

years ago. In the case of post-USSR Russia, the loss in influence and power is far greater because it was a superpower and because it does not belong to an alliance or a union of states that would make up for the loss. Russia is a lonely power²³ in a world where exchanges and competitiveness bear more significance than traditional

instruments of power, like conventional arms or territorial control. For all these reasons, in the longer term, Europe and Russia will need to come closer on many issues of mutual interest, and France can be a key actor in this rapprochement. The timing will depend heavily on political evolutions inside Russia.

About the Author

Marie Mendras is Professor at Sciences Po University, Research Fellow with the National Center for Scientific Research in Paris, and Associate Fellow with the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House in London. She is the author of *Russian Politics. The Paradox of a Weak State* (Hurst, London, & Columbia University Press, New York, 2012).

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ANALYSIS

The UK and Russia—Towards A Renewed Relationship?

Andrew Monaghan, UK

Abstract

Relations between the United Kingdom (UK) and Russia present a complex and interesting subject for analysis. The relationship offers fertile grounds for cooperation and partnership in numerous areas. But particularly since the mid 2000s they have been beset by prominent—and recurring—disagreements and scandals, with the result that there is a profound imbalance between areas of substantial practical cooperation, for instance in economic and business relations on one hand, and almost no state-to-state political relationship on the other. This short paper first sketches the broader contextual environment in which current relations should be understood. It then outlines aspects of cooperation, before turning to consider the more problematic elements. The paper concludes by reflecting on the current status of the relationship and prospects for its development.

The Wider Context

UK–Russia relations should be seen in a triple overlapping context. First, both the UK and Russia are comparatively low on each other's overall list of international priorities, as reflected in the strategic documentation of both parties. Russia is notable by its absence in the UK's National Security Strategy, for instance, while the UK has a low profile in Russia's Foreign Policy Concepts and National Security Strategies. Moscow believes Anglo-Saxon influence in global affairs is declining, while London asserts a post Cold War agenda that no longer sees Russia as the main international focus. For neither side, therefore, does the relationship have a central strategic profile; both parties focus on other international priorities.

Second, relations between UK–Russia reflect the wider trends of Russia's relationships with Euro-Atlantic institutions. While there was some warmth until

2003, there has been a growing sense of dissonance in the relationship, caused by disagreement about the roots, nature and results of developments in international affairs. Indeed, the list of such disagreements is lengthy, from the broader evolution of wider European security since the end of the Cold War, including NATO enlargement, to the Iraq war, from the wars in Chechnya to Russia's war with Georgia in 2008, from the Yukos case to the energy disputes between Gazprom and Naftogaz Ukraini. In each case, the British and Russians found themselves on opposing sides of the argument. If the relationship is not one of strategic importance, therefore, nor is there a sense of the warmth that might be found in Russia's relations with some continental European states such as Italy.

The third context, more specific to the UK–Russia relationship, is one of general mutual suspicion. Conspiracy theories in the UK about the roles of the KGB and

its successor organisations in international affairs and even in the UK itself find their mirror image in Russia, where the hidden hand of British intelligence, particularly MI6, is seen by many in Russia to be behind all kinds of nefarious activities both on the international stage and in Russia. Critics exhume and reinvigorate the cadavers of history to reinforce the image; thus the echoes of the murder of Russian diplomat Alexander Griboyedov in 1829 (the work, according to conspiracy theories in Russia, of British intelligence who roused the mob in Tehran to fulfil their purpose) and the murder in London of Georgi Markov in 1979, have found their resonance in the conspiracy theories about the murder of Alexander Litvinenko in London in 2006.

The result is that, in “atmospheric” terms, London and Moscow believe each to represent “the other”, arguing that it was ever thus: a permanent antagonism of first imperial competition in the Great Game then ideological friction between the UK and the USSR. These three contexts pervade the contemporary relationship.

Flourishing Practical Cooperation?

This sense of contextual dissonance often masks a developing and, in some areas, flourishing relationship. Though not prominent, military cooperation has included a range of activities. If the officer decommissioning programme in which the UK assisted the Russian armed forces in retraining and preparing Russian officers for civilian life was seen positively in both London and Moscow, it was the UK’s leading role in the successful effort to save the AS28 submersible off the coast of Kamchatka in 2005 that reflected the positive aspects of such cooperation. Often forgotten now, the success of this operation was the result of naval exercises in which the relevant military personnel had become acquainted, and created a positive atmosphere in UK–Russia relations. Vladimir Putin visited the UK (even being the first foreign leader to visit the Cabinet Office Briefing Room A, COBRA) and a number of agreements were signed, including cooperation on measures to address terrorism. The rescue of the AS28, however, was the pinnacle of such cooperation. Since then, the officer retraining project has come to a close and not been revived and counter terrorism cooperation was suspended after the murder of Litvinenko.

More familiar is the cultural and educational interaction between Russia and the UK, with regular exchanges of art, literature and film festivals. High-level exchanges have also taken place in education, as Ministers seek to build cooperative “knowledge partnerships”. These have included nuclear physics and energy conservation projects and appear to be about to spread to other areas of academic endeavour including history. This, of course,

builds on a growing societal base which has seen increasing numbers of British citizens visiting Russia and a growing number of Russians moving to live in the UK.

Senior officials on both sides regularly emphasise the depth and frequency of cultural contact as a means of strengthening interaction between individuals, societies and even governments, and as an important element in the establishment of a bilateral relationship. Similarly, Paul de Quincey, head of the British Council, has suggested that culture provides a ‘relatively painless’ way of doing business together despite the ‘fractious’ nature of relations. Cooperation in culture and education has grown since 2011, and 2014 has been designated the UK–Russia “Year of Culture”, with numerous cooperative projects planned.

