

RECLAIM THE COMMON GROUND IN THE U.S.-RUSSIAN RELATIONSHIP

DMITRI TRENIN | JANUARY 2014

Russian-American relations today represent islands of targeted and productive cooperation in the midst of a sea of official mistrust and media negativism. It is in the interest of both countries to reclaim new areas of collaboration and to navigate their differences better. To do that, those Americans and Russians who believe, correctly, that their country's national interests will be better served by closer interaction with the other party, need to put their heads together to aid their governments.

U.S.-Russian relations have come to represent a mix of islands of targeted and productive cooperation against the background of profound negativism in both countries' media and deep mistrust at the government level. Successful collaboration and angry rhetoric exist side by side: the United States and Russia have learned, at last, what it means to walk and chew gum at the same time. But this is a suboptimal achievement.

It is in the interest of both Moscow and Washington to reclaim new areas of collaboration and to more effectively navigate their differences. To do that, those Americans and Russians who believe, correctly, that their country's national interests will be better served by closer interaction with the other party need to put their heads together to aid their governments.

THE STATE OF THE RELATIONSHIP

For those used to the familiar Cold War pattern of peaks of tension separated by valleys of détente, the current U.S.-Russian relationship is new.

There is a vast asymmetry in power and in the attention given by one country to the other. Russia prides itself on having become the world's fifth-largest economy in purchasing power parity terms, but it is a far cry from the economy of the United States. Moscow is currently rebuilding its military, but its conventional forces are just beginning to recover from two decades of neglect. The Kremlin has become much more active internationally, including in the Middle East, but its influence is still small outside the former Soviet Union. Russia's soft power is admittedly weak.

This state of affairs leads the Russians to see the United States as behind many problems that they encounter, and the Americans virtually neglect or ignore Russia. Both sides are wrong in this case.

The relationship is both competitive and cooperative at the same time, with an emphasis on competition. But so far, Moscow and Washington have no interest in real confrontation. While



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the general atmosphere of the relationship is rather cool, periodic predictions about a new Cold War between Russia and the United States are baseless.

Domestic politics in both countries are invading and occupying territory formerly belonging only to foreign policy. The Kremlin is wary of the link that it sees between its domestic liberal critics and those in the United States who sympathize with these critics. In the U.S. Congress, standing up to Russian authoritarianism and its representatives has become good politics that carries almost no penalty. But vibrant contacts exist between the two countries at the societal level, with the Russian government pressing for a relaxation of the visa regime even as political relations remain difficult.

This relationship has produced mixed results. Real U.S.-Russian achievements on Syria's civil war and Iran's nuclear program contrast with quarrels about government-secret-leaker Edward Snowden, the U.S. Magnitsky Act that sanctions Russian human rights abusers, gay rights, and Ukraine's future. Russia's views on the global order and its own foreign policy course are at odds with those of the United States, prompting political figures and opinion leaders in both countries to become more vocal in criticizing their former Cold War adversary.

Yet, the recent record of cooperation suggests that the relationship retains great potential. Actors in Moscow and Washington would benefit from tapping into that potential under the right set of circumstances and conditions.

THE RIGHT TIMING

Based on the relationship's track record, cooperation between Russia and the United States can only ensue where the two countries' interests meet and at opportune moments. Take the issue of Syria's chemical weapons.

If the regime of Bashar al-Assad had continued to use chemical weapons in Syria's ongoing civil war, the U.S. government's credibility would have been called into question because of Washington's vocal stance against the weapons. And it would have made a mockery of the international regimes governing weapons of mass destruction.

But if the U.S. military had launched a strike against Syria in retaliation for the use of chemical weapons in a Damascus suburb, the action would have reversed the trends of U.S.

military disengagement from the Muslim world and of Washington's restraint in the use of military force—both seen as positive by the Kremlin.

In this case, the needs of the White House and the Kremlin happened to coincide and allowed cooperation. The Obama administration wanted to stay out of the Syrian conflict, but it could not ignore the violation of its own "red line" regarding the use of chemical weapons in Syria. The Kremlin wanted to keep the United States out of the Syrian war, and it was both able and ready to press Damascus for chemical disarmament. The Assad government was willing to give up its chemical weapons arsenal in exchange for a cancellation of U.S. military strikes and a measure of international recognition in the process of chemical disarmament.

Similarly, collaboration between Washington and Moscow in preparing a conference on Syria's domestic political settlement is based on both capitals' concern about the rise of jihadist elements in the ranks of Syrian rebels. Would-be terrorists who see both the United States and Russia as their enemies and thus targets of future attacks are already finding their feet in Syria. The fact that the Boston Marathon bombers hailed from Russia's North Caucasus illustrates the connections between the two powers and the fluid nature of present-day terrorism.

U.S.-Russian differences on approach should not preclude cooperation where the lives of their own citizens are at stake.

AN EQUAL PARTNERSHIP

It is also clear that U.S.-Russian cooperation can only be effective if it is co-equal in substance as well as in form.

Initially, the United States essentially wanted Russia to help it with its agenda for Syria in exchange for some kind of a commission fee. In practice, this meant that Washington wanted Moscow to stop supporting Bashar al-Assad politically and militarily and to help to ease him out of power in Damascus.

This approach did not work because Moscow saw its engagement with Washington differently—it saw two leading powers bringing Syrian factions together, in the style of the Dayton accords that ended the war in Bosnia, without prejudging an outcome to the intra-Syrian dialogue. A few months later, such cooperation became possible for virtually the first time both because the situation on the ground in Syria changed and because

of Russia's new willingness and capacity to step up to a more active international role.

