

The Right Direction for U.S. Policy toward Russia

A Report from The Commission
on U.S. Policy toward Russia



March 2009
Washington, D.C.

The goals of the Commission on U.S. Policy toward Russia are to offer its best judgments on American national interests and priorities in the U.S.-Russian relationship to the President, the Congress, and the interested public; to explain why constructive management of this critical relationship is difficult given recent history, differing interests, and sometimes competing narratives; and to present broad policy recommendations for a new administration to advance American national interests effectively in relations with Russia.

This Report reflects the general policy thrust and judgments reached by the Commission, although not all members of the Commission necessarily subscribe to every specific statement in the Report.

The Commission on U.S. Policy toward Russia is a joint project of The Nixon Center and the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, a research center within Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Securing America's vital national interests in the complex, interconnected, and interdependent world of the twenty-first century requires deep and meaningful cooperation with other governments. The challenges—stopping the proliferation of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, defeating terrorist networks, rebuilding the global economy, and ensuring energy security for the United States and others—are enormous. And few nations could make more of a difference to our success than Russia, with its vast arsenal of nuclear weapons, its strategic location spanning Europe and Asia, its considerable energy resources, and its status as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. Rapid and effective action to strengthen U.S.-Russian relations is critically important to advancing U.S. national interests.

An American commitment to improving U.S.-Russian relations is neither a reward to be offered for good international behavior by Moscow nor an endorsement of the Russian government's domestic conduct. Rather, it is an acknowledgement of the importance of Russian cooperation in achieving essential American goals, whether preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, dismantling al-Qaeda and stabilizing Afghanistan, or guaranteeing security and prosperity in Europe. Success in creating a new and cooperative relationship with Russia can contribute to each of these objectives and many others. Failure could impose significant costs.

Our recommendations are both substantive and procedural. Most importantly, the United States must:

- Seek to make Russia an American partner in dealing with Iran and the broader problem of emerging nuclear powers.
- Work jointly to strengthen the international nonproliferation regime with the goal of allowing for wider development of nuclear power while establishing tighter limits on nuclear-weapons technologies.
- Pursue closer cooperation with Russia against terrorism and in stabilizing Afghanistan, including strengthening supply routes for NATO operations there.

- Take a new look at missile-defense deployments in Poland and the Czech Republic and make a genuine effort to develop a cooperative approach to the shared threat from Iranian or other missiles.
- Accept that neither Ukraine nor Georgia is ready for NATO membership and work closely with U.S. allies to develop options other than NATO membership to demonstrate a commitment to their sovereignty.
- Launch a serious dialogue on arms control, including on the extension of the START I treaty as well as further reduction of strategic and tactical nuclear weapons.
- Move promptly to graduate Russia from trade restrictions under the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, something promised multiple times by previous administrations, as a signal of America's seriousness in restarting the relationship.
- Work to bring Russia into the World Trade Organization while insisting that Moscow must make its own strong and consistent effort to establish necessary conditions for foreign investment.

To succeed in resetting the relationship, the United States should also establish new structures and processes to develop and implement American policy toward Russia and to engage with the Russian government. Neither America's bureaucratic machinery nor the current institutions of U.S.-Russian dialogue are adequate to the tasks ahead—both must be substantially reinforced. Within the American government, this means ensuring that policy toward Russia—or other policies that could affect relations with Russia—receives priority attention from cabinet-level officials and that lower-level officials are accountable for implementing decisions. Bilaterally, it will require working with Moscow to develop new mechanisms for dialogue between our governments to facilitate deeper engagement at all levels.

Even with all of these changes, however, U.S. policy toward Russia cannot succeed without a much clearer definition of American interests and priorities and serious consideration of Russian interests. Even as the United States faces a profound economic crisis, the foreign-policy challenges facing our country are increasingly complicated and difficult—and our interests in dealing with particular situations can be competing or even contradictory. It is for this reason that we must make hard choices in shaping our foreign policy,

focusing most on what is truly vital in a strict sense—first and foremost nuclear nonproliferation, arms control, terrorism, and global economic recovery.

