

# INDISPENSABLE INSTITUTIONS

The Obama-Medvedev Commission and  
Five Decades of U.S.-Russia Dialogue



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CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

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# SUMMARY

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Having fallen to a historic low after the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, U.S.-Russia cooperation is again on the rise, thanks to last year's "reset" of the relationship. The U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission, launched at the July 2009 Moscow summit, aims to enhance cooperation between the two countries on a broad range of shared interests. Although the Commission appears promising so far, significant challenges lie ahead and the two sides must work closely to monitor both the structure and the substance of this new institution to ensure it continues to produce results.

Moscow and Washington have engaged each other directly since the 1950s, beginning with limited academic and technical exchanges that were closely monitored by government agencies on both sides. In the 1970s, summit diplomacy yielded parallel negotiations and agreements on a range of shared interests, from health science to agriculture. The 1980s brought the first standing ministerial working groups, which managed a complex agenda of security, economic, and humanitarian issues.

It was only after the Cold War, however, that both sides began to fully explore how their cooperation could benefit common interests. Over the past two decades, two distinct experiments in bilateral institutional cooperation—the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission and the Bush-Putin Strategic Dialogue—produced important lessons about how to structure engagement effectively. But these and other efforts suffered from numerous problems, including bureaucratic inflexibility, distrust between and within the two governments, and an emphasis on personal rather than institutional relationship-building.

To address these shortcomings, the organizers of the new commission created a streamlined, flexible structure that fosters interaction at multiple levels and assigns responsibility for deliverables to specific individuals. Led by Presidents Obama and Medvedev, the Commission's Coordinators are U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who oversee seventeen substantive

working groups that are in turn co-chaired by senior executive branch officials from both countries. The working groups address topics ranging from nuclear security and arms control to educational and cultural exchanges, and the Coordinators report on the Commission's overall progress to the presidents at least once a year.

Thanks to strong support from the White House and the Kremlin, plus the efforts of dozens of officials connected to the individual working groups, the Commission has produced impressive results in its first year. Already a traditional strength of the U.S.-Russia relationship, security cooperation now includes new binding arms control and nonproliferation agreements, joint efforts to combat terrorism and drug trafficking, and concrete Russian assistance for the NATO mission in Afghanistan. The Commission also achieved progress in less traditional areas, such as facilitating dialogues on small business and environmental issues, sponsoring people-to-people exchanges, and promoting joint scientific research, to name just a few examples.

Despite these early successes, the Commission needs enhanced institutional support to remain effective. Organizers must:

- Ensure that officials at the presidential, cabinet, and staff levels devote attention and political capital to the Commission's work, despite many competing priorities.
- Continue to make activities public to hold the working groups accountable for producing concrete outcomes.
- Increase input from local and state government officials, who have firsthand knowledge of best practices that can support the working groups' goals.
- Leverage web and social media technologies to make the working groups more dynamic and accessible to the public.
- Increase private-sector engagement to help government handle the expected growth of Commission contacts and projects.

In addition, individual working groups would benefit from an enhanced focus on the following specific goals:

- **ENVIRONMENT:** Leverage the recent extreme weather phenomena in Russia and the United States to develop joint programs addressing the consequences of climate change.
- **ENERGY:** Enhance the group's focus on energy efficiency and clean energy technologies.
- **EMERGENCY SITUATIONS:** Draw on U.S. and Russian experience and capabilities to provide effective disaster relief in other countries.

- **SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY:** Use the Kremlin's focus on modernization to strengthen efforts to improve information technology and e-government practices for enhanced transparency.
- **COUNTERNARCOTICS:** Increase cooperation on drug abuse treatment and prevention, especially at the local level.
- **AGRICULTURE:** Move beyond trade disputes to cooperatively address issues such as food security.
- **HEALTH:** Increase engagement between Russian and U.S. pharmaceutical and medical research communities on non-communicable chronic diseases, such as heart disease and diabetes, which kill Russian men in large numbers and contribute to Russia's ongoing demographic crisis.

Continuing the Commission's record of success and delivering the results that both sides want will require attention from the very highest levels. Presidents Obama and Medvedev should maintain regular, direct communication about the Commission's progress and goals. At the same time, working-level officials on both sides must apply creativity and flexibility to the challenges of building effective joint programs while overcoming bureaucratic inertia, political distractions, and outdated prejudices.

The history of U.S.-Russia 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. Without continuing high-level attention and follow-through on concrete, achievable goals, even this latest success story could quickly lose momentum, setting relations between Moscow and Washington once again adrift.



# INTRODUCTION

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There is a broad consensus among experts and policy makers that when President Obama took office, the U.S.-Russia relationship was at its lowest point since the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup> Russia had recently prevailed in a short but violent conflict with a U.S.-backed neighbor, Georgia, and had unilaterally recognized the independence of two of the country's secessionist regions, which are still occupied by Russian troops; the United States and Russia had competed for influence and traded recriminations over political instability in Ukraine and Central Asia; and a stalemate on nuclear security between the world's top two nuclear powers had likely emboldened North Korea to test a second nuclear weapon, while giving Iran room to accelerate its bomb-making program.

Since the Obama administration's "reset" was announced in February 2009, a very different tone has emerged between Washington and Moscow. Presidents Obama and Medvedev have met some half a dozen times, spoken frequently on the telephone, and reportedly enjoy a warm personal relationship.<sup>2</sup> With such positive relations between the two leaders has come an ambitious agenda for bilateral cooperation, and dramatically increased expectations from stakeholders on both sides.

While the improved tone in U.S.-Russia relations is itself an important accomplishment of the reset, administration officials insist that improving atmospherics was never their main goal. The administration's own metric for success on Russia was whether the policy produced concrete outcomes that would benefit U.S. national interests.<sup>3</sup> To its credit, the administration was mindful of recent history in pursuing the reset: Much of the stagnation in the past decade of U.S.-Russia relations had been a consequence of tying the relationship too tightly to personalities and politics, while loosening or untying completely the institutional bonds of cooperation at operational levels.

Little more than a year on, the reset has produced some impressive concrete outcomes, ranging from a new strategic nuclear arms control agreement to cooperation on the transit of troops and equipment to Afghanistan to a united front on a new round of sanctions against Iran. Despite the embarrassment that both sides felt at the June arrest of ten deep cover Russian agents in the United States, they resolved the crisis quickly and quietly, prevented it from ruining the positive atmospherics of Medvedev's Silicon Valley visit and the "Cheeseburger summit" in Washington, and continued active consultation on pressing issues like Russia's WTO accession bid and the situation in Kyrgyzstan. Still, as both presidents have emphasized, much remains to be done, especially in quintessentially post-Cold War arenas of cooperation: trade, technology, public health, and global development.

In July 2009, Presidents Obama and Medvedev agreed to create the U.S.-Russia Presidential Commission, also known as the Bilateral Presidential Commission (BPC), as an institutional foundation for bilateral progress on their wide-ranging goals. According to its Coordinators, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, the two administrations gave the BPC a broad mandate to establish "new channels of cooperation to advance strategic stability, international security, our mutual economic well-being, and stronger ties between Russians and Americans."<sup>4</sup>

From the U.S. perspective, the creation of the BPC is evidence that this administration believes in U.S.-Russia cooperation for the long term and wisely seeks to anchor that cooperation to institutions rather than personalities. The Obama administration's insistence that the BPC produce concrete outcomes reflects its understanding that progress in the relationship depends on both sides seeing a real return on their investment of political capital, not just high-level positive atmospherics. Indeed, it is this focus on deliverables that best explains and justifies the creation of the BPC. While the Commission and its more than a dozen working groups do not substitute for positive high-level interactions, they do aim to ensure regular, institutionalized interactions between actors on both sides of the relationship, so that the breadth, depth, and frequency of cooperation increases on a working level without the need for frequent intervention from the top.

President Obama was right to identify the U.S.-Russia relationship as an early priority of his administration's foreign policy. The potential benefits of reduced tensions and enhanced cooperation between Moscow and Washington are immense, as the early accomplishments of the reset have already illustrated. However, for the reset to continue to deliver successful outcomes, it will need to branch out beyond security-oriented spheres of bilateral cooperation, which were already well-established in the 1990s and even earlier. This will be a major test not only for the BPC but for the U.S.-Russia relationship and the Obama administration's foreign policy as a whole.

# THE STRUCTURE OF THE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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In the enthusiasm surrounding the early successes of the new Presidential Commission, it should not be forgotten that 2009 was not the first time the U.S.-Russia relationship was endowed with an institutional foundation. To understand the challenges and opportunities the BPC will face, it will help to examine some of the history of U.S.-Russia institutional engagement. In the post-Cold War period alone, there were two notable attempts to create a formal framework for managing U.S.-Russia cooperation, and for roughly the last half century there has been at least some formally structured engagement between U.S. government agencies and offices and their Soviet or Russian counterparts.

The ubiquity of formal structures for managing the U.S.-Russia relationship—be they commissions, dialogues, or ministerial working groups—is a function of the unique history of relations between Moscow and Washington. For almost the entire history of U.S.-Soviet relations, the United States and the USSR were ideological enemies—even when they were formal allies during World War II. Thus, both sides' official policy was to minimize or prohibit altogether any interaction between citizens that was not formally sanctioned and monitored by government. Naturally, then, any cooperation between governmental or nongovernmental entities had to be facilitated and managed by government, hence the need for often elaborate bilateral structures. Because this legacy has persisted, and because the present Russian government exerts a substantial influence on Russian society's engagement abroad, the need for government-managed structure and process in the bilateral relationship remains strong today.



# THE COLD WAR YEARS: COMPETITION, DÉTENTE, AND PERESTROIKA

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During the Cold War, the U.S.-Soviet relationship was managed at a high level through official summits and ministerial meetings whose primary purpose was to manage competition and tensions between the two superpowers. There were, however, limited efforts to build a broader institutional foundation for direct, bilateral cooperation. After Stalin's death in 1953—and in particular after the 1956 Twentieth Party Congress, at which Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin's abuses—the Soviet Union became slightly more open to the idea of accepting peaceful coexistence and engagement with the United States, even as Cold War competition continued.

The foundational achievement of this thawing period was the 1957–1958 negotiation of a bilateral agreement “on Exchanges in the Cultural, Technical and Educational Fields.”<sup>5</sup> Signed in January 1958 by President Eisenhower and Premier Khrushchev, it was named the Lacy-Zarubin agreement after the chief U.S. and Soviet negotiators. As an executive agreement, it did not require Senate ratification in the United States, but initially it required reauthorization every two years (a term that was extended to every three years in the 1970s). Over time, the number of scholars exchanged under the agreement rose from 75 to 90 per year to more than 190.

