My subject today, relations between the United States and Europe, on the one hand and Russia on the other, raises four questions: Where are we now in this relationship? How did we get here? Where should we go from here? And how do we get there? Let me confess at the outset that I am more confident that I know the correct answers to the first three of these questions than to the fourth – which is, of course, the most urgent and important of them.

II

Where are we now? We are in a bad place. Relations are worse, and more dangerous, than at any time since the beginning of the 1980s. Each side regards the other with suspicion and growing hostility. American officials talk of evicting Russia from the Group of Eight and creating a special rapid-reaction force to oppose Russia. Russia intensifies its ties with America’s Latin American nemesis, Hugo
Chavez of Venezuela and increases its defense spending. The deterioration of what, in the days of the Cold War, were called East-West relations has made it far more difficult to deal with what is perhaps the most serious security threat the world faces: Iran’s nuclear weapons program. To have a chance of stopping that program without war requires the credible threat of stringent sanctions. No such threat is credible without wholehearted Russian support. Yet the Russian government has declined to provide the kind of support an effective policy requires. An Iranian nuclear arsenal would hardly serve Russian interests, so the Russian reluctance is to be understood, I believe, at least in part as the result of a reflexive opposition to any initiative sponsored by the United States, and of a general policy of trying to weaken the American position in the world however and whenever possible.

The August war in Georgia symbolizes the growing rift between Russia and the West and has also, of course, significantly worsened it. The prevailing view of that conflict is the same in both Russia and the United States. Each regards what happened as a wanton act of
aggression against a small, beleaguered nation; but each side casts the other as the aggressor. In Russian eyes, Georgia attacked South Ossetia, with the complicity of the United States, for the purpose of subjugating the non-Georgians in that territory. Russia came to their rescue, delivering them from what the Russians call, with considerable exaggeration, “genocide.” Americans see the events of August 7 as a bullying Russian attack on a smaller, weaker, and, unlike Russia itself, democratic neighbor.

Neither of these accounts fully accords with reality. Russia’s devotion to the rights of ethnic, national and religious minorities will come as news to the Chechens. And the Russian version of events omits the destruction of civilian property and infrastructure in Georgia by the Russian army and air force and Russian indifference, at best, to murderous attacks on Georgian civilians in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The commonly accepted American account, however, is not a model of accuracy either. Georgia is not an exemplary Western-style democracy. Its press, for example, operates under constraints that no fully
democratic country would permit. As for the fighting itself, the
preponderance of evidence strongly suggests that it was Georgia, not
Russia, that struck first, by launching an attack on South Ossetia. The
non-Georgians there and in Abkhazia certainly did not and do not wish
to be governed from Tblisi. They had unhappy experiences with the
new Georgian government in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of
the Soviet Union, experiences they are anxious not to repeat. The
motive for Russia’s presence in these two territories is undoubtedly a
cynical one, having more to do with Russian power than with the rights
of the local people; but the fact is that that presence does provide
welcome protection to the majority of the people living there.

Nor is the United States particularly well placed to criticize the
Russian intervention. Since the end of the Cold War this country has
conspicuously championed the rights of minorities around the world, on
occasion, as in the Balkans, even going to war in their defense. A
dispassionate observer could be forgiven for concluding that the
principle underlying American policy on humanitarian intervention is to
provide sympathy and support for beleaguered minority groups that Russia opposes while offering neither to beleaguered minority groups that Russia supports. Moreover, while the distorted picture that most Russians have of the Georgian conflict undoubtedly stems from the control that the government exerts over the mass media in their country, the fact that so many Americans also subscribe to an inaccurate account is not so easily explained.

The recent past aside, opposing preferences for Georgia’s future have the potential to make the relationship between Russia and the West even worse – perhaps much worse – than it already is. Both American presidential candidates have expressed their support for admitting Georgia to membership in NATO, the Western military alliance, and for admitting another, larger former Soviet republic turned independent country, Ukraine, as well. The Russian government has made clear that it considers both initiatives to be entirely unacceptable. Indeed, the prospect of Georgian NATO membership was surely one reason for the harshness of Russia’s military action in August. On this issue,
unfortunately, the West has no good options.

