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Dartmouth Conference: from escalation to dialogue?



A question is haunting the ever-worsening relationship between Russian and the United States: how low can it go?

Diplomats are waging a tit-for-tat war of retaliation, closing consulates, slashing numbers of staff, and even eliminating parking spaces near embassies. Moscow and Washington accuse each other of violating arms control agreements. The FBI is investigating alleged Russian interference in the 2016 election even as Moscow accuses the United States of planning to interfere in Russia's upcoming March 2018 presidential election.

"The situation in our bilateral relationship, in so many spheres, is very difficult," Russia's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Ryabkov told me last week. "In some areas, it's straightforwardly a miserable one."

I met with the deputy minister in Moscow as part of a group of Americans participating in the Dartmouth Conference, a bilateral citizens' diplomatic initiative founded fifty-seven years ago in the depths of the Cold War. It brings together Russians and Americans, including former officials and experts from a variety of fields, who are intent on finding ways to improve relations. The conference is co-convened on the American side by the Kettering Foundation and on the Russian side by the World Policy and Resources Fund.

We were eager to hear from Ryabkov, one of the few current points of official contact for the United States with Russia. He's been meeting with U.S. Under Secretary of State Tom Shannon, trying to iron out what both sides euphemistically refer to as "irritants" in the relationship. But even talking isn't guaranteed: at least one session was canceled by Moscow to protest a new round of U.S. economic sanctions against Russia.

Ryabkov nevertheless told us he's "very comfortable" in "keeping our business going" with Shannon.

Shannon, he said, "is, number one, a very strong defender of the U.S. American national interests and a very knowledgeable person, highly professional, which helps, because at all times you know where you'll find him."

But these face-to-face meetings are not about personal chemistry, he added. "The difficulties are huge and the confidence [level] between countries is very low," he said. "Just to discuss issues "requires a good deal of perseverance and readiness to speak very frankly, candidly, and openly to one another."

If the relationship has hit bottom, we asked, could it mean there's nowhere to go but up? Ryabkov said he hoped so, but drew ironic laughter from our group by quoting Polish poet Stanisław Jerzy Lec, who said, "When we reach the bottom, we believe this is the end, but then someone knocks from beneath."

"For the moment, I believe, what we need most is to put an end to this cycle of tit-for-tat actions, this cycle of deterioration in our relationship, to stabilize it, and then to take some time to find solutions to at least some of the issues before us."

Other Russian officials with whom we met, however, predicted more storms ahead. Nearly everyone on the Russian side dismissed FBI and congressional investigations of Moscow's possible role in the 2016 U.S. presidential election as "laughable." Echoing a common viewpoint in the Russian media, one official told me it was ridiculous that Russia could ever interfere in the elections of "such a powerful nation as the United

States.”

Almost everyone with whom we talked criticized the investigations for not offering any proof, but they also seemed aware that the investigations are still ongoing. Congress, several said, is totally “Russophobic.” Some said they are apprehensive about what might come next, the possibility of the situation, as one official put it, “degenerating into something of an uncontrolled nature, with unforeseen consequences.”

Business people are “really afraid,” one official said, and most Russians with whom we met seemed convinced that American media are intent on whipping up fear of Moscow.

Our Russian colleagues seemed most concerned about what they see as the impossibility of even talking with the Trump administration.

Structures built up over previous administrations to facilitate dialogue with Russia have been frozen or dismantled. The Bilateral Presidential Commission, which both countries founded jointly to promote cooperation, was suspended in 2014 by President Barack Obama to punish Moscow for its military incursions in Ukraine.

“How can we talk about nuclear issues if we can’t even talk with the Energy Department?,” one Russian lamented.

Some Russian participants expressed concern at the contradictions between statements on Russia coming from President Trump himself and from members of his cabinet.

As we headed for the site of our Dartmouth Conference discussions, a former government country retreat two hours from Moscow called Zavidovo, I was apprehensive. With all the mutual distrust and lack of communication between our governments, could we work together with our Russian colleagues to define steps to begin to pull the two countries jointly out of this hole?

But, as one member of the American group explained, in circumstances like these, people-to-people relations take on extreme importance. Fueled by coffee, tea, Russian cuisine, and long walks through birch forests, our Russian and American participants, some of whom have helped mold their governments’ foreign policy, covered multiple issues on which our countries disagree.

There was no attempt the blame the other side, to define “who started it.” Differences abound, and some run deep.

Russia still is dealing with the dissolution of the USSR, said one Russian participant, but it’s no longer consumed with an “imperial complex.” Its foreign policy is based on protecting national interests and sovereignty.

The United States, he went on, is beset with a “lost empire complex,” forced to accept the growth of other centers of power and influence in the world. “A wounded animal can be dangerous,” he cautioned. “I know that sounds quite bold, but this mentality does exist in Russia.”

Some Russian participants, watching U.S. news reports of protests over racial issues and political divisions among Americans, concluded that the American vaunted democracy is quickly eroding. An American participant shared polling data showing that the United States is experiencing cultural and demographic changes but is working through them. It’s easy to confuse anger and frustration, he cautioned, with giving up on democratic norms.

On the Russian side, there was frustration at U.S. economic sanctions, but also a certain bravado that sanctions, and Russian countersanctions, are actually forcing Russian domestic business to develop faster than it might have.

On the American side, participants explained that sanctions are not a deliberate plot to take advantage of Russia. “Sanctions,” said one American, have emerged as the alternative to military action. “They are way to do something to force an issue into a new channel or force change.”

Our sustained dialogue allowed us to accept those differences and, by the end of our meetings, to develop a list of joint recommendations on how Russia and the United States can cooperate on issues as diverse as arms control, regional conflicts, educational exchange, religious dialogue, and public health. The list will be shared with policymakers in both countries.

On the last day of the conference, meeting in Moscow with Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, our group asked him to name two things Russia hopes for to improve relations.

“If the U.S. really and truly believes that Russia has done something so wrong that quote-unquote ‘Nothing is possible anymore,’” he said, then he hoped the United States would “sit down together with Russia, look into it, and decide what can be done.”

His second hope, he said, is that both countries together would address the issue of strategic stability “while there is still time,” to see whether it’s possible to maintain the “architecture” of arms control and nonproliferation that has helped maintain stability for decades.

On this point, there was complete agreement: arms control is hanging by a thread.

“Our leaders have made a mess of relations over the past two decades,” said one American participant, but citizens, we all agreed, have more tools that they realize to change that.

At the Dartmouth Conference, Russians and Americans set aside differences and, most important, talked with each other. The conference is planning initiatives in the coming months to make citizens more aware of the tools they have to stop the slide in relations and begin the difficult journey upward.

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