

## **U.S.-Russian relations: Improving them is impossible, but it is necessary to continue working on them**

*Alexander Golts, [Yezhednevny Journal](#)*

To be intellectually honest, we must admit: the relations between Russia and the United States do not have much chance to be radically improved. Unless of course, you do not take into account the possibility of dramatic changes of the international situation that cannot be predicted, such as a sudden attack from Mars or a threat from an approaching asteroid. Vladimir Putin considers the relationship with other countries in the spirit of the 19th century realpolitik. He sees them as ruthless—not a game—but a zero-sum fight. “First, we will eat what is yours, and then each will eat their own,” as Putin recently described the policy of Russia’s partners in the European Union. Moscow is sure the ultimate goal of the United States is to “weaken” Russia as much as possible. The Kremlin believed (alas, quite sincerely) that the protests of citizens and their struggle for political rights are the result of an American conspiracy. This attitude virtually eliminates long-term trust between Russia and the United States.

On the other hand, the growing burden of unresolved domestic and international problems (opposition from Republicans on health care reform, conflicts with closest allies, the uncertain future of Afghanistan) removes Russian-American relations from the sphere of foreign policy priorities of the United States. Washington simply does not have the time and resources to deal with them. To complete this gloomy picture one should add that our two countries do not have any serious economic interdependence, such as the United States has with China. Moreover, it is possible that in the future the United States will begin to export natural gas to Europe and will become a direct competitor to Russia in this most important area of its economy.

However, the unfortunate and obvious fact that the relationship is unlikely to improve does not mean it should be ignored. But the goal (if not to lie to ourselves) should be formulated differently: how to prevent further deterioration and degradation of mutual relations when there are clear contradictions in basic values and interests. Unfortunately, if you stay on the ground of reality, the recommendations can only be given to the American side. Being a victim of its own stereotypes, the Kremlin does not think it needs any advice “from the outside.” Moreover, such recommendations will be perceived by it as interference in its inner sanctum—its foreign policy kitchen.

As to the U.S. side, it is obviously necessary for it to revise its policy regarding Russia. It is hardly necessary to question the highest principle of this policy, existing almost from the time of the Clinton administration: we must work together where our interests coincide, and argue where they are not the same. The question is how the United States determines Russian interests. It seems that the attempts to

estimate these interests based on rational assumptions seriously mislead the American side. Here is just one example. In September 2013, speaking in Berlin, President Obama offered to continue a joint reduction of nuclear arsenals, to 1,000 warheads. This would seem to be a remarkably generous offer. Russia cannot reach the ceilings of the new START treaty, so real reductions in both warheads and delivery vehicles would have to be carried out only by the United States. All Russia would have had to do would be to give up its extremely expensive nuclear buildup program. However, Moscow resolutely rejected the U.S. proposal, simultaneously accusing Washington of its intention to achieve total military superiority over Russia by the implementation of the concept of Prompt Global Strike.

I think it was a mistake to try to consider Russian interests from a purely pragmatic point of view: that Moscow was granted the opportunity to keep nuclear parity with the United States at a lower level, while saving several dozen billion dollars. The Kremlin sees its interest in an entirely different sphere—in self-affirmation in the international arena as a country equal to the most powerful country in the world, the United States. From this point of view, the public announcement of U.S. proposals without prior approval from Moscow was initially doomed to failure. From the Kremlin's point of view, if Russia agreed it would have looked to be obediently following the recommendations of Washington. It could have been different if possible reductions had been discussed in the course of secret negotiations (Putin genuinely respects only something secret) in order to carry out not a unilateral, but a joint initiative of Russia and the United States. Yes, this approach could deprive President Obama of laurels for being the single person striving for nuclear disarmament. Yes, maybe applause in Berlin would go in this case not only to him but also to Putin. But now, in the midst of a scandal (that U.S. intelligence bugged the Federal chancellor's phone), who remembers the standing ovation at the Brandenburg Gate? And this important agreement, if it had been achieved, would be in force today.

In this sense, the Russian-American road map for the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons looks like an almost perfect model, since it came in the form of a joint initiative that was based on Senator Richard Lugar's proposal previously rejected by Moscow.

I suspect someone will accuse me of cynicism. He or she can say that in order to achieve positive results, I urge indulging the Kremlin's ambitions. It is not true. I am just calling for a correct assessment of Moscow's motives. In this sense, Washington's tough decision to "take a break" in relations with Russia has been extremely positive. In this situation it seemed Moscow was likely to take a tough stance. But none of this happened. The decision by the White House to take a break caught Kremlin strategists off guard. Moscow has no ideas of its own in the field of foreign policy. All that Russian diplomats are able to do is to immediately declare any American initiative hypocrisy and perfidy. Washington proposes to

reduce nuclear arsenals—then it wishes to obtain superiority through conventional weapons. The White House abandoned the fourth phase of European missile defense deployment—this masks the intention to get a strategic advantage. However, all of these arguments make sense if the dialogue with Washington is continued. And with no dialogue, these complaints are losing value. Russian foreign policy, which has been and remains “America-centric,” turns into a dull recitation of certain phrases in the void. China will be completely indifferent to Russian complaints about American missile defense.

Thus, the improvement of relations with Moscow is possible if Washington manages to assure Moscow that this would strengthen the idea of Russia as a great power, equal in caliber to the United States. The main problem is to reach something real positive from this improvement.

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