TABLE 1

**Educational Exchange Programs Between the United States and the USSR Launched Under the Aegis of the Lacy-Zarubin Agreement in 1958<sup>6</sup>**

PROGRAM	U.S. AGENCY IN CHARGE	SOVIET AGENCY IN CHARGE	RESULTS
Graduate Student/Young Faculty Exchange	International Research and Exchanges Board and Inter-University Committee on Travel Grants	Soviet Ministry of Higher and Specialized Secondary Education	20-50 students exchanged from each side for 1-2 semesters
Senior Research Scholar Exchange	International Research and Exchanges Board and Inter-University Committee on Travel Grants	Soviet Ministry of Higher and Specialized Secondary Education	10 or more scholars exchanged from each side for a period of 5 months
Summer Language Teacher Exchange	International Research and Exchanges Board and Inter-University Committee on Travel Grants	Soviet Ministry of Higher and Specialized Secondary Education	30-35 teachers exchanged from each side for a period of 9 months
Postdoctoral Exchange Under the IREX Aegis	International Research and Exchanges Board	Soviet Academy of Sciences	15 U.S. and 30 Soviet students exchanged for a period of 5 months
Program of Collaborative Research	International Research and Exchanges Board	Soviet Academy: Bilateral Commission on Humanities and Social Sciences	80 scholars exchanged from each side for a period of 1 week

From the start, the Lacy-Zarubin agreement had a very broad scope, facilitating exchanges in “science and technology, agriculture, medicine and public health, radio and television, motion pictures, exhibitions, publications, government, youth, athletics, scholarly research, culture, and tourism.”<sup>7</sup> According to the U.S. National Security Council (NSC), the exchanges served to:

... broaden and deepen relations with the Soviet Union by expanding contacts between people and institutions; involve the Soviets in joint activities and develop habits of cooperation with the United States; end Soviet isolation and inward orientation by giving the Soviet Union a broader view of the world and of itself; improve US understanding of the Soviet Union through access to its institutions and people; and to obtain the benefits of long-range cooperation in culture, education and science and technology.<sup>8</sup>

Khrushchev himself believed that the U.S. interest in the exchanges was a thinly veiled effort to “make us open our borders, to increase the flow of people back and forth.”<sup>9</sup> Although a great supporter of the exchanges, the late Soviet scholar of the United States Georgi Arbatov argued that, because many U.S. policy makers viewed the Soviet system as “something abnormal which can yield to the normal,” promotion of trade, exchanges, and cooperation of all kinds might simply be intended as a “wedge for this purpose.”<sup>10</sup> The possibility of losing control over the flow of people and information was obviously of great concern to a Soviet government that had only recently put down the Hungarian uprising and was to face mounting pressure in subsequent decades from its own people for freedom to emigrate, supported by the West. On the other hand, the Soviets also stood to benefit: by learning more about the United States; by obtaining access to U.S. science, technology, and advanced research programs; by encouraging the view that the Soviet Union itself was an advanced, peaceful superpower; and, to some extent, by legitimizing its very existence within a European continent dominated by Soviet arms.

This dissonance between U.S. and Soviet aims, and between the risks and potential benefits of exchanges, was palpable in the Lacy-Zarubin agreement’s landmark achievements, such as the 1959 U.S. National Exposition in Moscow, which gave rise to the famous Nixon-Khrushchev “kitchen debate.” Likewise, even though student exchanges were supposed to be handled by nongovernmental entities, the Soviet Committee of Youth Organizations was administered by the same party ideologues and secret police operatives that populated other Soviet bureaucracies. In turn, the nongovernmental U.S. Council on Student Travel coordinated closely with the State Department, which expressed its endorsement and appreciation: “As it is our policy to encourage an increase in meaningful contacts between the United States and the Soviet Union, the Department approves your program and wishes you success.”<sup>11</sup> This official attention was unusual coming from the U.S. side, which

routinely hosted thousands of visiting students, experts, and performers from abroad without formal governmental agreements. However, the benefit, as one official put it, was that “these programs were never suspended or closed even during the harsh time of the Cold War period.”<sup>12</sup> The close attention paid by official handlers and intelligence agents to participants in all types of U.S.-Soviet exchange programs also highlighted the degree to which cooperation in the exchanges outstripped any other form of U.S.-Soviet cooperation during a period of intense military and economic competition.

By the time of President Nixon’s 1972 “*détente*” visit to Moscow, mainstream U.S. and Soviet policy had come much closer to genuinely embracing the spirit of cooperation and coexistence embodied in the Lacy-Zarubin agreement. On the core front of nuclear competition, the sides had moved toward accepting parity rather than continuing to risk the unthinkable dangers of unconstrained competition. Thus, both had an interest in finding vehicles and institutions that could promote more stable and regular relations.

Building on the existing framework of cultural, scientific, and educational exchanges, the 1972 summit produced bilateral cooperation agreements in a number of substantive areas such as housing, health, and agriculture. Both governments ordered their respective ministries to establish direct contacts in order to develop viable agreements on managing competition and cooperation in each of these areas. U.S.-Soviet environmental discussions resulted in the 1972 U.S.-USSR Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Environmental Protection, which promoted “cooperative activities” in the prevention and reduction of air and water pollution, conservation, earthquake prediction, the nascent study of man-made climate change, and many other related themes.<sup>13</sup> In 1976, U.S.-Soviet dialogue on agriculture produced the Soviet-American Grain Agreement, which sought to prevent manipulation of global grain prices and ensure a relatively stable supply from Soviet grain exports.<sup>14</sup>

With a few exceptions, however, initiatives like these were understood not as substantive programs, justified by their own merits, but primarily as a means to an end: preventing U.S.-Soviet competition from causing a broader confrontation that might lead to nuclear war. Accordingly, the U.S. Congress provided line-item funding for U.S.-Soviet cooperative programs to each of the U.S. agencies concerned, and these agencies were empowered to pursue only those specific cooperative programs outlined by the heads of state in their summit meetings and follow-up ministerial meetings.

In the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), the negotiations leading to the 1975 Helsinki Final Act showed evidence of many of the themes that underpinned U.S. and Soviet interests in bilateral engagement during the subsequent decade. For the United States, these themes were: (1) regulating strategic nuclear competition and managing the risk of nuclear confrontation; (2) reducing the likelihood and consequences of regional conflicts in the Middle East,

FIGURE 1  
**U.S.-USSR Agreements, 1972–1974<sup>15</sup>**



Asia, Africa, and Latin America; and (3) injecting discussions about human rights and political freedom into superpower interactions.<sup>16</sup>

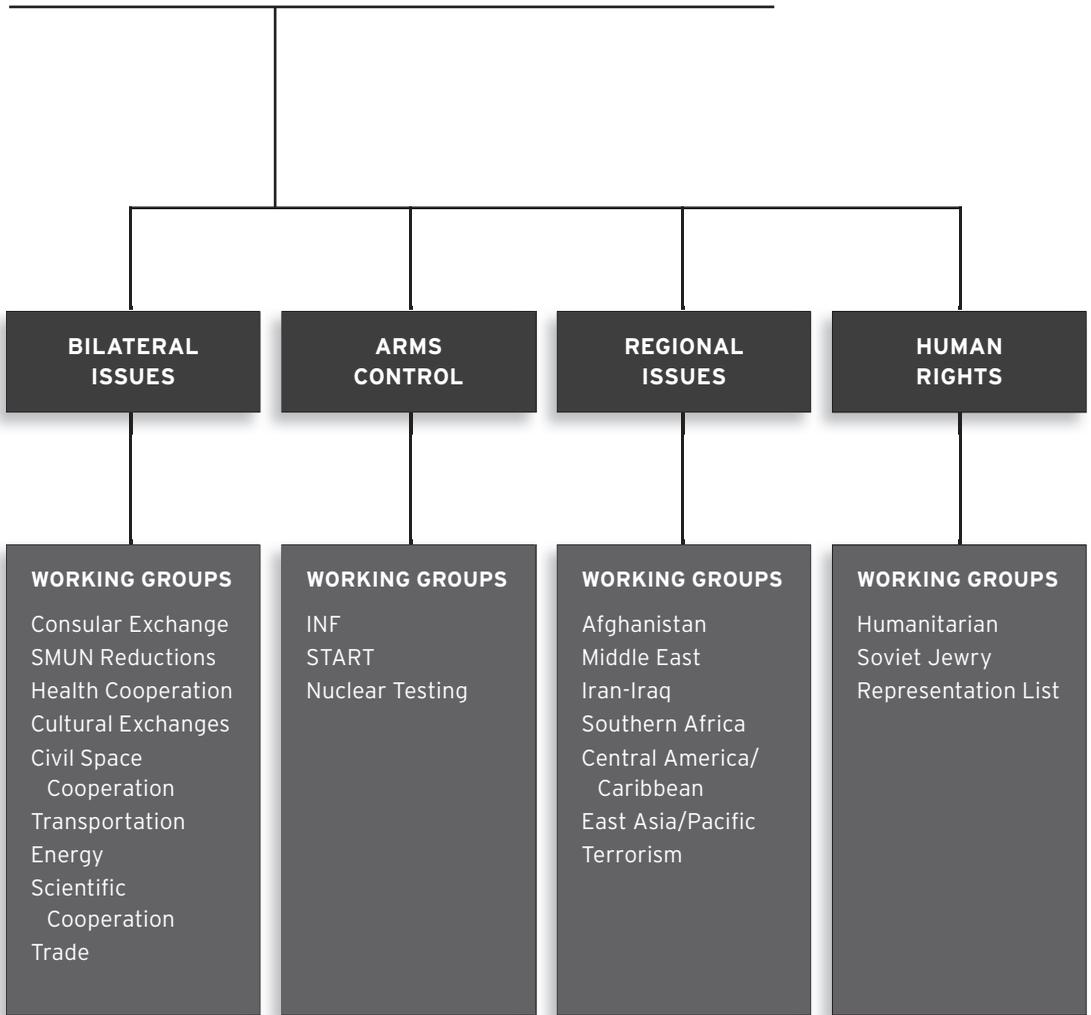
The Soviet side shared the first two interests: They found nuclear competition to be too expensive, especially with the arms race expanding to encompass missile defense and space systems, and they agreed that regional conflicts had the potential to draw both sides into an unwinnable nuclear war. However, the Soviets balanced the U.S. drive for freedom of travel, expression, and religion with their own insistence on the inviolability of international borders and the principle of non-intervention in the internal political affairs of European countries—in effect, a final Western “ratification” of the de facto Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe after World War II. The delicate balance between these two sets of interests was ultimately enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act, which contained both a “declaration of principles guiding relations between participating states,” which included the inviolability of international borders and non-intervention in internal affairs, plus broad provisions on the promotion of human rights, the principles of democracy, and “Cooperation in the Field of Economics, of Science and Technology and of the Environment.”<sup>17</sup>

As perestroika unfolded in the mid-1980s under Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, the United States had to decide whether to believe in the sincerity of the new leader and his reforms or to continue on a path of arms-length engagement, coupled with hedging and competition. President Reagan, encouraged by Margaret Thatcher’s famous declaration that Gorbachev was somebody with whom she could do business, leaned toward genuine engagement, with one caveat, embodied in his famous maxim, “trust, but verify.” By the time of the 1986 Reykjavik summit, with bilateral arms control moving full speed ahead on multiple fronts, Reagan and Gorbachev were both prepared to adopt a less stilted view of the other dimensions of the bilateral relationship and to focus on possibly cooperating on shared interests. According to then-classified briefing materials from the summit, the two leaders discussed initiating or expanding direct cooperation on topics ranging from intelligence sharing and counterterrorism to Chernobyl-inspired studies of the long-term dangers of radiation.<sup>18</sup>

To be sure, the Soviets continued to press on arms control, “sovereignty,” and economic issues at bilateral summit meetings like Reykjavik, just as they had at the CSCE. The United States, for its part, continued to make human rights a priority. Thus echoes of the stalemate of opposing interests from the 1970s continued to reverberate.<sup>19</sup> However, following Reykjavik, a direct ministerial-level dialogue between Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze and U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz was initiated to address these difficult issues in a potentially more productive bilateral forum. The ministerial meetings spawned several working-level sub-groups, including groups dealing with “consular” and “humanitarian” issues, such as the challenging topic of Jewish emigration.<sup>20</sup>

FIGURE 2

**Shultz-Shevardnadze Dialogue: Working Agenda<sup>21</sup>**



Much of the ministerial working group's attention throughout the late 1980s focused on managing the ever-increasing political independence of the Soviet satellites of Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, the Soviet Union itself was undertaking major reforms that presented opportunities for bilateral U.S.-Russia engagement geared at developing the Soviet economy, especially its banking and high-technology sectors. Educational and cultural exchanges of all kinds rose immediately before and during this period: An estimated 343 Americans and a similar number of Soviet undergraduate and graduate students, scholars, and teachers were exchanged in 1981 alone.<sup>22</sup>

During this period, the 1958 bilateral agreement on exchanges was extended for six more years—in effect indefinitely, as the Soviet Union itself collapsed before the agreement came up for renewal again. Unfortunately, bilateral cooperation under détente-era agreements on space, health, the environment, and other topics dwindled for lack of attention and bandwidth on both sides. The rapid pace of change and the opening of countless opportunities for productive bilateral engagement on core political interests left officials little time to think strategically about building an institutional foundation for wide-ranging cooperation.<sup>23</sup> This meant that much of the promising U.S.-Soviet engagement of the 1970s and 1980s depended on personal ties between officials who would be out of office by 1993.

