America seems reluctant in accepting the fairly benign fact that countries do not like to be dictated to and thus misses opportunities for creating new dialogues. This is especially prominent in explaining the poor relationship at the moment with Russia. There seems to be an element of purposeful animosity in the way Russia is viewed, analyzed, and engaged, especially at the so-called expert level and most prominently within the now Republican-controlled United States Congress. Perhaps one of the worst examples of this ‘analytical animosity’ comes with the over-reliance on ‘insider knowledge’ without actually vetting the source’s objectivity. As we will see below, what would be automatically deemed a horribly flawed research structure in academia, full of selection bias, too often ends up powering the opinions of major decision-makers in Washington DC.

The recent exit of Alexander Sytnik as a senior fellow from the Russian Institute for Strategic Research is a prime example of this problem. Upon his exit early in 2015, Reshetnikov unleashed a torrent of information that, while interesting, really does not amount to more than just gossip and hearsay. Worse, American media and political analysts adopted it almost wholly as fact rather than as one perspective from a motivated source to talk badly about Russia:

“The Russian analyst’s scathing remarks about the country’s leadership and about the community of government experts confirm that the concept of Russian supremacy has a strong hold on the Russian leadership. These supremacist views are not limited to the post-Soviet space, where ‘only ethnic Russians are capable of creating statehood.’ The West is also seen as decadent and somewhat spiritually inferior to the Russians. The spread of such views in Russia, especially among the country’s leaders, precludes easy and quick solutions to the Ukrainian crisis, but rather suggests a relatively lengthy period of tensions between Russia and the West, even if Russian strongman Vladimir Putin were, for some reason, to step down.”

The tendency here is to use personal opinion as confirmation of fact when it could be easily rejected as biased material. The only confirmation taking place is the affirming of preconceived ideas and a particular agenda that undermines any new attitudinal environment developing between Russia and the United States. As a consequence, it is easy to find ‘research’ proclaiming Russian goals that have never been formulated or addressing Putin objectives that have never been stated. This is not to say that Russia is incapable of having ulterior motives or secret agendas. Truly every country to one degree or another has them. The criticism here is the propensity in the Russian analytical sphere to presume such agendas and then cherry picking information to affirm the assumption. In pure methodological terms, selection bias is rife within the community that analyzes Russia, leaving those analyses decidedly weak.

This bias is only more pronounced when you leave academically-oriented think tanks/news monitors and observe opinions within the corridors of American power. Traditionally, this focus has been on a decidedly anti-Russian fervor coming from the Republican Party. However, this analysis would argue that except for a very brief and ultimately dashed Obama ‘reset’ Russian-American relations within Washington DC has always been dominated in both parties by this supposedly Republican mindset.

That mindset sets a fairly stark characterization: Russia is an aggressive and untrustworthy dictatorship that is an
innate contradiction to American values. As such it will inevitably always be a threat to U.S. interests and global security. By all indicators, Russia is a threat not just to itself and its immediate neighbors but to the entire world, masking its own domestic failings and instabilities with an aggressive foreign policy that will never acquiesce to a more peaceful and cooperative global community. Indeed, in an American political world that specializes in ambiguous statements and plausible deniability, it is rather remarkable how freely the American Congress seems to deride Russia:

- John Boehner: “It is increasingly evident that Russia is intent on expanding its boundaries and power through hostile acts.”
- Ted Poe: “The Russian bear is coming out of its cave because it got its feelings hurt because of the fall of the Soviet Union, and not it is trying to regain its territories.”
- Chris Smith: accused a “repressive Russian regime” of “coddling dictators” around the globe from Central Asia to Syria to Cuba and Venezuela.
- Trent Franks: After the conclusion of an arms deal between Russia and Venezuela, President Putin was called a “thugocrat” engaged in “dangerous alliances.

Keep in mind all of the above statements were uttered before the 2014 crisis in Ukraine even broke out. So before the U.S. Congress received what has been portrayed as undeniable and irrefutable proof of Russian aggression in Ukraine, it was already quite prepared to view Russia as a corrupt kleptocracy willfully abusing human rights and powered by an irrational and paranoid hatred of the United States as the sole driver of its foreign policy.

While much hope was initially placed on the so-called Obama ‘reset’ in American relations with Russia in 2008, the reality is that enthusiasm quickly faded and subsequently placed the Democratic Party as squarely pessimistic and adversarial in its attitude toward Russia as the Republicans. Indeed, in today’s environment of divided government having a problem with Russia seems to be one of the few happy consensus points in Washington. The only problem, of course, is how that consensus is built more upon partisan posturing, each side trying to one-up the other in order to earn foreign policy merit points. There are voices that decry a picture being painted that combines inaccuracy with heightened rhetoric while purposely ignoring mitigating contexts and less negative observations. However, those voices are extremely rare and at the moment easily drowned out by the drumbeat of Russian derision. Until those voices get louder or strive to become more prominent public figures in Washington, it seems there is little hope for an improvement in relations between the United States and Russia based on actual events in the real world. Image and attitude, unfortunately, seem to carry greater weight.

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