



What is the G8, and should Russia be kept in it?

By Ira Straus

The current debate over Russia in the G8 has had plenty of fireworks, but it has been based to a large extent on misconceptions about the G8. There is an apparent lack of memory, both of what the G8 is and of what Russia's role in it has been.

For those of us who are unhappy with the current trend of Russian politics, it is tempting to look for a way to punish Russia and seize upon the G8 as a high-visibility place to do it. But this issue is about the G8 and Western interests, not just about Russia.

Too much of the debate has been solely about Russia, and about emotional aspects of the Russian question at that. The debaters have known far less about the G8 than about Russia. This is not surprising: international institutions are relatively little understood entities compared to national states. This is particularly true of the Atlantic-based institutions like the G8.

Misconceptions about the G8 abound, and they start at the very beginning: with a false characterization of the G7. The group is often described as a "club of the major democracies". This is plainly mistaken: India has always been a major democracy but has never been included. A competing mischaracterization is to call it a grouping of "the main economic powers of the world"; if that were the case, the Soviet Union and China would have always been in it.

Such characterizations have led to a widespread proposal for adding China and India to make a G-10.

This shows the danger of a false characterization, even if it sounds idealistic and good for PR at first hearing: it leads to conclusions that would undermine the core usefulness of the actual G8.

What the G7/G8 Is

In reality, the G7 always consisted, not of all major democracies, nor of all economic powers, but of the specifically Western and Westernized democratic powers. These were the powers that were already joined institutionally in the Atlantic system of institutions – NATO, OECD, IEA, COCOM, and other related structures. The G7 was, accordingly, a part of the Atlantic system. It constituted an informal executive committee of the Atlantic system.

Russia's gradual inclusion in the 1990s fit in with this reality. Russia was brought in as a great power that belongs broadly to the Western (European or Christian heritage) civilization, one that was always a member of the Concert of Europe. It was the same reason why NATO in 1994 declared itself open to eventual membership for Russia and all post-Soviet OSCE countries. The West did not consider Russia ripe for NATO membership yet; the G7 was considered a more appropriate venue for it at that stage. Even that was far from a perfect "fit", since Russia was far from being a full democracy. But it was a much better fit than is implied when G7 is depicted in undifferentiated globalistic democratic language.

The most skillful G7 proponents have advocated that the Group be reinforced institutionally as an organizing core for a powerfully structured Community of the Atlantic and Pacific basin democracies. The Community would be formed by drawing to-

gether all the Atlantic institutions into a unified structure with a common identity, with the G7 as its focal point. This was the goal of James R. Huntley, founder of the Committee (now Council) for a Community of Democracies (CCD).

To date, this grand scheme has yet to materialize. CCD was not able to raise money to advance its goal, a Community of the Western Democracies. It did however find NED funding for the wider but thinner project of an association of all the world's democracies. Madeleine Albright took up this project and put it into practice, creating the very loose international grouping that is today called "the Community of Democracies" – a name that can be a source of confusion since CCD had something much thicker in mind for a "community" of Western democracies. Meanwhile the G7 has had to look elsewhere for upgrading its élan.

How Russia G-8 membership has served vital Western interests

In the '90s, the G7 got enhanced attention by putting Russia on its platter as a great power to assimilate. This served to focus enormous public attention on the G7, such as might be envied by the other Atlantic institutions. It also gave the G7 a project – helping with the economic and political reform of Russia – around which to build some institutional membranes, and a focus for keeping up its energies during the placid moments of the 1990s.

It has also been a basis for important practical steps in cooperation with Russia. Rose Gottemoeller, non-proliferation director in the Clinton Administration, has pointed out that the G8 played an essential role in launching and gradually developing nuclear cooperation projects with Russia. These projects have contributed, quietly, to a profound improvement in the nuclear security situation.

Russia's G8 standing was also extremely useful for the West during the Kosovo war of 1999, when the half-integration of Russia with the West was at risk of unraveling completely. Yeltsin and Chernomyrdin were able to come back from behind politically and salvage the relation, but only barely, and thanks to the continued connective links maintained all along through the G8. It was the G8 that served as the venue where Russia could sit as an equal and reach with some dignity a common policy with the West

on Kosovo. Without Russia's help in getting Serbia to fold, NATO probably would have had to go into a ground war against the Serbs. This would have been extremely divisive: the allies were very reluctant to put forces on the ground. The heavy casualties and stories of the moral ambiguity of the war would have put NATO itself at risk of unraveling as an alliance and an institution. It was Russia, through the G8, that got NATO out of the hole.