We must also significantly improve our understanding of Russian interests as Russians themselves define them. The United States and Russia have common interests as well as divergent interests and we cannot afford either to take Moscow's cooperation for granted or to assume that conflict is inevitable. Nor should we allow ourselves to be blinded by undue sentimentality—or undue hostility—in working with Russia. Moscow will likely be a difficult partner at best, but the stakes are simply too high not to approach our bilateral relationship very seriously, with appropriate skepticism but also a genuine desire to find a path forward.

Breaking out of existing patterns of psychology and behavior to change the U.S.-Russian relationship will be difficult in both the United States and Russia and cannot succeed without serious commitments in Washington and Moscow. America and Russia also have differing interests and perspectives on many major international issues. Yet a new sense of our interdependence may well be the silver lining in the dark economic clouds over both our countries and the rest of the world. If we are able to turn this sense of interdependence and our shared vulnerability to nuclear weapons and terrorism toward building a new U.S.-Russian relationship, America could make significant foreign-policy gains from Iran to Afghanistan and beyond. If we fail, these and other challenges will become only more dangerous and harder to resolve. A new, more forthcoming approach to Russia is far from guaranteed to succeed, but we are convinced that the risk in making the effort is far smaller than the costs of a slide into hostility.

RUSSIA AND AMERICAN INTERESTS

Protecting and advancing America's national interests in the decades ahead requires a strategic reassessment of the United States' relationship with Russia with an emphasis on exploring common interests. A constructive relationship with Russia will directly influence the United States' ability to advance effectively vital national-security interests in nonproliferation, counterterrorism, and energy security, and to deal with many specific challenges such as Iran or European security. If left unchecked, the ongoing deterioration of U.S.-Russian relations will begin to seriously damage our ability to achieve objectives across these interests. The Obama administration must establish an effective, comprehensive bilateral structure to facilitate consultation, dialogue, and negotiation. U.S. priorities must be defined more clearly. And we must more realistically assess Russia's views of its interests.

Though leaders in both countries have made encouraging statements in recent weeks suggesting a new commitment to improving relations, we are deeply concerned by the gap between the current U.S.-Russian relationship and the level of cooperation that the United States needs with Russia in order to advance vital American interests. Not only rhetoric but swift action is essential to build a relationship with Moscow that addresses critical U.S. goals in Iran, Afghanistan, and around the world.

Both governments are to blame for the decline in U.S.-Russian relations; thus, rebuilding the relationship will not be easy and is not solely the responsibility of the United States. Moreover, cooperation is not a panacea. American and Russian interests are not identical and the United States cannot address some of its important interests through cooperation alone, such as preventing Russia from using Europe's energy dependence for political leverage. Moscow is clearly a difficult partner at best, with its own perspectives, approaches, and foreign-policy preferences. The United States will have to work toward some goals without Russia or over Russian objections. We must also entertain the possibility that despite America's best efforts, Russia will choose an unacceptable direction. The United States

should avoid contributing to such a decision, but must be prepared to respond to it if necessary.

Part of the problem is that the United States and Russia have yet to develop an effective set of structures that allows for not only frank and comprehensive dialogue, but also exploration of possible cooperative projects and prompt, coordinated implementation of leadership decisions. The Bush and Clinton administrations attempted to develop many such structures, including the Strategic Dialogue, the Camp David Checklist, and the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission. None can or should be replicated: all depended heavily on the personalities involved and each had its own shortcomings. But the United States and Russia must find an institutional basis for their relationship befitting its strategic necessity.

Any attempt to renew the U.S.-Russian relationship must also include a much clearer definition of American priorities and a more realistic understanding of Russia's view of its interests as well as Moscow's capabilities and intentions. The two poles of misplaced sentimentality and undue alarm have plagued our debates about Russia in the past and policies based on what we think Moscow should want—rather than what Russians themselves say they want—have failed. To succeed in strengthening U.S.-Russian relations, we can no longer afford such illusions. Nor can we continue to believe that we may have everything we find desirable without making difficult choices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We offer specific recommendations in seven broad areas: nonproliferation and arms control; terrorism; European security; the global economic crisis and U.S.-Russian trade and investment; energy and the environment; Russia's neighborhood; and democracy, rule of law and human rights. Afterward, we describe the logic that underlies them.

