

THE SHORT TERM VS THE LONG TERM

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At the most basic level, these are still the two countries with the largest nuclear arsenals in the world, and overtly hostile relations between them are therefore not particularly good for anyone. In a more pragmatic sense, there are many ways that Russia can help (or hinder) U.S. foreign policy interests, and vice versa. Both countries are interested in how events unfold in Afghanistan and the Middle East, the trajectory of international terrorism, and the long-term rise of China. And of course both countries continue to be interested in developments in Europe, even if not quite to the same extent as during the Cold War. In many (but of course not all) of these cases, cooperation between the United States and Russia can help both countries achieve important goals. Finally, the United States has long been seen as a friend of the Russian people by certain segments of the Russian population, especially those with more liberal political outlooks; some of these people may be the leaders of Russia in the future. What the United States does today *vis-à-vis* Russia and the way it treats its own citizens may affect how those citizens feel about the United States in the future.

What can and should both countries do to “fix” the relationship?

Clearly, dialogue between the two countries is important if relations are going to improve. But it may be time to think about the difference between getting things fixed in the short term and in the long term. Clearly, both sides face temptations to use their relationship to play to their own domestic audiences, and President Putin has undoubtedly made antagonizing the West a part of his strategy for maintaining support at home. In the short term, in the aftermath of the public decision to cancel the summit, the United States may find it can best advance its foreign goals by quietly re-establishing contact with the Russians at lower levels. (And to be clear, I think tying the future of U.S.-Russian relations to the fate of Edward Snowden would be a mistake.) But in the longer term, the United States may want to consider ways to convince Putin that there are consequences to “playing the American card” so often for domestic consumption, especially in terms of using it to demonize his opponents at home as somehow un-Russian. Taking a firmer stance with the regime now might end up paying dividends down the road, although this will of course be tricky in practice.

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