

9/11 and a Lost Chance

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In recent days, the world press has been full of articles devoted to the 10th anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attack. The jury is still out on whether the 10-year fight against global terrorism has been successful. The only real victory has been the elimination of Osama bin Laden and dozens of al-Qaida leaders. But one thing is clear: The Greater Middle East will serve as a base for terrorists for years to come.

But U.S. leaders were not the only ones to make mistakes. The 9/11 tragedy and subsequent global fight against terrorism offered a good chance for the Kremlin to boost ties with the West, but Russia lost the opportunity. The Sept. 11 attack occurred at a time when U.S. - Russian relations were improving. In June 2001, Bush and then-President Vladimir Putin met for the first time in Ljubljana, Slovenia, where Bush famously looked into Putin's eyes and got "a sense of his soul."

In the months after 9/11, Putin supported Bush and improved ties with the United States. In the initial hours after the World Trade Center was attacked, Putin received contradictory recommendations from members of his inner circle. One suggestion was to simply ignore the events in New York and Washington. But Putin was the first leader to call and express his

condolences to Americans and to offer Russia's full support.

What's more, Putin ignored a recommendation from then-Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov, his trusted ally, to block NATO from establishing military bases on the territory of the former Soviet Union to fight the Taliban. Putin personally contacted the leaders of the Central Asian republics to convince them to let the Pentagon set up their bases. When the United States invaded Afghanistan in October 2001, Russia provided arms to units of the Northern Alliance, a coalition of warlords who occupied territory evacuated by the Taliban as they fled U.S. bombs.

U.S.-Russian cooperation got off to a strong start after 9/11, but it quickly fizzled. Moscow was counting on getting something in return from Washington. Putin, for example, hoped that Bush would reverse a 2002 decision to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. But Washington simply took Moscow's assistance for granted, interpreting it as a response that any civilized country would have taken to support a partner hit by a major terrorist attack.

Moreover, Washington took the position that U.S. forces in Afghanistan were beefing up Russia's national security on its southern borders. The United States was aware that the General Staff had planned to deploy 60,000 troops to repel a possible invasion by the Taliban into Central Asia just months before 9/11. Now, the United States was doing Russia's work.

But that was hardly enough for Putin. He wanted to see actions from the United States that showed that Washington continued to view Moscow as a superpower. Instead, in 2003, Putin got the U.S. invasion of Iraq, ignoring Russia's interests in the region. The overthrow of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was a watershed moment for Putin. After this, Putin concluded that the rule of force, not law, was paramount in global affairs. It is no coincidence several months later, in October 2003, former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky was arrested. Many were surprised that Russian authorities arrested the richest man in Russia, a darling of foreign investors and politicians, and then sent him to jail and took over most of his assets. But doing this, Kremlin leaders showed that they would do whatever they wanted, despite global protests — much like how Bush acted toward Iraq.

In 2004, Putin became deeply concerned about the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, suggesting that it was caused by a U.S. conspiracy. To avoid an Orange Revolution in Russia, Putin devised a Cold War strategy — or, rather, a cheap imitation of it. In 2006, he began pressuring the Central Asian republics to close down the very same U.S. military bases that had been created with his blessing right after 9/11. Moreover, the Kremlin used every opportunity to exaggerate the potential threat to Russia's national security of U.S. missile defense systems deployed in Central Europe.

Then in 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama tried to “reset” U.S.-Russian relations, including reviving U.S.-Russian cooperation on Afghanistan. Russia responded by providing safe transit of U.S. and NATO shipments to Afghanistan. But Moscow did have its own tricks up its sleeve. It considered the Afghan transit deal as the perfect bargaining chip with Washington. The Kremlin showed its true colors, for example, as soon as U.S. Congressman Ben Cardin drafted the Sergei Magnitsky bill. The Kremlin suggested that the bill, if passed, could potentially hurt U.S.-Russian relations, including the Russia transit route for U.S. military shipments to Afghanistan.

In the end, Russia lost a chance to become a true partner of the United States after 9/11. But, in

reality, there was never a chance of this happening from the beginning. Although Sept. 11 offered a chance to build a short-term U.S.-Russian alliance, a long-term alliance would have required that the two countries share common democratic values. Thus, as long as Putin remains in power, any alliance with the West will be temporary at best.

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