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Icy Silence: The Future of U.S.-Russian Relations

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In classic Russian theater, when a scene calls for the noise of a crowd, all of the actors on and off stage begin repeating the phrase "What to say when you have nothing to say?" — creating the necessary "white noise." This week's vapid media reporting struck me as an informational version of the same phenomenon.

It is as if commentators are now doubling as psychologists, trying to read deeper meaning into the expressions that Russian President Vladimir Putin and U.S. President Barack Obama wore when they greeted each other in Beijing and Brisbane or the fact that they chatted for a few minutes at this or that forum. But how could they possibly have discussed anything of substance concerning Ukraine or Iran in those fleeting sessions of "speed diplomacy?"

Is it even important that the two presidents spoke to each other? Of course, it is nice to know that both have enough tact to acknowledge the other's presence, but that is the most we can hope from them these days. U.S.-Russian relations have reached a point where simply talking will not change anything.

Putin and Obama have limited their conversations to discussions about the weather or the cut of the complimentary coat they received from summit organizers. This is not because they hold an insuperable aversion for each other — although there is a decided lack of warmth between them.

The problem is that they have nothing to talk about. More precisely, there is plenty to talk about, but they lack the motivation to try because each side knows all of the other side's stock phrases, arguments and counter-arguments in advance. A deep chasm has opened up between Russia and the U.S., but this time it stems not from differing ideologies, but from divergent perceptions of the world — past, present and future.

U.S.-Russian relations were openly hostile during the Cold War, but this did not prevent the sides from agreeing on the rules of the game and acceptable behaviors. They had some sharp conflicts and dangerous tensions along the way, but they did manage to establish a mutually acceptable framework. But when their confrontation ended, that framework collapsed along with it.

The U.S. alone emerged from that standoff with a sense of omnipotence — something it viewed as a natural and well-deserved outcome. After all, the U.S. believes in its exceptionalism and bases everything on that principle. Meanwhile, Russia painfully mourns the loss of its superpower status and has yet to fully come to grips with the rupture that occurred almost a quarter of a century ago. It left Moscow with a heightened sense of the fragility of not only the Russian state, but of the entire world order.

The U.S. sees the modern world as the product of its own creation, a work in progress that its Cold War victory has helped bring closer to completion. And Washington considers itself entitled, even obliged, to continue sculpting that world order according to the same template it adopted as the only "right" one after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Of course, there are plenty of realists in Washington who understand that things did not go as planned and that changes are necessary, but institutional and intellectual inertia stubbornly push events toward the old approaches. Obama came to office with a new program, with the understanding that he could not run the U.S. in the same old way. But in the end, he got bogged down in the same rut as his predecessors. The difference is that he continues on reluctantly and without inspiration, achieving even less convincing results.

Russia views everything happening on the world arena as evidence of the overconfidence of a global leader who assumed it has the right to decide matters for everyone. And whereas 25 years ago that leader really did stand head and shoulders above the rest, now it stumbles repeatedly, making moves that, frankly, are destructive not only to others, but even to its own interests. Russia's feeling of vulnerability as the loser in the Cold War combines with a growing fear of what that global hegemon might perpetrate in its effort to maintain dominance. And it is inevitable in such a situation that Russia would want to take revenge and prove that the U.S. was premature in dismissing it.

The U.S. and Russia want to contain or stop each other, each for its own reasons. What dialogue is possible under such conditions? The only subjects left for them to discuss are the weather and the beautiful view. True, it is good they say that much to each other, but even then it is only on the sidelines of this or that international conference. It is no longer possible

to hold a bilateral summit because they cannot agree on an agenda or on concrete results that they hope to achieve. That leaves only communicating "on the run," as diplomats call it. Only two forums remain where the U.S. and Russian presidents will see each other — APEC and the Group of 20. Their paths will not cross at any other venue.

Something is seriously wrong when the leaders of the two largest countries in the world — both nuclear superpowers — refuse to communicate with each other. What's more, such a simmering conflict is dangerous over the long term. But that is how the situation stands today, and no immediate change is anticipated.

Obama will have far more important questions than that of Russia to tackle during the final two years of his presidency. First, he must cope with a hostile Congress that already considered him weak for always giving in to Putin. Second, the remnants of his "reset" with the Kremlin no longer work and the complete lack of mutual understanding prevents the creation of a new agenda. Third, there is no urgent need to make Russia a priority in general: Washington has little need of Moscow for its current and short-range goals. Cooperation would only become necessary given large-scale movement in the international arena, but recognizing that fact requires strategy, and strategy is what's lacking.

Putin also has little reason to change his approach to the U.S. First, he sincerely believes that U.S. foreign policy is destructive and completely senseless. Second, his anti-U.S. stance does more than anything else to boost his popularity at home. Third, Russia has greatly intensified its relations with the countries of the non-Western world, and that requires Moscow to position itself — at least to some extent — as an alternative to the U.S.

And finally, speaking before the United Nations, Obama put Russia on a par with Ebola and the Islamic State. It would be strange for Moscow, finding itself placed in such company, to put forward proposals for the resumption of a dialogue.

It is difficult to imagine that any of the presidential favorites in the U.S. would want to fundamentally change Washington's policy toward Russia, thus ruling out the possibility of a breakthrough following the change in U.S. leadership. What's more, just as the new U.S. president is taking office, Russia will be gearing up to decide who will rule this country from 2018 to 2024. It seems that in the years ahead, a couple of words exchanged on the sidelines of international forums will be the only form of communication that the presidents of Russia and the U.S. will have.

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