With the decline and collapse of the Soviet Union, a new relationship between the United States and the Russian Federation had to be cultivated and, as much as was possible under such tumultuous circumstances, institutionalized. But the new Russia faced immediate and urgent economic and social upheaval. State-run industry withered in the face of competition from new private enterprises, and the post-Soviet leadership was uncertain of its own political strength. The main U.S. policy response was therefore to offer assistance. Help for Russia itself was initially ad hoc, aimed at keeping the economy stable and preventing the eruption of humanitarian or security crises like those raging elsewhere in the former Soviet space. At the same time, the United States administered assistance to the former Soviet-dominated states of Eastern Europe under the Support for East European Democracy (SEED) Act of 1989, a flexible instrument intended to ensure that the transition to democracy and a market economy in Eastern Europe would be irreversible.<sup>24</sup>

In 1992, Congress passed the Freedom Support Act (FSA), a version of the SEED Act for the fifteen independent states that emerged from the defunct Soviet Union.<sup>25</sup> The FSA created new entities and government authorities to deliver much-needed economic and technical assistance to the former Soviet states while advancing the parallel goals of promoting democracy and market reforms and preventing the proliferation of Soviet nuclear weapons or expertise. A new Coordinator position was created within the Department of State to oversee these programs. As the title suggests, the Coordinator had primary responsibility for U.S. government aid

to all former Soviet states, including Russia, as well as responsibility for working with the government departments and agencies that distributed the aid. Thus the State Department, in part through the FSA and the position of the Coordinator, managed bilateral engagement for the first year of post-Soviet U.S.-Russia relations.

During the same period, the George H. W. Bush White House directly managed a short-lived attempt at U.S.-Russia strategic dialogue. In the final months of the administration, Bush and Yeltsin created a working group to discuss the possibility of joint U.S.-Russia missile defense. The working group had a three-prong structure, with sub-groups assigned to consider the threat environment that might necessitate missile defense, possibilities for U.S.-Russia technological cooperation, and specific regional applications of a theater missile defense system. However, President Bush faced a tough (ultimately unsuccessful) reelection battle that year, and the administration's attention quickly wandered from this isolated effort.<sup>26</sup> When Bush left office, the last vestiges of the 1980s-era U.S.-Soviet relationship departed from the top policy circles, and the incoming leaders now had a clear path to build a wholly new infrastructure for the relationship.



# THE CLINTON YEARS AND GORE-CHERNOMYRDIN

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The first summit meeting between Presidents Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin in Vancouver in April 1993 dramatically changed the structure of the U.S.-Russia relationship. It was at this summit that the concept of a comprehensive bilateral Commission to manage diverse aspects of U.S.-Russia engagement was first introduced. Clinton and Yeltsin appeared to recognize both the importance of the bilateral relationship and the potential it offered to advance each side's interests in fields such as energy, space, and science and technology. U.S.-Russia ministerial-level cooperation had occurred in each of these arenas before, but it had typically derived from discrete bilateral agreements signed in high-level summits between U.S. and Soviet leaders. Bilateral cooperation had been instrumental to improving the superpower relationship in these summits; yet the substantive outcomes of cooperation were incidental by comparison.

What Clinton and Yeltsin agreed to was a thoroughly institutionalized—even normalized—form of bilateral cooperation. This cooperation would nonetheless require significant high-level management to jumpstart working-level engagement, as the bureaucracies in Moscow and Washington had not had much working level contact before. Yet both presidents were “big picture” leaders with little patience for micromanaging their bureaucracies and both preferred to delegate the coordinating roles to trusted senior officials.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Vice President Al Gore and Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin accepted a mandate to “develop a program to advance a new joint agenda in energy, space, and science and technology to the benefit of both countries,” and the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission was born.<sup>28</sup>

The presidents' initiative at Vancouver had originally developed out of the need to keep senior officials on both sides personally connected to the working partnership between the two governments. This close coordination was novel but necessary to ensure that the hundreds of millions of U.S. taxpayer dollars being allocated to

ambitious economic development and democracy reform projects in Russia would be well spent.<sup>29</sup> In private conversations with Clinton's top Russia adviser and future Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozzyrev lobbied for a commission chaired by Gore and Chernomyrdin so that his own bosses "would have more of a personal stake in the American connection" and U.S. assistance "would be more palatable in Russia—less like 'patronizing charity'—if it were put in the framework of US-Russia cooperation."<sup>30</sup> Talbott also believed that it was helpful to have another channel to Moscow at the second-highest level in light of Yeltsin's "erratic streak."<sup>31</sup>

Officially known as the U.S.-Russian Joint Commission on Economic and Technological Cooperation, the group met for the first time in Washington, D.C., in September 1993 and again in Moscow in December of that year. These meetings set the subsequent precedent for biannual full Commission meetings alternating between Russia and the United States. The Commission's original three-part focus on trade, economics, and technology gave way by the mid-1990s to eight committees chaired at the cabinet level plus a secretariat on the U.S. side. Substantive committees dealt with space, business development, energy policy, defense conversion, science and technology, the environment, health, and agribusiness.<sup>32</sup> There were several additional informal working groups dealing with other topics.

In practice, the Commission provided precisely the kind of high-level attention both sides knew was necessary to keep officials actively engaged at the operational level. On the U.S. side, action officers and their political superiors within agencies knew that Vice President Gore would be evaluating the progress they made with their Russian counterparts at least twice a year, when the full Commission met in plenary, and that this would also be their best opportunity to appeal to the very top for the funding and authority for their programs. Between full Commission meetings, activity was overseen and coordinated by the U.S. Secretariat, which included the Ambassador at Large for the New Independent States (NIS), the Adviser to the President and the Secretary of State for NIS Assistance, and national security aides on the President's and Vice President's staffs. These officials helped track and promote activities of the working committees, which increased the visibility of the Commission's substantive accomplishments in the plenary meetings and in periodic reports to Congress and the public.

On the Russian side, the high-level attention given to bilateral cooperation was by far the most important aspect of the Commission's structure. According to officials involved at the time, the fact that Prime Minister Chernomyrdin and President Yeltsin expected progress updates at each of the Commission's high-profile plenaries compelled otherwise reluctant players in the bureaucracy to deliver.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, Russian working group heads benefited from the chance to learn about the U.S. interagency process by watching their U.S. counterparts.<sup>34</sup>

FIGURE 3

**The Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission 1993–2000<sup>35</sup>**

<b>SPACE</b>	CHAIRS: NASA Administrator Daniel Goldin Russian Space Agency General Director Yuri Koptev
<b>ENERGY</b>	CHAIRS: U.S. Secretary of Energy Hazel O'Leary Minister of Fuel and Energy Yuri Shafranik
<b>SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY</b>	CHAIRS: OSTP Director Jack Gibbons Minister of Science Boris G. Saltykov
<b>BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT</b>	CHAIRS: U.S. Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Economic Relations Oleg Davydov
<b>DEFENSE CONVERSION</b>	CHAIRS: U.S. Secretary of Defense William J. Perry First Deputy Minister of Defense Andrei Kokoshin First Deputy Minister of the Economy Valeriy Makhailov
<b>AGRICULTURE</b>	CHAIR: Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman
<b>ENVIRONMENT</b>	CHAIRS: EPA Administrator Carol Browner Minister of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources Victor Danilov-Danilyan
<b>HEALTH</b>	CHAIRS: U.S. Secretary of Health Donna Shalala Minister of Health and Medical Industry Eduard Nechayev

Sources: U.S. Department of State, *Fact Sheet: Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission - U.S. Vice-President Albert Gore, Jr.; Russia Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin*, Washington, D.C.: December 26, 1994; U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, "Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission Announcements," *U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission News Digest* 96:134, July 17, 1996, <http://www.sec.gov/news/digest/1996/digo71796.pdf>; Foundation for Russian-American Economic Cooperation, *Russian-American Pacific Partnership*, <http://www.fraec.org/?nodeID=196>; Kenn et al., "The Crisis in Russia's Nuclear Cities," in Joseph Cirincione, ed., *Repairing the Regime: Preventing the Spread of Weapons of Mass Destruction* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

TABLE 2

**Additional Major Initiatives and Projects Launched Under the Aegis of the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission<sup>36</sup>**

PROJECT	CHAIR/COORDINATING OFFICIAL	DESCRIPTION/FUNCTION
Regional Investment Initiative	U.S. Agency for International Development and Russian Regions	providing a wide range of assistance to Russian regions; removing obstacles to investment; mobilizing capital
Capital Markets Forum	U.S. Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin, U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission Chairman Arthur Levitt, First Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Government Vladimir Kadannikov, and Russian Federal Commission on the Capital Market Chairman Dmitry Vasiliev	supporting and guiding the development of Russian capital markets
Ad Hoc Working Group on Russian-American Pacific Partnership	U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Agency for International Development Russian Interregional Association for Economic Development of the Far East and Trans-Baikal Regions	creating a framework for public and private sector engagement in commercial and business affairs between the two countries

Although the Commission formally created a two-way street for cooperation in each of its substantive areas, political and economic realities in Russia in the mid-1990s typically gave the interactions a more unidirectional character. On business development, for example, U.S. experts worked with Russians to make recommendations for improving the investment climate, facilitating trade, and streamlining regulation. The U.S. government provided funding to help U.S. companies entering the Russian market and advised the Russian side about managing complex issues related to privatization of state industry. A major priority then as now was Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), which the committee on agribusiness, for instance, addressed by seeking to improve Russia's conformity with international standards.<sup>37</sup>

Defense conversion was also a rather unidirectional undertaking, with the U.S. side primarily concerned with ensuring the accounting and security of Russian weapons, facilities, sensitive materials and technologies, and expertise. However, the defense conversion committee was quite successful in directing Cooperative Threat Reduction (Nunn-Lugar) and related nonproliferation funding to competitive civilian enterprises founded with former weapons scientists and facilities. The Commission provided a useful venue for U.S. officials to teach lessons in good governance by example and observe which Russian counterparts were effective and reliable partners. In the words of one observer, "the Commission provided a way of helping [the Russians] see how government runs by watching ours."<sup>38</sup>