We should ask whether we would really prefer now if Russia had never been in the G8 and we had ended up stuck in a Kosovo ground war. Would it have been better to put NATO at risk of falling apart, for the sake of keeping a sense of virginal purity in its sister institution, the G8?

We will probably need Russia's help again. After September 11, 2001 we needed it for the war in Afghanistan. We continue to need its oil and gas, even as we are worried about dependence on it. We needed Russia in both world wars; we needed Russia's European soul for getting us peacefully out of the Cold War; we will continue to need Russia in the sequel to the series of world wars – the global war with Islamist extremism and terrorism. These are vital, survival interests. Can we afford to undermine the political and diplomatic basis for proceeding with them, by kicking Russia out of the G8? In principle, we need to develop that basis further: we need more of Russia than we have got of it, so to speak. But political circumstances are not propitious.

How Russia in the G8 also creates problems for the West

Despite the importance of having Russia in the G8 today, there is a price paid for it. At the G8 one is ideally supposed to focus on the common interest, shunting to the side the traditional role of threats or implied threats in negotiations. No Western power does this perfectly; Russia less so. Russia sees itself as having a number of interests in opposition to the West, to be dealt with by power-politics bargaining, i.e. implied threat, habitual resistance to Western positions for the sake of bargaining chips, and using its energy power to maneuver Western countries into separate deals with it. This makes it harder for the West to upgrade its common interest at G8 meetings.

Russia has often seen its first interest in the G8 as

one of maintaining its own status there and perfecting its claim to full membership, rather than enhancing the status and solidarity of the G8 as a whole. Nevertheless, the latter, G8 strengthening purpose is one that the Russian elite, when it was in a more idealistic mood in 2001-2, gave impressive evidence of sharing; indeed, it spoke of it more than is usual among Western elites.

As the rotating G8 president this year, Russia has conducted itself well in preparing the agenda of the G8. It set forth a series of themes relevant to G8 development as an institutional group. In this, it has done better than some previous G8 presidencies.

Russia has highlighted energy security, internationally infectious diseases, and education for adaptation to globalization. These are central G8 concerns.

It would have been a laudable and successful debut for Russia as G8 president – except for one nagging fact: Russia

started off its year as president with a “gas war” with Ukraine. This underlined the fact that Russia is not just an ally of the West vis-a-vis the geopolitical use of oil by Islamic regimes; it is also sometimes itself an adversary in its own geopolitical use of oil and gas. This adversarial aspect will continue as long as Russia and the West have substantial divergences in geopolitical concepts.

And the divergences remain large. The dismal fact is that Russia and the West have delayed persistently on the need, obvious ever since 1991, of eliminating their opposing Cold War strategic concepts and replacing them – along with the interconnected systems of force structures, geopolitical clienteles, and planning and decision channels – with an integrated, compatible concept and system. This failure has been seen both on the nuclear and conventional (NATO) levels, where the two sides have only continued to pare down the differences by detente (reduction of separate forces) rather than to build an entente (a

part-integrated system for pursuit of shared objectives). Locked by default into conflicting strategies, they naturally apply their resources – including oil and gas resources – to tip “their side” of the scale.

It is also a fact of nature that Russia, as an energy exporter, has opposite energy pricing interests than the other, energy importing G7 and OECD countries. This makes it more difficult, although also more important, for the West to keep Russia on “its side” and avert an anti-Western alliance of oil and gas powers. Better for the different interests on prices and supplies to be traded off within the G8 hut as friends rather than have Russia go outside the hut into an

OPEC huddle. Such trade-offs of huge interest are never easy even while staying friends, but they are not impossible, as Norway for example has shown. The space for bargains, though tight, has not disappeared: Russia still needs its Western consumers, the West still needs Russian oil, and the Russian elite is still oriented to the West as its natural home.

