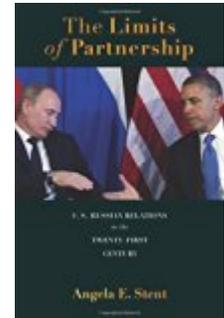


Angela E. Stent. *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. 384 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-15297-4.



Reviewed by Kimberly Marten

Published on H-Diplo (December, 2014)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Angela E. Stent, in her book *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, provides an engaging, accessible, and well-written review of U.S.-Russian relations from the Soviet collapse in 1991 through mid-2013, when her book went to press. Her book is enlivened by personal recollections and interviews with U.S. and Russian policymakers, stemming from her years as one of the top Russia hands in the United States. In addition to her current work as a professor directing the Center for Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies at Georgetown University, Stent has served both on the U.S. State Department's Office of Policy Planning Staff and as the National Intelligence Officer for Russia and Eurasia at the National Intelligence Council—all during the time period covered by the book. Her real-world experience shines through her analysis, lifting this book beyond a typical academic history of events.

Stent's insights are especially timely and useful given the sharp deterioration of the U.S.-Russia relationship in 2014, because she tells us how we

got here. Her theme is that throughout the dozen years she covers, every attempt at outreach and cooperation by one side or the other eventually hit a brick wall. The fundamental problem, she argues, is a disconnect in how the two states see the power balance between them.

Moscow, she argues, wants to be accepted as a great power, still equal in status and influence to the United States despite its loss of Soviet territory and the Warsaw Pact alliance, and despite the decline of Russia's military and economic reach in the 1990s. President Boris Yeltsin was disappointed that the vaunted U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) partnerships with Russia did not yield more substance for Russian national interests. Vladimir Putin's rule centers on the return of Russia as a military and economic powerhouse that must be taken seriously. From Washington's perspective, in contrast, the economic core of Russia is weakened by corruption and an overreliance on raw materials exports. The United States believes that the power balance asymmetrically favors the West, in spite of Putin's braggadocio.

Russia has often simply been seen as not as important as other pressing issues facing American decision makers.

Washington wants Russia to play by the liberal internationalist rules laid out by the United States and its Western allies, urging Moscow to join the world system created under U.S. leadership after World War II. Russia resents the idea that it should recognize the rules that the United States holds dear, believing that the United States wants it to remain a junior partner forever, no matter how much strength it regains. The current crisis in Ukraine and the follow-on sanctions regime, while occurring too recently to be covered by Stent's book, are thus understandable from her analysis as a battle of wills. The outcome of the conflict will determine who is right—Russia or the United States—about their relative balance of power going forward.

For the most part, Stent's book goes chronologically step by step through the major diplomatic and security policy events that defined U.S.-Russian relations in this era. She posits that there were at least three “resets” after the Cold War, with Barack Obama's famed 2009 initiative simply the most recent attempt. The first was heralded by the emergence of the new Russia out of the Soviet collapse in 1991, and what she terms the “modest” efforts of U.S. President George H. W. Bush to react (p. 7). Stent argues that because of election year politics, Bush in 1992 had to concentrate on supporting the independence of the other post-Soviet states, rather than on the Russia agenda. Nonetheless she finds that the United States succeeded in its goal of controlling potential nuclear materials proliferation from Russia. Second was Bill Clinton's effort to create a bilateral U.S.-Russian framework to enable a host of U.S. security objectives: the denuclearization of other post-Soviet successor states (especially Ukraine, which bargained hard); ending violence in the former Yugoslavian territories of Bosnia and Kosovo; the enlargement of NATO; and an end to the Iranian

nuclear weapons program. She counts these efforts as partially successful, but notes that once again U.S. concerns about other states—this time those in Eastern Europe that wanted NATO membership—prevented the United States from truly creating the kind of special relationship with Russia that Yeltsin desired. Russia's bitterness, she argues, made it appear “more important for Russia to oppose what NATO was doing than to help solve a major humanitarian crisis” in the Balkans (p. 44). The third reset attempt, Stent argues, was Putin's, when he reached out to the United States after al Qaeda's attacks in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001. Putin's goal was to create an antiterrorist alliance that would be the basis for a new world order, again elevating Russia to a status equal to the United States. These hopes were dashed when U.S. President George W. Bush ignored Russian concerns by unilaterally abrogating the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty that had formed the core of Cold War arms control, and invading Iraq without heeding Russia's opposition in the United Nations Security Council. Cooperation was further undermined by the so-called Colored Revolutions in post-Soviet Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, which challenged by proxy the authoritarian system that Putin was building in Russia.

The one exception to Stent's chronological analysis is her chapter “Economics and Energy,” which contains brief outlines of issues ranging from the energy resources of the Caspian Sea and Arctic Ocean to Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization. While the chapter includes some unique items, like a summary of Stent's conversation with Putin about whether Russia is an energy superpower, as well as some important insights into Russian thinking, its historical summaries are too brief and disjointed to fit well into the book's overall analytic framework.

Stent's book does not provide a detailed, day-by-day summary of all of Washington's decisions about Russia. That can be found in a rich existing

literature, for example, James M. Goldgeier's book about NATO expansion, *Not Whether But When: The U.S. Decision to Enlarge NATO* (1999), and diplomat Strobe Talbott's memoir about Clinton's administration, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (2002). Nor does Stent go into great empirical depth about Russian thinking or decision making. While she cites a number of Russian sources, the book concentrates on U.S. policymaking and U.S. reactions to Russian moves. Stent also makes no attempt to contribute to political science theorizing, although her book falls squarely within the realist tradition.

Instead, her goal is to explain to a broad audience why the U.S.-Russia relationship always seems to go awry—and to provide food for thought from her unique experiences and vantage points to future U.S. decision makers about what might be done differently. In that she succeeds. As Stent sums up in her concluding chapter, the major question that the United States has repeatedly faced in its decisions about Russia is how to deal with “Russia's unique post-imperial preoccupations” (p. 257). She urges that expectations be limited to avoid further disappointments on both sides.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: Kimberly Marten. Review of Angela E. Stent. *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. December, 2014.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42263>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.