



## An Enduring Approach to U.S.-Russian Cooperation

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Make Permanent the Bilateral Presidential Commission

**James F. Collins and Matthew Rojansky**

July 2011 marks two years since the creation of the U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission (BPC), a critical framework for managing U.S.-Russian cooperation across multiple areas in the wake of the 2009 “reset.” Now with more than 20 working groups bringing together dozens of interagency stakeholders, the BPC has enabled effective cooperation on a broad bilateral agenda, ranging from nuclear arms control and nonproliferation to exchange programs, and from disaster response to prison reform. Yet there is still a real risk that successful U.S.-Russian cooperation could derail as it has in the past—especially in light of ongoing budgetary pressures, serious outstanding disagreements on security issues, and upcoming elections in both countries.

The best mechanism to ensure continued success in managing U.S.-Russian relations is to endow the BPC with the structure and resources it needs to become an enduring foundation for intergovernmental and societal cooperation. Now is also the time to undertake a critical reevaluation of U.S. assistance programs for Russia, in light of the Russian government’s clear message that, while it values cooperation, it has outgrown its role as an “assistance recipient.” Fortunately, the BPC offers an ideal vehicle to re-channel important programs for bilateral engagement, and with additional resources the commission and its working groups can provide much-needed oversight to ensure that resources are spent most effectively. The following measures should be undertaken to begin the process of reforming and strengthening the BPC:

- Create a BPC secretariat led by a senior official and empowered to coordinate all BPC funds and activities, with staff based at the U.S. Department of State and at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow;
- Conduct a comprehensive census of all current funding allocated for U.S. government work in and with Russia to facilitate a transition from foreign assistance–based interaction to that of cooperative engagement;

- Allocate monies previously dedicated to assistance to the BPC secretariat to support current cooperative work and to provide seed funding for future programs;
- Clearly define the roles of all government agencies participating in BPC working groups, and offer an explicit mechanism for nongovernmental stakeholders to become and remain involved; and
- Retain the BPC's focus on results, minimal reporting and paperwork burdens, and flexible approach to working group meetings, including the use of technology to facilitate informal contacts.

Through the accomplishments of the BPC and its working groups, the United States and Russia have made a promising beginning. Now it is time to cement these frameworks into a solid foundation for future success by endowing the BPC with the resources it needs to withstand the challenges that lie ahead.

The prospects are good that in the remaining months of 2011, the final key building blocks for a renewed U.S.-Russian relationship will be put into place. With the entry into force of the New START treaty and of the 123 agreement on civilian nuclear cooperation, as well as Russia's long-delayed accession to the World Trade Organization likely by the end of the year, the priority objectives spelled out by the two presidents in their 2009 summits in London and Moscow will have been achieved.

These accomplishments are complemented by significant advances in cooperation regarding NATO military operations in Afghanistan, better understanding and cooperation on the challenge of Iran's nuclear program, and reduced tensions over missile defense in Europe and the post-Soviet space. Altogether, the reset in U.S.-Russian relations has indeed fostered a recovery from the dangerous state of affairs just two-and-a-half years ago, with the real possibility of broader and deeper cooperation ahead.

Obtaining deeper cooperation, however, will demand significant recommitment to the project, and movement beyond the initial achievements outlined above. At their last meeting in Washington, eight former ambassadors to Washington and Moscow noted that long-term success will require nothing short of a fundamental change in political consciousness away from the standard and all-too-easy reversion to Cold War stereotypes and rhetoric and toward a different paradigm that replaces competition with cooperation.<sup>1</sup> This group likewise urged that both sides begin now to develop steps to build on the foundation put into place by the reset.

An essential first step is to provide a greater degree of permanence to the structures and institutions employed on both sides to manage relations and to

address issues that arise on a day-to-day basis. As a recent Carnegie report on this topic noted, “the history of U.S.-Russian bilateral engagement shows that managing the relationship successfully requires sound institutions to advance the interests of both sides and to sustain global peace and security.”<sup>2</sup> Administrations throughout the Cold War period and over the past two decades have sought to develop such structures with a mixed record of success and failure. But all of these efforts have shared one feature—impermanence.

