

Russia's Relations with the West

An Address to the Victoria-Khabarovsk Association

- the EU has found a solution to facilitate travel between Russia and its exclave of Kaliningrad after the EU accepts Poland and the Baltic States as members in 2004;

- in November Russia voted in favour of the UN Security Council Resolution 1441 on Iraq.

In order to determine the solidity of what has happened and the prospects for the future, we should look briefly at the history of Western-Russian relations, and specifically US- Russian relations, in the decade following the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Initially, both Russia and the United States were under strong domestic pressure to make progress in their relations with each other. Yeltsin sought a deep partnership with the West, and specifically the United States, because he wanted to consolidate his power and to get Western assistance for his reforms. He also hoped that he would receive counter-concessions in foreign policy. Clinton wanted to reduce his defence budget so as to finance his domestic priorities.

By the time that Putin came to power, the Russians had come to the conclusion that they had received little for their efforts to accommodate the West. After having accepted the reunification of Germany, which had been difficult enough, the Russians had then been shocked when the West had taken NATO Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic into NATO. The eastward expansion of NATO amounted, in their eyes, to a trespass in their sphere of influence; it was contrary to certain assurances that the Russians thought they had received at the moment of the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact; and it was emblematic of the decline in Russian influence in the world. The NATO attack on Yugoslavia added to their concern because it suggested that NATO was not a purely defensive alliance. In addition, many of the conservatives considered that the prescriptions for economic reform dispensed by Western countries and Western institutions were an attempt to ruin the Russian economy.

Putin came in, not as a Westernizer, as had Yeltsin, but as a nationalist, determined to make Russia strong and to restore Russia's standing in the world.

On the other side, Western opinion formers, and especially many in the United States, were shocked by the role that Russia had played in the Kosovo conflict by supporting Milosevic. In addition, many Republican critics of Clinton's policy of close relations with Yeltsin insisted that Putin's renewal of the war in Chechnya, coupled with Russia's sales of dangerous weapons and technologies to rogue states, meant the United States should disengage from Russia. Bush therefore came to power determined to take a different line with Russia from that of Clinton.

The change in the approach of the two countries towards each other led to a serious chill in relations. Putin embarked on a series of visits to Russia's old friends, China, North Korea, Iran, Libya, Cuba and Vietnam. During his visits he called for a return to a multi-polar world. With China Putin concluded in July 2001 a friendship

treaty, which stopped just short of being an

The first factor is that economic co-operation with the West offers for Russia the only hope it has of recovering its econom



that that of Switzerland; its share of global trade is less than 2%, about that of Spain, and less than half of that of Canada. Its share of FDI is below that of Chile or Thailand. Its ma

Furthermore, Russia has no useful historical memory of a market economy. An evolution in Russia's political and economic culture therefore is likely to be a very slow and gradual process. What will emerge will be different from European models. A possible parallel may be drawn with Turkey, which eighty years after the after the Attaturk revolution remains, at best, a very authoritarian democracy.

What all of these factors mean for Russia's relations with the West is that rapprochement is likely to proceed at best slowly, with many detours. While Russia does not have much choice in the long run, there will be times when it will feel constrained to go its own way. We, for our part, must show persistence, and wisdom in seeking to develop relations with Russia and encourage reform. However imperfect the Russian reality may be, a Russia increasingly integrated with the West is to be preferred to an unstable, impoverished country, nursing resentments, and in conflict with its neighbours.