

## **Building, not “rebuilding,” strong U.S.-Russian relations**

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There should be a complete academic analysis and careful choice of language in setting the task of the project. U.S.-Russian relations have never been something that may deserve “rebuilding.” In reality, there was a short-lived attempt on both sides to continue the Soviet-U.S. relationship after the disintegration of the USSR. The meaningful U.S.-Soviet relationship that emerged in the late 1980s toward the end of the Cold War, and which was based on strategic cooperation, indeed deserved “rebuilding.” But newly born in 1992, Russia was not the USSR, and could not be regarded as a substitute.

U.S.-Russian relations as such started in 1992 with great enthusiasm and evident absence of solid ground. The happiness of the Americans (because of the death of the rival superpower, which left them as the only power at the top) was coupled with rosy hopes for “democracy” in Russia. These hopes were largely based on the promises of the then-Russian leader, Boris Yeltsyn, who was ready to promise anything, including democracy, in exchange for the support he badly needed. Thus, the first illusion appeared that contributed to the emergence of the problems in U.S.-Russian relations: that Russia might become a democracy and a friendly nation.

This illusion was coupled with another one largely shared in Washington: that Russia was too weak to be reckoned with. The unilateral decision to extend NATO to the east, practically to the Russian western border, followed in 1995. It was not yet an invitation to a new controversy but was accepted by many in Russia as a sign of a still powerful anti-Russian trend in American policy and as a strong imperative to put under question the real attitude of the United States toward Russia.

Both facts appeared as a result of either a gross misunderstanding of the events that brought an end to the USSR or a wrong reading of the real situation in Russia after the end of Communist rule. Russia did not become a democracy, and there were powerful residues of Stalinism in the country, which badly needed an enemy both inside and outside. Inside the country there were the Chechens, outside it was NATO.

In this sense, what the United States has done perfectly fits the interests of those in Russia who were standing “with one leg in the past” (as President Barak Obama once observed). While actively criticizing the U.S. government for its inadequate decisions (in addition to NATO enlargement, there was also the war in Yugoslavia), they were happy that their worst forecasts were coming true and that this enabled them to continue to hope that their grip over the country would survive.

No doubt that did not contribute to something like establishment of a sound and cooperative relationship between Russia and the United States. Actually only once, during the first year of the Obama administration in 2009, was the task of improvement of these relations mentioned: the “reset.” It was hailed on both sides as a “way out” but in reality did not mean much. Behind the eloquent and exotic surface there was a strange idea to go back (to what point?) and restart the (nonexistent) relationship. Very touching, but with little practical sense.

In practice the relationship was split into three identifiable parts. The first one, going back a long way (to Soviet-American times), was on strategic arms control. The rules in this area were set long ago and made it possible to reach a new agreement on strategic arms reduction (START-3).

Taking into consideration the existing state of affairs in this area, both sides may plan for the future though it will not necessarily be an easy job.

The second area is the problem of conflict resolution in different parts of the world, both from the times of the Cold War and from the recent heritage (Korea, Taiwan, India-Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Syria). Evidently both sides have rather similar interests in these situations and could cooperate on a much more regular basis. What is needed is the political will to work out an appropriate *modus operandi*.

Number three is the group of global problems where Russia and the United States simply must cooperate: nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction; prevention of aggression; financial crisis; food, water, and energy security; protection of the environment; space research; development of the Arctic; and some others. This is not a strictly bilateral relationship; but it strongly ties together the interests of Russia, the United States, and the other members of the global community.

The task of building (and not “rebuilding”) strong U.S.-Russian relations should start somewhere at this point. The rest is the subject for thinking and discussion.

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