We believe that the United States should:

- Seek to make Russia an American partner in dealing with Iran and the broader problem of emerging nuclear powers.
- Work jointly to strengthen the international nonproliferation regime through existing and new international treaties, to increase security at nuclear facilities globally, and to secure or eliminate weapons-usable material in third countries. A key goal must be to allow for the wider development of nuclear power while preventing proliferation of nuclear-weapons technologies.
- Reinvigorate the work of the U.S.-Russia Counterterrorism Working Group and more broadly, seek closer cooperation with Russia against terrorist threats and in stabilizing Afghanistan, including strengthening supply routes for NATO operations there.
- Take a new look at missile-defense deployments in Poland and the Czech Republic and make a genuine effort to develop a cooperative approach to the shared threat from Iranian or other missiles.
- Work closely with U.S. allies to develop options other than NATO membership to demonstrate a commitment to the sovereignty of Ukraine and Georgia and to encourage their orientation toward the West.

- Fundamentally reexamine the structures and processes of engagement between the United States and Russia across the board. The U.S.-Russian relationship requires mechanisms for consultation and negotiation that are proportionate to its vital strategic importance.
- Launch a serious dialogue on arms control, including the extension of START I before the treaty expires in December 2009, as well as on further reduction of strategic and tactical nuclear weapons. This should include discussion of the “nuclear zero” goal articulated by President Barack Obama and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.
- Establish, with our European allies, clear rules for European and Eurasian security based on a shared concept of security that incorporates Russian perspectives. The rules must be realistic, widely supported and enforceable, and, with existing institutions and agreements, would form the basis of a new regional architecture.
- Support European efforts to develop non-Russian sources of natural gas, whether delivered by pipeline or by sea as liquefied natural gas (LNG).
- Work with our European allies and Russia to develop a mutually acceptable system of rights and responsibilities for energy suppliers, transit countries, and consumers. Include discussions of a reciprocal investment regime if possible.
- Ratify and implement the U.S.-Russian Civil Nuclear Agreement. Work with Russia to ensure access to nuclear fuel for nonnuclear states without proliferation risks, perhaps by exploring the creation of an international nuclear-fuel bank that would render national enrichment efforts unnecessary. Cooperate to phase out highly enriched uranium and to develop and build proliferation-resistant reactors.
- Include Moscow in broader discussions with major developed and developing economies to manage the global economic crisis and create new international financial rules and systems.

- Work bilaterally with Russia and multilaterally with other governments to achieve Russian WTO membership. Strongly encourage the U.S. Congress to move promptly to graduate Russia from the cold war-era Jackson-Vanik Amendment and negotiate and sign a Bilateral Investment Treaty.
- Establish structures that engage one or more cabinet-level officials in regular interaction with Russia, define accountability, and demonstrate to the bureaucracy that U.S.-Russian relations are a priority.
- Create permanent bilateral forums in which sub-cabinet-level diplomats, military and security officials, and economic officials could interact regularly and cooperate on concrete projects while also developing a better understanding of decision making on each side by the other, building mutual trust, and fostering working relationships.
- Seek to improve U.S.-Russian cooperation in the Middle East peace process, especially in working on an Israeli-Syrian treaty.
- Establish a government-to-government dialogue on Russia's neighborhood, with a view to developing confidence-building measures to ease bilateral tensions.
- Call attention to Russian leaders' formal commitments to democracy and international obligations to protect human rights while respecting Russia's sovereignty, history, and traditions and recognizing that Russian society will evolve at its own pace. Ensure that U.S. behavior meets or exceeds the same standards and that statements about Russian conduct are proportionate to those directed at other governments.
- Intensify scientific and technical collaboration in areas like alternative-energy technologies, energy efficiency, and space-based climate research.

BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS

Underlying these recommendations are supporting arguments for why and how they should be adopted. These arguments, like the recommendations they support, represent the considered judgment of our Commission, which itself represents a broad spectrum of American political thought and extensive national-security and foreign-policy experience.

