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Putin and Obama Must Meet in New York

By Igor Ivanov

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It was announced recently that President Vladimir Putin will speak at the 70th session of the United Nations General Assembly and will also head the Russian delegation.

The upcoming anniversary session of the UN General Assembly later this month — taking place at a time of heightened tensions between Russia and the West — will be the center of international attention. Speeches, public discussions and closed-door bilateral meetings may well define the course of international events.

The world's leading states, responsible for safeguarding international peace and security under the UN Charter, are expected to reaffirm their readiness to play an active role in reducing tensions and combining their efforts to take on common challenges and threats.

The United Nations is the world's most influential international organization. The General Assembly sessions provide a unique opportunity for states to outline their views on current international issues, as well as make potentially groundbreaking progress in bilateral relations with other countries.

The agenda of the upcoming session of the General Assembly includes a wide range of topics. However, it is clear that the Russian and U.S. leaders will be at the very heart of the event. And this is understandable. It is evident that many of the key international problems we are facing today simply cannot be resolved without the joint efforts of Moscow and Washington.

To achieve this, we need constructive dialogue between the two states, which is, unfortunately, almost non-existent. The only way to get it back on track is through concerted efforts at the highest political level.

It is imperative for the entire international community that U.S. President Barack Obama and President Vladimir Putin meet at the event. Nobody expects that such a meeting will immediately lead to a breakthrough in resolving the issues at hand. Yet, no matter how long the road to normalizing bilateral relations may seem, the journey still has to start with a single step. And that step is absolutely vital.

It would send a signal to the media, to policymakers and the international community in general that the low point of U.S.-Russian relations is behind us and we can now start restoring cooperation between the two countries, which will certainly be a daunting and complicated task.

Skeptics and critics will debate whether it is even worth opening up a dialogue with the outgoing U.S. administration when it may be better to wait and see what happens in the U.S. presidential elections in 18 months. But this is a misguided policy.

First of all, U.S. foreign policy has always been bipartisan in nature. It does not matter, therefore, if the new administration is Democratic or Republican; it will still inherit Obama's foreign policy "portfolio" with all its assets and liabilities. Russia will not be building relations with the United States from scratch in February 2017. This is why the sooner we start making efforts and put this crisis behind us, the more favorable the conditions will be when it finally comes to the new administration.

The second point is perhaps the essential one: Who can say if we can afford waiting 18 months? Is the Islamic State going to sit back and do nothing? Will the unfolding crisis in the Middle East ever stop? And what if new crises were to arise — crises that would be impossible to settle without the joint efforts of Moscow and Washington?

The global situation is developing rapidly and, unfortunately, it is not moving in the right direction. The cost of idleness may be too high for all of us. That is why a dialogue between Moscow and Washington is absolutely essential. That is why we need to take this chance.

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