

THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

WORKING GROUP ON UNITED STATES POLICY TOWARD RUSSIA

Since the leaders of the Soviet Union began the dramatic transformation of their sclerotic regime two decades ago, the United States has responded to Russia's evolution successively with wonder, partnership, indifference, condescension, and most recently suspicion. At the same time, Russia has reacted with enthusiasm, then dismay, anger, and assertiveness. By the time of the two countries' respective presidential elections in 2008, U.S.-Russian relations had reached their lowest point in a quarter-century, and the multiplying frictions were compromising the ability of both—the United States no less than the Russian Federation—to achieve their objectives and advance their interests. New American leadership is prepared to “press the reset button” and address what President Barack Obama's vice president, Joseph Biden, has rightly called the “dangerous drift in relations between Russia and members of our [NATO] alliance.”

Given the impact of the U.S.-Russian bilateral relationship on the management of critical issues on the global agenda, the Working Group on U.S. Policy toward Russia, convened by The Century Foundation, calls on the Obama administration and the Congress to pursue a new framework for relations to right the troubled relationship at this crucial juncture.

Increasingly, Russians have responded to U.S. policy objectives in ways that underscore that Russia is not irrelevant in the world or to U.S. national interests. The Working Group has approached this effort with a clear-eyed understanding of the difficulties in dealing with a Russian government apparently intent on reestablishing its great power status and suspicious that American and European policies have aimed at marginalizing it. However, nothing in Russia's understanding of its own interests precludes close cooperation with the United States on a wide range of issues critical to American security and prosperity.

The Working Group offers the following recommendations for rebuilding a mutually beneficial relationship between the United States and Russia, mindful that there is no simple path to repairing relations:

Nuclear Issues

The suspension for most of this decade of any meaningful strategic dialogue or arms control negotiations needs to be reversed urgently and immediately, starting with agreement on deep new reductions in a treaty to replace the expiring START I by the end of this year.

This array of issues is critical to U.S. and Russian security, and is one of the few areas in which Russia and the United States are of comparable scale. Together they account for nine-tenths of the world's nuclear arsenal. The commitment by President Obama and President Dmitry Medvedev to pursue negotiations to replace the expiring Start I treaty with a new, legally binding treaty provides the two countries with a constructive agenda for pursuing verifiable nuclear arms reduction. Leaders in both countries have reaffirmed their nations' commitment to ridding the world of nuclear weapons, with entry into force of the comprehensive test ban treaty the next crucial step. Issues of strategic stability and nonproliferation, together with cooperation on nuclear terrorism, safeguarding nuclear material, and civil nuclear energy, should be the centerpiece of closer U.S.-Russian relations.

Missile Defense

The United States should reassess critically the last administration's determination to build missile defense sites in Poland and the Czech Republic. It should suspend further steps on antimissile weapons deployment while it assesses whether the proposed weaponry is cost-effective or even needed.

If the United States concludes, and NATO allies agree, that an antimissile system can be an effective, necessary, and affordable element of European security, it should seek a way to cooperate with Russia on deployment.

Nonproliferation and Iran

In the context of a broader spirit of cooperation, the Obama administration should test Russia's stated resolve to keep Tehran's nuclear program certifiably peaceful, complete with full-safeguard monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

By dint of geography and internal demography, Russia approaches its relations with Iran differently than does the United States, yet has interests in common and potentially important roles with regard to Tehran's nuclear program. While reluctant to impose harsher sanctions against Iran, Russia does not want to see the Islamic republic acquire nuclear weapons. President Obama's early steps to inject greater flexibility in U.S. policy toward Iran have caught Russian attention and, as that process unfolds, should prompt heightened Russian collaboration with the United States on averting an Iranian nuclear weapons program.

Washington should welcome Russia's voice in all major multilateral discussions of the crisis and its remedies, which would particularly strengthen the standing of those who see Russia's future as interwoven with the West's.

The global economic crisis has battered Russia no less than the United States, and economic conditions there will deteriorate further well into 2009, if not longer. The crisis has underscored the dependence of the Russian economy on the health of the global economy, including that of the United States. It has also refocused attention in both countries on economic exigencies, superseding the political tensions resulting from the Georgia war last summer. Both countries, along with Europe, share vital interests in reliable energy pricing and supplies and in halting climate change; yet, energy security for America's European partners would be enhanced through diversification of energy supply routes. Completing negotiations for Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization, followed by rescission of longstanding Jackson-Vanik trade barriers, should be a top priority.

Security of Independent States

The Obama administration need not expend political capital pressuring allies for further expansion of NATO, and should focus NATO's attention on the alliance's strategic mission as guarantor of Euro-Atlantic peace and security.

Expansion of the NATO military alliance, especially into countries previously incorporated into the Soviet Union, has poisoned U.S.-Russian relations for much of the past decade amid charges that Washington withdrew from the assurances it made at the time of German unification and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. The issue has become particularly acute since the Bush administration placed membership for Georgia and Ukraine on the NATO agenda. Yet Russia has its own strong reasons to support NATO's current efforts in Afghanistan in order to staunch the flow of both heroin and jihadist extremism into its territory, and NATO members should enlist its heightened cooperation there. The United States and Russia should address potential flash points in the region in bilateral discussions, in full respect of the independence and sovereignty of the states of the region. The notion of "spheres of influence" must be consigned to the past; the states of the former Soviet Union, like those anywhere else in the world, have a sovereign right recognized in international law to pursue their foreign policy interests with as many partners as they deem appropriate, and the United States has a core interest in these states maintaining peaceful and constructive relations with all their neighbors, Russia included.

Human Rights and Democratic Values

The United States can and should encourage Russia's strengthened adherence to human rights norms, both in competent international fora and on a bilateral basis, as principled advocacy for human rights does not constitute inappropriate interference in the internal competition for political power in Russia.

Respect for human rights and the promotion of democratic values have emerged as core tenets of U.S. foreign policy, and no U.S. administration should abandon these principles. They are an integral part of American national identity and Americans rightly insist that their government act in the world accordingly. While the human rights situation in Russia has improved in the past quarter-century relative to longstanding Soviet practice, many Russians—as well as Europe's human rights institutions—document continuing and growing problems in the authorities' respect for human rights guaranteed in international law. The Obama administration's intention to focus on repairing America's own tarnished international reputation is an essential first step to rebuilding the credibility needed to press a democratic, human rights agenda at a time when Russians increasingly doubt democracy's ability to address their needs and desires.

Policy Process

President Obama certainly will determine policy, but in light of the pressing domestic and international agenda he faces, the president should designate and empower a senior official close to him to act as his administration's point person on Russia, working with the secretary of state, to maintain an ongoing high-level strategic dialogue with the Russian leadership.

Placing specific issues, to the degree possible, in a cooperative context, the administration should move quickly on a bilateral agenda that can help improve the tone of relations—particularly nuclear arms control and economic matters—while also preparing to deal with often problematic issues of a more multilateral character, such as preventing arms proliferation and maintaining peace and security in both formerly Soviet-ruled states and the broader Middle East.

**THE CENTURY FOUNDATION WORKING GROUP ON
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