

# Janusz Bugajski: American vs. Russian imperialism

Janusz Bugajski, The Examiner  
Jul 12, 2006 5:00 AM (5 hrs ago)

## WASHINGTON -

On the eve of the G-8 summit in St. Petersburg, it is valuable to look beyond the immediate agenda of nuclear proliferation and energy security by pinpointing the core differences between America and Russia. Naïve commentaries assert that the governments in Washington and Moscow are essentially identical as both focus on promoting their national interests at the cost of allies and neighbors. Some even conclude that U.S. policy now presents the bigger danger to global security.

Claims of congruence between American and Russian policies have two consequences: They give fuel to anti-Americanism, and they help whitewash Moscow's attempts to re-establish a new empire. There are fundamental differences between American and Russian strategies and objectives.

In sum, while the United States, despite its errors and misjudgments, is a positive force for liberalism and democracy, the Russian Federation, despite occasional constructive steps, is a negative force for autocracy and dominance.

The condemnation of American power and policy has a long tradition. Ideological radicals in various corners of the globe continue to view the U.S. as an expansionist imperium, while nationalists perceive America as the unsavory melting pot of internationalism that eliminates national and ethnic identities. Since the onset of the campaign against international terrorists and following the U.S. occupation of Iraq, Washington has been attacked in many capitals as the major cause of international insecurity. Meanwhile, Russia has frequently been depicted as a benign state simply seeking to defend its national interests. Both positions are mistaken and misleading as there is a deep and widening chasm between U.S. and Russian policy. Such simplifications have impregnated commentary and influenced policy in many regions, including Europe.

First, the United States is a thriving democracy that seeks to project its model of pluralism, liberalism, and multiethnicity around the world. Its methods and applications may not always yield the intended results, but for America ultimate security means eliminating dictators and rogue movements that undermine basic human freedoms and threaten America's allies and their access to vital trade and resources. Washington provides large amounts of economic aid and technical support to help build market economies and pluralist democracies, although the results are not always successful.

In stark contrast, Russia is a corporatist police state run by KGB officers, politically loyal criminals, and imperialist nationalists seeking to project the Russian model on neighboring states. Moscow fears open democratic countries along its borders as this makes them valid candidates for NATO and EU membership, brings them closer to America, potentially challenges the authoritarian system within the Russian Federation itself. Russia deliberately courts dictatorships in Iran, Syria, North Korea and elsewhere to undermine American and Western interests.

Second, while Washington may demonstrate some double standards in its foreign policy approach, by maintaining cordial relations and cooperative links with several authoritarian states such as China and Russia, Moscow maintains a single standard by consistently supporting predictable autocrats rather than unpredictable democrats.

U.S. policy makers argue that it is impractical and impossible to conduct a comprehensive worldwide democracy promotion agenda given the limitations on American resources and the need for regional security. It therefore maintains contacts with a number of non-democratic governments to curtail regional instability, as in some cases maintaining the status quo might be the better alternative. Russia, in stark contrast, seeks to deliberately destabilize states that are pro-American and pro-European, thus making them more susceptible to Moscow's influence. It upholds dictatorial regimes along its vast borders, with Belarus and Uzbekistan as pertinent examples.

Third, all of America's allies and aspiring partners seek to build close relations with Washington in order to obtain U.S. protection and eventual membership in the most significant international and Western institutions. By contrast, many of Russia's neighbors are enticed or blackmailed into maintaining close relations with Moscow in order to gain subsidized energy and markets and to diminish the threat of Russian military interference on the pretext of defending Russian ethnics. Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova are valuable cases in point.

Russia uses its energy supplies to intimidate and unsettle its neighbors, while the U.S. and the West in general are so dependent on foreign fossil fuels that they allow themselves to be threatened and destabilized by suppliers, middlemen, and saboteurs.

And fourth, the United States remains a country of destination for millions of aspiring immigrants from all corners of the world. Meanwhile, Russia is in demographic crisis and finds it difficult to entice even its own ethnics to return to their motherland. Russia confronts a population implosion and territorial disintegration as the Muslim republics of the North Caucasus increasingly seek independence from the Muscovite domain while the rapidly growing number of Chinese in Russia's Far East will sooner or later seek their own separate state.

While President Putin will present himself at the upcoming G-8 summit as a responsible world leader concerned about global security, Washington and its allies must distinguish between sweet words and bitter deeds. Kremlin policy, whether in thwarting democratic development inside and outside Russia, controlling energy supplies to Europe, pandering to dangerous dictatorships in Iran and North Korea, or undercutting American influence in Central Asia, makes the world much more dangerous.

*Janusz Bugajski is director of the New European Democracies Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.*

*Examiner*