The most prominent cooperation, however, is in business. This is in part because of the high profile energy relationship, with major British companies cutting deals with, and sometimes tensions with partners in Russia, recently illustrated by BP’s activity, the tensions with its partners in TNK and BP’s deal with state oil champion Rosneft.

While the hydrocarbon business is the most prominent feature, the relationship is broader, and it is worth noting that, although economic and business cooperation was affected by the global economic crisis, and despite some tensions, it has been less affected by political dissonance. Indeed, despite a dip in 2009, trade has grown significantly. Official figures suggest that British investment in Russia has grown 21% year-on-year since 2001, and British exports to Russia increased to £5.5 billion by 2012. Regular visits to Russia by figures such as the Lord Mayor of London and the UK Trade and Investment Chief include meetings with senior Russian officials to seek to enhance such contacts.

More than one thousand British companies are active in Russia in areas as diverse as architectural and infrastructure design and construction, real estate, communications, financial and economic services, and public relations. Similarly, Russian companies—even those connected with the state, such as Gazprom—are active in the UK, and more than sixty Russian companies are listed on the London Stock Exchange.

State-to-State Relations: Tensions and Difficulties

Despite this practical relationship, political dissonance and tension was such that for an extended period from 2006 there was almost no state-to-state relationship between London and Moscow, and the list of problems is lengthy. If the cultural relationship is deep and wide, not least because of the facilitation of the British Council, Russian hostility towards and pressure on the offices and personnel of that same British Council has

had a lasting negative political result, remaining strong in the memory of British public and official institutions.

In 2006 then Ambassador Tony Brenton and colleagues faced months of harassment following public demonstration of support for Russian opposition figures. Another long running problem is the friction over extradition. Moscow long sought the extradition of Boris Berezovsky for trial in Russia, refusing to accept the British government's position that the government is unable to oblige the British judiciary to acquiesce to the demand. Berezovsky died in March 2013, but there are numerous other Russians sought by Moscow who have been granted political asylum in the UK, which means that the question will continue.

The shroud of mistrust in the relationship about intelligence service activities has found practical expression in spy scandals. In 2006, Russian television aired accusations of British espionage in the spy rock scandal (first denied and then, in 2012 acknowledged by the British authorities). In 2010, Ekaterina Zatuliveter, a Russian citizen working for British member of parliament Mike Hancock, was accused by the British authorities of espionage.

To this—incomplete—list of problems should be added the frequent recriminations caused by a significant “values gap” between the UK and Russia. The British government regularly accuses the Russian government of human rights violations, particularly in the North Caucasus. But other criticisms of human rights abuses feature in the dialogue between the UK and Russia, including the jailing of members of punk band Pussy Riot.

Nevertheless, it is the murder of Litvinenko that has had the most important and lasting ramifications for the relationship. The murder, and the subsequent fractious requests for cooperation in the investigation and British demand for the extradition to the UK for trial of the Russian suspects, rejected by Moscow, not only resulted in mutual expulsions of diplomats, but has created a block in the relationship that seven years later remains unresolved.

Towards Resuscitating the Political Relationship?

If the period 2006–2009 marked a nadir in the state-to-state relationship, high-level contacts began to resume in 2010 and have become increasingly frequent. A delegation led by Prime Minister Cameron, including Foreign Secretary William Hague and Minister of State for

Trade and Investment Lord Green visited Moscow in September 2011, and subsequently Cameron has met both Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev on several occasions in both bilateral and multilateral meetings. In March 2013, British and Russian foreign and defence ministers met in a “2+2” format in London.

Phrases such as “reset” are avoided, and the approach on both sides is cautious, but both the UK and Russia have stated their readiness to resume relations—primarily to sustain and develop economic ties on one hand but also because both face the same challenges in international affairs—Afghanistan, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and international terrorism.

Conclusions

Each side blames the other for the deterioration in relations, and thus each expects the other to make the first steps towards resolving the problems—which hampers the resumption of relations for conceptual and practical reasons. First, conceptually, Moscow and London remain divided over international questions, most clearly illustrated by their approach to Libya and now Syria. Defining the problem and response to it differently, in the wake of the UN sanctioned intervention in Libya, Moscow has vetoed UN resolutions on Syria tabled by the UK, USA and France. William Hague has condemned Moscow's vetoes as “inexcusable and indefensible”, and House of Commons report in October 2012 called it ‘perhaps the most important policy difference between the UK and Russia’. Similarly, the values gap will remain pronounced, with the likely result of more disagreements over human rights.

Second, on practical problems in the relationship, neither side appears willing or able to alter their position on the main points of tension. This is most particularly the case regarding the Litvinenko murder, but the other disagreements will not simply disappear. London recently granted Andrei Borodin former head of the Bank of Moscow, political asylum in early March 2013, and accusations of espionage and harassment of British officials in Russia have continued, most recently of the deputy head of the British Embassy Denis Keefe.

As a result, if the economic relationship appears likely to continue to grow, and cultural exchanges flourish, particularly in 2014, the attempts to rebuild political, state-to-state relations are slow and uneven, with continued tension and regular setbacks.

About the Author

Dr. Andrew Monaghan is a Research Fellow in the Russia & Eurasia Programme at Chatham House, and a Senior Associate Member of St Antony's College, Oxford. He has previously held research and teaching positions at the NATO Defence College in Rome and the Defence Academy of the UK.