-it-anyway-toward>.

<sup>156</sup> Goldgeier and McFaul, *Power and Purpose*, 114.

including extremist figures like Vladimir Zhirinovskiy who would at one point cheer on Russian forces as they pummeled Grozny during the Chechen War.<sup>157</sup> Zhirinovskiy's was a leader of the opposition that had nearly twice as many seats as pro-Yeltsin parties.<sup>158</sup> These election results directly challenged the double helix assumption by showing that economic reform had not generated popular support for pro-Western parties, yet American policymakers interpreted them as temporary setbacks rather than more serious rebukes of their economic policies. These revelations were a wake-up call for U.S. decision-makers, especially officials like National Security Advisor Anthony Lake and Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, who had heavily invested—ideologically and politically—in Yeltsin's reform course.

A memo sent to President Clinton on December 31, 1993, by Anthony Lake highlighted the loss of the reformers in the December parliamentary elections revealed that Russia was “deeply divided over the pace and direction of economic reform”, the “role and rights of Russia in the ‘Near Abroad,’” and how fast to “integrate with the West.”<sup>159</sup> Also before the summit, the National Security Council and Treasury staff wrote in a memo saying:

“The Parliamentary elections were a wake-up call generally, but specifically the Russian people view the government’s two-year attempt to begin a historic economic transition from command economics to a ‘Russian’ market economy as harsh and directly responsible for the decline in living standards during this period. Russia’s economic reforms have not

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<sup>157</sup> Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, 186-187.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>159</sup> Anthony Lake, Memorandum for the President: "Your Visit to Moscow," December 31, 1993, National Security Archive, George Washington University, January 25, 2024, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2024-01-25/clinton-yeltsin-moscow-summit-january-1994>.

succeeded on at least two fronts. They haven't established a social safety net for the average Russian and have also not reduced subsidies to large state enterprises.”<sup>160</sup>

The memo advised Clinton to continue “bold economic reforms” while acknowledging “our understanding” of “greater emphasis on social welfare programs.”<sup>161</sup> This memo represents the first official acknowledgment that the market-democracy double helix was failing on its own terms—markets were not producing democratic legitimacy and economic prosperity but rather popular resentment. However, the framing of the problem by American policymakers as one of technical, implementation problems rather than theoretical flaws demonstrates cognitive dissonance. This memo was the first to confess bluntly that Russia's economic reforms had failed on some fundamental goals: there was no working social safety net for the Russian people, and subsidies on large state enterprises had not been slashed significantly. In short, not only had shock therapy harmed the economy and peoples' welfare, but it had not succeeded on its own policy goals. Lake reminded Clinton that regular Russians were “worse off than when the USSR collapsed” and further warned against popular disillusionment with Yeltsin.<sup>162</sup>

Nevertheless, Clinton later urged Yeltsin to keep one of his key economic reformers, Yegor Gaidar, in government. This contradictory response—acknowledging failure while maintaining the same economic policy—again perfectly illustrates the cognitive dissonance theme. Rather than

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<sup>160</sup> Anthony Lake, Memorandum for the President: "Your Visit to Moscow. Expanded Meeting with Russian President Boris Yeltsin on Economic Issues," December 31, 1993, National Security Archive, George Washington University, January 25, 2024, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2024-01-25/clinton-yeltsin-moscow-summit-january-1994>.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Anthony Lake, Memorandum for the President: "Your Visit to Moscow," December 31, 1993, National Security Archive, George Washington University, January 25, 2024, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2024-01-25/clinton-yeltsin-moscow-summit-january-1994>.

questioning core assumptions, officials adjusted tactics while preserving the same double-helix mental maps, allowing them to appear responsive to evidence while avoiding a wholesale recalibration of U.S. policy. For example, there was an admission by Talbott at a State Department press briefing after the December 1993 parliamentary elections that the U.S. goal should be to promote “less shock and more therapy” for the Russian people.<sup>163</sup> However, he later wrote that “it sounded to both groups that I too was blaming Gaidar and Fyodorov for the rise of Zhirinovskiy and undercutting our own government’s insistence on rapid, disciplined structural reform and strict conditionality for IMF lending.”<sup>164</sup>

During the January summit’s opulent, 24-course meal at Yeltsin’s Novo-Ogarevo dacha, Yeltsin signaled that key reformer Yegor Gaidar would be moved to the Duma, essentially fired from his position at the center of Yeltsin’s reform process. Treasury undersecretary Larry Summers then insisted Clinton seek a one-on-one with Yeltsin after he heard that Gaidar would be fired. Clinton used the one-on-one session to urge Yeltsin to keep his team of economic reformers, including Yegor Gaidar and Boris Fyodorov.<sup>165</sup> While he acknowledged that he now understands “most ordinary citizens and some well-educated ones did not feel connected to what Yeltsin was doing” and did not feel like “their lives had improved”, the January 1994 memo states that Clinton’s “credibility was connected to President Yeltsin’s indication that he would continue the reforms,

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<sup>163</sup> Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, 134.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 147-149.

which were linked to a specific team of people.”<sup>166</sup> Hence, the departure of this team would damage Clinton’s ability to deliver on promises of IMF credits and debt relief to Russia.<sup>167</sup>

On the issue of European security, Talbott’s memorandum to Anthony Lake discussed Russian Foreign Minister Kozyrev’s “European Security Plan.”<sup>168</sup> Talbott was afraid that proposals by Kozyrev for European security, under which NATO would be placed under the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) control, were but an adjunct to a greater Russian plan to reorganize post-Cold War Europe.<sup>169</sup> He dismisses Kozyrev’s thoughts on Russia’s desire to “be the architect... along with the U.S. of a completely new European security order” and says that “it sticks in their craw that NATO appears poised to dictate the terms of the new order.”<sup>170</sup>

Talbott's dismissal of Kozyrev's proposals reveals the limitations of the faith in liberal international order theme—American officials could not conceive of sharing institutional leadership with Russia, despite rhetoric about partnership. His observation that “it sticks in their craw” shows awareness of Russian frustration while simultaneously rejecting Russian solutions that could leave other countries, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, a topic this paper delves into more in the next section. Moreover, Talbott had soured on Kozyrev, concluding that “Kozyrev has become

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<sup>166</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, "One-on-One Meeting with President Yeltsin of Russia," January 15, 1994, National Security Archive, George Washington University, January 25, 2024, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2024-01-25/clinton-yeltsin-moscow-summit-january-1994>.

