

U.S.-Russia Relations Can Change, Just Not Now

By [Mark Kramer](#)

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My inclination in 2007 was, for both political and security reasons, to think it was a mistake for the International Olympic Committee to award the 2014 Winter Games to Russia. However, the political reasons were undermined by the earlier decision to award the 2008 Summer Games to China, which is a much more repressive country than Russia. The security concerns were still relevant, but they were not insurmountable. One can certainly argue that Sochi was not the best Russian city for the games because of its temperate climate, but in Russia decisions about which city to put forth are made at the center under President Vladimir Putin, with scant input from localities. If the IOC bought into it, so be it.

Putin has given extraordinarily high priority to the Olympics and depicted the IOC's decision to hold the Games in Sochi as a triumph for Russia and, implicitly, for himself. Far more than other national leaders in host countries in the post-1945 era, Putin has used the Sochi Games as a vehicle to cement a lofty position for himself on the international scene. This dynamic can be seen in the way Putin greeted the arrival of the Olympic flame in Moscow in early November 2013, as recorded by the BBC: "When the Olympic flame first arrived in Moscow, he

[Putin] was at the center of an elaborate ceremony on Red Square. With rousing music playing, he strode out of the Kremlin gates on live television and marched up a long red carpet to receive the flame personally. He then stood there, torch in hand as the national anthem played."

All the symbolic measures surrounding the Olympics — sending an Olympic torch into space for a spacewalk and sending another torch to a Russian icebreaker moving through to the North Pole — have been linked to the glorification of Russia as a world power and, implicitly, to the exaltation of Putin as the supreme leader of this great power. This sort of gloss is distasteful, yet it is important to remember that the Chinese authorities engaged in their own disingenuous manipulations when hosting the Games in 2008, depicting them as a tribute to the communist system in China.

Abhorrent though the Russian government's campaign against gays and lesbians has been, calls for a boycott of the Olympics over the vicious homophobia in Russia never seemed persuasive. The Summer Games were held in China in 2008 despite much worse human rights problems there than in Russia, and it would have seemed hypocritical to have boycotted the Sochi Games. Moreover, despite the IOC's strictures, some athletes are bound to use the games to criticize the anti-gay campaign — or at least I hope they do. But even if a boycott would have been inappropriate, it was good that numerous Western leaders stayed away from the opening ceremony on Feb. 7. That sent a message to the Russian authorities — and to other undemocratic regimes — without penalizing athletes who have trained hard for many years.

"Why does the U.S.-Russia relationship matter at this time?" This would be a good question to ask Putin. From his perspective, it was more important to engage in grandstanding than to seek a constructive relationship with the U.S. Putin was evidently hoping that a trade could be arranged for Viktor Bout — a notorious criminal who has caused mayhem and misery in large parts of the world, apparently in collusion with the Russian security services — and when the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama turned down any such exchange, Putin responded with pique. Obama's decision to cancel his September 2013 meeting with Putin was justified under the circumstances.

For the time being, U.S.-Russia relations are at their lowest point since the spring of 1999, during the war with Kosovo. The much-ballyhooed "reset" may have achieved a few modest results early on, but it has turned out to be a colossal failure. Nonetheless, over time the U.S. and Russia do have important reasons to try to establish a better relationship. The two sides share an interest in preventing Afghanistan from again becoming a haven for Islamic terrorists. They also share an interest in preserving stability in South Asia and East Asia. Both countries stand to benefit from cooperation on environmental issues, questions of public health, efforts to combat human trafficking and illegal arms dealing, and counterterrorism.

At the same time it would be wrong to gloss over the major issues that divide the two sides. The internal clampdown in Russia over the past 18 months is bound to cause friction and to inhibit cooperation. The Russian government has been unwilling to take a firm stance on Iran's nuclear weapons program and seems perfectly willing to accept a nuclear-armed Iran, even if, on balance, the Russian authorities would prefer that Iran not acquire nuclear weapons. The Russian authorities have done all they can to prop up the Assad regime in Syria

and to prevent any effective international action regarding the civil war in that country. Russia continues to behave in a domineering manner toward its neighbors, such as Georgia and the Baltic countries. On all of these issues, if the U.S. can obtain concrete favorable action by Russia, it will certainly bolster U.S. interests and put relations back on a sounder footing.

After the dismal experience with the relations "reset," the best step will be to avoid such gimmicks in the future. Far too much of the reset was public relations rather than substance. The two sides should candidly acknowledge the many issues on which they disagree as well as those on which they agree.

The steady emergence of the U.S. as one of the world's largest energy producers and eventually one of the largest energy exporters, will give U.S. officials a valuable source of leverage they have not had in the past. Because the Russian economy remains so heavily dependent on extraction industries, especially oil and natural gas, the U.S. should begin as soon as possible, which probably will not be before 2017, to export energy to European countries that currently import almost all of their needs from Russia. By edging in on these markets, U.S. officials over the longer term will have greater leeway to push for Russian concessions on a range of issues.

So long as Putin is president of Russia, it is hard to see how the bilateral relationship can change fundamentally. Both sides deserve blame for this dismal situation, but it is too late now to undo past mistakes and to foster amity and close cooperation, at least while Putin is around. Instead, the U.S. should use what leverage it can wield to seek Russian concessions on issues of importance to U.S. interests. Over the longer term, there may be an opportunity to forge a genuine partnership and genuine friendship with Russia — something the U.S. failed to do in the 1990s — but at this point the best that can be done is to minimize damage and preserve the significant areas of cooperation that still exist.

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