Before the August war the United States advocated including Georgia and Ukraine in NATO. The Western European members of the alliance, particularly France and Germany, did not agree and would surely veto a formal proposal for admission now. If the United States presses the case strenuously a transatlantic dispute as acrimonious as the one provoked by the American decision to attack Iraq in 2003 could result. American officials, and those who aspire to succeed them in office, may privately count on a European veto; but they cannot finesse the issue so easily. The United States could give Georgia a unilateral guarantee, as it does, for example, to South Korea.

Such a guarantee, in view of the events of August 7, would have to be accompanied by preparations to mount an active defense of Georgia. The last time such a necessity arose, the United States stationed 440,000 troops, along with thousands of tanks, aircraft, and nuclear weapons, in Germany. Thus a security guarantee to Georgia would in all likelihood revive the military standoff of the Cold War, although in the Caucasus
rather in Germany. Today, however, with far smaller armed forces and with the American military already overstretched by its commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq, it seems fair to ask where the requisite forces would come from, and to wonder whether the American public would be willing to authorize deploying any forces at all on behalf of Georgia and against Russia.

NATO has not deployed western forces on the territories of the formerly communist countries that have joined NATO since the end of the Cold War, but that practice has now come to an end. In the wake of the Georgian war, Poland announced its decision to permit the deployment on its soil of an American-controlled ballistic missile defense installation. The reason for this decision, Polish officials made clear, was not a fear of an Iranian nuclear attack but rather a desire to ensure that the United States will defend Poland against Russia by playing host to American military personnel, who come along with the radars and rockets they have agreed to accept. As they did in Germany during the Cold War, American personnel are to serve as a “trip-wire,”
to bring the United States into any war that breaks out there. This means that, with or without Georgia, NATO’s eastern members will be divided into two separate categories: some with American personnel within their borders, which are presumably safer for this; others – the three tiny Baltic countries bordering Russia, for example, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – without such troops and the security they provide.

The inclusion of Ukraine in NATO would be even more problematical than Georgian membership. Ukraine is far larger and would require a much bigger Western military force for its defense. But Russia could do grave damage to Ukraine without firing a shot, by stirring up nationalist sentiment among ethnic Russians in the Crimean peninsula, where it is already strong, and in the largely Russian Donbass region in the eastern part of the country. Bringing Ukraine into NATO could conceivably set in motion a series of events that would end by tearing apart that European country of more than fifty million people.

Yet declining to extend the alliance further east or to offer unilateral American guarantees would undercut the American rhetoric of
solidarity with Georgia and so amount to a political defeat, a retreat in the face of what American officials have branded Russian aggression. It would also violate the pledge, often repeated by the last two American administrations, that no deserving European country will be left out of NATO.

In the Caucasus, therefore, the United States can neither safely move forward to include Georgia in its alliance system nor gracefully refrain from doing so. A headline in the satirical newspaper *The Onion* offered what is, alas, the only cost-free policy in these circumstances: “U.S. Advises Allies Not to Border Russia.” In the absence of what might be called the “tectonic” solution to the problem, we are stuck, with no good options in that corner of Eurasia and with a deteriorating relationship with the largest country in the world and one still armed with thousands of nuclear weapons. How did this happen?

III

Part of the answer to that question lies in Russia’s experience after the end of the Soviet Union, which created resentment of and hostility to
the West in general and the United States in particular. Russia suffered a dizzying loss of international power and prestige, which Russians to whom both had been important found particularly painful. The economic developments of the early years of post-communism made many Russians poorer. For this some of them blamed a Western-imposed regimen of shock therapy – although the West did not impose the economic measures that Russia adopted and in any event, as the economist Anders Aslund has shown, those measures were in fact too modest rather than too sweeping for Russia’s economic well-being. In addition, more than a few Russians retained elements of the non-Western outlook on politics and the anti-Western approach to foreign policy that they had learned in the Soviet era. One of these Russians, Vladimir Putin, became president of the country in 2000 and surrounded himself with like-minded members, current and former, of the security services. In recent years a rising tide of oil revenues has generated resources that their regime has used to win popularity at home and pursue more assertive policies beyond Russia’s borders. For the
deterioration of relations with the West, therefore, and all apart from the rights and wrongs of the conflict in Georgia, Russia bears a major share of the responsibility.