Nonproliferation and Arms Control

The detonation of even a single nuclear warhead in the United States would have catastrophic consequences for America and its future. Likewise, the use of only one nuclear weapon anywhere else would also profoundly affect the United States through its considerable global political and economic consequences.

Without deep Russian cooperation, no strategy is likely to succeed in preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons, nuclear terrorism, and nuclear war. On the contrary, the future of the global nuclear order will be determined in large measure by whether leaders in Washington and Moscow will jointly recognize this overriding threat and develop a common strategy. Having created the weapons and owning 95 percent of all nuclear warheads, the United States and Russia have a special obligation to lead.

Unfortunately, disagreements on key elements of the arms-control regime have clouded rhetoric and distracted the two countries from pursuing their shared core interests. In addition, despite the good relations previously enjoyed by U.S. and Russian leaders, their personal chemistry never produced a successful joint plan of action or sufficient practical guidance to Washington's or Moscow's bureaucracies. Regardless of why this did not happen—and there are many reasons—there has been little substantive progress.

Nonetheless, Russia has been cooperative in areas of importance for the United States, including in dealing with Iran, where Moscow has been somewhat helpful, though not as constructive as many would wish. Working with Moscow to solve the Iran problem, including

possibly strengthening sanctions on Iran if necessary, should be a top U.S. priority. However, America is unlikely to be able to resolve the Iranian nuclear issue solely through sanctions, and Russia's cooperation could contribute substantially to a successful outcome. Addressing differences on START I and missile defense could help to renew a degree of trust and aid greater cooperation on Iran and in the broader U.S.-Russian relationship. A discussion of new nuclear-arms reductions could also add to this.

Terrorism

The September 11 attacks starkly demonstrated the common threat of terrorism to America and Russia. Moscow has since provided important assistance to the United States and its NATO allies in Afghanistan; however, this help may be at risk if U.S.-Russia and NATO-Russia relations weaken further. After initially acquiescing to a U.S. military presence in the region, Russia has complicated U.S. efforts to maintain air bases in central Asia to support operations against the Taliban and al-Qaeda, including Kyrgyzstan's recent decision that the United States should close its Manas base. This in part reflects U.S.-Russian differences over both Afghanistan and the wider central Asian region. It also starkly illustrates the potential costs of treating the former Soviet Union as a competitive battleground rather than a zone of cooperation. Though the Russian government has an interest in preventing the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan, Moscow might revoke its permission for transit of NATO cargoes to Afghanistan via Russia if NATO-Russia relations deteriorate further. Greater cooperation in Afghanistan is far more desirable and could build on past collaboration to develop deeper intelligence sharing and improved coordination with Russia's long-standing allies in the country. However, it will require greater willingness to consider Russian perspectives.

Broader U.S.-Russian counterterrorism cooperation has been hindered by divergence in U.S. and Russian assessments of the challenges and opportunities presented by various non-state actors to the United States, Russia, and other countries. This divergence has prevented the two countries from agreeing on a common definition of terrorism and is one of the factors behind American reluctance to assist in Russia's fight against Chechen separatists and Russian engagement with Hamas and Hezbollah. Despite this, working

successfully with Moscow could offer major opportunities, especially in the greater Middle East, where the United States has relatively few sources of human intelligence. Intensified cooperation in the Middle East peace process could also have some impact on terrorism in the region.

European Security

The United States has a vital interest in a strong, secure, and free Europe. We are concerned with Russian efforts to use its energy leverage, including in the recent Russia-Ukraine gas dispute, though declining energy prices may reduce Russia's influence, at least in the near term. The United States must resist these efforts and any efforts by Russia to establish a sphere of influence in Europe or elsewhere in Eurasia, including attempts to deny other countries their right of association with NATO or other organizations. At the same time, however, Washington should not expect that it can attempt to create its own sphere of influence on Russia's borders while simultaneously seeking a constructive relationship with Russia.

