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U.S. Needs a Russia Strategy

By Andrei Tsygankov

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The new conventional wisdom among Russia experts in the U.S. seems to be that the agenda of the two sides' relationship will have to be limited to issues of nuclear arms control. Even in that area, it is difficult to expect any breakthroughs. According to this view, the U.S. and Russia cannot increase their level of cooperation because of the divergence of their interests and political systems.

The countries are divided over the Middle East, missile defense, human rights and other issues, and Washington does not see a meaningful role for Russia in the changing world. The Kremlin prioritizes stability over democracy, and that runs against Western values and policies. The U.S. also does not view Russia as sufficiently strong to be a global partner on issues from the Middle East to Asia. Finally, the United States advocates arms reductions, whereas Russia, in anticipation of greater instability in Eurasia, is determined to rebuild its nuclear arsenals.

What is missing is true leadership: the ability to offer a bold vision on tackling the world's problems jointly with others, acting on it and accepting necessary risks. As Jack Matlock,

the U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, reminds us, a good example of true leadership is how former Presidents Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev jointly ended the Cold War in the late 1980s by moving the world toward a new era.

Whatever Washington pundits say, today's Russia remains a critically important partner in shaping the world. In the Middle East, Russia is indispensable in facilitating a difficult transition to a new Syria after Bashar Assad leaves the stage and a greater stability in the region. In the Asia-Pacific region, Russia is needed to build a cooperative political and security system with participation of the U.S., China, India and other powers. Russia's energy reserves and transportation potential in Siberia, the Far East and the Arctic are unmatched and should attract large investments from Western and Asian countries. In Eurasia, Russia has initiated an ambitious project of economic integration and will continue to pull neighboring economies into its orbit. In Europe, Russia will be the main supplier of energy for many years to come. Globally, no progress in nuclear reductions is possible without Russia on board.

The agenda for U.S.-Russian relations is therefore expansive and far from exhausted. The real question is not whether such agenda exists but whether Washington is prepared to embrace it and assume the required leadership. So far, President Barak Obama has not shown signs of such leadership. His second term as president was marked by the unnecessary confrontation between the U.S. Congress and State Duma over the Magnitsky Act. Obama had the opportunity to veto the harmful legislature but preferred not to risk his relationships with Congress. More recently, the White House proposed to cancel stage four of the missile system's deployment as a way to engage the Kremlin in a new conversation over nuclear reductions. While it is a step in a right direction, it is unlikely to make a difference precisely because it rests on narrow calculations of gains and is not presented as a part of a broader vision of the two sides' relationships.

Many in the West blame the Kremlin for the United States' inability to jumpstart the relationship with Russia. This, however, may be a convenient excuse for not trying to do its part. Conveniently, President Vladimir Putin provides reasons to present Russia as the obstructionist party in the relationship. The Kremlin's restrictions against U.S. nongovernmental organizations, withdrawal from Nunn-Lugar, kicking out USAID and passing the anti-Magnitsky law can be easily misconstrued as Russia's unwillingness to enter into a meaningful dialogue with the United States.

But this view fails to address the root cause of the problem. From Russia's perspective, these steps try to restore sovereignty and end the era of U.S. over-involvement in Russia's domestic affairs. These steps are anti-American only from the perspective of those objecting to Russia's sovereignty.

As difficult as it may be, this position must be accepted as a foundation of a new U.S.-Russian relationship. It should also be understood that such a position makes it difficult for Putin to initiate a serious conversation with the U.S. After 9/11, Putin took a considerable risk by offering a bold vision of cooperation with the U.S. but was ultimately brushed off and humiliated by the White House. For the bilateral relationship to change, a new vision this time must come from the U.S.

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