

WILL ENGAGEMENT BE WORTH THE TIME, EFFORT?

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I'm sure that the other responders to this question will come up with a list of reasons why Russia matters. I am sure that I will pretty much agree with that list. In the best of all possible worlds, is there anyone (to repeat the obvious) who wouldn't like Russian cooperation in reducing nuclear weapons or regulating regional conflicts?

Let me focus instead on a broader issue: whether in today's crisis-ridden world the U.S.-Russia relationship is still among the top priorities for U.S. policymakers, based on a calculation of whether the result of sustained engagement will be worth the time and effort.

At present, the United States thinks Russia is unhelpful and Russia thinks the United States is weak. America has always had a narrow definition of what is "helpful"—the Russians are right to complain that on past occasions this has really meant doing what the United States wants them to do. But America then (in the 1990s) is not America now. Now America really, really, doesn't know what to do in several crisis areas, particularly in Syria and the Middle East, and really, really doesn't want to get involved in yet another far-off war, so asking the Russians to follow our lead when we don't know where we are going is not likely to produce great results.

Russia, for its part, has pursued anti-Americanism at home, criticized American domestic and foreign policy, taken cynical advantage of America's missteps and intelligence overreach, and looked for international friends in all the wrong places. It took the cancellation of a summit, thus denying President Putin the international legitimacy he craves, and of course renewed talk about military intervention in Syria, to elicit a greater willingness to be helpful in investigating chemical weapons use. But, despite the happy talk at the recent "2 plus 2" meeting, the Russians let it be known that recent talks on missile defense were at an impasse.

Does this sound like we have grounds for much optimism about where the relationship is headed?

Add to this the fact that the two leaders don't like each other very much, and are increasingly constrained by domestic groups that don't want the relationship to get better, and it is clear that no amount of sober analysis by a group of experts about why Russia matters, or about shared interests and the virtue of realpolitik, will fundamentally change the present dynamic of the relationship.

Marshall Shulman once wrote that progress in U.S.-Russian (then U.S.-Soviet) relations required success in three separate negotiations: one between political groups in the United States; the second between elites in Russia; and a third negotiation between the two countries. Of the three negotiations, he said, the bilateral talks were by far the *least* difficult. He was right then, and I think he would say the same about the current situation. These dynamics have to change before anything is going to get done.

And, finally, then, as now, a sustainable U.S. foreign policy toward Russia has to care about what happens to Russians and how Russian citizens are treated by their own state. This is not a made-up concern, and it is not going to be wished away by the realists' magic wand. All of us have a part to play in getting the message across to the Russian elite that it is impossible to benefit from an international system based on the rule of law and international norms if you neither respect the law nor agree to live by international norms.

We see examples every day that the defense of property rights (so critical to Russia's modernization) is not possible without guaranteeing the rights of the people who own that property.

It is debatable whether American policymakers have lost the right to lecture anyone on either of these points, but that does not mean these principles have lost their validity. We—all of us who support what Carnegie Corporation and countless others are trying to do in Russia—have to continue to engage at home and with counterparts in Russia on all fronts. Eventually, policymakers will have no choice but to do the same.

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