Ukraine and Georgia have a right to make their own decisions about their possible NATO membership. So too do the states that are currently members of NATO have a right to make their own decision on whether or when to invite these states to join the alliance. While recognizing the broad commitments made at NATO's Bucharest Summit, we do not believe that the United States has a compelling security interest in expediting NATO membership for either Ukraine or Georgia at this time. While both are strategically located, their membership in the alliance could decrease rather than increase Europe's overall security given the realities on the ground in each, especially if it seriously damages relations between NATO, Ukraine, Georgia, and Russia at a time when the United States and NATO face many critical challenges elsewhere. A special relationship with NATO short of membership could serve the same function as membership, and would be a useful way to ensure that those Ukrainians and Georgians seeking to join NATO do not become discouraged. Furthermore, and in parallel, establishing a path to European Union association and membership for Ukraine and Georgia could begin to anchor them more firmly in the West—provided that their populations want it and can satisfy the necessary criteria.

If the administration and the Congress decide that the nature of the Iranian threat, the availability of technologies, and the costs justify proceeding with missile defense, America has a strong interest in winning Russian cooperation: key U.S. allies would prefer such an approach, it could make the system more comprehensive and effective, it would send a powerful signal to Iran, and it would avoid unnecessary damage to relations with Russia or new dangers resulting from Moscow's possible reaction to the deployments if they are pursued without a prior understanding with Russia. Building a joint system that could include Russian facilities and equipment is most desirable. Measures to increase transparency, like inspections, are another option. Avoiding linkages to other American actions, such as the decision to provide Poland with Patriot missiles, would also help. At a minimum, the United States must seriously address Moscow's concerns that the system could be directed against Russia.

The potential collapse of the post-cold war security architecture in Europe—established by the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, and the NATO-Russia Council, among other agreements and institutions—is also a serious threat to European security. Here, the fundamental problem is Russian dissatisfaction with a security system established at the time of Moscow's greatest weakness, during the 1990s. Russia does have legitimate interests in Europe, though it sometimes pursues them through unacceptable means. Ultimately, no security architecture can be sustainable without participation by all affected parties, including Russia. Stable security architecture that builds on existing institutions and agreements could contribute significantly to Europe's security and prosperity. Russia's President Dmitry Medvedev has called for dialogue on new security architecture and this provides an important opportunity for the United States, NATO, and the European Union to make specific proposals.

Global Economic Crisis and U.S.-Russian Trade and Investment

Though Russia's economy remains one-tenth the size of America's, managing the global economic crisis is a top issue and a clear common interest for Washington and Moscow. Notwithstanding its serious challenges, the crisis is also an important opportunity for the

United States in dealing with Russia because it has changed the psychology of the relationship and can contribute to framing U.S.-Russian relations in positive and cooperative terms. Despite holding the world's third-largest currency reserves, Russian officials now realize that their country's economic future depends significantly on both the global economy and the United States and they look to Washington for solutions. The crisis has also exposed many of Russia's continuing economic and financial weaknesses, including its failures to diversify or encourage foreign investment.

The United States finally has a chance to integrate Russia fully into the international economy and to take an important step toward addressing broader concerns of other major developing economies like China, India, and Brazil that their voices are not sufficiently respected in global economic matters. The G-8 and the G-20 could be useful vehicles for this. Russian accession to the World Trade Organization is a key step in this process and would bind Moscow to WTO rules and protect American companies.

More narrowly, the United States and Russia have not thus far developed extensive bilateral trade and investment. Some of this is a result of geography, but much is due to insufficient effort, an inability to overcome the Jackson-Vanik Amendment either substantively or symbolically, and underappreciation of the important economic interests at stake. Russia will become only more important to the global economy over time.

Of course, closer economic engagement with Russia will also require that Moscow takes a more responsible approach on key issues, including restoring investor confidence by passing and implementing free-market regulations and securities laws, genuinely fighting corruption, establishing independent and effective courts, and demonstrating its reliability as an energy supplier.

Energy and the Environment

The steep decline in energy prices in recent months has transformed one of Russia's principal strengths—its vast resources—into a major weakness because of Moscow's failure to diversify the Russian economy. But low prices are not likely to last indefinitely. The

United States should take advantage of the window of opportunity created by falling prices to reopen its energy dialogue with Russia.

