

# STOP THE DETERIORATION IN TONE

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The U.S.–Russia relationship matters for many reasons, both immediately and over the long term. Most pressing, the United States has a very important national security interest in preventing Iran from obtaining anuclear weapon—and Russia’s cooperation is key in maintaining united international pressure on Iran to negotiate as well as limiting or shutting off the supply of advanced conventional weapons to Tehran. Moscow’s assistance is also valuable in conducting the U.S. and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Strategically, America’s relationship with Russia can play a significant role in defining the twenty-first century international system and in sustaining U.S. global leadership. As China has grown in influence, it has increasingly challenged some aspects of the U.S.-led international system. However, Beijing is unlikely to be in a position to rewrite international rules without considerable backing. As the second-largest world power dissatisfied with elements of the current system, Russia can either support this effort or not. For Americans who see China as America’s principal foreign policy priority, effectively managing U.S.-Russia relations is a critical building block in dealing successfully with Beijing in the decades to come.

The first priority for Washington and Moscow in repairing their fraying relations must be to stop and reverse the sharp deterioration in tone. Improving the tone of the U.S.–Russia relationship was the first step in the Obama administration’s reset policy and—until 2011—was in some ways its most significant accomplishment. President Obama’s recent comments about Mr. Putin’s body language are not helpful; nor is officially encouraged anti-American sentiment in Russia.

To improve relations significantly, however, both sides will need to do much better than avoiding gratuitous mutual criticism. To succeed, the two governments must define a shared vision for their relationship that advances each nation’s individual national interests, they must make achieving that vision a priority in a manner that shapes decisions on some other issues, including on issues that may be politically painful for each, and they must explain their policy approaches convincingly to their citizens and to skeptical elites. Thus far, the U.S. and Russian governments have failed at the first of these tasks and have applied limited effort at best to the last two. Most damaging has been the mutual failure to make clear why the U.S.-Russia relationship matters to both countries.

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