Just as each American president over the last half-century developed his own personal approach to the leadership in Moscow, so, too, each administration has defined its own system to reflect that approach. Each administration’s perceived need to define its own policy structure is understandable. When Washington’s relationship with Moscow stood pivotal and preeminent in American foreign and security policy, presidents and their advisers tailored means and institutions to conduct this vital but limited relationship. Ensuring maximum responsiveness to administration policy, strategy, and priorities and demonstrating the capacity to manage U.S.-Soviet relations was seen in both countries as a political necessity. The results over the years have been complex systems of summitry, special links between bureaucratic structures, different ways of organizing agendas, a binational commission, and any number of other attempts to systematize the conduct of business between the two governments. And just as each U.S. administration worked out its own system and approach to relations with Russia, these systems passed from the scene as each successive administration came to an end.<sup>3</sup>

Now, two decades after the end of the bipolar international order defined by the Cold War, the approaches of the past are no longer adequate. Washington and Moscow have refocused from near-exclusive preoccupation with each other to address more diverse priorities and interests. Similarly, the two countries must now address an agenda that has expanded to include an exponentially greater range of issues than it did during the Cold War. And that refocus has opened new demands for greater capacity to cooperate, manage differences, pursue shared objectives, and conduct relations productively across an expanding range of issues and topics that will outlive administrations and the impermanent structures traditionally developed to conduct our bilateral business.

## **What the BPC Is Today**

The Obama administration took up the challenge of improving relations with Russia early in 2009 and, from the outset, made development of a structure for managing relations a priority. Even before this administration arrived on the scene, the ground for the effort had been well laid. For most of the previous administration, leaders in Moscow had bemoaned the demise of regular contact afforded by the Clinton administration’s binational commission—the so-called

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Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission.<sup>4</sup> American policy analysts and critics of the George W. Bush administration had likewise urged the return of a more regularized and systematic approach to the conduct of U.S.-Russian relations.

The new administration responded positively to these urgings. In their first meeting in London, Presidents Obama and Dmitri Medvedev called for “a fresh start in relations between our two countries,” to be based on more regular, institutionalized contacts.

Today we have outlined a comprehensive and ambitious work plan for our two governments. We both affirmed a mutual desire to organize contacts between our two governments in a more structured and regular way. Greater institutionalized interactions between our ministries and departments make success more likely in meeting the ambitious goals that we have established today.<sup>5</sup>

Between that meeting and President Obama’s visit to Moscow in July, American and Russian officials negotiated a jointly agreed approach to delivering on this vision. The result was the BPC, announced in Moscow in July 2009, reflecting both the interests of each side and the shared experience of two post–Cold War administrations in organizing the business of the two countries.

Since its inception, the BPC has become the Obama administration’s institutional framework to conduct and manage relations with the Russian Federation. Moscow endorses the system as well, and it mirrors commissions already in place to manage Russia’s other bilateral relationships.

The BPC is formally headed by the two presidents, with the U.S. secretary of state and Russian foreign minister serving as coordinators. Each of the BPC’s 21 working groups is co-chaired by a senior U.S. and Russian official, and their areas of responsibilities range from business development, modernization, and high technology, to nuclear security and nonproliferation, media, sports, youth, and culture. There is also a “steering group” headed by a senior U.S. and Russian diplomat and charged with managing priorities for the commission as a whole. Under the terms of its founding document, BPC working groups are strongly encouraged to engage with the U.S. and Russian private sectors, nongovernmental organization (NGO) and civil society communities, and institutions of culture, education, and science. This directive recognizes the importance of bilateral contacts outside of government to the development of normal and stable relations between the two countries in the long term.<sup>6</sup>

## **Why Make the BPC Permanent?**

The time has now come to ensure that the BPC can continue to serve the long-term objective of building normalized, productive relations between Russia and the United States. This will require that the BPC process and structure created in 2009 be made to endure beyond the present U.S. and Russian administrations

and become a stabilizing force for long-term cooperation. Although the existence of a BPC structure is not a guarantee of successful relations in itself, it is an essential prerequisite to avoid the dangerous drift in U.S.-Russian ties that took place during the past decade. As both sides enter seasons of political transition in late 2011 and 2012—and with no slowdown in international crises and domestic distractions—it will become increasingly difficult for leaders to invest the level of political capital required to sustain high-level bilateral engagement. Having the structure in place to enable working-level officials to cooperate directly on projects with high-level endorsement can help keep the relationship on track and avert the need to “reset” a relationship once more permitted to drift.