<sup>167</sup> National Security Archive, "The Clinton-Yeltsin Moscow Summit, January 1994," George Washington University, January 25, 2024, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2024-01-25/clinton-yeltsin-moscow-summit-january-1994>.

<sup>168</sup> Strobe Talbott, Memorandum for Anthony Lake, Subject: Kozyrev's "European Security Plan," January 12, 1994, National Security Archive, George Washington University, January 25, 2024, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2024-01-25/clinton-yeltsin-moscow-summit-january-1994>.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

part of the problem rather than part of the solution” because he is moving in a more nationalist direction as a result of the December 1993 Duma elections.<sup>171</sup>

Slight cracks in the broader U.S.-Russian relationship started to show, with Clinton bringing up concerns about Russian arms sales to Iran, their slow movement on NATO Partnership for Peace, and their withdrawal of troops from the Baltic states.<sup>172</sup><sup>173</sup> At one point, Yeltsin does not seem fully engaged and instead talked about the U.S. and Russia creating a “new system of international relations” and suggested that they should “propose an initiative to reshape world institutions such as the United Nations and the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe.”<sup>174</sup> In turn, Clinton expressed a commitment to help Russia further integrate with Europe and Western-led structures such as NATO’s PfP but did not entertain Yeltsin’s grand reformist designs so that other countries “don’t think we are dividing Europe.”<sup>175</sup> The disconnect between Yeltsin's vision of reshaping international institutions and Clinton's focus on Russian integration into existing structures reveals the fundamental mismatch in mental maps. While Yeltsin sought partnership based on equal status, American officials remained committed to integrating Russia into Western-led multilateral organizations whilst remaining aware that “equal” partnership on Russian terms meant Russia retaining influence over former Soviet states and the countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, "One-on-One Meeting with President Yeltsin of Russia," January 13, 1994, National Security Archive, George Washington University, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2024-01-25/clinton-yeltsin-moscow-summit-january-1994>.

<sup>173</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, "Second Expanded Bilateral Session with President Boris Yeltsin of Russia," January 14, 1994, National Security Archive, George Washington University, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2024-01-25/clinton-yeltsin-moscow-summit-january-1994>.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

Talbott's ridicule of Russian proposals for alternative security architectures shows how the dual-track policy of NATO enlargement through PfP and Russian engagement was already forming—American officials were committed to NATO-centered solutions and treated Russian alternatives as obstructionism rather than legitimate projects. The early emergence of this dual strategy reflects the growing recognition that the 'squaring-the-triangle' strategy of Russian integration and NATO enlargement might be incompatible given Yeltsin's increasingly hardline opposition toward this issue.

## **Advent of the Cold Peace, 1994**

Athenians: “Since you know as well as we do the right, as the world goes, is only in question between equal power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”

Melians: “You should not destroy what is our common protection, the privilege of being allowed in danger to invoke what is fair and right.”

— *Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War, Book 5*

This early period in U.S.-Russian relations, particularly on the topic of economic reforms and NATO-Russia cooperation under the Clinton administration, revealed mental maps that were anchored in liberal institutionalism and belief in future convergence with Western norms and practices. This represents a clear evolution from the Bush administration's cautious realism toward a more optimistic faith in institutional transformation—highlighting faith in the liberal international order, the market-democracy linkage, and the dual-track policy, all supported by the personal relationship between Clinton and Yeltsin. The period also demonstrates faith in Russia's integration with the liberal order extended beyond domestic reform to international security cooperation, with American officials believing that military partnership through the Partnership for Peace (PfP) and eventually NATO enlargement would reinforce democratic development in Central and Eastern Europe and in Russia. Because of this, U.S. officials underestimated the power of nationalist forces and antagonism toward NATO enlargement among most of the Russian policy elite.

NATO Secretary General Manfred Woerner’s 1992 meeting with Russian parliamentary leader Ruslan Khasbulatov exemplified the liberal institutionalist mental map that would define American thinking throughout this period—specifically, the belief outlined by scholars like Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye that international institutions could transform state behavior by creating shared norms and expectations.<sup>176</sup> For example, one belief was that institutions like NATO could transform adversarial relationships and integrate Russia as a responsible stakeholder in the international system. In Moscow, Woerner proposed a shared vision of European security “from the Urals to the Atlantic” structured around three institutional pillars: the Helsinki process, the European Community, and NATO. “We want to build a Europe that will inhabit a new security environment... a unified Euro-Atlantic community,” he declared, signaling NATO’s intent not as hegemonic, but as inclusive and stabilizing.<sup>177</sup> This framing responded to Russian desires for post-Soviet integration into European security structures.

The prevalence of the first and third theme—faith in the liberal order and the dual-track policy, respectively—appears throughout this period in multiple forms of official communication and policy initiatives. One of the recurring manifestations of this theme was the consistent belief in institutional frameworks as drivers of change. Defense Secretary William Perry’s March 1994 conversation with Russian Duma Speaker Ivan Rybkin brought out the advantages of the PfP—a program for creating interoperability and mutual trust between NATO and former-Soviet states—

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<sup>176</sup> Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977).

<sup>177</sup> Memorandum of Conversation between NATO Secretary General Manfred Woerner and Speaker of the Russian Supreme Soviet Ruslan Khasbulatov, [date], National Security Archive, George Washington University, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nato-russia-russia-programs/2024-04-04/short-lived-nato-russia-honeymoon>.

laying out “the practical benefits of participating in joint training and exercises of Russian, American, and European armed forces to solve operational problems...The program is essentially proposing expanded implementation of what is already being done at the bilateral level.”<sup>178</sup> While officials like Vladimir Lukin in Russia acknowledged the worth of PfP, they posed the domestic political problem of “selling it in Russia.”<sup>179</sup> American officials heard these concerns but interpreted them as temporary communication challenges rather than fundamental policy contradictions. This rift foreshadowed increasing tension between U.S. expectations and Russia's domestic political trajectory that would become pertinent by 1994 during the Budapest summit.