It was to be expected that areas of cooperation tied to post-Soviet economic and politico-military transition were somewhat lopsided, with the United States advising on change, and Russia doing the changing. Nevertheless, committees in other areas did produce genuinely collaborative projects. A prominent example was the Committee on Space Cooperation, which was one of the original three focus areas of the Commission as envisioned by Clinton and Yeltsin in 1993. By 1996, the space committee had signed numerous cooperation agreements, resulting in the now famous link-up of the U.S. space shuttle program with the Mir Space Station, joint flight tests, and access to Russian launch capabilities for commercial applications.<sup>39</sup> The science and technology committee blended coordination of U.S. assistance, such as that provided by the Civilian Research and Development Foundation for developing and redirecting Russian defense science to civilian applications, with collaborative research projects such as a joint Alpha-Magnetic Spectrometer experiment to detect anti-matter and dark matter in space, a joint seismological research program, and the establishment of a joint space biomedical research center.<sup>40</sup>

The bilateral accomplishments of the health committee demonstrated the value of advanced Russian medical research to the United States (and vice versa), and included adoption of mutually beneficial food safety standards, agreements on pharmaceutical development and sales, and information exchanges about advanced

medical devices. Finally, the committee on environmental issues demonstrated not only a bilateral approach but also an impressive level of engagement with the broader global and multilateral challenges of climate change and environmental protection. Both sides pushed their bureaucracies to implement the Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Montreal Protocol on ozone-depleting substances. Exchanges also took place on sharing best practices for sequestering radioactive waste, sustaining forests, and preventing pollution in the Arctic.<sup>41</sup>

While the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission did facilitate meaningful engagement between U.S. and Russian working-level agencies, it was significantly limited by both its own structure and the tumultuous economic and political environment in which it operated. Some U.S. and Russian government veterans involved with the Commission noted that the pattern of activity often felt artificial; little would happen until just before the Commission plenary, when committee members would scramble to produce work plans and draft agreements for review and approval by the vice president and the prime minister or to justify requests for more resources for their agencies or offices.<sup>42</sup> As a result, too much time was spent negotiating the outcomes of the semiannual plenary session and too little was spent on substantive cooperation with Russian and American counterparts. Some even attacked the Commission's excessive bureaucracy as an impediment to innovation and a temptation to produce mere "fodder for its summits: 'new' programs to unveil, documents to sign, photo ops for the principals."<sup>43</sup> Others lamented that the process was simply too slow, the participants insufficiently motivated to produce real and ongoing results, and the senior leaders on both sides inadequately engaged with their bureaucracies to resolve these blockages.<sup>44</sup>

Outside critics leveled more serious charges against the Commission's co-chairs and the committee heads, stirring bitter domestic partisanship (which reached a crescendo with the 1998 Clinton impeachment) into the foreign policy mix. These critics argued that the Commission effectively skirted congressional oversight by swallowing up and circumventing congressionally sanctioned executive agencies, and that it empowered the vice president to "go around making agreements, secret or otherwise, with foreign officials," in violation of the Constitution. While the Freedom Support Act had initially enjoyed strong bipartisan support on the Hill, by the late 1990s, critics on the right charged that the Commission had effectively hijacked Congress's intent to foster the development of democracy and a market economy and replaced it with personal relationships of "mutual admiration and trust" between U.S. and Russian officials, many of whom had been linked to corrupt practices and even worse crimes by the U.S. intelligence community.<sup>45</sup>

Although many of these extreme criticisms were politically motivated exaggerations, there was a kernel of truth in the argument that the Commission's inherent weakness was its complete dependence on the personal engagement of its

co-chairmen. By 1998, the American side had become increasingly preoccupied not only with the domestic political battle over Clinton's impeachment but also with the impending 2000 elections, in which the Commission's U.S. co-chair, Al Gore, was a presidential candidate.

Circumstances in Russia created an even more serious distraction from the work of the Commission. Russia's first cataclysmic post-Soviet economic crisis hit in the summer of 1998, when global demand for oil, gas, and metals, on which Russia depended (as it still does) for the vast majority of its state budget, plummeted due to a sudden decrease in demand from Asia. Unable to meet bond payment obligations, pay state workers, or continue to prop up the ruble, the Russian government was quickly bowled over by the double-digit pace of inflation and public outcry. Although an ailing Boris Yeltsin was able to hold on to the presidency, he did so at the cost of reshuffling his cabinet several times, resulting in the departure of Prime Minister Chernomyrdin in favor of tough-minded former foreign minister Yevgeny Primakov.

The Commission limped along under the new banners of Gore-Primakov and Gore-Stepashin until 1999, but there is little public record of its meetings or accomplishments. This was due not only to political and economic distractions on both sides but also to heightening tensions in the U.S.-Russia relationship over Kosovo and NATO expansion. In March 1999, for example, while en route to a planned Commission meeting in Washington, Prime Minister Primakov ordered his plane to turn around and return to Moscow to protest the NATO bombing campaign against Serbia.<sup>46</sup> Although the Commission met in July 1999, with Gore and newly appointed Prime Minister Stepashin co-chairing, the momentum for direct government-to-government cooperation on a working level had waned, and discussions were limited to summit-type rhetoric on shared "challenges and threats" entering the new millennium.<sup>47</sup>

There is no doubt that the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission played an important role in institutionalizing bilateral U.S.-Russia cooperation during the critical years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Without the Commission, there might have been no direct ties between U.S. officials outside the State Department and their new Russian counterparts, and it can be argued that these relationships were essential to preserving productive bilateral engagement as Russia suffered through the economic and political upheaval of the 1990s. Still, the Commission failed to secure its own accomplishments, and by the late 1990s, politics and snowballing bureaucracy had sapped its momentum. Perhaps the greatest disappointment of the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission was that it failed to build a lasting foundation for working-level U.S.-Russia cooperation independent of the personalities at the top. Past failures ought to have driven this lesson home, but unfortunately the same mistake was doomed to be repeated.



# THE GEORGE W. BUSH YEARS: STRATEGIC DIALOGUE AND DRIFT

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In 2001, newly elected U.S. President George W. Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin, who had been in office for little more than a year, held their first summit meeting in Slovenia, where Bush famously looked into Putin's eyes and "got a sense of his soul." The leaders described their hopes for a constructive relationship and appeared ready to personally spearhead further U.S.-Russia bilateral engagement. However, the same meeting marked the formal end of the moribund Commission on Economic and Technological Cooperation (Gore-Chernomyrdin), which both regarded as a relic of the unique circumstances of the previous decade. The new leaders' framework for bilateral cooperation would prove to be ambitious but short-lived and ultimately unsuccessful.

President Bush believed that Russia was neither a primary rival nor Washington's most important partner and that the two countries could cooperate like "normal" partners where their interests intersected on issues like preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and advancing trade and economic development. Putin brought to the table a set of concrete Russian concerns including ongoing U.S. criticism of Russian operations in Chechnya, U.S. missile defense plans, and NATO expansion to the Baltic States and elsewhere along Russia's borders. Despite the broad and substantive agenda of this first summit, there was talk not of creating a formal mechanism for managing U.S.-Russia relations but of continuing consultations, dialogue, and cooperation on discrete issues of interest to both sides. Apparently, these issues were to be managed by the presidents themselves.<sup>48</sup>

By the end of President Bush's first year in office, the United States had passed through the reorienting trauma of September 11, invaded Afghanistan, and was preparing to initiate a second war in Iraq. For many in the Bush administration, Russia and the post-Soviet space fell even further off the radar screen of an increasingly Middle East-focused U.S. foreign policy. Others, however, recognized the

important role that Russia could play in Washington's sharpened focus on combating religious extremism, WMD proliferation, and the problems of failed states. This recognition gave rise to the beginning of a new institutional framework for the bilateral relationship: a commitment by Presidents Bush and Putin to engage in a high-level strategic dialogue following their 2002 Moscow-St. Petersburg summit, and the creation of a largely unpublicized working group on the U.S.-Russia bilateral agenda.<sup>49</sup>

The working group began to meet in 2003 under the formal chairmanship of National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and Head of the Russian Presidential Administration Aleksandr Voloshin. However, Voloshin and Rice handed functional leadership over to their deputies, Oleg Chernov and Stephen Hadley. Their mission was to: (1) help guide policy on both sides by fleshing out a more detailed vision for the strategic partnership and cooperation the two presidents had committed to; (2) monitor implementation of agreed policies and identify log-jams that should be promoted to the presidential level for resolution; (3) provide a setting in which candid discussion of sensitive issues like domestic political dynamics and intelligence could occur; and (4) identify areas of competition and ways to minimize the consequences of that competition for the broader cooperative agenda.<sup>50</sup>

Small delegations from each side met once a month in either Washington or Moscow beginning in 2003. Because the group leaders each enjoyed direct access to their respective presidents, they were, at least in theory, able to set the agenda for work being done throughout the U.S. and Russian governments. However, reviews were mixed. According to some participants, the small-group format facilitated frank dialogue on strategic issues and long-term goals of importance to both sides, from energy security to counterterrorism to Russia's accession to the WTO. Others argued that the closed-door approach was counterproductive, since even when the group reached consensus on an important issue, the result never made it into wider government policy.

Follow-through on these discussions was ad hoc at best. Eventually, the working group developed an expansive "checklist" of issues brought up by each side that required further discussion or action from specific government agencies. In order to keep the working group's discussion at a strategic level, the officials delegated topics from the checklist to cabinet agencies for follow-up, with staggered progress reports due to the president every six months such that, at each monthly meeting, progress could be reviewed in at least one area.<sup>51</sup> According to participants, agencies frequently ignored these deadlines, and the White House's failure to impose consequences on them encouraged further foot-dragging.<sup>52</sup>

As the White House and the Kremlin conducted this closed-door strategic dialogue in 2003 and 2004, there was a more public dimension to bilateral cooperation that engaged business, nongovernmental organizations, and the legislative branch.

According to the presidents' 2002 statement, both sides were committed to establishing an "unprecedented political alliance, friendship, and economic partnership between the U.S. and Russia at the highest levels of government, creating opportunities for strengthening ties and developing many spheres of cooperation."<sup>53</sup> In 2002, Senators Nunn and Lugar, co-authors of the Cooperative Threat Reduction program, referred to the U.S.-Russia strategic dialogue as being critical to nuclear nonproliferation,<sup>54</sup> while the presidents themselves announced the creation of a U.S.-Russia "banking dialogue" in a meeting at President Bush's ranch in Texas.<sup>55</sup> The 2002 Moscow-St. Petersburg summit also included public announcements about ongoing bilateral efforts on media entrepreneurship, energy, business and investment, strategic security, and people-to-people contacts.<sup>56</sup>

The public dimension of the strategic dialogue included high-profile activities like an October 2002 U.S.-Russia Commercial Energy Summit in Houston, Texas. The two-day meeting featured top U.S. and Russian officials in the fields of energy and financial policy, as well as representatives of 70 U.S. and Russian energy companies. Recognizing the shared interests of the United States as a major energy consumer and Russia as a major supplier in stable, secure energy markets, the participants committed to joint efforts to improve Russia's energy export capabilities to the United States and other markets and established a commercial working group to bring companies from both sides together.<sup>57</sup>

Although the 2002 energy meeting was quickly followed by a similarly high-level summit in St. Petersburg in September 2003, this was to be the last such public gathering of officials and business leaders from both sides. On October 25, 2003, Russian authorities arrested and jailed Mikhail Khodorkovsky, CEO of Yukos, Russia's largest energy company, on charges of corruption and theft. Khodorkovsky's arrest signaled the beginning in earnest of a process of forced realignment among Russia's most powerful businessmen, who were required to abandon independent political activity and submit to direct or indirect Kremlin influence on their enterprises or leave the country altogether. The state also reasserted direct control over "strategic sectors" of the economy, which included everything from oil and gas to telecommunications.<sup>58</sup> As private business and investment came increasingly under state control, there was little room for the once promising private-sector dialogue that the official summits were meant to catalyze and support. In short, it was becoming clear that the U.S. administration's vision of a "normal" relationship driven primarily by interaction among businesses, civil society, and officials with shared interests fit poorly with political and economic reality in Russia.