Giving the BPC greater permanence can serve a second important objective—by consolidating a new basis for U.S.-Russian cooperation. For nearly two decades, U.S.-Russian relations had been organized on the paradigm of donor (Washington) and recipient (Moscow). From the first months of the Soviet Union’s decline and collapse, the United States set about creating mechanisms to support the development of the Soviet successor states, including Russia.<sup>7</sup> It was a vision inspired by selective recollection about the conditions that produced European and Pacific successes after World War II through the Marshall Plan and half-a-century’s worth of assistance related to economic development and market systems. To this was added the landmark Nunn-Lugar program, designed to share the burden of newly independent Russia’s urgent need to master the management, reduction, and security of its nuclear weapons complex under the conditions of a society and economy newly opened to the outside world.<sup>8</sup>

Not surprisingly, after the initial shocks following the Soviet collapse and the economic hardships of the early 1990s, Russia has used its recovery and resurgence to cast off the mantle of assistance recipient and reaffirm its role as a mature international partner to the United States, Europe, and other countries. Russia’s decision in 2010 to invoke the termination clause of its longstanding aid agreement with Washington (Agreement between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Russian Federation Regarding Cooperation to Facilitate the Provision of Assistance) has now put an end to the formal legal basis for bilateral assistance of this type to continue.<sup>9</sup>

In rejecting the assistance model, Russia’s leaders have made clear their determination to set relations with the United States on a basis of partnership and cooperation in which each side contributes to and benefits from shared goals and activities. U.S. legislation and, in some respects, the U.S. approach to the relationship has yet to catch up with this reality or accept the new premise put forth from Moscow. However, the Obama administration has begun to lay a good foundation for such a transition, and the BPC is the ideal vehicle for doing so—if it can be made to endure.

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Making the BPC permanent would consolidate and advance the progress made thus far. This step was one of the main recommendations of the group of former ambassadors to Moscow and Washington that met in November 2010. Such a step, they agreed, could help take the reset and its short-term progress toward a redefinition of relations that would ensure a stable, long-term U.S.-Russian partnership.<sup>10</sup> Now the opportunity is at hand to take this step, and discussions should be undertaken between the BPC's leaders on both sides to identify and agree on a format for making the commission permanent.

## How to Make the BPC Permanent

The most obvious requirement for sustaining productive and balanced interaction between U.S. and Russian officials under the BPC is political will. The two presidents can provide high-level endorsement and guidance, as they did in the initial creation of the BPC, but beyond that point, the commission must be self-sustaining and equipped to endure the likely challenges ahead. Thus, it is now time to endow the BPC with a more permanent and effective coordinating and governing body, a sustainable funding base to develop and execute shared projects, and a robust system for accommodating and balancing the interests of each of the governmental and nongovernmental stakeholders in the various working groups.

On the U.S. side, the first step is a psychological and philosophical transition in thinking about relations with Russia from the model of foreign assistance to a program of cooperative activities designed to engage governmental, private-sector, and NGO entities in fields of mutual interest. Making this transition will require some reorganization within the U.S. bureaucracy, cooperation with Congress, and readiness to devote resources and manpower to the process of sustained engagement on a wide range of U.S. government elements charged with the execution, oversight, and development of joint projects.

Central to the effort will be creation of a new permanent structure to support the political leadership provided the commission by the president and secretary of state. Such a structure would consist of a U.S. interagency council for the BPC supported by a permanent, limited secretariat staff. The council could be headed by the U.S. co-chair of the current BPC steering group. It would oversee and provide guidance to the secretariat housed within the State Department and staffed from among those at State and other agencies that in practice already bear primary responsibility for coordinating BPC activities. Advisory boards from the private sector and NGO communities could be formed to liaise with these sectors, assist with program development, and enhance the reach of the participating government agencies. Such cross-pollination within the bureaucracy would help deliver on the BPC's mission of deepening interagency and public-private cooperation.

