

# RUSSIA-U.S. RELATIONS

## IS THERE ANY LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL?

Igor S. Ivanov

On September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015, the Russian and American presidents held a bilateral meeting on the margins of the General Debate of the 70<sup>th</sup> United Nations General Assembly. A couple of years ago, such a meeting would have been considered an ordinary event and would have attracted limited public attention. But not this time.

The meeting between Vladimir Putin and Barack Obama turned out to be one of the most intriguing episodes of the UN's annual meeting of world leaders. Many observers had doubted that such a bilateral meeting would take place at all; there had been much speculation about which subjects the two leaders would discuss and what agreements they could reach.

The conversation turned out to be relatively brief and certainly could not have resolved all the contemporary

problems of Russian-American relations. However, the overall reaction to the meeting was predominantly positive—both in Russia and in the United States. The resumption of dialogue between Moscow and Washington at the top level is regarded by many observers as an opportunity to halt the global international system's current slide towards anarchy and chaos, by way of a renewed commitment to approach the many urgent problems of world politics in a serious and constructive way.

It is yet to be seen whether this opportunity will be used to its full extent, but many of us are slightly more optimistic today than we were before the meeting at the UN.

### ON THE WRONG TRACK?

Nobody would claim that U.S.-Russian relations are on the right track. We may differ about exactly how bad the situation is, who is to be blamed

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### *UN's annual meeting of world leaders*

for the failure of the reset, and whether things are likely to get even worse before they get any better.

What is certain is that the state of the relationship is clearly abnormal and evidently contains numerous risks not only for the two countries, but for the international system as a whole. The political stocks are at their historic lows since the most dramatic moments of the U.S.-Soviet confrontation half a century ago.

The current crisis in relations between Washington and Moscow appears even more frustrating when one starts thinking about the multitude of

very serious and very urgent problems that the United States and Russia have to confront today—from international terrorism and climate change, to global migration management and United Nations reforms. Instead of focusing on the emerging challenges of the twenty-first century, we tend to bring to life almost forgotten ghosts of the Cold War; the archaic paradigm of an eternal zero-sum game between the Kremlin and the White House once again shapes our priorities and obscures our vision.

### A DIFFERENT WORLD

Today one hears much talk about an onsetting second Cold War between the United States and Russia. In

my view, such a characterization of the current bilateral relationship is misleading: during the real Cold War, our two countries were divided by irreconcilable ideological contradictions—something that does not exist now. The world of the twentieth century was less complex, less diverse, and arguably easier to manage, than the world today.

However, one can learn a lot from the Cold War experience—and not only in the negative sense, but in the positive one, too.

It might appear somewhat paradoxical, but it was exactly during the Cold War that most of fundamental agreements and treaties governing the modern international system were signed and enforced. It was also during the Cold War that global and regional institutions and regimes emerged and matured. Within the framework of the bipolar world, our two countries played a central stabilizing role in the conduct of international relations during the second half of the previous century.

We may have many reservations about how this role was performed in

specific situations, but we cannot deny that leaders on both sides had a sense of historic responsibilities for their statements, actions, and strategies.

Today the world is very different from what it was during the Cold War. We have entered a very complex and controversial transformation process that should result in the establishment of a new global order to replace the one we inherited from the twentieth century. Nobody can say for sure what this new world order will look like; nobody has a master plan of how to build it. But, at the same time, nobody can free the founding members of the UN and, above all, the permanent members of its Security Council, from the responsibility they accepted to bear 70 years ago.

It would be extremely dangerous and highly irresponsible to start dismantling the old system until a new one is put in place—until it is tested and demonstrates its efficiency.

#### SHARED RESPONSIBILITIES

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The United States remains a priority for Russian foreign policy. I hope that Russia is still a foreign policy priority for American decision-makers as well. In my view, leaders of Russia and America have a special responsibility to confront and contain the present global destabilization, as well as to build a new system of international relations.

Four principal reasons come to mind. First, the relationship between Moscow and Washington formed the axis of world politics in the second half of the last century. Although the Cold War is in the past, it caused numerous problems that continue to poison international politics to this day, generating distrust, crises, and conflicts.

Russia and the United States share the primary historical responsibility to overcome this Cold War legacy as soon as possible.

Second, Russia and the United States remain the only countries in the world capable of destroying each other—and the rest of humanity—many times over in a suicidal nuclear war. Therefore, issues such as nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation, and the prevention of nuclear terrorism fall primarily on the shoulders of our two nations.

This is an apt moment to recall that our two countries are leading players in the global arms trade; this cannot help but impose serious political and moral obligations.

Third, for many historical, geographical, and economic reasons, Moscow and Washington almost inevitably become involved in the most pressing regional issues of the day, be they in the Balkans and the Caucasus, the Middle East, or the Asia-Pacific Region.

This global “arc of instability” transects areas of vital interest to the two countries.

Fourth, our two countries are caught up in many of today’s global problems. For example, unlike other states, due to their distinctive regional, cultural and religious diversity, the United States and Russia occupy the first and second place, respectively, in the world ranking on the number of migrants they accommodate.

Our countries are also among the world’s leading energy producers. These facts have very significant impacts on the global environment and climate change. The United States and Russia are, moreover, in a position to do more

than other states to confront growing cyber threats and promote effective international cooperation in space exploration.

