There is no stronger example of the schizophrenic nature of American foreign policy toward Russia than comparing statements written in the formal National Security Strategy (NSS) of President Obama with actual testimony given by the Director of National Intelligence James Clapper. In 2010 the NSS asserted that the U.S. would endeavor to ‘build a stable, substantive, multidimensional relationship with Russia, based on mutual interests.’ What’s more, the NSS called Russia a 21st century center of influence in the world and a country with whom America should build bilateral cooperation on a host of issues, including forging global nonproliferation; confronting violent extremism; fostering new trade and development arrangements; promoting the rule of law, accountability in government and universal values in Russia; and in cooperating as a partner in Europe and Asia.

Now take into account Director James Clapper while appearing before Congress in 2013 to discuss global threats. He described Russian foreign policy as a nexus of organized crime, state policy, and business interests (let it be noted that all three of these descriptors were said pejoratively. It wasn’t just the organized crime reference that was considered bad). Clapper went on to warn that both China and Russia represented the most persistent intelligence threats to the United States and that Russia could even face social discontent (read: political disorder and revolution) because of a sluggish economy, the constraint of political pluralism, and pervasive corruption.

At first blush these two accounts seem to offer a completely incomprehensible attitude toward Russia. But this is only at first blush. Reading deeper between the lines of the NSS reveals key words that always trigger contempt from Russian actors in the Kremlin. The ideal of promoting rule of law, government accountability and universal values is not an olive branch offering Russia the chance to team up with America to achieve these goals in problem areas around the world. This ideal was written as not needing to happen with Russia but in Russia. To follow that goal up with being a ‘cooperative partner’ in Europe and Asia has always signaled to Russian ears an American skepticism about Russia’s ability to be a ‘non-meddler’. In other words, the NSS comes across not as a mechanism to promote deeper co-equal ties between the two countries but rather as a snobbish slap across the face about how the United States needs to engage Russia to stop it from getting in its own and others’ way.

Clapper’s comments in some ways garner even more derision from Moscow. Not so much the complaints about centralized power and corruption. Russia has been hearing these criticisms since Yeltsin first came down off the tanks after the August coup in 1991. Russia has always been rather indifferent to these arguments. Rather, Clapper’s comments about the possibility of social discontent and unrest, placing that possibility at the feet of the Russian government because of repression and incompetence, always comes off as a red flag to the bull of Russian conspiracy theorists: they are quick to see American interference in any and all things that go wrong in Russia. And even if the more rational voices in Russian political power dismiss conspiracy theories, there is still the obvious interpretation that while America might not try to personally foment unrest, it would welcome instability if it happened.

Americans at times can play too fast and loose with semantics: as long as the U.S. does not actively try to create such discord, it thinks it cannot possibly be seen as a source of such discord. There are simply no Russian actors that would agree with that interpretation. Russians to this day point to Georgia, to Ukraine, to the countries of the Arab Spring, to Syria, and believe the build-up to the unrest was either directly orchestrated by the United States or at
least subtly fostered by America. Indeed, it is surprising there is not more analysis comparing the U.S. National Security Strategy with the subsequent Russian foreign policy concept that came out in 2013, on the heels of Clapper’s testimony. It affirms the Putin criticism that U.S.-Russia relations will always remain complicated because of fundamental cultural differences. What might be these cultural differences? Namely, that American identity is based on individual wants, racism, genocidal and other extreme forms of violence and this will always conflict with Russian identity, which is based on ‘loftier ambitions, more of a spiritual kind.’ This was only compounded on September 11th of the same year, when Putin published a letter to the New York Times:

- The UN could collapse and international law would suffer if nations take military action without UN approval.
- Such action in Syria would only result in a total destabilization of the area and a widening of conflict and terrorism.
- Russia is protecting, therefore, international law rather than the Assad regime.
- Many in the world are beginning to see the United States as relying solely on brute force and that such U.S. reliance has proven ineffective and pointless.
- President Obama’s statement that the United States should act when possible to uphold international norms was ‘extremely dangerous,’ arguing that all countries are equal already under international law.

This amounts to nothing more than posturing presidents who feel forced into a tit-for-tat foreign policy verbal battle, where each side envisions the other as the chief global antagonist while promoting themselves as the cowboy in the white hat standing up for the less powerful.

Rightly or wrongly, Russia is convinced that America has a global agenda that pushes a single unilateral superpower with special attention paid to keeping Russia on the sidelines, politically and militarily marginalized. Most analysts in the West take these reactions from Russia as an example of Moscow’s innate instability and political unreliability. What they unfortunately fail to realize, however, is how much of that so-called instability comes as a reaction to what the Kremlin feels is the national security schizophrenia of the United States, a country fully smitten with its own image as a white knight to the world while also being fairly quick to tell the same world it is ‘saving’ exactly how it is misbehaving and how it needs to change.

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