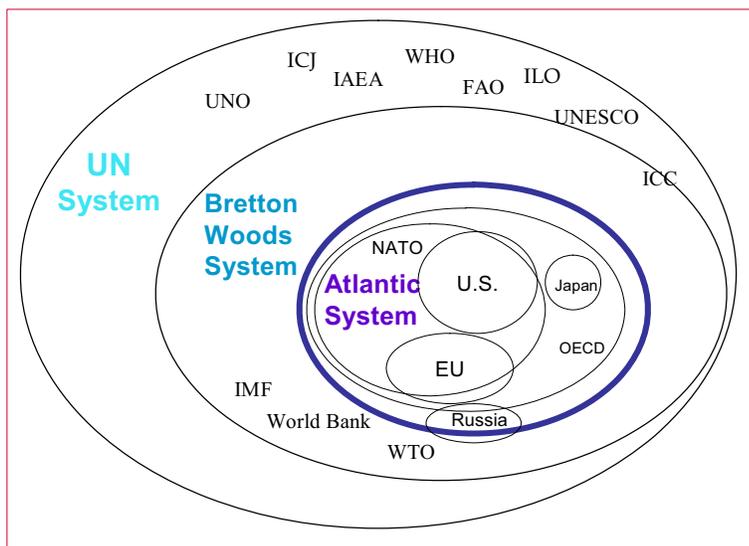
While the cumulative trend since 1985 has been for Russia

to adapt to the Western world order, and Russia has come a tremendous distance – taking enormous and costly strides toward the West, against which the Western attempts to accommodate Russia look tiny by comparison – nevertheless there have been a number of unnerving ups and downs and threats of reversal. The downturn of the last couple years has actually been less sharp than most of the earlier ones, although it has continued for a longer time.

During each of the downturns, there were calls just as loud and widespread as those of today for giving up on Russia. We need to realize the price we would have paid had we heeded them.

What To Do with Russia?

In this very mixed situation, what is to be done? Expulsion or suspension of Russia from the G8 would be counterproductive. The calls for this have been a matter of grandstanding and media feeding.



A more modest proposal, advanced in a Council on Foreign Relations report on *Russia's Wrong Direction*, is to revive the G7 alongside the G8. This need not be greatly at the expense of the G8: the latter would still serve an important function, in parallel with the G7 functions as executive committee for the NATO-OECD system. Some elements of a renewed G7 are already being implemented quietly, and a financial G7 has always continued to exist alongside the G8. Announcement of a formal G7 reconstitution, however, would be premature. Russia's G8 presidency this year is already in process, and is not seriously harming the Group. After the year ends, the G8 will go back to meeting under Western presidencies for a number of years to come.



Long before there is another Russian G8 presidency, Russia will have held its domestic presidential elections in 2008. Much of the negative turn in Russia has flowed from Putin's preparations for controlling the results of this electoral process.

It can hardly be overstated how important it is for the West that the restructured Russian leadership after 2008 should come primarily from the more Western-oriented side of the Putin administration, not the anti-Western side; that, in the period when Putin is deciding who to support as his successor, he should continue to identify more with the West than against it; and that, in its formative period, the reconfigured regime should define its identity along Western lines and feel itself as belonging to the West and having a home there. For this purpose, exclusion would be counter-productive; continued constructive engagement is the better option, unsatisfying though it may be emotionally at this time. Russia is not Iran: it is not a regime far off the deep end, with which engagement always feels like appeasement, rather it is a country that Westerners are disappointed with, but that has itself been conducting large-scale appeasement of the West in recent years.

Russia is also not China, which has been treated much better than Russia and let into the WTO ear-

lier, despite remaining a party-state under the Communist Party and a predatory trader. If Russia in its present conditions comes to be treated still worse, the double standard will be obvious – it is already widely

commented on in Russia – and will lead to counterproductive conclusions about how to get good treatment from the West.

If Russia had been deeply integrated with the West in the 1990s, through, say, NATO and IEA as well as the G8, it would make sense to ask whether there are some cautious steps back that could be appropriately taken in our institutionalized relations in this period. But it has not been deeply integrated and there is virtually no flex space for stepping back at this time. That is

why the debate boils down in practice to how can the West continue to advance the constructive engagement of Russia despite the unpropitious atmosphere, and how much should it quietly renew autonomous G7 channels at the same time.