The December 5, 1994, Budapest summit of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) was a watershed moment in post-Cold War diplomacy as it marked a significant stand-off between Presidents Boris Yeltsin and Bill Clinton. U.S. policymakers until this point had been pursuing a dual strategy of NATO enlargement and strategic partnership with Russia, with both sides differing over what a post-Cold War European security structure should look like. As we know from previous documents, Yeltsin preferred a grand partnership between the U.S. and Russia in managing international affairs, whereas the U.S. was hesitant in significantly altering the existing arrangement, preferring to utilize NATO as a tool of stabilizing and democratizing Central and Eastern European states, with inclusion for Russia in the arrangement as well. This fundamental disagreement over post-Cold War architecture reveals the collision between Russian

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<sup>178</sup> Memorandum of Conversation between U.S. Defense Secretary William Perry and Speaker of the Russian Duma Ivan Rybkin, [date], National Security Archive, George Washington University, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nato-russia-russia-programs/2024-04-04/short-lived-nato-russia-honeymoon>.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

expectations of equal partnership and American mental maps that assumed Russian integration into existing Western-led institutions rather than a return to a spheres-of-influence model.

Clinton administration officials assumed they could reconcile NATO enlargement and integrate Russia into a U.S.-led Euro-Atlantic security community. As Strobe Talbott explained in an internal memo, Clinton was poised to advance “two strategies that are crucial to [his] vision of post Cold War Europe: admitting new members to NATO and developing a parallel security relationship between the Alliance and Russia.”<sup>180</sup> Talbott’s formulation reveals faith in the liberal international order and the dual-track policy mental maps, and how Russia’s eventual integration into international institutions will smooth over their concerns on NATO enlargement.

This dual-track strategy rested on a mental map guided by the assumptions of the liberal international order: that there was growing market capitalism and democracy, that institutions like NATO would secure peace and stability in Europe and for Russia as well, and that former adversaries like Russia would eventually join these multilateral organizations and security arrangements. The administration miscalculated both the symbolic interpretation of NATO enlargement from inside Russia and the growing domestic resistance Yeltsin was facing. As Ambassador Thomas Pickering wrote in a cable, Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev was seen as too “compliant to the West” by many who believed there was “strong domestic opposition on both

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<sup>180</sup> Strobe Talbott, Memorandum to the President: "The Moment of Truth," National Security Archive, George Washington University, November 24, 2021 NATO Expansion – The Budapest Blow Up 1994, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nato-75-russia-programs/2021-11-24/nato-expansion-budapest-blow-1994>.

sides of the [Russian] political spectrum to early NATO expansion.”<sup>181</sup> Pickering’s warning about Kozyrev should have alerted American officials that their preferred Russian partner was becoming politically vulnerable. This was also perhaps an indication that the emphasis on the personal relationship between Clinton and Yeltsin was undermining its own objectives due to wider, pessimistic trends in Russian politics.

Throughout 1994, Clinton tried to convince and placate Yeltsin, telling him that “I would like us to focus on the Partnership for Peace program” rather than NATO<sup>182</sup>. At the same time, however, there were “policy entrepreneurs” in Washington, like National Security Advisor Anthony Lake and Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke, who were focused on accelerating the pace of NATO enlargement and abandoning the PFP initiative, going against many in the administration like Defense Secretary Perry and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs John Shalikashvili.<sup>183</sup> In their September Washington, DC summit of that year, Clinton reassured Yeltsin there “will be an expansion of NATO” and that U.S-Russia relations would operate under the three “nos”: no surprises, no hurry, and no exclusion of any state from the expanded alliance.<sup>184</sup> Clinton also reminded him that “NATO expansion is not anti-Russian,” saying that there was “no imminent

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<sup>181</sup> Thomas R. Pickering, Cable to Secretary of State: "Russia and NATO," National Security Archive, George Washington University, November 24, 2021, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nato-75-russia-programs/2021-11-24/nato-expansion-budapest-blow-1994>.

<sup>182</sup> Memorandum of Telephone Conversation between President Clinton and President Yeltsin, July 5, 1994, National Security Archive, George Washington University, November 24, 2021, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nato-75-russia-programs/2021-11-24/nato-expansion-budapest-blow-1994>.

<sup>183</sup> Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 103-122.

<sup>184</sup> Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 116.

timetable.”<sup>185</sup> Clinton reiterated this in November and early December 1994, stressing that the pace would be slow and Russia’s concerns would be taken seriously.

In a letter to Yeltsin in November 1994, Clinton highlighted the inclusive, gradual approach to NATO enlargement, saying the North Atlantic Council (NAC) summit the next month will be about working out a “common view on precepts for membership” which will be presented “to all members of Partnership for Peace who want to receive it.”<sup>186</sup> He further reassured Yeltsin, saying:

“I would like to reassure you now that what the NATO allies do at the upcoming North Atlantic Council (NAC) session in Brussels will be fully consistent with what you and I discussed in the White House during your visit.”<sup>187</sup>

Clinton's repeated assurances of "no surprises" and "no imminent timetable" for NATO enlargement demonstrate their personalized diplomacy in action—he was trying to manage Yeltsin's concerns rather than addressing the underlying policy contradiction. The gap between his reassurances and actual policy momentum reveals how personal relationship management was becoming disconnected from institutional decision-making.

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<sup>185</sup> Memorandum of Conversation between President Clinton and President Yeltsin, [Washington/Moscow] Summit, [September 1994/May 1995], National Security Archive, George Washington University, November 24, 2021, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nato-75-russia-programs/2021-11-24/nato-expansion-budapest-blow-1994>.

