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U.S.-Russia Relationship Stuck in the Soviet Era

By Samuel Charap

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It should be obvious to any observer of international affairs that the U.S.-Russia relationship matters for both countries and for the world. But the fact that such a question gets asked is revealing. It seems to result from an implicit comparison with the centrality of the U.S.-Soviet relationship, which, in relative terms, was far more important for both countries and for the world. But that comparison is misleading; Russia is not the Soviet Union, and bipolarity has been over for almost 25 years.

Compared to any other bilateral relationship that exists in the world today, the U.S.-Russia dyad is remarkably important: there isn't a single global issue unaffected by it. But the fact that its importance is being questioned demonstrates the extent to which the Cold War legacy haunts this bilateral relationship. To fix the relationship, both sides need to recognize that it is broken and that serious effort needs to be made in order to repair it.

The two governments have yet to undertake any such efforts. For all its myriad successes,

the "reset" of 2009-2011 was fundamentally about the deliverables produced by the relationship and not about addressing its long-standing problems.

There are three primary problems or pathologies that plague bilateral ties. The most corrosive is that elements within both countries' national security establishments continue to view each other as adversaries, almost 25 years after the Cold War's end. These attitudes are most overtly seen in the persistence of mutually assured destruction as the paradigm defining the nuclear relationship. A second pathology is the gap between Washington's expectations about Russia's post-Soviet political development and Russian realities, which haven't conformed to those expectations. Finally, the U.S.-Russia rivalry in post-Soviet Eurasia represents a continuing handicap on relations.

Addressing these problems would mean finding common ground, overcoming misperceptions and rethinking assumptions. It would not produce deliverables fit for presidential summits. But without such an effort, the two governments will once again end up taking steps that force them to cancel summits, as U.S. President Barack Obama did earlier this month.

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