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What to do with the Atlantic institutions?

Looking more broadly at the Atlantic system, the question boils down to this: how can the Atlantic institutions be further developed in the meanwhile, if relations with Russia are stalled? Can the Alliance complete the assimilation of its Pacific wing – Japan, Australia, New Zealand – into the NATO core? Can it develop its new partnerships in every region of the world, focused on new tasks and enemies? Can it adapt its institutions and its work more effectively to these new tasks of facing a new enemy, and one of a new kind? All of this is underway, although not on an adequately transformative scale.

If NATO and the other Atlantic institutions do all this, and on an adequate scale, they may finally move almost completely outside of the psychological orbit of the Cold War – the orbit within which many Russians and Westerners alike have continued to perceive NATO and Atlanticism. This mental association has been the largest single factor inhibiting mutual assimilation of Russia and NATO in the years

since 1991. It may take another cycle of history, in which there is less focus on Russia, to overcome it.

Waiting for another cycle of history is an easy answer; too easy, for it entails uncontrollable risks. A cycle of delay could degenerate at any time into conflict. There is a precedent: it took two cycles before the Atlantic Allies got it right with Germany, and the second cycle brought an even deadlier world war than the first.

There might be greater cause for optimism if the official Atlanticist milieu were still imbued with the federative spirit of the founders of NATO, seeking out, e.g., every practical step for bringing the Atlantic into a deep enough political union that the military side of Atlanticism would no longer overshadow the political side. In that case, transformation might go far enough to complete the cycle before new crises arise. At best, however, one can say only that some elements of that spirit have been recovered in recent years.

It will be hard to freeze the present half-way relationship with Russia and refocus elsewhere for any lengthy time; too many problems will keep dragging the two sides back into trouble. If the Russia-G8 issue gets a rest, Russia-NATO issues may soon come to the fore. The push for Ukrainian membership in NATO in 2008 would likely bring a new crisis in Russia-West relations. This would be piled atop the present negative turn in Russia, which was already sharply exacerbated by the Ukrainian election battle of 2004. One never knows when one gets to the straw that breaks the camel's back.

To be sure, Ukrainian entry in NATO could be turned into a neutral or even positive factor if the NATO-Russia structures were strengthened at the same time. This was the solution found in the two previous rounds of NATO expansion: the NATO-Russia Council was formed in 1997 and upgraded in 2002, and it served greatly to soften the blow in each case. However, in the present period of mutual disillusion, a further upgrading is less likely, a crisis in relations more likely.

If matters are nevertheless kept on an even keel – if the issue of Russia in the G8 is left to rest after this year, if NATO either defers Ukrainian membership or balances it with enhanced relations with Russia as in the previous rounds of expansion, if meanwhile NATO focuses primarily on adapting to the global

struggle with terrorism, and on transforming itself and expanding its reach to the Pacific allies and to partnerships elsewhere in the world, if the Cold War configuration of NATO versus Russia finally fades out of NATO's consciousness of itself and Russia's consciousness of NATO – then the prospects after the 2008 Russian elections may not be so bad after all.

These are big “ifs”. If they come to pass, they will give the West a respite: a period of half a dozen years after 2008 to evaluate the results of the leadership changes in Russia, before Russia would again hold the rotating leadership of the G8. If Russian then continues to go in a negative direction, the time may arrive for formally reconstituting a G7, or even for suspending Russia from the G8. But it is no less possible that Russia's underlying trend since 1985 – adaptation to Western global leadership – will regain predominance. In that case, there will be another opportunity for integration of Russia into the West. It will be important for the West to be prepared for it this time, as it was not in 1991 or the years after.

If Russia were thus to come back the westward way, the negative turn in 2004-6 would look in retrospect like another of the many blips that have floated across the screen – floated very worrisomely, and then dissipated – in the course of the long process of Russia's transformation. It is a process that has taken Russia far away from its starting point as a Communist superpower at the center of an alternative world system; it may yet deposit it into the position of a contributing great power within the Western world system. □

Dr. Ira Straus is U.S. coordinator of the Committee on Eastern Europe and Russia in NATO. He is not part of the Streit Council. He was Executive Director of the Association to Unite the Democracies from 1985 to 1991.