Added to the increasingly hostile market for U.S. business in Russia were ongoing tensions between Moscow and Washington over NATO expansion and the administration's so-called Freedom Agenda, under which the United States supported (fomented, in Russia's view) color revolutions in the post-Soviet space. Despite

rising tensions on many fronts, some discussion on cooperation continued in the high-level strategic dialogue, at least until the close of Bush's first term. But the departure of Voloshin in late 2003 complicated effective follow-through on an increasingly ambitious checklist. Throughout 2004, Russian involvement in the dialogue weakened, in part because the new officials charged with expressing the Kremlin's positions had limited access to President Putin and thus could not respond quickly and fluidly to U.S. proposals—which was the whole point of a direct White House-Kremlin dialogue in the first place. Not surprisingly, the United States also lost interest in the dialogue at the same time that almost all the administration's foreign policy views came to be evaluated through the narrow lens of the Freedom Agenda. The U.S. president's public rhetoric, defined by this agenda, left little room for back-room negotiations with an authoritarian Russian regime.

On the Russian side, Putin reasserted state power and reaped the benefits of good fortune, in the form of higher global demand for Russia's natural resource exports. Thus the Kremlin's sense of national power and its coffers were swelling at the same time that the strategic dialogue was dwindling. Although this renewed Russian assertiveness seemed to clash with U.S. and Western interests in a number of high-profile cases, much of the apparent tension was caused by a widening gap between Washington's real intentions and Moscow's negative perception of U.S. political, economic, and military engagement in its geopolitical neighborhood. Ironically, the door to frank and open high-level dialogue on the most difficult issues was closing at precisely the time it most needed to remain open. Moreover, because the strategic dialogue and its structure, goals, and accomplishments had always been kept relatively quiet, individual officials on both sides had little incentive to continue to work together once pressure from the top disappeared.

From the administration's perspective, there were perhaps too many competing priorities to spend its scarce attention and political capital on developing a fully articulated and structured approach to the relationship, especially when simmering tensions over the post-Soviet space resulted in persistent high levels of suspicion and distrust. The Russians, however, perceived this as U.S. indifference to the relationship itself, yielding a destructive feedback loop wherein Russian officials would complain that they had "no one to talk to" on the U.S. side—the ultimate insult to the world's largest country and a longtime superpower. In response to this trend, and consistent with its own vision of resurgent Russian influence as a leading world power, Moscow pursued institutionalized cooperation elsewhere, most notably with China through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and among like-minded post-Soviet states through the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

From 2005 through the end of the Bush and Putin presidencies, the U.S.-Russia relationship was without any significant institutional underpinnings. Some even argue that the United States lacked a "Russia policy" altogether during that period,

and that U.S.-Russia tensions arising from Washington's engagement with Ukraine, Georgia, and other states in Russia's "near abroad" was a consequence of the Bush administration's failure to see the region as a whole in which Russia needed to play a central part.<sup>59</sup> Compared with the strategic dialogue and the public outcomes of the 2002 Moscow-St. Petersburg summit, the 2005 Bratislava summit yielded only an anemic joint statement that primarily recycled past commitments and platitudes on nuclear security, WTO accession, counterterrorism, space cooperation, and exchanges.<sup>60</sup> There were occasional efforts to reframe or refocus bilateral engagement around important but essentially lowest common denominator interests, such as preventing nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and global warming.<sup>61</sup> Whatever the administration's actual policy toward Russia during this period, the relationship was idling badly, with the potential for misfires that could threaten fundamental interests on both sides.

Russian experts and officials never tire of reminding their American counterparts that Vladimir Putin was the first foreign leader to call the White House after the 9/11 attacks and offer both condolences and concrete assistance. In the immediate post-9/11 period, some officials on both sides worked hard to define and advance a cooperative agenda. Yet as the years went by after 2005, those early efforts appeared increasingly ironic in the face of a drifting and deteriorating U.S.-Russia relationship.



# THE U.S.-RUSSIA PRESIDENTIAL COMMISSION: CREATION AND STRUCTURE

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The creation of a new institutional framework for the U.S.-Russia bilateral relationship in 2009 arose from a confluence of geopolitical, domestic political, and economic changes on both sides. First, the American people had elected in Barack Obama a president who was already strongly committed to repairing ties with Russia. As a senator, Obama had visited Russia in 2005 and come to understand and appreciate the central importance of cooperative approaches to nuclear security under the tutelage of veteran Senator Dick Lugar and other senior leaders. When the Russia-Georgia war broke out in August 2008, Obama avoided echoing the inflammatory anti-Russia rhetoric bandied about by many Democrats and Republicans, even though it made him vulnerable to criticisms that he was weak and inexperienced on foreign policy. Instead, he consulted with Bush administration officials and called on both sides to show restraint.<sup>62</sup>

On the Russian side, the economic crisis that began in late 2007 had crushed global demand for Russia's energy and raw material exports, wreaking devastation on the Russian market and pushing state finances precariously close to the brink of a 1998-style collapse. Although the budget was shored up by a substantial stability fund accumulated by cautious Kremlin managers during the early and mid-2000s, the impact of the crisis doubtless reminded Russia's leaders of their country's vulnerability to global market forces. The drying up of what had previously seemed an endless stream of oil and gas wealth limited the Kremlin's power projection capabilities and may have moderated its aspirations to coercively secure a sphere of "privileged interests" in the near abroad.

In Putin's hand-picked successor, Dmitri Medvedev, Russia had gained a new and—at least on the surface—quite different figurehead. Whereas the disappointment of Putin and Bush's initial warmth and eventual estrangement contributed to a failed U.S.-Russia strategic dialogue during the preceding decade, in 2009, both

sides could offer fresh faces and the chance for a new approach to the bilateral relationship. Perhaps more important, both Obama and Medvedev had experience as lawyers and law professors. Both could recognize the value of institutions and procedures for resolving tough problems, whether between litigants in a trial or between governments on the international stage.

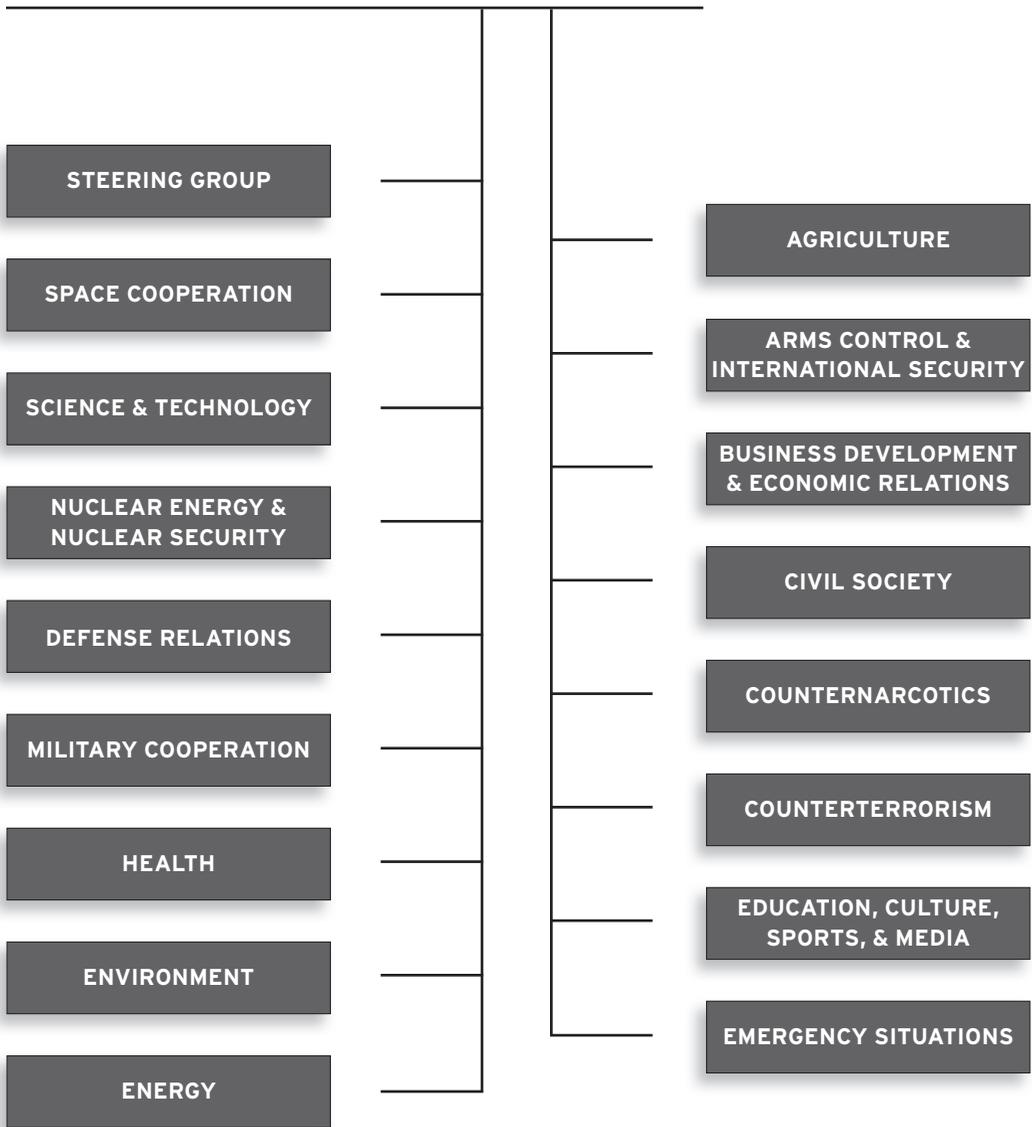
In this atmosphere of heightened awareness of the risks of competition and mutual vulnerability to transnational economic and security threats, and with a fresh personal relationship between two new heads of state, the United States and Russia were well-positioned to commit to a relationship “reset” in early 2009. As pragmatists, however, both leaders appeared to recognize the need for that reset to produce real outcomes that would benefit both sides. If the reset proved to be just another declaration of good intentions with no concrete follow-up, it would be quickly forgotten, and the relationship might degenerate to the dangerous nadir of the previous year, or worse.