<sup>186</sup> Clinton Letter to Yeltsin, November 28, 1994, National Security Archive, George Washington University, November 24, 2021, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nato-75-russia-programs/2021-11-24/nato-expansion-budapest-blow-1994>.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

Because while Clinton was assuring Yeltsin of partnership and patience, the administration was quickly proceeding on enlargement. On December 1, 1994, the NAC issued a communiqué announcing a study of membership requirements to be completed by late 1995—timing to avoid influencing the Russian Duma elections in December 1995 given Yeltsin’s electoral vulnerability.<sup>188</sup> In Moscow, this was interpreted as an out-in-the-open sign that enlargement was accelerating. Kozyrev had declined to sign Partnership for Peace documents in Brussels during that NAC summit, telling Yeltsin that the communiqué proclaimed that “partnership is subsidiary to enlargement.”<sup>189</sup> In a subsequent letter to Yeltsin the day after on December 2, Clinton says that he was “surprised and disappointed” by Kozyrev’s actions and that “we have adhered assiduously to the principles on which you and I agreed: no surprises; high priority on maintaining—and strengthening—the U.S.-Russia partnership; and careful, inclusive deliberations taking a full account of the opinion and interests of Russia.”<sup>190</sup>

Yeltsin’s letter in response to Clinton on December 3 on the NAC communiqué said that “I cannot agree with your appraisal of this document.”<sup>191</sup> Instead, he wanted Clinton to provide “assurances that enlargement rather than partnership is not being emphasized now” and engage in a dialogue on “specific obligations and security guarantees for Russia and NATO.”<sup>192</sup> Yeltsin preferred a

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<sup>188</sup> "NATO Expansion – The Budapest Blow Up 1994," National Security Archive, George Washington University, November 24, 2021, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nato-75-russia-programs/2021-11-24/nato-expansion-budapest-blow-1994>.

<sup>189</sup> Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, 173.

<sup>190</sup> Clinton Letter to Yeltsin, December 2, 1994, National Security Archive, George Washington University, November 24, 2021, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nato-75-russia-programs/2021-11-24/nato-expansion-budapest-blow-1994>.

<sup>191</sup> Yeltsin Letter to Clinton, December 3, 1994, National Security Archive, George Washington University, November 24, 2021, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nato-75-russia-programs/2021-11-24/nato-expansion-budapest-blow-1994>.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

“new and transformed” alliance through partnership as the only way to enlarge NATO, instead of moving ahead with an accelerated schedule.<sup>193</sup> The strength of Yeltsin’s opposition to the NAC communiqué was underestimated, and the warnings signs missed, by the American delegation in Budapest without Talbott’s presence.<sup>194</sup> This situation illustrates misperception and miscommunication between both sides as it points to the disconnect between Clinton’s sincere belief he was adhering to their agreements and Moscow’s perception of betrayal. The faith in Russian integration informed the dual-track policy, leading to the underestimation of Russia’s perceived concerns over NATO enlargement.

All this led to Yeltsin’s public outburst at the Budapest summit, where he said that the “domineering” U.S. was “trying to split [the] continent again” through NATO enlargement.<sup>195</sup> Senior Director for Russia at the NSC, Nicholas Burns, sent a memo to Talbott revealing that Clinton was “really pissed off” that Yeltsin had “showed him up” with his public criticism of U.S. policy.<sup>196</sup> Clinton “did not want to be used any more as a prop by Yeltsin.”<sup>197</sup> Clinton’s anger reveals how their personal relationship turned policy disagreements into personal affronts. Still, we see a subsequent desire from Clinton to square the triangle—enlarge NATO while at the same time engage with Russia. This shows the limitations of this kind of mental map that fuses

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> National Security Archive, "NATO Expansion – The Budapest Blow Up 1994," George Washington University, November 24, 2021, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nato-75-russia-programs/2021-11-24/nato-expansion-budapest-blow-1994>.

<sup>196</sup> Nicholas Burns, Memorandum to Strobe Talbott: "Letter to Yeltsin on Budapest and other items," December 1994, National Security Archive, George Washington University, November 24, 2021, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nato-75-russia-programs/2021-11-24/nato-expansion-budapest-blow-1994>.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

ideological and security concerns, as American policymakers did not understand the seriousness of Russia's concerns, given Yeltsin's and Kozyrev's consistent misgiving about the NAC summit.

Kozyrev told Talbott in a backroom conversation that "the stimulus for partnership [NATO's PfP] has to a large extent been killed by enlargement." Kozyrev even mentioned that domestically, the "military-industrial people are infuriated" and that not even liberals understand "why [NATO] is moving its borders toward Russia."<sup>198</sup> Yeltsin himself, during an interview with Clinton in the spring of 1995, spoke of NATO expansion as a "new encirclement" and said that agreeing to it would constitute a "betrayal on my part of the Russian people."<sup>199</sup>

This idea of a "new encirclement" goes back to the myth of betrayal during the negotiations at the end of the Cold War on German unification. The myth recounts how Baker made a promise to Gorbachev saying that NATO would expand "not one inch" eastward if the Soviets agreed on German unification within NATO.<sup>200</sup> In reality, according to Robert Zoellick, one of the U.S. diplomats in the room during a 1990 summit between Gorbachev and George H.W. Bush, Gorbachev accepted the idea of German unification within NATO based on the principle that every country should freely choose its own alliances.<sup>201</sup> Zoellick says, "I was in those meetings, and Gorbachev has [also] said there was no promise not to enlarge NATO," nor does the treaty

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<sup>198</sup> Strobe Talbott, Memorandum Eyes Only to the Secretary: "Mail Call – My Lunch with Andrei," April 1995, National Security Archive, George Washington University, November 24, 2021, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nato-75-russia-programs/2021-11-24/nato-expansion-budapest-blow-1994>.

<sup>199</sup> Memorandum of Conversation between President Clinton and President Yeltsin, Kremlin, Moscow, May 10, 1995, National Security Archive, George Washington University, November 24, 2021, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nato-75-russia-programs/2021-11-24/nato-expansion-budapest-blow-1994>.

<sup>200</sup> Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 42

<sup>201</sup> Jeff Neal, "There was no promise not to enlarge NATO," Harvard Law Today, March 16, 2022, <https://hls.harvard.edu/today/there-was-no-promise-not-to-enlarge-nato/>.

negotiated prevent NATO from enlarging to the East.<sup>202</sup> When asked by Bush if Gorbachev believes in the principles enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975<sup>203</sup>—that all nations are free to ally with others as they see fit—Gorbachev said yes, which caused his own colleagues at the table to visibly separate themselves.<sup>204</sup> So clearly, not everyone in the Soviet leadership agreed with Gorbachev on NATO enlargement, but frankly, it's a failure of Soviet leadership that they didn't agree a better deal for themselves. Besides, in reality, NATO enlargement was never directed against the Soviet Union or Russia; the problem was that many Russians perceived just the opposite.

