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Trust Is Key to Repairing Ties With Russia

Russia should show it can be a responsible member of the international community.

By Jon Huntsman

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Mikhail Metsel / TASS

As I reflect on 2018 and look forward to 2019, I am reminded of my words in this very publication a year ago. At that time, I stressed that we need to roll up our sleeves to come up with a constructive way forward in our bilateral relations, and that building trust is a key dimension of that. This is true today more than ever.

Trust, however, is something that must be earned by acting as a responsible neighbor and reliable partner. Russia's recent actions in the Black Sea – including its unjustified firing on and seizing Ukrainian vessels and arresting Ukrainian sailors – have seriously eroded the

delicate trust established over the past year.

Russia's use of a "Novichok" nerve agent in an attempt to assassinate Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia on British soil also dealt a serious blow to trust between our two countries, and between Russia and the international community as a whole. These irresponsible actions are unbefitting of a country with a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

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For our part, we have worked in good faith to renew dialogue and find a path forward, despite our differences. This renewed dialogue has taken place at several levels. Our presidents met in Helsinki and spoke briefly on the sidelines of the G-20. The first Congressional delegation in several years met with Russian lawmakers. Secretary of Energy Rick Perry, NASA Administrator Jim Bridenstine, and National Security Advisor John Bolton visited Moscow and met with their Russian counterparts for substantive conversations. The governor, legislators, and community leaders from my home state of Utah recently welcomed my Russian counterpart, Ambassador Anatoly Antonov.

In addition, Russians and Americans from all walks of life continue to travel between our two countries, strengthening people-to-people relationships and fostering understanding at a community level.

Russia has the opportunity to demonstrate that it is a responsible member of the international community so that it can return to the constructive path through which we can strengthen trust between our countries. Without a sincere commitment by Russia to abide by its international agreements and respect the sovereign, international borders of its neighbors, any efforts to improve relations will fall short. We cannot afford this, for the sake of our two countries and for global stability.

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I've expressed the hope many times that we can end the year with our relationship in a better place than we started it. As I look back over the successes and challenges of the past 12 months, I am convinced that we can make progress in our relations if we can see a demonstration of goodwill from the Kremlin.

Trust must be earned through action and demonstrated responsibility. While 2018 went from diplomatic expulsions to some expanded dialogue in critical areas like counterterrorism, Syria, North Korea and Afghanistan, 2019 must see breakthroughs in actually solving these problems. Real results and therefore enhanced trust are impossible without it.

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