It does not, however, bear all of the responsibility; and post-Cold War relations between Russia on the one hand and Europe and the United States on the other had already taken a wrong turn well before August 7, 2008. The fateful turning point was the American-driven decision in the mid-1990s to expand NATO eastward to include countries formerly under communist rule. The policy of expansion had three poisonous effects on relations with Russia, which have become more toxic over time.

That policy broke the promise that western leaders had made several times to their Soviet counterparts as the Cold War wound down that their alliance would not extend its reach into what had been communist Europe. (For citations of some of these promises see Stephen F. Szabo, *The Diplomacy of German Unification*, New York: St. Martin’s, 1992, pp. 58-65.) The result was to create festering doubts, in
the minds of Russians, about the trustworthiness of the West. The American president Ronald Reagan had, it is true, adopted the principle, in dealing with the Soviet Union, of “trust but verify.” But that was a principle appropriate for a relationship between irreconcilable adversaries. It was not and is not a promising basis for the cordial relationship for which both sides hoped when the Cold War ended.

NATO expansion also proceeded in bad faith on the part of the United States. American officials offered several different, and not necessarily mutually compatible, rationales for it, and none of them made sense. On some occasions they described NATO membership for the formerly communist countries as a reward for becoming democracies. Why this was an appropriate basis for joining the alliance was never made clear, especially since during the Cold War undemocratic countries – Greece under the colonels, for example, and Turkey under military rule – had been members in good standing.

On other occasions NATO expansion was advertised as a way of promoting democracy where it had not yet fully taken hold. This made
no sense because the political direction of the initial new entrants, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, was not in doubt. Moreover, if the United States had truly believed that a place in NATO guaranteed free elections and constitutional rights, the offer of membership should immediately have been extended to the largest formerly communist country, where the fate of democracy was of paramount importance and where its success was far from guaranteed: namely, Russia. Instead, the Russians were told, several times and in no uncertain terms, that they would never be invited to join.

Indeed, the only coherent rationale for expanding NATO, and the reason that the Eastern Europeans, who had no doubts about their own commitment to democratic governance, wanted to belong, was to protect them against Russia. The Russians could see this perfectly well, and it did not improve their attitude to the West to have Western, and particularly American, officials tell them, often in patronizing tones, that NATO expansion was not aimed at them, when it was obvious to all that it was.
The Russians objected publicly and frequently to expansion but their objections were ignored. They were ignored because the United States and its allies could afford to ignore them. They could afford to do so – they were able, that is, to expand NATO toward Russia’s borders despite Russian objections – because Russia was too weak to stop them. This was the basis for the third malignant effect of NATO expansion. It brought home to Russia the continuing relevance of one of the oldest rules of geopolitics. Its classic formulation appears in the dialogue between the Melians and the Athenians in Thucydides’ account of the Peloponnesian Wars: the strong do what they will, while the weak do what they must.

Stalin offered his own version when, in urging the crash program of industrialization of the 1930s, he said that those who are weak are beaten. It was the effect of the policy of NATO expansion, conceived by the Clinton Administration and continued by the Bush Administration, to persuade post-Soviet Russia of the continuing validity of the central precept of Stalin’s statecraft, and the Russian government
acted on that precept in Georgia. American foreign policy has many legitimate aims, but validating Stalin’s view of the world is not one of them.

NATO’s Balkan Wars of the 1990s reinforced the point. Again over Russian objections, the United States twice attacked the Balkan nation with the closest ties to Russia: the Serbs. The issues at stake had no connection with any American strategic or economic interest and the campaigns were initially conducted without the authorization of the United Nations – or for that matter of the Congress of the United States. If the Russians came to believe that it was American policy in the wake of the Cold War for NATO to do whatever it wished, whenever it wished, wherever it wished, and that the principle underlying that policy was that might makes right, it cannot truthfully be said that they lacked evidence for such a conclusion.

