

GET PAST THE COLD WAR MENTALITY

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The U.S.–Russia relationship matters greatly now, for a multitude of reasons. A growing number of the most pressing problems facing the world today can only be addressed effectively through multilateral channels, and solutions to these problems will be more robust and lasting if both the United States and Russia cooperate to help craft them. Solutions to critical global challenges such as developing new technologies (and safeguards) for expanded nuclear power generation and addressing the threat of climate change are prominent examples. Achieving a lasting peace in Syria, and the Middle East more generally, will require U.S.–Russia cooperation of a different sort, but the need is just as urgent. Leaving Russia “out of the equation” will hinder progress toward addressing much of the international agenda, as well as weaken the international interface of Russia with the West, to the detriment of Russia’s internal development. In an era when the forces of globalization have transformed information flows and international interactions, Russia’s integration into the world economy and polity cannot be reversed.

Both the United States and Russia need to get past the Cold War mentality that persists in some quarters in both countries. That mentality, supported by outdated ideological bias and further advanced, on occasion, by commercial interests, is itself a continuing threat to world peace.

Focus on problems both sides want to solve

The U.S.–Russia dialogue needs to broaden and change fundamentally in tone. Participants should include representatives from official institutions, the private/commercial sectors, and civil society on both sides. The more “demand driven” this dialogue is, the better. Discussions should focus on addressing challenges and problems that both sides want to solve, including problems of a global nature where U.S.–Russian cooperation could make a positive difference. In a narrow but practical sense, academic exchanges would fit this agenda, as would “sister city” and other twinning arrangements involving civil society. Work to strengthen the Russian and international financial systems is another area where past cooperation, undertaken quietly and away from the inhibiting glare of publicity, has produced extraordinarily positive results, helping to build mutual trust and respect that has carried over into other areas of dialogue. Efforts to promote Russian and international economic growth, to help diversify the raw-materials-centered Russian economy, and to address common problems that are too complex for either country to address alone, would also be beneficial. Development of critically needed alternative sources of energy and long-term solutions to climate change are examples of global challenges from this last category.

Efforts reflecting ideological agendas, or one country’s attempts to tackle problems and shortcomings it perceives in the other, are unlikely to advance mutual understanding and deepen mutual respect. Such efforts are more likely to be perceived as meddling. In this context, cooperation to promote broad-based economic growth is more likely to produce positive results than efforts aimed head-on at “democracy building.”

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