This more equal approach was fruitful. Moscow delivered Damascus's agreement on Syria's chemical disarmament and saw to it that the process of disarmament went forward without undue obstacles. Russian diplomats and experts worked closely with their U.S. counterparts on developing procedures for disarmament. Russia provided special trucks for transporting chemical agents to ships as well as a naval escort for their journey to the liquidation facility. As a co-convener of the conference on the political future of Syria, Moscow had to engage with all Syrian parties, minus the extremist groups, and present itself as a peace broker.

Co-equality is a very demanding thing for those seeking that status, but once it becomes a reality, it can satisfy all parties involved. Russia should be encouraged to produce more and better-quality international public goods.

AREAS FOR COOPERATION

Common ground does exist between U.S. and Russian national interests in a number of areas. The two powers should seek out these overlapping areas of interest and build their cooperation on this basis.

For instance, as Moscow is becoming more focused on the Korean Peninsula, it can play at least as useful a role on the North Korean nuclear issue as it is playing on Iran, where Russia has been acting as a supporter and facilitator of diplomatic contacts between Tehran and Washington.

Historically, Washington has relied on Beijing, a North Korean ally, to help deal with Pyongyang. Moscow can be another partner in stabilizing the Korean situation. Economically, it can make a contribution to stability in Korea through energy and infrastructure projects linking the South and the North. And politically, Moscow is formally responsible for promoting security cooperation in the framework of the Six-Party Talks. As Russia develops its Korea policy further, it can emerge as an independent player with a modicum of credibility in Seoul, Pyongyang, Beijing, and Tokyo. As such, it can be a useful partner for Washington too.

The functional areas where there is sufficient overlap of U.S.-Russian interests range from cybersecurity to counterterrorism to climate change and beyond. They include such key economic

areas as energy and global finance. Of particular importance is cooperation in education, science, and technology, areas crucial for development in the twenty-first century. One megaproject that brings together many of these strands is cooperation in the North Pacific—the part of the world where the U.S. and Russian territory is separated by just three miles of water.

WELL-MANAGED COMPETITION

Russian-American cooperation in these areas will not eliminate their competition, but both parties need to manage their competitive tendencies better.

The legacy of the Cold War is only slowly fading away. Russian authoritarianism, conservatism, strategic independence, corruption, and human rights abuses will continue to irritate U.S. politicians, various vested interests, and the general public. By the same token, U.S. omnipresence, a penchant for interventionism, promotion of democracy and various special causes, and "American exceptionalism" will provide ammunition for Russian anti-Americanism. In addition to these specific areas of friction, there will always be the reality of geopolitical competition, substantial differences on the issues of the world order and global governance, and a partial clash of values.

To more effectively manage these differences, they should be put in perspective. Washington and Moscow should seek to strike a better balance between competition and cooperation, not allowing the former to dominate the relationship completely.

Restoring a measure of mutual respect and basic civility in the relationship would be a useful first step, particularly for both countries' politicians and media figures. At present, they are no longer restrained by the threat of a nuclear conflict, and they feel there is nothing particularly valuable to lose if the relationship sours. But thriving on the bad relationship is less advantageous than exploiting a vibrant one.

ECONOMIC COOPERATION

To help stabilize the relationship, Washington and Moscow should develop an economic "cushion." The task is primarily Russia's responsibility.

In many other instances in which the United States successfully manages relations with a country very different from itself, such as China, major economic interests guarantee a degree of respect and basic civility. The very low level of U.S.-Russian economic

interaction is rightly named as the reason why the bilateral political relationship lacks a stabilizing force.

There have been attempts to correct that, as exemplified by the recent deal between the U.S. energy firm ExxonMobil and Russian state-owned oil company Rosneft. Yet, there are only so many opportunities for economic cooperation on that scale.

Russia and the United States should promote investments in the other country, but doing so requires more than just favorable attitudes on the part of the two federal governments.

For Russia to become attractive for U.S. investors, it needs to improve its business climate, which it has begun doing. The responsibility of the Russian government here is paramount.

First and foremost the administrative and bureaucratic red tape that accompanies operating in Russia needs to be reduced. The government also needs to upgrade the role and quality of its court system, upholding and expanding the elements of the rule of law.

Meanwhile, Russian investors seeking entry to the U.S. market need technical assistance and guidance from the U.S. side as they consider their moves.

At the regional level, Russian plans of relaunching development of the Far Eastern and Siberian territories open an opportunity for large-scale economic, technological, and scientific collaboration with the states along the U.S. Pacific seaboard.

REFOCUSING ATTENTION

Russian and U.S. decisionmakers also need to be persuaded that each country's national interests are better served by U.S.-Russian collaboration if the relationship is to become more productive.

Russia's overriding national goal of modernization requires stable relations with the United States. This is particularly true of the country's two vast and strategically important regions, the Arctic and the Far East and Siberia. It also relates to Russia's plans to develop its knowledge industry, from education to scientific research and development, where the United States is the global leader.

By the same token, U.S. foreign policy, as recent developments have demonstrated, can be more effective if Moscow is an active and co-equal partner rather than a spoiler.

The Russian and U.S. governments are less focused on each other's country than at any time in the last seventy-five years. In part, this is because the Cold War has ended. However, it is also the result of the failure to balance inevitable U.S.-Russian competition with productive cooperation.

Well-connected Russians and Americans who believe that their own countries' wider national interests can be better served by reaching out to the other partner should join forces and bring their informed ideas and specific proposals to the attention of the two governments. These actors can also serve as an informal public committee to oversee progress in the U.S.-Russian relationship.

Despite their ups and downs since the end of the Cold War, Russian-American relations have demonstrated remarkable resilience. The government-to-government dialogue is occasionally frosty, but always serious. Behind the colorful public rhetoric, there is often a thinly veiled hope that the other party will eventually see the light and change its ways.

This hope is probably futile. However, draining the lingering mistrust and reclaiming more common ground makes sense and is worth an effort on both sides.

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