Putin would later use this myth as an excuse for his own imperial ambitions when invading Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. But even earlier, in 1993, Yeltsin called NATO's eastward enlargement "illegal" and violating the "spirit of the treaty" signed in 1990.<sup>205</sup> Later in 1996, Primakov told Western leaders that they made assurances to Gorbachev that "not one country leaving the Warsaw Pact would enter NATO."<sup>206</sup> Evidently, this as an ongoing theme of historical revisionism used by the Russian side. In a rebuttal to these accusations, the Assistant Secretary of State for Europe, John Kornblum, and John Herbst who was at State's office on the Newly Independent States (NIS), wrote a 1996 memo titled "*Russian Assertions about Two-Plus-Four Agreement*" sent to all European embassies and consulates to counter these Russian myths.<sup>207</sup> Kornblum and Herbst stated

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> "Helsinki Final Act, 1975," U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/helsinki>.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Kristina Spohr, "Exposing the myth of Western betrayal of Russia over NATO's eastern enlargement," LSE British Politics and Policy Blog, February 10, 2022, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/exposing-the-myth-of-western-betrayal-of-russia/>.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> "Russian Assertions about Two-Plus-Four Agreement," National Security Archive, Document 23, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16395-document-23-russian-assertions-about-two-plus>.

that the Two-Plus-Four negotiations applied only to the territory of the former East Germany and provided no precedent for limits on any new NATO members. Moreover, Moscow's involvement in internal German affairs such as prohibiting certain force deployment as part of the two-plus-four deal "was unique, arising from the post-war settlement, and did not set any legal or political precedents. It goes on to say that "Russia does not have a similar right to define or dictate the security arrangements of other sovereign states. If the Russians seek to advance any sort of two-plus-four precedent (i.e. NATO membership with limitations), we should immediately reject any "deals" over the heads of the Central and Eastern Europeans."<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

THE TREATY'S PROHIBITION DOES NOT APPLY TO TERRITORY OUTSIDE GERMANY. THE TREATY PERMITS THE STATIONING OF NATO-INTEGRATED GERMAN FORCES IN THE EASTERN LAENDER (NOW THAT SOVIET/RUSSIAN TROOPS HAVE DEPARTED). WHILE FOREIGN FORCES AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS SYSTEMS MAY NOT BE STATIONED OR DEPLOYED IN THOSE LAENDER, QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE MEANING OF "DEPLOYMENT" ARE LEFT IN THE HANDS OF A SOVEREIGN GERMANY.

IN BROADER TERMS, WE SHOULD ALSO REMIND MOSCOW THAT ITS TWO-PLUS-FOUR INVOLVEMENT IN INTERNAL GERMAN AFFAIRS (I.E. PROHIBITING CERTAIN FORCE DEPLOYMENTS) WAS UNIQUE, ARISING FROM THE POST-WAR SETTLEMENT, AND DID NOT SET ANY LEGAL OR POLITICAL PRECEDENTS; RUSSIA DOES NOT HAVE A SIMILAR RIGHT TO DEFINE OR DICTATE THE SECURITY ARRANGEMENTS OF OTHER SOVEREIGN STATES. IF THE RUSSIANS SEEK TO ADVANCE ANY SORT OF TWO-PLUS-FOUR PRECEDENT (I.E. NATO MEMBERSHIP WITH LIMITATIONS), WE SHOULD IMMEDIATELY REJECT ANY "DEALS" OVER THE HEADS OF THE CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEANS.

RUSSIAN ASSERTIONS

CONFIDENTIAL

*Excerpt from the Kornblum-Herbst cable "Russian Assertions on Two-Plus-Four Agreement"*

Kozyrev's admission that "not even liberals understand" NATO expansion reveals the complete failure of American mental maps to anticipate the extent of Russian opposition to NATO.<sup>209</sup> If pro-Western Russian liberals couldn't comprehend American logic, it suggests that the faith American policymakers had in integrating Russia within Western institutions—enlarging NATO and

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<sup>209</sup> Strobe Talbott, Memorandum Eyes Only to the Secretary: "Mail Call – My Lunch with Andrei," April 1995, National Security Archive, George Washington University, November 24, 2021, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nato-75-russia-programs/2021-11-24/nato-expansion-budapest-blow-1994>.

engaging with Russia at the same time—had become so divorced from Russian political realities that even the reformers were alienated from this policy. Yeltsin's language of “betrayal” highlights both the emphasis on the personal relationship that Clinton placed on managing overall relations with Russia, as well as cognitive dissonance of not only Clinton, but key advisors like Talbott, who missed key warning signs.

This reaction—viewing NATO enlargement as a “new encirclement” or neo-containment—was not justified by Russia. The U.S. and Europe offered Russia partnership and integration, but the key issue is that Russia felt “humiliated by the loss of its empire.”<sup>210</sup> Their push for “genuine partnership” based on equality meant leaving Central and East European states in a vulnerable security grey zone. After the exclusion of Ukraine from the alliance and the devastating consequences resulting from Russia’s violent revanchism in 2014 and 2022, the only issue with NATO enlargement appears to be that it didn’t go far enough, fast enough.

