

A RELATIONSHIP TO BE TENDED AND CULTIVATED

David Holloway, Freeman Spogli Institute, Stanford University

The relationship with Russia is a matter of continuing importance. For all its weaknesses, Russia remains a major power. It is, among other things, a member of the UN Security Council, possessor of the largest stockpile of nuclear weapons in the world, a leading producer of energy, and an important neighbor of China. Russia has the capacity to help or to hinder the United States in the pursuit of many of its most important foreign policy goals: nuclear arms reductions; nuclear nonproliferation; European security; the fight against terrorism; stability in the Middle East (including the Iranian nuclear program and the Syrian civil war). It is a relationship that needs to be cultivated over the long term, not something to be attended to only as the occasion demands. It has to be assessed in light of the general strategy—easier said than done, of course, but nevertheless the right approach.

What can and should both countries do to “fix” the relationship?

I don't know that the relationship can be “fixed.” I prefer a gardening metaphor to a handyman's. It's a relationship that needs to be tended and cultivated. It is now going through a difficult period and the difficulties are embedded, to simplify grossly, in two different narratives. The Putin narrative is one of resentment, of Russia exploited in the past and threatened in the present by the West. To many Americans (and Russians too), Russia is a country that has lost its way, to the point where one can ask whether the Cold War is over. Though misleading in important respects, these narratives exercise a powerful influence and make it difficult to identify a “quick fix.” This is a long-term project. Max Weber's description of politics as “the slow drilling of hard boards” seems to fit here.

David Holloway is the Raymond A. Spruance Professor of International History and a senior fellow of [the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University](#).

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