**CLOSER INTERACTION**

This is not to say that there are no real issues between the White House and the Kremlin. There are a number of fundamental disagreements about how the world should be managed and what the future global order is going to be based upon. It would be hypocritical and counterproductive to ignore the deep gap in perceptions (one can even say—a gap of values) between presidents Obama and Putin.

But this gap—as profound as it appears to be—cannot be a plausible excuse for not trying to work together whenever possible. Even less justifiable is the current reluctance from both sides to keep their communication lines to each other open and operational.

It is worth reminding readers that after the Ukrainian conflict broke out, the United States and Russia were in a position to cooperate on a number of critically important international problems. The P5+1 multilateral agree-

ment on the Iranian nuclear problem became possible to a large extent due to the consorted efforts of America and Russia. The elimination of the Syrian chemical arsenal was also completed primarily through joint bilateral actions.

Are these two cases unique, and should they thus be regarded as exceptions to the overwhelming logic of confrontation? Or should we rather build on these success stories, identifying new low hanging fruit for potential collaboration?

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Would closer Washington-Moscow interaction on fighting against ISIS constitute a unilateral concession by one side or the other? Would more cooperation on the Arctic region imply a policy of appeasement? Do we believe that existing contacts between American and Rus-

sian Universities, research centers, civil society organizations, and professional associations, have to be sacrificed in order to make our respective positions stronger and more consistent?

One can argue that cooperation—even in areas that are not politically sensitive and cannot be regarded

as 'toxic'—is hardly possible if there is no trust between the parties. Indeed, mutual trust is critical to any successful cooperation. This begs the question of how trust can be restored if the sides do not interact with each other? Trust is generated only through working together through testing each other's commitments, consistency, and integrity.

**THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS**

The Ukrainian crisis is a challenge to the entire international community. It is, undoubtedly, a challenge to our two countries. The critical importance of Ukraine for Russia is more than evident. And though the United States is not a direct participant in the Minsk Process, its influence on both the European players and the political authorities in Kyiv can hardly be underestimated.

In a way, the crisis in Ukraine is a test of American leadership of the Western alliance and beyond. Therefore, the way in which both Moscow and Washington handle one of the most complex, explosive, and controversial conflicts that Europe has seen in decades will, to a large extent, define the role of each of

our two countries in the global order to come.

But the crisis in Ukraine is not the only challenge that the United States and Russia face. The experience of the Cold War should teach both sides not to put all their eggs in a single basket, and should also remind us of the perils of turning a regional crisis—no matter how destructive and outrageous it may look—into the one and only factor defining bilateral relations.

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**THREE CRUCIAL DIMENSIONS**

Ukraine is of critical importance, but Ukraine is not the only game in town. In our view, there are at least three crucial dimensions of the relationship that have to be preserved and developed further. First of all, the U.S.-Russian nuclear dialogue has to be resumed. If there is no dialogue between

Washington and Moscow on strategic weapons, that sends a very bad signal to other nuclear countries, potential proliferators, our respective militaries, and everybody else.

Our inability to talk to each other

means that the new world order is likely to be based on a continuous arms race, expanding membership in the club of nuclear states, and a return to the old notions of deterrence, mutually assured destruction, unacceptable damage, and the whole archaic strategic culture of the Cold War era's bipolar world.

Second, the United States and Russia have common interests in many regional crises and zones of instability: Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Korean peninsula—to name a few. No doubt, the failure to agree on Ukraine will have, and is already having, a major negative impact on our ability to work together on other regional matters. But this should not be an excuse not to try.

Each of the aforementioned regional conflicts has its own logic and dynamics, its own driving forces, and domestic as well as international participants. There is no one-size-fits-all and, to the extent possible, we should approach each on a case by case basis.

Third, our two countries should under no circumstances sacrifice their cooperation in fighting international terrorism and extremism. There is simply no alternative to such cooperation, given the proposition that neither side wants to see the world saturated with terrorist networks, extremists overthrowing legitimate governments,

dangerous weapons floating around, and mercenaries migrating from one conflict region to another.

To continue cooperation in this area is not a concession granted by the United States to Russia, or the other way round. It is a long term challenge to both of our societies, as it is to the rest of the world.

Of course, there are many other important dimensions of U.S.-Russian relations that we would like to be preserved. But if we manage to rescue only the three aforementioned, the pursuit of damage limitation policies can be regarded as successful.

#### ENGAGEMENT IMPERATIVE

Skeptics and critics will debate whether it is even worth opening up a dialogue with the outgoing Obama Administration when it may be better to wait and see what happens in the U.S. presidential elections in 18 months. But this is a misguided policy.

First of all, U.S. foreign policy has always been bipartisan in nature. It does not matter much, therefore, if the new administration is led by a Democratic or Republican chief executive; it will still inherit Obama's foreign policy "portfolio"—with all its assets and liabilities.

Russia will not be building relations with the United States from scratch in

February 2017. This is why the sooner we start making efforts to put the present crisis behind us, the more favorable the conditions will be when the new American president is finally inaugurated.

The final point is perhaps the essential one: Who can say if we can afford to wait 18 months? Is ISIS going to sit back and do nothing? Will the unfolding crisis in the Middle East ever stop?

And what if new crises were to arise—crises that would be impossible to settle without the joint efforts of Moscow and Washington?

The global situation is developing rapidly and, unfortunately, is not moving in the right direction. The cost of idleness may be too high for all of us. That is why dialogue between Moscow and Washington is absolutely essential. That is why we need to take this chance.