The need to facilitate difficult, substantive work toward concrete progress led both sides to agree to create the U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission. Although the two presidents formally announced the launch of the BPC at their July 2009 Moscow summit, the Commission began to work in earnest in September of that year.<sup>63</sup> According to its mission statement, the BPC is dedicated to “identifying areas of cooperation and pursuing joint projects and actions that strengthen strategic stability, international security, economic well-being, and the development of ties between the Russian and American people.”<sup>64</sup> The priority and breadth of these goals were reflected in the Commission’s structure: Presidents Obama and Medvedev are official Co-Chairs, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov serve as Coordinators, and well over a dozen working groups, co-chaired by senior executive branch officials from both sides, address topics ranging from nuclear security and arms control to educational and cultural exchanges.<sup>65</sup>

At first blush, the agenda reflected in the BPC working group structure is substantially broader than that of any previous institution for managing the U.S.-Russia bilateral relationship, including the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission. This is evident not only from a tally of the two commissions’ working groups (eight versus seventeen), but from the statements of senior officials on both sides. They emphasize that past U.S.-Russia bilateral cooperation had been primarily about crisis-management and problem-solving, whereas the new Commission is dedicated to finding new opportunities to work together in previously unexploited fields. Of course, the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission also had the ambition to “achieve concrete benefits from [U.S.-Russia] partnership through encouraging mutually advantageous cooperation in a variety of commercial and technical fields.”<sup>66</sup> Simply put, from Gore-Chernomyrdin to the Bush-Putin Strategic Dialogue to the new Bilateral Presidential Commission, the shifting nomenclature and structure of institutions

FIGURE 4

**U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission**



Source: U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/ci/rs/usrussiabilat/index.htm>, as of October 18, 2010.

for managing the U.S.-Russia relationship has reflected both the inherent difficulty of the relationship and each side's recognition that it could be improved.

Whatever the aspirations, the accomplishments of any bilateral framework are necessarily subject to each side's potential to bring real resources and energy to the table. In the 1990s, the United States was primarily concerned with ensuring the success of Russia's transition from communist party dictatorship and a planned economy to free market democracy. This meant that the United States evaluated investments of all kinds in Russia through that political lens rather than on the merits of the various collaborative projects it supported. Russia, in turn, was inwardly focused, plagued by economic and political instability and simply unable in most cases to act as an equal partner with the United States. During the Bush-Putin era, external challenges, conflicting ideology, and staff turnover sapped top-level attention from the strategic dialogue. Today, both countries are very differently situated. Although the current BPC and the 1990s Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission have similar names and structures, the most significant difference between them may ultimately be the high strategic priority of U.S.-Russia cooperation for the United States, and the Russian side's greatly increased stability and capacity to bring resources to the table.

BPC working groups began meeting in the late fall and winter of 2009. The Commission Coordinators, Clinton and Lavrov, held their first official BPC meeting in Moscow in mid-October, after which they issued a statement revising the Commission structure slightly to create three additional working groups, for a total of 16, including a high-level "Policy Steering Group" co-chaired by Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Bill Burns and Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov. The Coordinators instructed working group co-chairs and any sub-group chairs to "develop an initial list of priority initiatives and roadmap for moving forward on those initiatives this year." They were also encouraged to "liaise, where appropriate, with parallel structures from the business community and non-governmental organizations, and consider their recommendations." Not unlike the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission, working groups were supposed to report on their progress at least twice a year, meeting as frequently as necessary during the intervening time to advance their agendas. Overall progress reports were to be submitted to the presidents by the Coordinators at least once a year.<sup>67</sup>

Among the earliest working groups to begin formal meetings was the Arms Control and International Security group, co-chaired by Under Secretary of State Ellen Tauscher and Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov, who met on the sidelines of the July 2009 Moscow summit for joint threat assessment discussions and again several times before the end of the year.<sup>68</sup> It is not surprising that the arms control group moved quickly, not only because the two countries already had a long history of cooperation in this arena, but because the two presidents had already instructed

their diplomats to begin negotiations on a new bilateral strategic arms control treaty (New START), which they initially hoped to conclude before the expiration of the original START treaty on December 5, 2009.

One of the most active and visible groups in the first few months of the Commission's life was the Education, Culture, Sports, and Media group, co-chaired by Special Representative Shvydkoy and Under Secretary of State McHale. In addition to half a dozen personal meetings among working group members, the group sponsored public/private sector delegation visits, concerts, lectures, film screenings, and a youth basketball exchange, whose Russian participants practiced their shots with President Obama at the White House.<sup>69</sup>

The BPC's focus on deliverables was clear from the beginning. Six months after the official creation of the Commission (but in reality only three months after the start of the working group meetings and less than two months after the BPC Coordinators' first official meeting), the Coordinators released a joint statement on the Commission's progress.<sup>70</sup> The statement included a substantial list of bilateral activities, ranging from formal working group meetings to lay out the goals and work plans they had been charged to create to the signing of agreements to begin and enhance cooperation on scientific research, particularly on clean energy, public health, and basic science.<sup>71</sup> Although the majority of the reported accomplishments were meetings and discussions rather than programs operating on the ground, it was unprecedented that such bilateral consultations were already occurring between working-level officials in such a broad range of substantive areas.

In the subsequent year since the formal launch of the Commission and the beginning of the working group meetings, there have been more accomplishments, meetings, and statements. In a speech delivered prior to the June 2010 Obama-Medvedev summit in Washington, Assistant Secretary of State Phil Gordon trumpeted the BPC's "well over 100 meetings and exchanges," bringing together "over 60 Russian and American government agencies, not to mention multiple private sector and non-governmental partners." Among the concrete results achieved by the Commission, he listed the April 2010 agreement to dispose of roughly 70 tons of weapons-grade plutonium, enough for 17,000 nuclear warheads; the announcement of early investments by U.S. companies in the Skolkovo innovation center outside Moscow; and a tender from Russia to the Boeing Company for 50 aircraft worth \$4 billion.<sup>72</sup>

Like the December 2009 joint statement, the first Joint Report of the Commission Coordinators to the Presidents, issued following the June 2010 summit in Washington, emphasizes outcomes. For each working group, the report lists not only the calendar of official meetings but also describes "deliverables/progress" and provides a concrete "agenda for the future" with planned activities tied to specific deadlines.<sup>73</sup> In light of the Obama administration's focus on deliverables, the Commission working groups have been under significant pressure to report progress.

Still, as is perhaps inevitable with a new undertaking such as this, the meetings, discussions of priorities, and agenda-writing exercises have tended to precede the more tangible outcomes. Each Commission working group reported on the number of meetings held, the topics discussed, and the future agenda in time for the joint report, often with an extensive and ambitious list of proposed future projects. However, it is clear from the report's text that far fewer groups were able to cite successful programs already underway.

Although it is far too early to pass final judgment on the BPC or the reset, at this early stage there is a distinctly lopsided feeling to the Commission's publicly reported accomplishments. In the areas of nuclear security and arms control, the accomplishments include meetings, dialogues, and visits, but also formal agreements to reduce the U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals, dispose of many tons of dangerous nuclear material, and enhance security around sensitive sites. Likewise, in both public documents and remarks, officials involved with the counterterrorism and counternarcotics working groups describe truly impressive working-level engagement, even intelligence sharing, between the two sides. In August 2010, for example, the Military Cooperation working group followed through on a planned activity cited in the joint report, in which U.S. and Canadian officers from the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) cooperated with their Russian counterparts to locate and track a simulated airplane hijacking over the northern Pacific Ocean.<sup>74</sup> Under the auspices of the Emergency Situations working group, FEMA, EMERCOM, and USAID officials took part in a joint tabletop exercise held in Russia on earthquake search and rescue operations in third countries.<sup>75</sup> Meanwhile, the working groups on counterterrorism and counternarcotics have reported substantive cooperation against international organized crime and terror financing, as evidenced by joint operations to map smuggling routes in Central Asia and Russian information-sharing on *Hawala* informal financial networks that have been used to fund the Taliban and Afghan warlords.<sup>76</sup>

In areas less related to traditional "hard" security issues, such as health, energy efficiency, and economic and trade development, there are far fewer banner accomplishments that represent concrete actions taken by governments on both sides. It is only fair, of course, to acknowledge that some of the subject areas in question, as in the case of the civil society working group, are either relatively new topics in the bilateral relationship or, like disaster relief or climate change, are linked to complex, multilateral problems. It is essential that the Commission deliver significant progress in its second year in areas of cooperation that move beyond the traditional hard security realm, reflecting the changed state of the world since the days of U.S.-Soviet engagement, or even since the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission of the 1990s.

# HOW THE COMMISSION WORKS

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To deliver concrete progress across the board, and particularly in areas where U.S. and Russian officials have less experience cooperating, or where they face substantial political obstacles, the BPC will need to maintain high-level attention and momentum, refine its functions and structure, and overcome many of the challenges inherent to the work of government bureaucracies. The Commission's ability to accomplish these goals depends not only on its institutional structure but also on the individuals charged on both sides to lead the working groups and advance their agendas, and on the specific challenges and opportunities presented by the diverse range of substantive topics included in the Commission's mandate.

If one of the Commission's most important contributions has been to provide a structured, institutional foundation and framework for the bilateral relationship, then the nature of that structure is of particular importance to the success or failure of the relationship. As was clear in the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission, structural questions—such as when and how often meetings are held, who attends, and how activities are funded—can often have a substantial impact on the outcome. In the case of the BPC, structure is all the more important, because of the ambitious breadth and depth of the post-reset relationship it has been charged to manage and support.

As described above, the Commission's working group structure has been in flux since its inception. Following the first meeting of the Coordinators, some working groups were added and others were renamed; cross-cutting programs, such as a U.S.-Russia "Innovation Dialogue," have taken place parallel to the Commission; and since the first joint report to the presidents in 2010, two more working groups have been added, although one has not been publicly announced.<sup>77</sup> More changes are likely, and indeed flexibility has been a watchword of the Commission from the beginning. The possibility of change is even written into the "terms of reference" that follow the BPC mission statement.<sup>78</sup>

For now, the Commission's structure is anchored to its seventeen substantive working groups. Each working group, co-chaired by a senior U.S. and Russian official, maintains a list of interagency participants. The interagency roster attached to each working group runs the gamut from the department or agency with primary responsibility for the working group's subject matter (and typically holding the co-chair position: for example, the Department of Energy in the case of the energy working group) to departments or agencies with significant capabilities related to the working group's mission to the State Department and the National Security Council, which play a coordinating interagency role in nearly every working group.

In any commission structure that brings together many moving pieces, there will inevitably be challenges in coordinating among diverse government agencies and private sector actors with highly disparate interests. While the Commission working group structure does not simply replicate existing functional offices or regional bureaus on the U.S. side, it does draw almost exclusively on existing capacities, albeit rearranging the lines of cooperation and reporting. This creates a potential challenge for management of competing priorities within the bureaucracy. For instance, what happens when two interagency stakeholders disagree about the working group agenda, or when some agency participants are less enthusiastic about the group's goals than others? Above all, how can the Commission as a whole ensure that U.S. government agencies not traditionally tasked with "diplomatic" roles work effectively with their Russian counterparts, especially in the face of competing domestic priorities?

The simple answer to many of these questions, at least on the U.S. side, is that the president has directed participants in the BPC to coordinate with one another and produce concrete outcomes through cooperation with Russian counterparts, so they must do so. However, where the rubber meets the road, a combination of formal and informal authorities help shepherd BPC participants toward the administration's goals. First, through Secretary of State Clinton's role as Coordinator, the State Department plays a coordinating role for the whole Commission. In practice, this means the State Department's senior officials who focus on Russia can reach out to senior officials of other departments and agencies to make sure that the Commission works smoothly. To some degree, this coordinating function trickles down to working level State Department officials who participate in working group activities, and who can thus serve as Coordinators among the interagency participants for each working group, even when they are not the working group co-chairs. It should be no surprise that of sixteen working groups covered in the Commission's first joint report, the State Department was an interagency participant in fourteen—all but the working groups on space and military-to-military cooperation.<sup>79</sup>

Within each working group, the co-chairs bear formal responsibility for managing interagency coordination. In most cases, this tracks with the agency's expertise

and domestic leadership on the issue in question. In cases where interagency participants disagree, the co-chairs' working-level representatives can intervene to try to resolve the issue, often with support from the State Department. If working level officials are stalling or otherwise hindering the working group, representatives from the co-chair agency can elevate the problem up their own chain and a senior official from the co-chair agency can reach out to a counterpart at the other agency to resolve problems. Officials involved say that, in practice, it is uncommon for problems to go "up the chain" in this manner, since State Department officials are experienced interagency Coordinators with access to the secretary of state in her role as Coordinator for the whole Commission.

