

THIS IS NOT A NEW COLD WAR

Jack Matlock, Former U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union

As they deal with the most serious international problems facing the world today, Russia and the United States need to cooperate with each other and with other countries. Russian and American interests are congruent as regards the most serious international problems in the world today—terrorism, organized crime, the spread of disease, and threats arising out of poverty and failed states, to name just a few. No one country, not even the most powerful, can alone cope with the challenges these problems present. Both Russia and the United States must find a way not only to cooperate, but to attract as many other countries as possible to take part in their efforts. In short, for the United States, Russia will be either a part of the solution or a part of the problem. For Russia, the United States will either be part of the solution or part of the problem. Both countries are too large and too powerful to be successful free riders; the problems will only get worse if there is no cooperation.

There is no simple “fix,” but one should recognize that the underlying U.S.–Russia relationship, though needing repair, is not as bad as recent disagreements and unwise legislative action in both countries might suggest. We are not in the midst of a new Cold War, though both countries exhibit destructive hangovers of outmoded attitudes. Planned meetings by presidents should not be canceled or postponed even if it appears that no concrete agreements can be reached. When U.S.–Soviet relations were at a nadir in the mid-1980s, President Reagan and Secretary of State Shultz steered away from the endless arguments over specific issues but concentrated on areas of common interest, stressing that both countries were injuring themselves by spending too much on arms, and solicited suggestions from the Soviet leaders as to how to deal with common problems. This led, gradually, to creating a degree of trust that enabled us to end the arms race.

Instead of talking exclusively or largely about Snowden, Syria, and missile defense, Presidents Obama and Putin could usefully step back from current arguments and compare their assessments of the most important problems in the world and discuss how each thinks these problems should be addressed. The result could be that both might find that there are areas where each could adjust his government’s negotiating positions to make closer cooperation possible.

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