One other point is worth making here: those of you who remember – or, in some cases, took part in – the political battle over NATO’s initial expansion a decade ago will recall that the public officials and their non-
governmental allies who were promoting expansion assured one and all that what has now come to pass would never happen. They confidently asserted that Russia would accept expansion and that the United States would never have to pay a price for it. We can now see those people to have been the foreign-policy equivalents of the economic officials and financial managers who just as confidently assured the world until very recently that the towering leverage they were assuming was entirely manageable and that the complicated financial instruments they were using would spread risk and thus make the financial system safer than it would otherwise have been. In both cases, we will be paying for their mistakes for some time to come.

Because it has brought no benefit to the United States, to Western Europe, or even to the new members of the Atlantic Alliance, NATO expansion has been a failure. It has also been a tragedy, because another, safer path was available to East-West relations in the wake of the Cold War, one that would have better served the interests of all countries involved. It is to that path that we must now try to return.
IV

The Cold War ended with a new kind of security system in place in Europe, one that I have elsewhere called a common security order and others have termed cooperative security. It had three distinguishing features. Two were embodied in the remarkable and underappreciated arms control agreements concluded in the final years of the Cold War and the beginning of the post-Cold War period: defense-dominance – that is, the configuration of armed forces to make them suitable for defending but not attacking territory; and transparency – that is, measures ensuring that each country knows precisely what armed forces all other countries have and what they are doing with them at all times.

The third defining feature was a commitment to resolve problems in cooperative fashion, with all parties having a say in dealing with them. That is how the arms control agreements came about, in particular the complicated Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) accord, which involved all the countries of the continent. It was the spirit in which the
United States, the Soviet Union, and their allies managed the end of their global rivalry and the collapse of communism in Europe. This spirit of cooperation also made possible the forging of the coalition that fought and won the first Gulf War.

A common security order did not and could not put an end to all political differences in Europe. It could, and would, however, ensure that these were resolved peacefully, even as political conflicts are resolved peacefully within countries governed by democratic principles, and indeed as they are in relations between and among democracies, such as the members of NATO. This was the security order to which Russia expected to belong in the post-Cold War era, and, given the way the Cold War had ended, had every reason to expect it would belong. Instead, by expanding NATO and excluding the largest country in Europe from it, the Clinton Administration destroyed it.

That administration constantly invoked history to justify and celebrate its foreign policies, but by discarding common security it ignored something that it could, and should, have learned from the
international history of the modern era. The immediate post-Cold War period was the fourth occasion on which, following the end of a great war, the European political and military order had to be reconstructed – the other three being the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 and the aftermaths of the two World Wars in 1918 and 1945, respectively. Because these occasions have so powerfully influenced subsequent events, historians have devoted considerable attention to them over the years; and while there they have certainly not reached complete agreement on the proper understanding of any, let alone all of them, one pattern has been widely recognized.

When a great war ends, the victors do better to integrate than to alienate their wartime adversaries. Integration was the policy toward France after 1815 and Germany and Japan after 1945, and that policy brought peace with the former foes. By contrast, the post-World War I settlement alienated Germany and paved the way for another terrible war two decades later. NATO expansion followed this unhappy precedent. Some of the leaders who gathered in Paris in 1918 to remake Europe
tried to forge a settlement acceptable to the defeated Germans but the
war had been so costly in blood and treasure for the winning countries
that their publics insisted on imposing terms that the Germans were
bound to resent and ultimately to resist. In the wake of the first world
war the victorious powers alienated Germany because their hands were
tied. For having alienated Russia in the same way in the wake of the
Cold War, the Clinton Administration has no such excuse.

It may be objected that no matter how attractive common security
is in principle, and no matter how feasible maintaining it may have been
in the early 1990s, reviving it has been rendered impossible by the
events of the last twelve years and Russia’s response to them. The
Russian president, Dimitri Medvedev, has declared that his country is
entitled to “a region of privileged interest” encompassing the countries
on its border. This sounds very much like a commitment to dividing
twenty-first century Europe, as it was so often divided in the past, into
spheres of influence, with the strongest countries exercising political and
military control over their neighbors.
Yet Europe is not necessarily doomed to another era of great-power rivalry of this kind. What, precisely, after all, can Mr. Medvedev mean by a privileged sphere? The Russian government will certainly not impose communism on the nations on Russia’s borders, as the Soviet Union did, since it is not about to impose communism on Russia itself. Nor will Moscow be able to expand to the borders that the Soviet Union had, especially without an ideological basis for a contemporary empire. Indeed, with its relatively short life expectancy and low fertility rate causing its population to fall by 700,000 each year, Russian power is likely to decline rather than increase in the years ahead.