In addition to the State Department, there is another coordinating channel. As a *presidential* commission, of course, the BPC is formally under White House and Kremlin leadership. On the U.S. side, this jibes with the White House's well-established role running the interagency policy process and shepherding the bureaucracy toward the president's top priorities. The NSC is listed as an interagency participant in ten of the sixteen working groups in the first joint report, ranging from arms control and international security to agriculture.<sup>80</sup> Through formal chairmanship of the U.S. interagency process, direct participation in working group activities, and frequent, informal contacts with officials from other agencies, the NSC exercises oversight on behalf of the president, who is officially co-chair of the Commission.

Extensive as it is, the Commission working group structure does not encompass all U.S. and Russian bilateral engagement. One prominent example is the New START treaty, negotiated by representatives from the U.S. Department of State and Department of Defense, and Russian Foreign Ministry and Defense Ministry officials, with frequent direct engagement from the president, the secretaries of state and defense, the national security advisor, and their Russian counterparts. The treaty is not mentioned even once in the 2010 joint report, even though it is frequently cited as one of the major accomplishments of the U.S.-Russia "reset." In fact, despite major joint U.S.-Russia progress on arms control issues, the summary of the Arms Control and International Security working group is the shortest in the entire report. Likewise, although uniformed U.S. and Russian military officers met regularly in the Military Cooperation working group, for the Commission's first year, no formal working group encompassed the frequent dialogue between U.S. civilian officials in the Department of Defense and their Russian defense policy counterparts.<sup>81</sup>

Outside the security realm, there are multiple areas where the BPC could not possibly capture the full range of U.S.-Russia bilateral activity. For example, U.S. and Russian negotiators have been working for years on a plan to bring Russia into the WTO, and despite a roller coaster of conflicting signals over the past two years, officials on both sides expect results in the very near future. However, it appears

that WTO accession falls outside the purview of the Business Development and Economic Relations working group, since only the development office of the U.S. Trade Representative is represented there, and WTO accession negotiations are handled by its WTO and multilateral relations office.<sup>82</sup> Important as Russia's accession to the WTO is, it makes some sense not to burden or distract the new Commission's economic working group with the unique and long-standing challenges related to that process.

Through nongovernmental organizations like the U.S.-Russia Business Council and the American Chamber of Commerce in Russia, and at the request of the companies themselves, government officials meet regularly with business leaders from both countries. As in the Commission working group forum, private sector representatives frequently use these meetings to explain how regulatory change can help their businesses resolve problems with government regulators and bid for access to markets controlled directly by the state. Of course, the officials charged with managing the economic working group themselves agree that their goal is for the private sector to take as much leadership as possible in the bilateral relationship.<sup>83</sup> Since investment must ultimately come from private sources, it makes sense for government to play a facilitating or catalytic role in support of private sector goals.

Cultural, sports, and educational exchange is another area in which government is not the primary driver of bilateral cooperation. Although U.S.-Russia ties are still very limited compared with bilateral engagement between the United States and other large countries, 4,911 Russian students visited the United States in 2008, which represents an increase of almost 3,000 percent over 1990, when only 166 graduate and undergraduate students were exchanged.<sup>84</sup> The BPC working group on exchanges has helped foster some prominent examples, such as tours of the Bolshoi and Marinsky ballets in the United States, a U.S. film festival in St. Petersburg, and the Russian youth basketball delegation's visit to the United States.<sup>85</sup> However, the vast majority of U.S. and Russian students studying abroad and performers crossing the Atlantic have done so through independent or preexisting government programs like the congressionally sponsored Open World program, the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), and various university-administered travel programs.

Although the seventeen-working-group structure of the Commission covers a broad agenda and much bilateral cooperation in the Commission's chosen areas of focus takes place parallel to the government track, some areas for potential cooperation have fallen through the cracks altogether. Supporters of increased higher education exchange and cooperation among U.S. and Russian universities, for example, have complained that the BPC working group structure serves their interests poorly, since university-level education priorities are effectively split between the Education, Culture, Sports, and Media working group and the Science and Technology working group. Although the first group has engaged university leadership

in discussions, its primary focus has been on the public diplomacy component of education exchange and not on education itself. The science working group, meanwhile, is focused on research and development cooperation in areas like nanotechnology and climate science but has little institutional interest in higher education and basic science at universities.

On the surface, the Civil Society working group, which is co-chaired by senior presidential advisers on both sides, should be one of the most targeted and effective of the Commission's components. The United States has a vast and highly developed network of civil society groups working at home and internationally, and Russia has enjoyed a proliferation of similar groups, from effectively none in the Soviet period to more than 240,000 today.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, the working group's mission is arguably central to the entire purpose of the Commission: to foster direct people-to-people contacts on a nongovernmental level so that, over time, the bilateral relationship will become more organic and self-sustaining with less government intervention required.

As working group co-chair and NSC Senior Director for Russia Michael McFaul has suggested, the civil society working group may not be the best forum for broaching the difficult questions of human rights, corruption, and democracy that still divide Russians and Americans, questions that are still fundamental to creating a functional civil society.<sup>87</sup> In part, this is because of the strange pairing of the group's co-chairs: McFaul is well-known in Russia for his strong pro-democracy views and harsh criticism of the Kremlin's slide toward authoritarianism under Vladimir Putin. His Russian counterpart, First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration Vladislav Surkov, is equally well-known for his role building the Kremlin's "power vertical" and tightening control over the economy, media, and civil society. While the parallel U.S.-Russia civil society summits might address topics like anti-corruption and press freedom, it seems unlikely that the working group will identify areas ready for meaningful agreements between the two governments that would result in concrete policy changes. On the other hand, in areas of shared interests such as best practices for regulating international adoption and migration, there is no reason this working group cannot deliver real progress.

Officials involved with the Commission are quick to point out that, whatever the limitations of its overall architecture and individual working groups, the Commission itself has been carefully designed to encourage flexibility and opportunistic cooperation by individual actors in and out of government. The structure of the Commission itself, in other words, should never pose a barrier to cooperation when there is a will to cooperate on both sides. Unlike Gore-Chernomyrdin, officials say, this Commission prioritizes outcomes and is intended to encompass all kinds of innovations in process—videoconferences, direct phone and email communication, and unofficial visits—to facilitate the working groups' goals.

Of course, it's one thing to declare that the BPC working groups should be flexible and quite another thing to implement that flexibility in a bureaucratic environment. In every working group, there are officials who prefer traditional face-to-face meetings, seldom take initiative, and favor appearances over actual results. Indeed, thanks to unique organizational cultures in government and concerns about classified information, some agencies are simply unwilling to use the tools of modern international communication as creatively and extensively as the BPC organizers would like. On the Russian side in particular, the expectation of a summit-type "big show" around working group and Commission meetings is still strong. This proclivity can frustrate the efforts of lower-level action officers to get things done without producing endless agendas and briefing books for senior officials.

Overall, the BPC might best be described as an experiment in "networked diplomacy." The Commission's working group structure itself was designed with the lessons of recent experience in mind. It seeks to avoid the excessive bureaucratization of Gore-Chernomyrdin but also to provide a more robust, enduring structure than the fleeting Bush-Putin Strategic Dialogue had. Whether U.S.-Russia cooperation continues under BPC auspices will certainly continue to depend on whether the presidents and senior officials on both sides pay attention and expend political capital to keep their governments focused. However, cooperation can now also draw upon the new and expanded government-to-government relationships under the BPC's working group framework, as well as nongovernmental partners engaged with the BPC's dozens of separate projects. In the short time it has run so far, this diplomatic experiment appears promising.

# CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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The BPC is by far the most elaborate, comprehensive, and high-profile institution created in the history of U.S.-Soviet and U.S.-Russia bilateral relations. Despite the Commission's early success, and no matter how broad or deep the engagement between Moscow and Washington becomes, there is a real risk that a major crisis like the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq or the 2008 Russia-Georgia war could freeze cooperation on the official level and cause the entire elaborate working group structure to fade and disappear. The Commission organizers recognize this risk. In fact, one of the major purposes of the BPC is to build up personal contacts between U.S. and Russian officials and foster growth in nongovernmental relationships, so that engagement can continue even during a crisis, or can swiftly recover after one. The BPC, in other words, is designed to strengthen the relationship to the point where the formal Commission structure itself is no longer necessary.

Even without a major crisis jarring the bilateral relationship, the BPC will face significant challenges simply delivering the concrete results it has promised. One such challenge is the difficult reality of domestic politics in both countries. Hostility and distrust toward Russia are still widespread among the U.S. Congress and the general public. Witness the bitter debate surrounding the New START ratification process in the Senate: Some opponents of the treaty have argued that Russia is largely irrelevant to U.S. security interests, while others have argued that Russia should still be seen as an untrustworthy adversary.<sup>88</sup> Even supporters of the reset and the president's nuclear agenda disagree among themselves about whether U.S.-Russia engagement is a tacit endorsement of what some have called Moscow's "assaults on universal human values."<sup>89</sup>

On the Russian side, domestic political opposition is a much less salient factor, but the Kremlin itself may not be as willing to engage in meaningful policy change in as broad a range of areas as the seventeen working-group structure suggests. The

significant limitations to progress on civil society and democracy issues have already been noted. In the business community, as well, many believe that what is needed is not increased dialogue between the U.S. and Russian governments, but concrete changes in Russia's regulatory environment, real transparency, and a serious effort to eliminate official corruption, starting at the top. There is widespread skepticism that the BPC's Business and Economic Development working group can make any of these changes happen. A similar argument can be made regarding educational exchanges. While Russia has several world-class universities, there is little about Russia's outdated, underfunded educational system to attract American students who are not already interested in Russia. Consequently, many more Russian students are interested in studying in the United States than the other way around, and there is a limit to what the working group on exchanges can do to create demand where there is none.

On the other hand, to the extent that each of these challenges—democracy, ease of doing business, educational opportunities, and others—is at heart about the Kremlin's desire to change its policies, engaging in a bilateral dialogue on these issues may be the most effective channel for the United States to encourage positive movement. After all, experience has shown that there is little point in trying to strong-arm Russia into reforms that its own leaders do not support; the system will not sustain them, and collapse could produce an even more dangerous backlash. Yet the frequent, direct contacts between Russian and U.S. officials, citizens, and non-governmental groups being facilitated by the Commission offer ongoing opportunities to share experience, best practices, and advice that can eventually help persuade Russia's leaders to experiment with reforms on their own. In fact, given the current leadership's focus on modernization, the working groups should try hard to demonstrate the link between Western economic and technological development and their social and political underpinnings: free expression, the rule of law, protection of property rights, and government accountability.

In every past case of bilateral cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union or Russia, one of the major challenges has been for the leaders on both sides to maintain sufficient oversight of their respective bureaucracies. Indeed, a natural tendency of government agencies is for infighting and short-term interests to distract or obstruct fulfillment of the long-term mission. This can be a particular problem when officials charged with executing the president's directives do not believe that diplomatic activity is part of their portfolio, actively distrust their counterparts, or do not expect to see a direct benefit from the effort required of them. Although the "brute force" approach, namely a president willing to compel subordinates to take action, can be effective, it is simply not realistic for the complex, multi-layered agenda of the U.S.-Russia relationship. And it is certainly not sustainable, as other domestic and international policy priorities and political battles compete for presidential time and attention.