To highlight the ever-present imperial logic under which Russia operated, American General Wesley Clark, on a visit to Russia in 1994, was asked by a Russian military official, “When will your NATO ships be in our port of Riga?” It was three years since Latvia gained independence from the Soviet Union; it wasn’t Russia’s port, it was Latvia’s. In turn, Clark replied, “I don’t know, but the more you ask that question, the sooner they will come.” Clark left Moscow with the impression that “whatever the friendliness between Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin, these Russian military leaders would be difficult.” Madeleine Albright, former Secretary of State under Clinton

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<sup>210</sup> Jeff Neal, "There was no promise not to enlarge NATO," Harvard Law Today, March 16, 2022, <https://hls.harvard.edu/today/there-was-no-promise-not-to-enlarge-nato/>.

from 1997 to 2001, later said that “the key issue was how to manage the devolution of Russia from an imperial to a normal nation.”<sup>211</sup>

Sarotte explains that during this time in 1994, “Yeltsin was clearly struggling with both the reality of the final withdrawal from Europe [Russian troops from the Baltics] and his own demons.”<sup>212</sup> In response, the French wanted to go easier on him, saying that Yeltsin had “taken his troops out of the Baltic countries” and was “cooperating with us on the denuclearization of the other republics” and “working pretty well with us in Bosnia.”<sup>213</sup> Then French president Jacques Chirac said that it was hardly surprising that Yeltsin “does not want us to expand NATO.” U.S. policymakers known as the troika—Alexander Vershbow, Nicholas Burns, and Daniel Fried—saw it differently. In October 1993, they laid out a confidential roadmap for Anthony Lake entitled “*Moving Toward NATO Expansion*” where they advocated for full Article-5 enlargement with the objective of creating an “integrated and inclusive security system for Europe, including but going beyond NATO expansion.”<sup>214</sup> This would also include an institutionalized relationship for Russia and Ukraine, with “the possibility of membership in the long-term for a democratic Russia.” In the background, and something that was to be “rarely articulated”, was that NATO enlargement was also an “insurance policy/strategic hedge (i.e., neo-containment of Russia).”<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 123.

<sup>212</sup> Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 116.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> "Moving Toward NATO Expansion," memorandum, October 4, 1995, Clinton Presidential Library, <https://www.archives.gov/files/declassification/isicap/pdf/2016-140-doc05.pdf>.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

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October 4, 1998



Moving Toward NATO Expansion

We have two months to (a) refine USG thinking about our basic goals and rationale for NATO expansion; (b) conduct initial consultations with the Allies (and, subsequently, with the Russians, Ukrainians and CEEs); and (c) based on (a) and (b), prepare an initiative for the December NATO Ministerial that would kick off a formal process within the Alliance to define an agreed policy framework for NATO expansion. Holbrooke's much heralded IWG is off to a slow and acrimonious start. We should develop a consensus among ourselves about USG direction and tactics, based on our work to date and our thinking post-Yeltsin Summit, the better to help lead State, OSD and JCS. A summary of where NSC staff members stand\* and unresolved issues follows:

I. Agreed elements

Objectives.

- Develop an integrated and inclusive security system for Europe, including but going beyond NATO expansion.
- In the medium term, an expanded NATO, including the more advanced CEEs, with the prospect of further expansion to those not admitted in the first tranche.
- In parallel, an institutionalized relationship between NATO and Russia (and something similar between NATO and Ukraine). This could take the form of a Treaty (an alliance with the Alliance) or of associate membership.
- New members would acquire all the rights and responsibilities of current members (full Article V guarantee) and would commit to eventual full integration in NATO's military structures, but there would be a flexibility on operational issues such as stationing of foreign forces.
- NATO expansion should take place in coordination with enlargement of the EU, but should not be delayed to match the EU's likely timetable.

Rationale

- To project stability eastward and to underpin the democratic reform process in CEE, we need to create a perspective that Partnership for Peace will lead to membership for some PFP members.

\* This paper reflects the views of Sandy Vershbow, Nick Burns and Dan Fried. Dick Schifter favors a more cautious approach; his views are attached.

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- To make clear expansion is not seen as directed against any country, process must be developed in parallel with long-term strategy vis-à-vis Russia/Ukraine that includes continued partnership ~~with NATO~~ and development of other institutions (CSCE, G-8).
- Expansion process will be evolutionary and linked to a continued PFP as mechanism for relations with countries not obtaining membership in first group.
- "Insurance policy"/"strategic hedge" rationale (i.e., neo-containment of Russia) will be kept in the background only, rarely articulated. On contrary, possibility of membership in the long term for a democratic Russia should not be ruled out explicitly (pace Volker Rühle).

**Criteria**

- Avoid explicit checklist (e.g. military requirements); stick to "precepts" -- democracy, market economy, responsible/good-neighborly security policies.
- On military side, general goal of "interoperability" will be refined as PFP evolves.

**Timing**

- For own planning purposes, anticipate earliest explicit decision on new members no sooner than first half of second Clinton term.
- Should avoid proposing specific timetable at this stage, or identifying which countries are likely to be included or excluded from the first group.
- During interim:
  - o Use PFP (reinforced by U.S. bilateral security assistance) to deepen relations with all partners, potential members and others, and to promote interoperability.
  - o Watch for progress vis-à-vis "precepts."
  - o Begin to establish the functional building blocks of the ~~future enhanced~~ relationships between NATO and Russia/Ukraine; consult with Moscow and Kiev on ~~best way to~~ institutionalize this relationship.

During the December 1994 Budapest summit, Clinton proclaimed that “NATO remains the bedrock of security in Europe”, adding that no other country would be allowed “to veto expansion” and at the same time sidelining alternative security arrangements like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), a forum preferable to the Russians. Yeltsin then accused Clinton of risking a “cold peace.”<sup>216</sup> But at that point, cooperation had already broken down. The U.S. Embassy described Yeltsin’s reaction as that “of a businessman who has just learned that his partner has taken out a new insurance policy in case their venture fails.”<sup>217</sup>

Moreover, Kozyrev couldn’t advocate for NATO enlargement in Moscow anymore. Whereas before he was a voice speaking against hasty enlargement—but not fundamentally opposed to it in principle—now he had to oppose it because “all others had dropped the word ‘hasty’ and simply become opposed to enlargement, full stop.”<sup>218</sup> Yeltsin would next take a series of tragic missteps by launching a brutal assault on Chechnya, horrifying the leaders of countries near Russia.<sup>219</sup> Analysis from Embassy Moscow revealed that the war represented “the weaknesses of the Russian state and the tragic flaws of its first democratically-elected president.”<sup>220</sup> Meanwhile, a New York Times journalist called the invasion “the end of Russia’s liberal dream” and Kozyrev later concluded that the Chechen War strained “relations with our Western partners for years.”<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 120.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 121.