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To provide the council and secretariat adequate resources in support of their responsibilities, Freedom Support Act (FSA) funds earmarked for Russia and presently lodged in the office of the assistance coordinator should be placed at the disposal of the BPC. The secretariat, in cooperation with Congress, should be given authority over and responsibility for allocating, monitoring, and coordinating funds expended by other bureaus and departments on projects falling under the purview of the BPC and its working groups. The AID mission at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, which is primarily charged with expending assistance funds, should be replaced by a Moscow-based interagency team that would serve under the ambassador as the “on the ground” counterpart for the Washington-based secretariat. This structure would enable much more effective oversight of BPC program implementation, endowing the coordinators with the ability to closely monitor the expenditure of funds and stay on top of those charged with executing bilateral programs on both sides, whether they are in the United States or Russia. Most importantly, formally putting FSA funding at the disposal of the BPC secretariat would enable the commission to actually support many of the innovative new ideas generated by its working groups that are currently grounded due to a lack of specifically earmarked funds.

The very idea of creating yet another bureaucratic office—and, even worse, describing it as “permanent”—will, of course, provoke some opposition from within the executive branch itself, as well as from Congress and the public at large. Some may recall the major criticisms of the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission in the 1990s—sluggish bureaucracy, excessive focus on plenary sessions rather than concrete deliverables, and little real engagement by non-diplomatic officials and the private sector.<sup>11</sup> It is essential that a new BPC secretariat be designed to reinforce what is already good about the commission, not undermine it. In particular, the BPC must retain its focus on results, minimal reporting and paperwork burdens, and a flexible approach to working group and sub-group meetings, including the use of videoconferencing, email, and social networking platforms to facilitate informal contacts between the sides.

Another potential concern lies in the location of the secretariat. If housed in the State Department, as proposed, the office runs the risk of becoming isolated from the political leadership of the administration. Were it housed in the National Security Council (NSC), for example, the secretariat might enjoy better access to the president and top NSC officials. However, this would come at the expense of its perceived political independence, and with the unacceptable risk that a future administration could eliminate the office altogether as part of the “house cleaning” that invariably accompanies post-election transitions. Thus, the best solution would be to keep the secretariat within the State Department, with a strong complement of working-level officials drawn from other relevant agencies and a leadership that enjoys high-level access throughout the administration.

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Implementing this vision will not be easy and will require the political commitment of the White House, the State Department, and Congress to undertake a bureaucratic reorganization along with the necessary legislative reauthorization—a difficult task at any time. A position to lead the effort should be identified early on and given responsibility for heading the reorganization process. A starting point could be a comprehensive census of existing programs and commitments focusing on action officers within each agency participating in the BPC working groups or funding programs in the Russian Federation. For a future BPC to work effectively, it will be essential for its U.S. government stakeholders to understand the goals, policies, funding, and implementation for the full range of U.S. government programs and policies already in place. This census will likewise give the ambassador in Moscow and the White House/NSC a complete picture of the resources presently available to define and implement policy toward Russia.

A second step essential for the BPC's success will be to clarify the role of each participating agency and official. The BPC's overarching mission statement—agreed to by both U.S. and Russian representatives—is excellent but should have complementary implementation guidelines on each side, which for the United States should reflect the coordinating role of the secretariat, and the mechanisms by which funds and authority can be made available to working groups to accomplish their goals. These guidelines should continue to give priority to the role of the BPC in supporting and encouraging participation in the development of U.S.-Russian relations outside the governmental track. There should be an explicit mechanism for these nongovernmental stakeholders to participate in or have their voices heard at the level of the secretariat and the individual working groups in a regular and sustained manner.

A third step should define the sources of funds directly available to the BPC secretariat for allocation to the working groups in support of cooperative activities, as well as those funds that relevant government agencies are directed by Congress or the administration to make available in support of BPC activities. The most logical source of funding for BPC activities would be the FSA funds presently allocated under the supervision of the coordinator for assistance in the State Department's Bureau of European Affairs. Those funds—amounting to roughly \$72 million in FY 2008—would constitute a solid base of funding for the activities of the BPC and its working groups, which currently receive no direct budgetary support.<sup>12</sup>

