

# Book Review: The Limits of Partnership: US-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century

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*The Limits of Partnership* calls for a fundamental reassessment of the principles and practices that drive U.S.-Russian relations, and offers a path forward to meet the urgent challenges facing both countries. **Paul Wingrove** appreciated the depth, perception and nuances in this book.

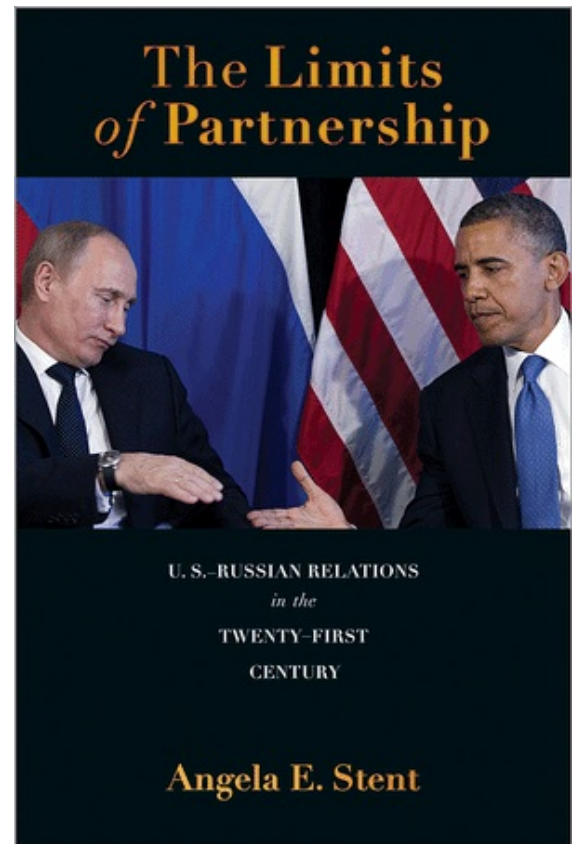
**The Limits of Partnership – US – Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century. Angela Stent. Princeton University Press. 2014.**

Angela Stent has written an enlightening, well-informed and – above all – measured and balanced account of relations between the USA and Russia, from the downfall of the Soviet Union to the present day. Her narrative covers US-Russian conflict and co-operation globally (the war on terror, Afghanistan, the Middle East, Europe), and is substantially up-to-date, although this review refers to the hardback edition of the book published in 2014, which does not include the extra material on the Ukraine crisis found in the more recent paperback edition.

Stent is well placed to write an authoritative account. She works primarily in the academic world (Georgetown University – and she has taught at MGIMO in Moscow) and has spent some time in US government. Thus, she draws not only on the academic literature but also on inside knowledge and a substantial range of high level contacts, many of whom she has interviewed. Her list of interviewees includes an impressive number of the key US diplomatic and political players, as well as – importantly – *some of* their high level Russian counterparts. Their perceptions, analyses and anecdotes are well used. Occasionally, they just happen to be interesting (did Sarkozy really go into negotiations following the Russian-Georgian war of 2008 without a map of the region? Apparently so.)

The questions at the heart of this book turn out to be largely American questions about Russia, and questions that actually are not much changed from what they were at the start of the Cold War: what sort of state are we – the USA – dealing with here? and then: how to deal with it, if we have an agreed answer to the first question? questions that some felt would not need to be asked *since* the end of the USSR would bring an end to US-Russian competition. As during the Cold War, these questions have produced a broad range of answers and proposed policy responses – from the pragmatic and realist (Russia is a normal state with national interests, forget their domestic politics) to the values approach (it may have changed since the fall of communism, but Russia is internally a corrupt, authoritarian state, and externally *an* imperialist power and needs to be both changed and checked).

Of course, as with the Cold War analyses, some turn the argument round and hold that however Russia behaves in the contemporary era, the West is largely to blame – NATO enlargement and EU expansion, bypassing the United Nations in international actions in Kosovo and Iraq, missile defence systems, exporting democracy, and a number of other policies and actions, all have stung Russia, which is still recovering from the humiliation of losing an empire and – as some would have it – losing the Cold War and finding itself isolated and enfeebled in the USA's uni-polar



world. The USA, in other words, did not and does not understand Russia. Notably, some suggest, the USA did not understand the sensitivity of Russia towards incursions into post-Soviet space, which has produced the most tense moments in recent US-Russian relations. This is a debate which deeply divides the academic community, diplomats, and politicians, *and there* are academic or political figures who will maintain that we understand Russia only too well. Thus, under President G W Bush, a robust view of Russia's behaviour was to be found in the office of Vice-President Cheney, a stout defender of the 'values' approach to Russia; and it exists in Congress, which remains highly sceptical of Russian policy, both domestic and foreign. Presidents, despite some of their public utterances, have tended towards an – at least initially – optimistic pragmatism.



**President Barack Obama and President Vladimir Putin walk to the G8 Summit dinner following their bilateral meeting in Ireland on 17 June 2013.**

This uncertainty about what Russia is, what it might be, and how to deal with it, has in part determined the volatile pattern of US relations with Russia since 1991. While we all may be familiar with the Obama 'reset' of relations, arguably there have been four resets on the US side since 1991, each ending in disappointment – that is, American disappointment. Notably, the George W Bush reset ended with the Russian-Georgian war and the Obama reset with the Crimean and Ukrainian crisis of 2014. Stent writes that no US President has found the key to a long-term, qualitatively better relationship with Moscow, which will only be found when both parties move beyond the Cold War and post-Cold War *past* – which is true, but possibly doesn't take us very far. Perhaps the error – if there has been an error – was not incorporating Russia into some sort of European or Euro-Atlantic security structure at the point, perhaps in the 1990s, when it might have been conceivable, and when there was such thinking in the air, mixed in with talk of a common European home, or a European confederation. As Stent observes, the Russians have twice inquired about joining NATO. But perhaps there were too many doubts and suspicions, and interests, for that ever to be a realistic proposition, and now the time has passed. And, we might ask, was there ever enough westernising sentiment in Moscow to build upon? The Gorbachev moment was fleeting, and the Yeltsin years too fragile. *Not many years beyond* the millennium, despite early hopes for Putin, rapprochement with the west *seemed problematic*. But that did not necessarily imply a return to a new cold war; a difficult and enervating relationship, one of conflict and co-operation, was just as imaginable. And yet, in outline, a barely resolvable conflict in the heart of Europe was visible even as the USSR fell. While the USA sought a 'Europe whole and free', Moscow still seemed to aspire to a sphere of privileged interest in the region. Hence, while Europe has been for some time, for Bush and Obama, second in their priorities, it still holds the most potential for damaging US-Russian confrontation.

Stent provides a poised, readable overview of the US-Russian relationship in the post-Cold War era, and fine,

balanced, knowledgeable accounts of some of the key events and elements in that relationship: the impact of the Iraq war, the colour revolutions, the Russian-Georgian war; and, naturally, a substantial chapter assesses the political significance of Russia's energy resources and its economy. What is Stent's broad conclusion? To maintain long-term American engagement with Russia, but don't expect too much from it (future POTUS, please note).

Read again, slowly, I appreciated the depth and perception and nuances of her account, which should be the starting point for students and professionals. It would be interesting to have a similar account from the viewpoint of a Russian academic, but I suspect we may have to wait some time for that.

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**Paul Wingrove** was formerly Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Greenwich. [Read more reviews by Paul.](#)

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