All evidence points to the fact that U.S. policymakers were ultimately justified in NATO enlargement, despite internal debates that advocated for further investment in PfP or the adamant opposition from Russian leaders and policymakers. The quote at the start of this section that comes from the Melian dialogue represents the security dilemma faced by Central and East European countries in the 1990s, and some U.S. policymakers who pushed for full-guarantee enlargement recognized this. For context, in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, when the small island of Melos appeals to justice and fairness against a stronger Athens, who is about to conquer them, the Athenians respond with brutal realism: “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” Central and East European countries similarly found themselves in a neutral, security grey zone and asserted their moral and sovereign imperative to “invoke what is fair and right” by choosing their own security arrangements. The Poles, Hungarians, and Czechs understood that appealing to Russia’s goodwill might prove futile in the future. Russia’s subsequent violent revanchism in Georgia and Ukraine has only vindicated their view. NATO enlargement thus represented the right to seek security guarantees to protect countries’ independence and territorial integrity—key tenets of the rules-based order that Moscow has repeatedly violated.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion

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“As you address the problems of one era, you’re often planting the seeds for the next set of challenges. History doesn’t stop.”

— *Jim Baker, U.S. Secretary of State, 1989-1992*

This thesis began with a fundamental puzzle: why did U.S. policymakers maintain unwavering support for Boris Yeltsin and optimism about Russian democratic transition from 1992-1994, despite mounting evidence of authoritarian consolidation, economic failure, and rising nationalism? The analysis has examined how the Clinton-Yeltsin personal relationship shaped U.S. perceptions of Russia's domestic situation and policy priorities, explored the role of "end of history" narratives in officials' interpretations of Russian setbacks, and investigated how American policymakers attempted to reconcile simultaneous support for Yeltsin and NATO enlargement.

Part of the story of U.S.-Russia relations during the Bush and Clinton administration is one of persistence of key mental maps that guided the policymaking process and key decisions. While Bush and Clinton had different approaches, there is still a remarkable amount of consistency. Clinton built on Bush’s legacy of securing a Europe “whole and free,” the key difference being that his team was filled with Wilsonian idealists, while Bush had a more pragmatic, realist outlook. As a result, the Clinton administration was more inclined to support Russia’s political and economic reforms through larger transfers of assistance and placed a premium on integrating

Russia into multilateral institutions, including NATO. These mental maps ultimately shaped how American policymakers interpreted Russian developments, filtered contradictory evidence, and maintained policy coherence even as their foundational assumptions were systematically challenged by events on the ground.

The five themes identified in this analysis—faith in the liberal international order, the double helix assumption linking markets and democracy, the dual-track policy of NATO enlargement and Russian engagement, the emphasis on personal relationships over institutional development, and the cognitive dissonance that protected core assumptions from disconfirming evidence—operated together and influenced each other, proving remarkably resistant to change when Russian realities diverged from American expectations.

The belief that Washington Consensus-style market reforms would lead to democratization efforts was undergirded by efforts at Russia's integration into multilateral institutions, that in turn, was guided through the faith of American policymakers in the liberal international order. At the same time, NATO enlargement was couched in the language of promoting democracy in Central and Eastern Europe and institutionalizing the alliance's relationship with Russia and Ukraine. The personal relationship between Clinton and Yeltsin further underscored the idea that there was no other alternative than Yeltsin in Russia's domestic political scene, leading to wholesale support even when Yeltsin strayed from democratic norms and practices. When Russia displayed this type of divergence from expectations, cognitive dissonance ensured policymakers held on to their core beliefs and identities, in turn "minimizing the negatives" by focusing on "maximizing the

positives.” This ultimately blinded many to Russia’s democratic backsliding and increasingly revanchist rhetoric and actions.

The Clinton administration's response to Yeltsin's violent assault on parliament in October 1993 provides perhaps the clearest example of how optimistic Clinton was about Russia’s reform efforts and how much emphasis he placed on the personal relationship between him and Yeltsin. Advisors told him to follow “principles and process,” but held to a binary view of ‘Yeltsin versus the communists,’ limiting any alternative approach toward Russia after Yeltsin had used violence domestically and started to centralize authority in the presidency. Then Secretary of State Warren Christopher praised Yeltsin’s “superb handling” of the crisis that involved shelling of the parliament and the deaths of 145 people.

The irony is profound: in attempting to support Russian democracy and reform efforts through personal diplomacy with Yeltsin, American officials were blindsided by Yeltsin’s increasingly authoritarian behavior. Too much trust and optimism was placed in one figure. The Clinton administration “minimized the negatives” to such an extent that they had trouble seeing Russia for what it was.

Wayne Merry's prescient March 1994 dissent cable, which warned that economic shock therapy reforms were economically crippling and politically destabilizing and predicted they would “recreate an adversarial relationship between Russia and the West,” was suppressed by the Treasury Department and only released publicly thirty years later. This reveals how institutional

structures actively reinforced mental maps by filtering out inconvenient information rather than integrating it into policy analysis.

The ‘squaring-the-triangle’ attempt to simultaneously enlarge NATO and maintain a constructive partnership with Russia represents perhaps the most fundamental contradiction embedded in American mental maps. Officials like Strobe Talbott genuinely believed they could advance “two strategies that are crucial to [Clinton's] vision of post Cold War Europe: admitting new members to NATO and developing a parallel security relationship between the Alliance and Russia.” This dual-track approach reflected the liberal institutionalist assumption that integration into a network of Western-led multilateral organization could accommodate competing interests through personal engagement.

However, this mental map failed to grasp the extent to which NATO enlargement would be interpreted in Moscow not as integration and partnership but as a “new encirclement,” even though it is the view of the author that American policymakers were ultimately justified in promoting enlargement as a hedge against future Russian revanchism. Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev's warnings that “the stimulus for partnership has to a large extent been killed by enlargement” and that even Russian liberals couldn't understand “why [NATO] is moving its borders toward Russia” should have alerted American officials that their preferred policy framework was generating the very opposition it sought to overcome.