We do not fear Russian downstream investment in the United States or Europe—or Russian investment in other sectors outside energy. On the contrary, we see both as means to secure fair access to investment opportunities in Russia and a source of leverage. If Russian investors had significant holdings in America or other major Western economies, it would create an important constituency in the country for stable and cooperative relations with Washington and the West. The key principles in advancing this goal of greater investment are reciprocity and transparency, in both Russia and the West.

The United States should help Europe develop alternative sources of energy, particularly natural gas, to diversify Europe's supplies, including through pipelines from central Asia that do not cross Russian territory when these projects are commercially viable. Working to undermine Russian pipeline proposals does not advance this goal, however. Europe needs energy, Russia has energy, and the United States cannot itself provide Europe with energy or compel Russia or other countries to do so either in general or at particular price levels. Ultimately, the most effective instruments to deal with Russian energy leverage are the domestic policies of the European Union and its member states and alternative sources of supply. Working to stabilize rather than exacerbate relations between Russia and key transit countries like Ukraine would also contribute to Europe's energy security. The United States should work cooperatively with key European partners to take up President Medvedev's and Prime Minister Putin's recent calls for a new energy dialogue.

In addition to its role as an energy producer, Russia is a major energy consumer and the world's third-largest single emitter of carbon dioxide, the leading greenhouse gas contributing to global warming. Its ratification of the Kyoto Protocol brought the treaty into effect. Expanding cooperation in energy efficiency and new energy technologies would serve both countries well. Russia's widespread environmental degradation also provides major opportunities for joint action outside the area of climate change.

Russia's Neighborhood

Russia's war with Georgia and its pressure on Ukraine and the Baltic States has been very troubling. The United States has a strategic interest in preventing Russia, or any other power, from dominating the region bridging Europe, Asia, and the Middle East and in strongly supporting the independence and sovereignty of countries there. At the same time, Russia does have legitimate interests in the region.

Close U.S.-Russian cooperation in Russia's neighborhood is unlikely, but the United States should avoid zero-sum competition for influence there. Such competition is bound to damage American interests, especially because Russia is located in the region and the United States is not. As a result, attempts to pull countries away from Russia or to block legal Russian activities are unlikely to succeed. Russia's war with Georgia and its gas disputes with Ukraine should remind us that making the region a political battlefield can have dangerous unintended consequences. The United States must also recognize in this context that its interests are not identical to those of Russia's neighbors and avoid becoming their instrument in dealing with Russia. Despite real differences and even tensions, U.S. and Russian interests and policies in this region need not inherently come into conflict.

Democracy, Rule of Law and Human Rights

We disagree with much of Russia's domestic conduct and believe strongly that the United States has a real and enduring interest in encouraging democracy and the rule of law in Russia and other countries. What is most important to American security interests in Russia, however, is a rational and competent Russian government. The recent performance of the Russian government in its dispute with Ukraine over gas is not entirely reassuring.

Among the strengths of organized democracies are systems of checks and balances that prevent arbitrary and unpredictable foreign-policy behavior. Nevertheless, we should have no illusions that democracy could solve our many differences with Russia—democracies don't always see eye-to-eye, as Western divisions about the U.S. decision to go to war in Iraq demonstrated.

Moreover, building a functioning democracy is no simple task, and few governments welcome deep involvement in these processes and decisions by outsiders—especially foreign governments. Though exchange programs and technical assistance can continue to contribute to developing civil society in Russia, America’s ability to help Moscow develop stronger democratic institutions is fundamentally limited both by a suspicious government and a disillusioned and skeptical public. In fact, U.S. financial and rhetorical support can even undermine its intended beneficiaries if it is not pursued cautiously.

Notwithstanding America’s need for cooperation with Russia in the name of vital security interests, the United States has no interest in pretense regarding Russia’s domestic arrangements or the differences between American and Russian values. We must also recognize that among its other consequences, Russia’s lack of Western-style checks and balances weakens internal mechanisms for critical scrutiny of government decision making. This and Moscow’s relatively undeveloped interagency coordinating procedures can sometimes lead to decisions difficult for most outsiders to accept, even when Russia may have a legitimate case.

