

STEP ONE IS A MUTUAL “TIME OUT” IN HOSTILE RHETORIC

Robert Hunter, Former U.S. Ambassador to NATO

There is no time when the U.S.-Russia relationship does not matter. Now is particularly important because negative attitudes on both sides, amplified by the media, are hardening. It can then be difficult to “soften” them again—and to get the dialogue, or, more precisely, the many dialogues, at many levels involving many different people and national institutions, moving in directions and developing patterns of behavior and interaction that have a chance to be mutually productive. This is particularly so when the United States and Russia are impacting on one another’s “turf” and “concerns” more than they have for a number of years; as each seeks to define a set of roles consonant both with its ambitions and with radical shifts in global politics, economics, and culture; and where each needs to understand what is possible and what not possible in matching their national interests to one another—and how to tell the difference and to seek areas of accommodation.

What can/should be done by both sides to get it “fixed”?

“Fixed” begs the question, implying an ideal and unchanging state of being. Like history’s other major powers, the U.S. and Russia will be rivals, while, one hopes, also partnering (or at least tolerating) where possible; and seeking in their mutual self-interest to reduce risks of unbridled tensions and to build the “global commons.” Step one is a mutual “time out” in hostile rhetoric and caviling at each other’s domestic politics, followed by again showing respect for one another; depersonalizing the relationship (actually, the relationships)—no more “Putin this” or “Obama that,” media shorthand without meaning in interactions between modern states. “Time out,” as well, on summits that have little productive value, and more interactions at more levels and with new faces and a younger generation; disaggregating aspects of relations (geographically and functionally)—no search for an unneeded and not possible “grand bargain”—while making room for third parties and consigning “zero sum” to the “ash heap of history;” and finally getting over the long-dead Cold War and its mental and psychological strictures.

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