

Transforming the Basis of U.S.-Russian Relations

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It is still unclear what Russia and the United States want from each other, or what strategies these two countries have in respect to one another. The practice of their bilateral relations shows that Moscow and Washington pretend to be partners, keeping a bead on one another at the same time.

The leaders of Russia and the United States have repeated on multiple occasions that their bilateral relations are based on pragmatic approaches and that their countries fruitfully cooperate in fields of mutual interest or concern.

On the one hand, this allows the bilateral dialogue to keep going under any circumstances. For instance, the cooperation in Afghanistan is still unchanged despite several serious crises in U.S.-Russian relations, including the recent one related to the Snowden case. There is also the example of counterterrorism cooperation, recently proved by the help provided to the United States by Russia in the investigation of the Boston Marathon bombings.

On the other hand, the superfluous pragmatism can make U.S.-Russia relations fragile and limited, in addition to the obvious inability of a pragmatic approach to end the contradiction between partnership and threatening posture in U.S.-Russian relations. The dependence on several projects can help save the relations between countries in the short run, but it cannot create a basis for a long-term partnership.

So far, Russia and the United States continue to use the foundation that was built during the Cold War. That is why it is no wonder that these countries still exercise mutual nuclear deterrence, which is based on a threat of inflicting unacceptable damage on one other. But it also means arms control, predictability, transparency, and, equally important, a strategic dialogue, which existed between Moscow and Washington in all weathers.

Nuclear deterrence looks obsolete. But it would be impossible and improvident to just throw it away, since without it Russia and the United States may be left without predictability and transparency in their relations.

The question is how to transform U.S.-Russian relations in such a way as to depart from nuclear deterrence and at the same time save predictability and transparency between these countries. This can be possible in the framework of a long-term transformation of the basis of Russia-U.S. relations.

This transformation may include an expansion of the arms control dialogue to emerging issues such as ballistic missile defense, precision-guided conventional weapons, and cyber warfare. Though one can hardly count on the likelihood of an agreement covering nuclear arsenals plus these weapons, there are many options aside from the START treaties to separately take on these issues, including implementing confidence-building measures and signing memorandums of understanding.

In some areas it is possible to expand the dialogue to third countries. Ballistic missile defense (BMD) can be a case for this. Russia and the United States could initiate two tracks of the BMD consultations: Euro-Atlantic with NATO, and Asian with China and other regional powers. This is but an example from the arms control field to demonstrate that the U.S.-Russian dialogue can be a focus for regional security, too.

The number of U.S.-Russian initiatives will depend only on political will in Moscow and Washington. An urgent need for such initiatives is evident.

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