Russia will, of course, continue to tower over its immediate neighbors and might like to be able to choose their governments for them. But here the Russians could learn a lesson from a much more powerful country, with an attractive ideology, that has nonetheless not managed, despite strenuous efforts, to implant its preferred form of government in countries it has actually occupied. And if the Russians do not consider the American experience of the last two decades to be a
cautionary example, they might reflect on their own recent history. It was the most potent of all modern political sentiments – nationalism – that brought the Soviet Union to an end, and it is nationalism that makes empire and traditional spheres of influence, which were common features of international politics for centuries, all but extinct today. Moscow can surely make trouble amongRussians in neighboring countries by exploiting this very sentiment, but it cannot govern or dominate those countries as did the Soviet Union.

What, then, do the Russians want that is actually within their power to get? They surely want neighboring countries to be friendly, they surely want to have a say in decision on international issues that affect them, and they surely do not want to have a military alliance at their doorstep from which they are excluded. These are conditions that any country would stipulate in answer to that question.

The third of these conditions means that, to end Russia’s estrangement from the West, and to recreate the lost common security order in Europe, NATO must eventually either include Russia or give
way to a new and more inclusive security order. This is sensible from the Western point of view as well, for there can be no serious, effective European security order that excludes Russia, nor can important American goals such as keeping Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons be achieved without the kind of active Russian cooperation that NATO expansion has blocked. A NATO with Russia as a member would be very different from today’s alliance. It would, for one thing, have a border with China. But the NATO of 2008 is scarcely the NATO of twenty years ago. In security affairs, as in other areas of human endeavor, change is the law of life. Such a change, however, desirable though it is, will not come soon. How then can it be brought about? How can the United States and Europe return to common security?

V

For American and Western policy to achieve this goal I have no roadmap to offer, only some thoughts on what we ought, I believe, to be doing, and not doing, in the months and years ahead. The first of them is to observe the fundamental principle of medical practice: first, do no
harm. The United States should avoid policies that make relations with Russia even worse than they are now.

This means deferring the offer of NATO membership to Georgia and Ukraine. It does not mean stating that in no circumstances can either of them join the alliance, but rather putting off the question into the future. It would be helpful if, in tandem with such a postponement, the European Union were to offer a closer association to both countries. It is also worth considering postponing the deployment of ballistic missile defense radar stations and interceptor missiles in Central Europe, at least until rigorous tests demonstrate, as I believe they have not yet done, that the United States has developed a system that actually works.

It may be objected that failing to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO immediately rewards Russia for its August war and thereby encourages other such initiatives in the future. Even if this is so, the consequences of deferral are preferable to the cost, in even more bitter and dangerous relations with Russia, of immediate expansion.

One suggested alternative, bringing Finland and Sweden into
NATO to afford a measure of protection to the Baltic countries, is no more attractive. It would do nothing for Georgia and Ukraine, and very little for Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania unless the Finns and the Swedes are willing to devote substantial military resources to their defense, a willingness for which I have seen no evidence.

A second requirement for the eventual restoration of a system of common security is for the United States to renew its commitment to such a system. This, in turn, requires recognizing that American and Western policy took a wrong turn with NATO expansion, and establishing a vision of a more cooperative relationship with Russia. Such a vision will take time to fulfill, if it can be fulfilled at all, but there is one constructive step that the United States can take in the next few months. Immediately after August 7 the Vice President, the Secretary of State, and the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (who subsequently became the 2008 Democratic Vice Presidential nominee) rushed to Tblisi. It would be useful for the next president to appoint a Secretary of State who can find his or her way to Moscow.
This leads to the most difficult condition for restoring common security: political change in Russia. My friend Edward Lucas, the Eastern Europe editor of *The Economist*, a seasoned Russia-watcher, and a leading contender, with his stimulating book *A New Cold War?*, for the distinction of being the Western writer most fiercely critical of the present Russian government, has called the country’s political system a “fascist kleptocracy.” Given the scale over the last decade of what is sometimes delicately termed the “transfer of assets” in Russia, from greedy, undeserving, but in some cases economically competent oligarchs to greedy, undeserving, and in all cases economically entirely incompetent *siloviki*, the noun seems fair enough. But the adjective goes too far.