By far the greatest risk to the BPC's longevity is the perception that it is ineffective; but being effective requires a source of funding to help turn good ideas into reality. Placing the modest amount that remains allocated for U.S.-Russian cooperation under the FSA at the direct disposal of the BPC would go far to ensure not only that there is a permanent coordinating body for the commission, but that various U.S. and Russian government agencies participating in the working groups actually see a concrete benefit from

participating in the process. Along with this direct funding stream, the BPC would likewise be well positioned to match Russian funding, appropriate funding sources from other U.S. government offices, and private-sector funds with needs, and to prevent duplication across working groups, programs, and agencies. It is not the purpose of this paper to propose any particular structure for the management of personnel, programs, and funding allocated by the Russian government to bilateral cooperation under the BPC umbrella. However, ensuring that the commission endures through and beyond the Obama and Medvedev administrations will obviously require political will, a strategic plan, and possibly some reorganization of bureaucracy on both the Russian and U.S. sides. It should be sufficient at the outset for the two governments to reaffirm their commitment to the BPC as a tool for structuring and managing U.S.-Russian ties, and for U.S. officials to be sure they know whom to call in Moscow to answer questions and set joint agendas. The current BPC working group structure is already a major boon in this regard, and the new secretariat will need to plug into its appropriate Russian counterparts as well.

Endowing the BPC with a more robust and permanent structure is essential to maintaining the momentum of U.S.-Russian cooperation begun successfully with the 2009 reset. However, the commission process is not a goal in and of itself. Indeed, the purpose of U.S.-Russian cooperation is to foster joint work that produces results of real value to both sides. The BPC is necessary and should be sustained as long as the two governments and societies need such a structure to underpin their relations. In the very long term, though, the goal of the BPC should be to put itself out of business—to reach a level of organic, routine cooperation between U.S. and Russian government officials and societies that produces ongoing benefits for both sides.

## Conclusion

The BPC has made a promising beginning. It has had important successes but also has weak elements. It has achieved its initial and principal objective of providing structure for the conduct of U.S.-Russian relations under the policy of achieving a reset in U.S.-Russian relations. However, both Russia and the United States are entering their political campaign seasons. Presidential elections in both countries mean that the BPC and the enhanced relationship will face new tests. Action is urgently needed now to ensure their stability.

In the last two decades, U.S.-Russian relations have taken Washington and Moscow on a roller-coaster ride of heights in expectation and lows of disappointment. Successes have too often been accompanied by missed opportunities, and the hope for a stable, more productive relationship has been unmatched by the commitment to develop the institutions and patterns of work demanded by that model of relations.

**The goal of the BPC should be to put itself out of business—to reach a level of organic, routine cooperation between U.S. and Russian government officials and societies that produces ongoing benefits for both sides.**

The creation and initial work of the BPC provides an opportunity to redress these shortcomings. It offers a foundation for more effective engagement, more productive diplomacy, and more active involvement by stakeholders outside government. However, like preceding efforts to institutionalize U.S.-Russian engagement, the present commission lacks stability and a financial base. Making the BPC permanent and giving it the resources it needs to function can make it a substantial force for continuity and further progress in U.S.-Russian relations.