The December 1994 NAC communiqué during the Budapest Summit announcing a study of membership requirements while Clinton was simultaneously assuring Yeltsin of “no surprises”

and “no imminent timetable” exemplifies how the dual-track policy worked in practice. American officials were convinced that managing the relationship with Yeltsin personally, while at the same time institutionalizing a NATO-Russia relationship, would placate Yeltsin and the nationalist voices in Russian policy circles who were adamantly against NATO enlargement. This disconnect reveals how mental maps created parallel realities and miscommunication, where each side operated under fundamentally different assumptions about the nature and meaning of their interactions.

Anthony Lake's articulation of democratic enlargement as “enlargement of the world's free community of market democracies” reflected a deep conviction that the liberal order possessed universal appeal and transformative power. The assumption was that Russia, like Germany and Japan after World War II, could be successfully integrated into Western institutions through a combination of economic incentives, security cooperation, and institutional engagement. This mental map made policy recalibration psychologically threatening because questioning Russian integration meant questioning the fundamental premises of post-Cold War American strategy.

When Treasury officials acknowledged that Russian economic reforms had “failed on at least two fronts”—establishing a social safety net and reducing subsidies to state enterprises—the response was to adjust tactics while preserving the same assumptions about eventual Russian democratization and integration into multilateral organizations. This allowed officials to appear responsive to evidence while avoiding substantive recalibration of policy toward Russia. The filtering out of alternative voices like Wayne Merry's and Peter Reddaway's warnings about the

political consequences of shock therapy became a feature of how faith in liberal integration operated, reinforcing optimistic assumptions while excluding pessimistic interpretations.

The failure to anticipate the domestic political consequences of economic shock therapy in Russia demonstrates how theoretical models transported from one context to another can produce unintended results when they encounter different historical, cultural, and institutional conditions. The assumption that markets and democracy naturally reinforce each other—the double helix—proved culturally contingent rather than universally applicable, as markets in Russia became associated with corruption and banditry rather than a process toward building an inclusive, stable democracy.

On balance, however, evidence shows the Clinton administration led a disciplined, concerted effort to put Russia on a trajectory of integration and partnership, working with Yeltsin every opportunity they got to promote reforms and Russia's modernization. Putin's rise to power at the end of the decade, however, all but doomed Talbott's and Clinton's attempts to engage Moscow and ensure Russia had a stake in the new security order. In May 2000, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State, Strobe Talbott, wrote this in a memo about newly elected President of Russia, right before the first Clinton-Putin summit:

“Putin both sees and presents himself (notably including in First Person) as a figure who represents a fundamental continuity with the past — again, in contrast to Yeltsin, who saw and presented himself as personifying a break with the past. Putin's self-image is as a guy who decided as a boy to devote himself to the cause of Russia's security, and who has seamlessly pursued that profession even as the institution in which he made his career

changed initials. The hard, and heartfelt, part of his vocabulary is revealing: order, dictatorship of laws, ‘anyone who insults us will not survive for even one day.’”<sup>222</sup>

Later in a June 2000 phone call between U.S. President Clinton and Russian President Putin, Clinton expressed his sincere desire for constructive U.S.-Russia relations:

“In any event, you can count on me to keep working on keeping the relationship strong. You know, I've made 5 trips here as President, and I first came here back in the 60s, when Strobe and I were young and full of hope. We had hope about this country when a lot of people didn't. It's a lot easier to have hope about it today. All my life, I've wanted to see this relationship strong and healthy.”<sup>223</sup>

Ultimately, U.S.-Russia relations in the early 1990s, from 1992-1994, laid a foundation for the deterioration of ties at the end of the decade. To understand Russia’s revanchist behavior under Putin in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, the immediate post-Cold War period offers an insight into what went wrong and why.

Following the optimism of the early 1990s in U.S.-Russia relations, many scholarly debates by the end of the decade focused on the question of “who lost Russia?” U.S. diplomat, William J. Burns, and former U.S. Ambassador to Russia from 2005 to 2008, argues in his memoir, *The Back Channel*, that:

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<sup>222</sup> U.S. Department of State. (2000, May 15). U.S.-Russian relations - on the eve of the first Clinton-Putin summit [FOIA document]. U.S. Department of State FOIA Reading Room. <https://foia.state.gov/FOIALIBRARY/SearchResults.aspx?searchText=U.S.-Russia%20relations%20on%20the%20eve&beginDate=05-15-2000&endDate=05-15-2000>

<sup>223</sup> Talbott, Strobe. Clinton-Putin one-on-ones Moscow summit, June 3-5, 2000 [Declassified notes]. Shared by Dr. Stephan Kieninger via LinkedIn, August 22, 2025. <https://www.linkedin.com/in/dr-stephan-kieninger-9bb66a105/recent-activity/all/>

“Russia was never ours to lose. Domestically, Russians had lost trust and confidence in themselves, and they would eventually have to remake their state and their economy. As the twentieth century wound to a close, Russians had been through generations of privation and tragedy. None of that could be fixed in a single generation, let alone a few years. None of it could be fixed by outsiders, even a United States at the peak of its post-Cold War dominance.”<sup>224</sup>

In a study that focuses mainly on American perspectives of U.S.-Russian relations, it is indeed important to bear in mind that Yeltsin and Russian policymakers had their own agency and were ultimately responsible for implementing reforms and maintaining a nascent, fragile democracy—which they failed to do. On the other hand, while America’s ability to shape other countries’ internal politics is often overstated, the U.S. does often play a pivotal role in shaping the conditions that influence how other nations develop. As Strobe Talbott would later say, “less shock and more therapy” would have been a better policy prescription for Russia to make the transition from command to a market economy.<sup>225</sup> This suggests that it is important to take stock and re-examine alternative policy options that were available. By assessing the mental maps of American decision-makers, this thesis shed light on the ideological underpinnings and personal relationships that influenced U.S. policy toward Russia, providing insight to how these factors contributed to various missteps and misperceptions that would shape the entire trajectory of post-Cold War relations.

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<sup>224</sup> Burns, William J. *The back channel: American diplomacy in a disordered world*. Oxford University Press, 2019, p.110

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

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