



## Has Russia Changed? Experience Leans Toward No

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SAN DIEGO — Hillary Clinton was right about one thing: This election has boiled down to a choice between change versus experience.

But not how Hillary expected. She argued that her time as first lady plus as U.S. senator made her “ready to start on Day One,” giving her the upper hand over Barack Obama. Now Republicans are stealing Hillary’s lines and claiming that experience in foreign affairs gives their presumptive presidential nominee, John McCain, the advantage over Obama.

The choice — between change and experience — takes on new meaning in light of recent events, which remind us the world is home to some dangerous neighborhoods.

But just how valuable is a candidate’s experience when it comes from living in a world that has changed? And how do you decide whether a country has changed over time or whether it remains as dangerous as ever?

On ABC’s “This Week,” former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney — who ran against and now supports John McCain — tried to make the case that those who have “experienced the world” are in the best position to deal with it.

OK. In his 71 years, McCain has certainly experienced a lot of the world, much more than his 47-year-old Democratic opponent. But what Americans need to know is that McCain understands the complexity of the world as it is now, and not how he experienced it throughout most of his lifetime.

After Russia invaded Georgia, McCain immediately condemned the attack on a fledgling democracy.

“We’ve seen this movie before, in Prague and Budapest,” McCain told Fox News, referring to the Soviet invasions of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Hungary in 1956. “And I’m not saying we are reigniting the Cold War, but, this is an act of aggression which we didn’t think we’d see in the 21st century.”

That cuts to the chase. In the last week, foreign policy experts and political pundits have struggled with two questions: What is Russia after? And exactly which Russia is this?

Is it — as McCain seems to suggest — the same old Russia of Nikita Khrushchev or Leonid Brezhnev that expanded its empire seemingly at will while engaging the West in a nuclear arms race? Or is it the new Russia of Vladimir Putin — who casts a long shadow over his successor, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev — which is hooked on a Wild West version of capitalism, home to countless millionaires thanks to oil revenue, and can’t afford to jeopardize its political and economic alliances with the United States? Or could the critics be right that the two Russias are really one and the same, that our old Cold War adversary still harbors expansionist tendencies?

Everyone has theories. But few seem to have answers. That includes the Bush foreign policy team. The administration is stacked with serious people who — on Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, China, North Korea, et al — seriously don’t have the foggiest idea what they’re doing. This bunch is just trying to coast to graduation, but now they’ve flunked their Russian finals. And the price is being paid by Georgia, a baby ally of the United States that President Bush referred to as “a small country halfway around the world.”

Even Condoleezza Rice is struggling to make the grade. Here is someone who was forgiven her learning curve in the dynamic areas of Latin America and Asia because, well, she’s an expert in Russia. In this crisis, she is hiding her expertise well.

Rice didn’t see it coming. Once it arrived, she painted the United States into a corner by demanding a Russian withdrawal even though she didn’t have the chips to back it up if Moscow called her bluff. Rice did convince Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili to sign a French-negotiated cease-fire “framework” with Medvedev, but even she isn’t positive the Russians will hold up their end.

Georgian officials report that there have been “no signs” of a Russian troop withdrawal despite repeated Russian promises to start moving back.

Don’t hold your breath. The Russians aren’t likely to let go of Georgia anytime soon. Why would they? If relations between

the two countries were tense before, they're down the drain now.

Whatever you think of the Russian invasion, this is a foreign policy mess of the first order that will almost certainly end badly. And instead of using the crisis to take shots at one another, McCain and Obama should explain what they would do — as president

— to ensure otherwise.

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