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Stop having unrealistic expectations

The United States and Russia are key pillars of the international system, and they share a capacity to shape critical issues of peace and security. From nonproliferation to regional security in Europe, the former Soviet Union, Afghanistan, the Middle East, and Korea, there are few areas of international security unaffected by the actions of the United States and Russia. While the import of U.S.-Russia relations for global security is nothing new, the bilateral relationship is becoming more important as change accelerates and the world becomes less predictable, since few other states have both the global interests and range of capabilities of the United States and Russia. The ability of Moscow and Washington to manage that change depends in large part on their ability to find a common language.

Both sides need to stop having unrealistic expectations about the other. Russia is not going to jettison its strategic independence to become a junior partner of the United States; it is not going to undergo an imminent democratic transition; and its government and people are not going to subscribe to the whole spectrum of “Western” values promoted by the United States. At the same time, Moscow should recognize that the United States has other priorities today, and is not going to seek Russian approval for everything it does internationally—nor is it going to eschew intervening abroad (with or without the imprimatur of the UN Security Council) when it believes vital interests are at stake. If Washington and Moscow can adopt a more sober perspective on one another, they can get back to cooperating on the basis of common interests.

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