Russia has no concentration camps, or plans to conquer all of Europe and subdue or murder all non-Russians. Mr. Putin is not Hitler or Stalin or even Brezhnev. Neither, however, is he Gorbachev or Yeltsin, two gentlemen whose reputations as genuine Russian patriots will someday, I believe, stand higher than that of the country’s current
prime minister. The Russian government is not fascist, but it is bad enough. It has steadily restricted democratic practices. It has proven mysteriously unable to find the murderers of its critics and opponents. It has encouraged the formation of groups espousing ugly forms of nationalism. It is not a regime that would fit comfortably into a system of common security.

Nor is it likely to change dramatically any time soon. It is popular with the Russian public and is in any case the product of powerful social forces: the country’s historically authoritarian political culture, its economic and international experiences over the past two decades, and the absence of the social bases of democracy that the Russian Federation inherited from the Soviet Union. We in the West lack the leverage to bring about fundamental changes in the way Russia is governed and we do not, let us remember, have the right to choose the people who govern it: that right belongs to the Russians themselves.

Any effort to deploy economic sanctions, which are sometimes suggested as a source of Western leverage, against Russia would at best
lead, I believe, to a dead end. It might be productive under certain circumstances to target the fortunes of selected individuals, assuming such a thing could be done; but without broad international participation, economic sanctions directed against Russia will have little effect; and the Europeans, dependent as they are on Russian natural gas, will not participate.

Moreover, the global economy is having a salutary influence on Russia’s political direction without any deliberate efforts by Western governments to guide and shape its impact on Russia. The Russian stock market has fallen sharply and capital has fled the country in response to the government’s threats against private businesses as well as to its adventure in Georgia. While unfortunate for many innocent (and some not-so-innocent) Russians, these developments have the useful effect of undercutting the central premise of the present regime, namely that the country can have both its current brand of political authoritarianism and economic prosperity. Over the long term, engagement with the global economy and the continuing development of
free-market institutions and practices within the country offer, I believe, the best hope for the evolution of the political system in a more democratic direction. As I argue in my 2007 book *Democracy’s Good Name*, it is these institutions and practices, when transferred to the political sphere, that promote democracy.

One Western policy does have the potential to nudge Russia toward a more liberal political system. The current Russian government owes much of its popularity to the revenues it receives from the sale of oil, which it has used to pay salaries and pensions and that enable it to avoid the kinds of economic reforms that could ultimately help to foster democracy. Reducing these revenues would reduce the power of the Russian government – as well, as it happens, as the power of the anti-Western governments of Iran, Venezuela, and Saudi Arabia. Reducing revenues requires reducing consumption, which in turn requires raising the price of gasoline through a high floor price for oil, or high taxes on gasoline, or both. These measures would encourage conservation and the development of alternative fuels. Raising the price of anything is
politically unpopular, and reducing oil consumption therefore depends on mustering the necessary political will. Europe and Japan, with their high gasoline taxes, have displayed the requisite will. The United States has not. This is a point worth bearing in mind when you hear Americans who favor the immediate admission of Georgia and Ukraine to NATO accuse the Europeans who do not of being soft on Russia.

Where, finally, does all this leave us in the West, and especially in the United States, in our relations with Russia? It leaves us with the task of recapturing the vision of European security with which we ended the Cold War, but then foolishly discarded. It leaves us waiting and hoping for Russia to become more democratic, and alert for any modest opportunities that may arise to encourage this. It leaves us, finally, I believe, with an interest in departing from the style of foreign policy that the United States has adopted in the last two administrations.

Each was prone to gaudy slogans announcing its ambition to remake the world. The Clinton Administration, with its humanitarian intervention, was going to end suffering and injustice on the planet. The
current, outgoing, Bush Administration, through democracy-promotion, was going to put an end to tyranny and oppression. The next administration would do well, at least where Russia is concerned, to adopt a humbler but more useful principle. It is called the first law of holes: when you are in one, stop digging.