## Notes

- 1 “Reflections on the Reset: A Statement by the Former Ambassadors to Moscow and Washington,” November 3, 2010, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2010/11/03/reflections%20Don%2Dreset%2Dstatement%2Dby%2Dformer%2Dambassadors%2Dto%2Dmoscow%2Dand%2Dwashington/4bb>.
- 2 Matthew Rojansky, *Indispensable Institutions: The Obama-Medvedev Commission and Five Decades of U.S.-Russia Dialogue* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010), vii.
- 3 For an overview of the history of U.S.-Russian/Soviet bilateral institutions see Rojansky, *Indispensable Institutions*, 3–27.
- 4 For more information on the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission, see Rojansky, *Indispensable Institutions*, 13–21. This informal name for the commission survived the departure of Viktor Chernomyrdin and stayed through the tenure of his two successors—Sergei Stepashin and Yevgeny Primakov.
- 5 Joint Statement by President Dmitri Medvedev of the Russian Federation and President Barack Obama of the United States of America, April 1, 2009, [www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544\\_162-4909175-503544.html#ixzz1Q76l3lkt](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-4909175-503544.html#ixzz1Q76l3lkt).
- 6 U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission. Commission’s full infographic is available at [www.state.gov/p/eur/ci/rs/usrussabilat/index.htm](http://www.state.gov/p/eur/ci/rs/usrussabilat/index.htm).
- 7 In 1992, Congress passed the Freedom Support Act, and created a senior position in the State Department to administer \$400 million in aid to the fifteen states of the former Soviet Union, including Russia. Through various permutations over two decades, the foreign assistance account for Russia has shrunk from a high point of almost \$1.3 billion in 1993 to \$71.6 million in 2008. The amount of the total U.S. assistance has also declined over the years from almost \$2 billion in 1993 to \$878.2 million in 2008. United States Department of State, Office of the Coordinator of U.S. Assistance to Europe and Eurasia, “Country Assistance Fact Sheet for Russia,” December 2009, [www.state.gov/documents/organization/140530.pdf](http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/140530.pdf).
- 8 The Cooperative Threat Reduction program, also known as the “Nunn-Lugar” legislation, began in 1991 in an effort to assist the states of the former Soviet Union in controlling and protecting nuclear weapons, weapons-usable material, and delivery systems. The initial budget of approximately \$400 million was administered by the Department of Defense (DOD), Department of Energy (DOE), Department of Commerce, and the Department of State. Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, [www.nti.org/db/nisprofs/russia/forasst/nunn\\_lug/overview.htm](http://www.nti.org/db/nisprofs/russia/forasst/nunn_lug/overview.htm).  
Like the State Department assistance account, the Nunn-Lugar program’s funding has fluctuated greatly in recent years, reaching its highest point in 2011 (\$522.5 million) and its lowest level in 2007 (\$372.1 million). National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2007, [www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-109hr5122enr/pdf/BILLS-109hr5122enr](http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-109hr5122enr/pdf/BILLS-109hr5122enr).

pdf; National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2011, [www.opencongress.org/bill/111-s3454/text](http://www.opencongress.org/bill/111-s3454/text).

- 9 Conversation with State Department Official, July 12, 2011. Russia's impending withdrawal from the International Science and Technology Center agreement is another salient example of Russia's attempts to shake off the mantle of assistance recipient. The Moscow headquarters of the International Science and Technology Center was established in 1992. The program identified thousands of nuclear, biotechnology, and former weapons scientists and provided them with employment opportunities in civilian research. Russia's withdrawal from the agreement will require the Moscow office to cease operations in Russia by 2015. Statement of the 53rd Governing Board of the International Science And Technology Center, June 26, 2011, [www.istc.ru/ISTC/ISTC.nsf/va\\_WebPages/GBStatement53Eng](http://www.istc.ru/ISTC/ISTC.nsf/va_WebPages/GBStatement53Eng); Daniel Birch, "Russia abandons \$1 bln Western Aid to Weapons Program," ABC News, April 20, 2011, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory?id=13414924>.
- 10 "Reflections on the Reset."
- 11 E. Wayne Merry, "Gore Should Own Up to His Part in Russian Mess," *Newsday*, September 8, 1999, A40.
- 12 "Department of State and Other International Programs," White House, [www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/budget/fy2012/assets/state.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/budget/fy2012/assets/state.pdf); Marian Leonardo Lawson et al., "State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs: FY2011 Budget and Appropriations," Congressional Research Service, April 22, 2011, [www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41228.pdf](http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41228.pdf).

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Ambassador **JAMES F. COLLINS** was appointed director of the Russia and Eurasia Program in January 2007. He is an expert on the former Soviet Union, its successor states, and on the Middle East.

Ambassador Collins was the U.S. ambassador to the Russian Federation from 1997 to 2001. Prior to joining the Carnegie Endowment, he served as senior adviser at the public law and policy practice group Akin, Gump, Strauss, Hauer & Feld, LLP.

**MATTHEW ROJANSKY** is the deputy director of the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Carnegie Endowment. Rojansky is responsible for advancing the program's strategic priorities, ensuring operational support for resident and visiting experts, and managing relationships with other Carnegie programs, partner institutions, and policymakers. An expert on U.S. and Russian national security and nuclear weapons policies, his work focuses on relations among the United States, NATO, and the states of the former Soviet Union.

From 2007–2010, Rojansky served as executive director of the Partnership for a Secure America (PSA). Founded by former Congressman Lee Hamilton (D-IN) and former Senator Warren Rudman (R-NH), with a group of two dozen former senior leaders from both political parties, PSA seeks to rebuild bipartisan dialogue and productive debate on U.S. national security and foreign policy challenges.

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