US RESPONSIBILITIES TO
RUSSIA IN A CHANGING WORLD,
OR ARE WE KNITTING SOCKS
FOR UNCLE JOE AGAIN?

Rex Wade argues persuasively that it is in the interests of the United States and the West to provide support and assistance for Russia's transition to democracy and a market economy. And it is surely difficult to take issue with his conclusion that the success of this transition is far from assured and that the direction Russia takes in coming decades will be a key factor in global stability. We can begin, then, with a set of shared assumptions about the central importance of Russia, which will undoubtedly remain a major power, and the desirability of doing what is possible to enhance that country's political and economic security and well-being.

Agreement over such generalities, however, obscures the really knotty questions of policy that Russia's future is likely to pose. Among these are:

— To what extent will structural factors determine Russia's and America's future, thereby making policy initiatives relatively irrelevant? In other words, does the West have the wherewithal to make a difference?
— To what extent is Russia's domestic evolution immune to external forces, and how can the West minimize the risks inherent in "meddling" in Russia's internal politics?
— Are the processes of democratization and economic reform as tightly linked as Wade and others imply? If they are separable, and there is a theoretical and empirical basis for believing thus, what are the implications for Western policy?

Global Structure and Reform in Russia

It is by no means clear how great a difference a Western commitment to provide long-term assistance and encouragement in Russia can make. There are forces both within and outside the country that limit the impact of foreign policy. Here, we will speak briefly to the imperative of global
structure and will turn shortly to the limits imposed by factors inside Russia itself.

The cataclysmic events of recent years, including the demise of Marxism-Leninism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, were partly the result of long-term forces that can only be affected at the margins. Both the Soviet Union and the United States are victims of an historical power cycle in which some actors, as a result of technological or ideological factors, find themselves playing the role of global leaders, even hegemons, during particular eras, only to be succeeded by others as a result of continuing structural change and perhaps imperial overstretch.

The United States and the Soviet Union became superpowers as a result of a concatenation of events during World War II which reduced other key actors to proxies, allies or even satellites. In recent decades, the dominance of both has been markedly reduced as a result of political, economic and technological innovation elsewhere and the burden of the Cold War and subsidizing global alliances. The erosion of Soviet power was highly visible and its consequences are the subject of the present seminar. What is less visible but just as consequential is the erosion of American and European power that seriously limits their capacity to assist Russia, other Soviet successor states and Eastern Europe.

The evidence is there. Germany has its hands full financing its own reunification and seems astonishingly ill-equipped to provide leadership even within the European Community, not to mention the former Soviet zone of influence. The EC itself — unable to carry out the promises of Maastricht, paralyzed by the bloody breakup of Yugoslavia and mired in painful recession — looks less a force in global politics every day. That leaves Japan and the United States. The former is mired in its own recession, which is likely to persist in the face of a strong yen and growing tension with the United States, and still is not able politically or psychologically to stride confidently by itself across the world stage. As for the United States, it is probably in the midst of global retrenchment. Without entering the “declinist” debate in detail, one need only recall the precedent of the United States going hat in hand to collect the resources necessary to fight a war against Saddam Hussein and keep open the West’s oil lifeline. Is it likely that a country that needs Korean funding to protect its interests in the Middle East can or will do what is necessary for Russia?

Promises that cannot be kept and overexpectation on the part of Russian leaders could help produce in Russia the sort of political and economic backlash that aid is intended to prevent. Woe to the Russian leader who finds his fate tightly linked to foreigners who cannot deliver the goods.