Over time, perhaps the most important force for democratization in Russia could be the emergence of a new middle class, resulting from dynamic economic growth and diversification. Western trade and investment, and Russia’s WTO accession, could assist in this process. Carefully structured assistance programs could help as well. But further decline in U.S.-Russian relations could slow if not reverse this process.

THINKING ABOUT AMERICAN AND RUSSIAN INTERESTS

Politicians and pundits talk about U.S. national interests whenever they want America to do something. Unfortunately, it is much rarer in our foreign-policy debate—or our domestic-policy debate—to acknowledge that our interests occasionally come into conflict or to assign priority to one interest over another. This is especially true in dealing with Russia, where it is simply unrealistic to expect that the United States can succeed with cooperative policies to address Iran’s nuclear ambitions, for example, while confronting Russia in other areas. Hard choices are a reality of international politics.

We find it useful to recall that relatively few American interests are truly vital, in the sense that policy failures could impact the survival of the United States as a free and prosperous nation. U.S. interests in combating proliferation and terrorism clearly fall into this strictly defined vital category and should receive priority in our foreign policy, both with respect to Russia and elsewhere. Some other American interests, while important, do not meet this strict test. We fully expect that some may disagree with this approach. We hope, however, that all will agree that the United States cannot succeed in its relations with Moscow, much less elsewhere, without a clear sense of which of our goals are vital and which are important but not vital.

Russian interests also matter. Russia’s interests cannot and should not guide American decision making. On the contrary, U.S. interests alone should determine U.S. policy. Still, American policies formulated without a good understanding of Russian perspectives are less likely to succeed in their intended goals and are therefore less desirable.

It is not useful for this panel, or any other group of Americans, to attempt to define Russian interests—something that is already too frequently done. Russia determines its own interests and shares some—and does not share others—with the United States. Moreover, where the United States and Russia do have common interests, they do not always assign those interests the same levels of priority. As a result, even when Washington and Moscow have

shared interests, it is shortsighted to take Russian cooperation for granted.

More generally, though the United States and Russia have many differing interests, we do not believe that American and Russian goals are in conflict on any issues of vital importance to either country. Thus, while U.S.-Russian relations have deteriorated in recent years, America's ties with Russia are profoundly unlike its dealings with the Soviet Union. This is cause for cautious optimism about U.S.-Russian relations over the long term.

MOVING FORWARD

Fortunately, while U.S.-Russian relations are deeply troubled today, Moscow is not hostile to the United States—at least not yet. Nor is the Kremlin trying to reassemble the USSR. In fact, even if the U.S.-Russian relationship should break down completely, Russia does not have the will or the resources for a new cold war.

Whatever many Americans think of their perspectives and goals, Russian leaders are generally pragmatic, interested in working together where possible and alone when necessary. They are also reluctant to alienate irrevocably the world's only superpower, especially now that the global economic crisis has shown that Russia's rapid growth and resurgence in global affairs have been to a significant extent dependent on such volatile factors as prices for oil, gas, and other mineral resources.

Changing direction in the U.S.-Russian relationship will not be easy. Yet it is an essential fact that if the relationship slides into an extended period of confrontation, it will damage American interests around the globe. A nuclear Iran protected by Moscow could profoundly reshape the security environment of the greater Middle East. While Russia's relationship with China is unlikely to become too close, the United States could drive them to greater coordination that might render useless the United Nations Security Council and complicate American efforts to achieve key goals worldwide.

If both Washington and Moscow are committed to improving their relationship, action to arrest the slide and gradually transform American relations with Russia into a partnership, however uneasy, could considerably advance U.S. goals from Iran to Afghanistan and beyond. In the complex and dangerous world of the twenty-first century, both countries' strategic interests require making a genuine effort at putting the U.S.-Russian relationship on a new high ground of cooperation, based on today's geopolitical, economic, and security realities and our many common goals.

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