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The Case for Negotiating With Adversaries



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The mainstream media has been largely critical and pessimistic regarding the Biden administration's opening of negotiations with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Meanwhile, there has been little comment on the fact that, over the past two decades, it has been Putin who has been the *demandeur* of bilateral talks. Putin has raised very specific issues that were in the interests of both Russia and the United States. Throughout this period, which has been marked by the relative silence of three U.S. administrations (e.g., Bush, Obama, Trump), Washington has made no specific offers and has been reluctant to engage Putin.

We should remember that the first head of state to reach President George W. Bush on the very day of the 9/11 attacks was President Putin, who made several calls to the White

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House and had to overcome the resistance of Vice President Dick Cheney who initially refused to forward Putin's messages of sympathy and assistance. Putin's offers were generous, including the offer of access to air fields in the former Soviet space as well as assistance in helping downed or troubled U.S. pilots.

Several months later, Putin got an "answer" from the Bush administration in the form of U.S. abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the cornerstone of the disarmament process and strategic stability. The absence of strategic missile defense was needed to open the door to comprehensive offensive missile reductions. Putin used his press conference in Geneva last month to ridicule the United States for walking away from arms control and disarmament by abrogating not only the ABM Treaty, but also the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty and the Open Skies Treaty.

Soviet and Russian leaders have typically been out in front of their U.S. counterparts in pursuing arms control and disarmament. This was certainly true in the 1960s when the Partial Test Ban Treaty and the Non-proliferation Treaty were negotiated. Mikhail Gorbachev was far more aggressive than Ronald Reagan in the pursuit of disarmament, which led to the destruction of an entire class of short and medium-range missiles in Europe in the 1980s. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Perle resigned their posts in 1987 to signal their opposition to the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty. Currently, Putin appears more willing than Biden to pursue negotiations on arms control.

The most meaningful and successful Russian diplomatic intervention took place in 2013, when the Obama administration was moving aggressively toward enforcing a "red line" declaration to use air power against Syria for its use of chemical weapons. President Obama soon discovered he had no support from his European allies or even his Democratic congressional allies for use of force. The sudden and surprising initiative from President Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov got Obama off the hook of military force.

The Russian initiative ultimately led to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's acknowledgement that Damascus had chemical weapons. Assad provided a comprehensive list of such weapons to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), and allowed OPCSW inspection of its declared chemical sites. Russian-American cooperation led to the removal of nearly all of Syria's chemical weapons; they were destroyed the following year in an unprecedented multilateral effort that includes personnel and forces from the United States, Russia, and several European

states from NATO. The verification measures that accompanied the disarmament aspects of the treaty provides a benchmark for future disarmament negotiations.

I cannot recall a similar disarmament exercise that achieved such remarkable progress in so few months. Ordinarily, negotiations of this magnitude would take years. The fact that the United States and Russia could work together in this fashion while Syria was engaged in a bloody civil war was even more remarkable. Putin and Obama should have been praised. Instead, Putin was ignored by the mainstream media and its pundits, and Obama was castigated by Democrats and Republicans alike for not carrying out the “red line” threat, which in actual fact would have made the Syrian situation even worse. U.S. air power could not have achieved the results that diplomacy recorded.

Russia’s concern with the problem of international terrorism is no less than the concern of the United States. In 2014, Russia invited the United States to join an effort that included Syria, Iran, and Iraq to establish a joint information center in Baghdad to coordinate their campaign against the forces of the Islamic State. Kerry and Lavrov met several times to establish parameters for coordination, but the Pentagon and the intelligence community blocked the idea of exchanging information with Russia. The Pentagon has been an obstacle to the negotiation of arms control agreements, moreover, for the past 60 years. Obama’s secretaries of defense, Robert Gates and Ashton Carter, were particularly opposed to tactical cooperation with the Russians on any issue.

In the Biden administration, however, the opposition to negotiations with Russia may be centered in the Department of State and not the Department of Defense. The Biden national security team includes Undersecretary of State for Policy Victoria Nuland, a hardline Cold Warrior on the subject of Russia. If Biden wanted to signal Putin that there were going to be few opportunities for bilateral progress, then the pick of Nuland was lapidary.

Putin probably viewed her presence in Geneva last month along side of Secretary of State Antony Blinken as an indication of Washington’s unwillingness to be forthcoming. The Russian intelligence services are well aware of Nuland’s gross interference in Ukrainian politics when she served as the assistant secretary of state for European affairs during the Obama administration. In that case, it was the United States that was crossing a Russian “red line.”

The Korean imbroglio seemingly provides another opportunity to test the boundaries of negotiations if Washington were willing to open talks at a diplomatic level with North Korea’s national security team. Kim Jong-un is an utterly reprehensible figure, but there

is reason to believe that incremental progress could be made in the short term regarding North Korea's nuclear program. Unlike Washington, Pyongyang has offered ideas on denuclearization that include a phased approach starting with the demolition of its only-known nuclear test site, followed by the dismantling of a rocket engine test facility and the nuclear complex in Yongbyon north of Pyongyang. I am not familiar with any public discussion of U.S. initiatives that discuss trade-offs for such proposals. The U.S. mindset is that North Korea will never engage the notion of comprehensive nuclear disarmament, but we will not have the answer to that conundrum until we engage in limited or incremental disarmament.

It would be useful to follow the very simple suggestion of former secretary of state John Kerry, who defended his discussions with Iran's foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, by explaining that "sometimes you have to talk to people like they're people." The Kerry-Zarif talks led to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the Iran nuclear accord. The four years of Trump's national security policy virtually anesthetized the diplomatic institutions, which may explain why the United States hasn't rejoined the Joint Comprehensive Plan of action, the Iran nuclear accord, which it abandoned in 2018. Is it any wonder that a recent international poll by the Alliance of Democracies Foundation in 53 countries found that people around the world view the United States as a greater threat to democracy in their country than either Russia or China, who happen to be co-signatories to the JCPOA?

Even worse, the United States typically pursues an ostrich-like policy of "non-recognition" of the very regimes (e.g., Iran, North Korea) it should be engaging. As Winston Churchill said, "jaw-jaw" is better than "war-war." In view of the shared interests between the United States, Russia, and China on non-proliferation, climate change, and international terrorism, it would be a missed opportunity for the Biden administration if it failed to institutionalize a strategic dialogue between Washington, Moscow, and Beijing.

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