

## **THE TWO COUNTRIES' SELF-PERCEPTIONS AND VISIONS OF EACH OTHER ARE POLES APART**

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The U.S.-Russia relationship still matters in today's world, but in a way that is very different from historical patterns. The importance of the bilateral relationship does not look the same from the perspective of Washington and Moscow. America remains a significant "other" for Russia, though Russia has ceased to be one for the United States.

Vladimir Putin's return to office and concerns over maintaining stability in the country in the spring of 2012 brought about a situation where domestic political considerations began to increasingly affect Russia's foreign policy course. Today, that course is characterized by a combination of several conflicting narratives, which coexist in a general space of rhetoric on national identity, domestic and international security, and civilizational divisions. A relatively new and ascending narrative includes a mystical belief in Russia's destiny to be a bulwark of traditional conservative values and moral principles rooted in Christianity. It is accompanied by anti-Western rhetoric and continuing securitization of the relationship with the United States. The Kremlin strives to preserve Russia's constructed identity with the help of its great power status in light of what the Kremlin perceives to be attempts to establish American domination behind the rhetoric of universal values. Russia's leaders are obsessed with preserving the great power image and with resisting the liberal West led by the United States at any cost. The United States is portrayed as a power attempting to meddle into Russia's domestic affairs. In sum, for the Kremlin, the United States is an imagined important actor in both cumbersome domestic politics and international system that is increasingly viewed in "civilizational" terms.

The current American vision of Russia is much more down-to-earth. It emphasizes concrete security issues, where the two countries' interests overlap, in spite of the differences in political

systems. When the Obama administration made strategic stability the centerpiece of its Russia policy, it effectively reduced the bilateral relationship to the Cold War-era issue. The rest of the agenda is about securing Russia's assistance in solving the problems that are important from Washington's point of view.

Making U.S.-Russia relations hostage of Russia's domestic politics and reducing them to the old-fashioned interactions in the fields of arms control and selected regional flashpoints are equally counterproductive. This should be fixed.

Russia's national interest demands a de-ideologization of the Kremlin's view of the world.

Political realism must be freed from the chains of outdated dogmas and from Russia's ambitions to oppose the imaginary and abstract "West" led by the United States.

U.S. national interests demand strategic vision and long-term foreign policy planning. Limiting cooperation with Russia to addressing a "crisis of the day" is short-sighted. The role of Russia in U.S.-China relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must be seriously discussed. Under certain circumstances, the Kremlin may try to position Russia as a "swing state" in relations between the U.S. and China, a role that neither India nor any other great power can effectively claim. Russia may either choose to expand common ground with the United States, or try to balance its global leadership by cooperating with China. This range of choices is important for the United States on many policy levels. The United States is watching China closely and cautiously; part of this caution will be keeping an eye on Chinese relations with the rest of the world. Not losing sight of Russia will be a priority for the United States.

The U.S.-Russia relationship matters at this time because both countries face, in very different ways, the unprecedented challenge of adjusting their policies to a rapidly changing environment, which is increasingly shaped by other actors and where global governance is in shambles.

"Fixing" this relationship requires creating a moment that will set the tone for the future of the U.S.-Russia relationship, as was done at the Obama-Xi summit in June 2013. An informal

summit creating a positive, mutually agreed public narrative of a new type of relationship would help to overcome many difficulties arising from strikingly different visions of each other and the world. The expert community, not the bureaucracies, should prepare the “philosophical side” of the summit, such as the two countries’ relative power positions in the international system and their visions of global affairs.

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