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The US-Russia Implosion

Richard Weitz does not expect the current breakdown in relations between the United States and Russia to culminate in another Cold War. He also warns, however, that dialogue between Washington and Moscow will remain difficult until both sides have more harmonious values and interests.

By Richard Weitz for ISN

A number of recent statements by senior US officials and Republican opposition leaders suggest that Washington has all but given up hope of developing a productive relationship with Russia during the last two years of the Obama administration—and perhaps well beyond then, regardless of who becomes the next U.S. president.

In his recent [State of the Union](#) address, President Barack Obama declared that his administration was determined to ensure that “bigger nations can’t bully the small” by opposing Russian aggression, supporting Kiev’s democratic legitimacy and credentials, and offering reassurance to Washington’s NATO partners. Dismissing arguments that the Putin administration’s aggression was a masterful display of strategy and strength, the US President also insisted that it is America that stands strong and united with its allies, while Russia is isolated with its economy in tatters. “That’s how America leads -- not with bluster, but with persistent, steady resolve.”

It’s a view that’s shared by the likely next US Secretary of Defense, Ashton Carter. In response to questions posed by the [Senate Armed Services Committee](#), Carter declared his support for the decision to suspend bilateral defense cooperation following Moscow’s occupation of Crimea. As he sees it, Russia’s behavior is inconsistent with that of a responsible, global stakeholder. In addition to this, Carter indicated that Russia has long fomented ‘frozen conflicts’ in Moldova and Georgia in order to limit their freedom of action and hinder both states’ Euro-Atlantic ambitions. The best way to counter these threats, he argued, is through the administration’s [European Reassurance Initiative](#) and the [NATO Readiness Action Plan](#). Both of these initiatives aim to help the United States support its Eastern European partners and make them more resistant to asymmetric threats or hybrid methods of coercion.

Beyond Rhetoric

The difference in tone between the recently revised [U.S. National Security Strategy](#) and the first version issued by the Obama administration in May 2010 also marks a departure from the earlier state of affairs. Where once there was talk of dialogue and cooperation, the revised strategy refers to Russian “aggression” and related terms about a dozen times in its 29 pages. In addition, Russia’s violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity—as well as its belligerent stance toward

other neighboring countries— is roundly criticized for endangering international norms that have largely been taken for granted since the end of the Cold War.

Indeed, the revised National Security Strategy baldly states that Washington is committed to deterring Russian aggression, remaining alert to Russia's strategic capabilities, and helping allies and partners to resist Moscow's coercion - over the long term, if necessary. Areas of focus include strengthening NATO's collective defense capabilities, providing even greater assistance to Ukraine and other NATO partners, as well as "countering Moscow's deceptive propaganda with the unvarnished truth".

Finally, there's a commitment to safeguarding Europe's energy security in the face of Russia's alleged use of its natural gas assets for political ends—an imperative that Joseph Biden emphasized at his [speech during last week's Munich Security Conference](#). The US Vice-President also highlighted the importance of fighting corruption and other societal vulnerabilities that Russia exploits, as well as the need to reassert the principles of collective security and the transatlantic partnership.

Republican Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham took an even harder line in their respective [presentations at Munich](#). McCain was adamant that Vladimir Putin does not want a diplomatic solution to the Ukraine crisis. Indeed, while the Russian President might be open to "tactical compromise", these will be no more than a prelude to further aggression. In response, the United States and its allies must supply Kiev with defensive weapons, a position that is gaining support within the administration despite Obama's reluctance to risk escalating the crisis

By contrast, [the 2010 National Security Strategy](#), which was issued during the heyday of the "reset" policy, envisioned many more opportunities for cooperation in trade, arms control, counter-proliferation, and counter-terrorism. Another telling difference is that, whereas the 2010 version spoke of the administration's backing of efforts within Russia to promote the rule of law, accountable government, and universal values, the 2015 edition ignores the country in its section on human rights - even though elsewhere it laments that many challenges to US security in recent years arose from efforts by authoritarian states to oppose democratic forces.

(Still) Some Light...

Yet despite their differences, the 2015 strategy nevertheless remains open to the possibility of partnering with Russia in cases of common concern and advantage. Five years ago, the Strategy affirmed Washington's interest in resetting its relationship with Moscow to build a stable, substantive, multidimensional relationship with Russia, based on mutual interests. Likewise, the 2015 version still affirms that Washington will keep the door open for greater collaboration with Moscow in areas of common interest, should it choose a different path - "a path of peaceful cooperation that respects the sovereignty and democratic development of neighboring states".

In addition, Ashton Carter outlined in his written answers to the Senate Armed Services Committee that he would be open to seeking measured avenues that allow more productive engagement with Russia. Yet this was to be limited to vital issues where Washington and Moscow share a clear national interest. The current National Security Advisor, Susan Rice, also used the same language in her recent [rollout of the new strategy](#) at the Brookings Institute.

Consequently, the potential for renewed dialogue and cooperation between Russia and the United States should not be overstated. For instance, administration officials acknowledge that, given the poor security relationship between them, Obama will not be able to negotiate another major bilateral arms control treaty with Vladimir Putin before the US President leaves office in January 2017. Moreover, due to their limited economic cooperation and past history of antagonism, the number of

stakeholders in both countries that support better relations is abysmally small. This paucity contributes to Moscow's wariness regarding U.S. policies towards Europe and Asia, particularly the former Soviet republics in both continents. There's also a divergence of opinions between Washington and Moscow regarding the exact nature of the threats posed by Iran and North Korea as well as notable differences in the promotion of human rights and democratic norms.

That said, there are still some issues of mutual concern that compel some level of cooperation (or at least coordination) between Russia and the United States. Aside from the obvious goal of preventing WMD terrorism and proliferation, Moscow and Washington are both threatened by Islamist terrorism and want to avoid a security vacuum in Afghanistan or other potential terrorist safe havens. Russia and the United States also need to keep their differences over Ukraine and other issues from escalating into a direct armed conflict--a goal that has not been helped by Russia's recent brandishing of its nuclear deterrent and [provocative shows of air power](#) over allied airspace.

Back to the Future?

Yet, despite official U.S. predictions that we should expect [more of the same](#) from Russia in 2015, we cannot talk about a return to the Cold War. As U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry correctly noted in his own [comments at the Munich Conference](#), the world has changed too much over the last three decades to return to that era. Put simply, there are currently no strong ideological differences between Washington and Moscow. Indeed, where differences are apparent (think human rights) they do not appear to be shaping foreign policy. Furthermore, despite its renewed military power and determined leadership, Russia remains a regional power with global ambitions—not a superpower peer rival of the United States. This asymmetry limits the scale of their competition and gives Washington the flexibility to contemplate political and security initiatives in regions like the Middle East without risking a military confrontation with Moscow.

At a minimum, mutual interests will help to keep US-Russia relations from becoming too adversarial and on an even enough keel until the emergence of stronger incentives for future cooperation, such as a more assertive China or transnational threats like migration or organized crime. Yet, the original "reset" exhausted its potential because it lacked the broad and enduring foundation necessary for it to become a sustained partnership between Russia and the West. A lasting improvement in Russia-U.S. relations will not occur until both sides have more harmonious values and interests.

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