A more common alternative to micromanagement is for the president to delegate oversight of bilateral cooperation to trusted subordinates, who in turn enjoy sufficient access to the president to call in the boss when absolutely necessary. That is the approach the Obama administration has taken with the current Commission. However, senior officials charged with management responsibilities may themselves be subject to policy and political distraction, just like the president, and they must choose carefully which issues to elevate to the Oval Office, especially when opposition comes from those who enjoy good access to the president and a plausible claim to be acting in accordance with White House priorities. Likewise, if a bilateral institution fails to deliver the type of concrete successes initially hoped for, senior officials may back away from taking personal responsibility for its management to avoid being “tainted” by failure, while at the same time making it that much harder to shepherd the bureaucracies toward success. A major test of the current Commission will be not only whether President Obama maintains a high level of attention and interest in the U.S.-Russia relationship, but also whether the BPC’s cabinet- and staff-level Coordinators do as well, and whether they prevail when conflicts inevitably arise with officials pushing other priorities.

Another important mechanism for keeping a bilateral institution like the Commission accountable for producing real outcomes is to make its activities public. The Commission organizers have adopted this tactic by requiring annual reports from the Coordinators—the U.S. Secretary of State and the Russian Foreign Minister—to the presidents, and reports from each working group to the Coordinators at least twice a year.<sup>90</sup> At 51 pages, the Commission’s first joint report in June 2010 was impressive and comprehensive. After just one year, the Commission’s working groups appear to have addressed a tremendous range of promising themes for cooperation and to have already begun the real work of planning, resourcing, and executing joint projects and programs.

Yet there is a risk here as well: having set a precedent that the working groups will produce many pages of accomplishments in a given year, each group is under real pressure not to let up on the pace of reporting progress. Shouldn’t next year’s working group agendas and joint report be longer and denser in order to demonstrate that they are making progress? Not necessarily. Progress is not always possible, for a variety of legitimate reasons. Groups will feel tempted simply to conduct meetings, write joint statements, or fund programs so that they can report on them even in the absence of real accomplishments. Of course, this would defy the flexible, opportunistic spirit of the Commission as described by its organizers, but it might also be an inevitable consequence of engaging disparate players in the bureaucracy who do not necessarily share the organizers’ views.



# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE BPC: FOCUSING ON RESULTS

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The momentum of the 2009 “reset” is still strong, having helped to deliver concrete accomplishments on nuclear security, regional threats, and economic cooperation. However, as both sides approach presidential elections and possible transitions in 2012, senior officials’ attention may wander. While it is by no means perfect, the BPC clearly presents a wide spectrum of opportunities for achieving more concrete progress in the bilateral relationship, and both sides should treat these opportunities as urgent priorities. The following are recommendations for the BPC as a whole, and for individual working groups, to enhance the Commission’s ability to deliver concrete results:

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## INCREASE PRIVATE SECTOR ENGAGEMENT.

The BPC working groups are primarily organized around government-to-government contacts. In some areas, such as military-to-military cooperation, policy coordination, and arms control and international security, this makes sense. But in other areas, like science and technology cooperation, economic development, energy, the environment, and nuclear energy, private sector involvement and leadership are indispensable. By itself, government simply does not have the capacity to handle the kind of exponential growth in contacts and projects that would mark real success in many of the working group areas. Thus BPC working groups and the Commission as a whole should devote special attention to raising their profile with the private sector and securing as much private sector participation in their meetings and initiatives as possible.

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## **INCREASE INPUT FROM LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY.**

While the U.S. president has sole constitutional authority and responsibility to conduct foreign policy (the same is true for the Russian side), federal officials can benefit tremendously by partnering with state and local governments. Indeed, both Washington and Moscow should seek input from local officials who have first-hand knowledge of best practices in areas like poverty eradication, criminal justice, and anti-corruption, as well as how to help small- and medium-sized businesses and take full advantage of local skills and resources.

Moreover, given the BPC's goal of broadening and deepening bilateral contacts outside the usual government-to-government channels, it would make sense to invest in connecting U.S. and Russian state/region and municipal officials directly through conferences, visiting delegations, and videoconferences. Exchanges involving local officials and judges have occurred sporadically since the end of the Cold War, but it would make sense now to adopt a systematic program with regular funding and explicit links to the goals of the BPC working groups.

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## **LEVERAGE WEB AND SOCIAL MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES TO MAKE THE BPC WORKING GROUPS MORE DYNAMIC AND ACCESSIBLE TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC.**

Although the State Department has produced a basic BPC website within the homepage for the Europe and Eurasia Bureau, the site currently does little more than repackage information that official publications have already disseminated.<sup>91</sup> Recently, the site expanded to include a catalogue of BPC-related photos and a form for submitting anonymous feedback. However, these are basic functions that have been available on government websites for more than a decade, and they fail to live up to the BPC's own emphasis on flexibility, opportunism, distributed and networked collaboration, and exploitation of innovative technologies.

The February 2010 Innovation Dialogue, a BPC project, demonstrated how tools like social networking, live-streaming audio/video, and handheld devices could be used to build cooperation among U.S. and Russian stakeholders in a range of fields. These tools should be more fully integrated into the BPC working groups across the board and used to bring opportunities for engagement to the attention of nongovernmental groups and individuals. Critics contend that past bilateral commissions did nothing more than churn out tons of paper. The best response to this charge would be to go totally paperless, transforming working group products into constantly evolving and accessible nodes in a broader network including governmental and nongovernmental participants on both sides.

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## ENHANCE THE FOCUS ON ENERGY EFFICIENCY AND CLEAN ENERGY TECHNOLOGIES.

The BPC currently includes an Energy working group co-chaired by Secretary of Energy Steven Chu and Minister of Energy Sergey Shmatko. Among their areas of focus are energy efficiency, clean energy technologies, and energy security. In practice, however, it has been easier to achieve progress in the last third of the agenda than in the first two. Whereas Russia has much to gain by cooperating on securing global access to its fossil fuel exports, Russian officials are less clear about the potential benefits of increased energy efficiency.

Still, there are positive signs, like the inclusion of clean energy technology research in the goals for the new Skolkovo “city of innovation” outside Moscow. This should be the basis for a concrete program of research cooperation between U.S. and Russian national laboratories and private firms. In addition, a “track 2” initiative bringing together experienced transportation engineers, industry representatives, and government regulators can help generate substantive ideas for joint progress on transportation efficiency. Similar efforts building on promising U.S. and Russian studies in the field should be devoted to developing a robust energy efficiency agenda and generating a list of concrete projects to be undertaken as soon as possible.

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## LOOK BEYOND “HOT BUTTON” DISPUTES TO ADVANCE THE AGRICULTURE WORKING GROUP’S COOPERATIVE AGENDA.

Trade disputes like the ongoing conflict over the Russian importation of U.S. chicken parts or Russia’s August ban on wheat exports can suck much of the cooperative spirit out of the relationship.

However, in the case of the wheat ban, there may be a silver lining: The hot, dry summer weather that damaged Russia’s crops and caused thousands of forest fires in the Moscow region demonstrates a need for increased food security preparedness. The two countries should take this opportunity to share best practices on fire response and recovery. Although it is too late to prevent the fires, the United States should send reforestation experts to assist their Russian colleagues. On food security, the working group should consider an exchange of farmers and food industry experts.

In each of these areas, the U.S. government has invested in substantial research for domestic preparedness purposes. It can offer the benefits of that knowledge to Russia while gathering valuable information about weather-related disaster conditions in the field. An opportunity for U.S. and Russian officials and NGOs to

discuss food security may also provide an opening to identify common ground on nutrition and food safety, offering another, more creative approach to resolving the disputes that have led to U.S.-Russia trade wars in the past.

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#### **USE RECENT EXTREME WEATHER PHENOMENA IN RUSSIA AND THE UNITED STATES AS AN OPENING TO ADDRESS THE CONCRETE IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE ENVIRONMENT WORKING GROUP.**

The working group has so far addressed Arctic and Bering Strait research, wildlife protection, and best practices for hazardous materials cleanup. The future agenda includes further work in these areas. It should be expanded, however, to address concrete environmental challenges in U.S. states and in Russia's regions.

For instance, climate change is the likely cause of recent increased activity by the pine bark beetle. As average winter temperatures rise and more beetle larvae survive, they have damaged huge swaths of forest in Montana and Idaho. Although some Russians view rising winter temperatures as a boon, increases or decreases in insect, plant, or animal populations could make Russia's Siberian forests vulnerable to similar infestations. Melting snow and permafrost can also lead to massive flooding and increases in parasite populations that can infect humans through the water supply.

The recent fires in the Moscow region also presented an acute air quality hazard to the city's residents. That experience may have reminded Russians of the importance of clean air, which could provide an opening for discussions about more effective emissions standards for the Russian transportation fleet and heavy industry.

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#### **INCREASE COOPERATION ON DRUG TREATMENT AND PREVENTION IN ADDITION TO LAW ENFORCEMENT AND INTERDICTION IN THE COUNTERNARCOTICS WORKING GROUP.**

The record on counternarcotics cooperation has been impressive under the BPC working group and prior to it. Preventing drug trafficking is obviously a priority for both countries: U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency and Russian counternarcotics officials have trained together, they routinely share intelligence on drug gangs, and they are increasingly coordinating their strategies for reducing the flow of heroin from Afghanistan through Central Asia to Russia and Europe. These are all very positive developments.

The working group should now turn to upgrading its efforts to connect U.S. and Russian government agencies and NGOs that provide drug abuse treatment and prevention services, especially on a local level. Drug trafficking and addiction have reached crisis levels in the Orenburg region of Russia, on the border with Kazakhstan. This would be a natural place to begin joint efforts based on best practices from border communities in the U.S. Southwest.<sup>92</sup>

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### **INCREASE THE HEALTH WORKING GROUP'S FOCUS ON NON-COMMUNICABLE CHRONIC DISEASES, SUCH AS HEART DISEASE AND DIABETES.**

The Health working group has not yet held a full meeting attended by the co-chairs, Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius and Minister of Health and Social Development Tatyana Golikova, but there has been extensive discussion of HIV/AIDS, including the sharing of best practices from U.S. treatment and prevention clinics, as well as expert meetings focused on maternal and child health. The agenda for the future is focused on promoting healthy lifestyles, which is a key component of reducing chronic, non-communicable diseases like heart disease and diabetes. (Russian society, in particular, is plagued by low male life expectancy linked to unhealthy lifestyles and chronic disease.) The working group needs to focus more attention on this area, leveraging more engagement from the pharmaceutical and medical research communities, where U.S. companies lead the world.

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### **LEVERAGE U.S. AND RUSSIAN EXPERIENCE AND CAPABILITIES TO PROVIDE EFFECTIVE DISASTER RELIEF IN OTHER COUNTRIES.**

The Emergency Situations working group has demonstrated excellent progress on sharing best practices for domestic disaster relief, although there may be much for both sides to learn from the recent Russian fires about how to improve large-scale responses. The group's future agenda already includes improving "operational information exchanges during planned humanitarian and disaster response efforts in third countries." This type of exchange is especially important, given the increasing likelihood of natural disasters due to climate change and the shared concerns of both countries with state failure and governance vacuums that can be exacerbated by humanitarian crises in the developing world. The working group should focus as much of its efforts as possible on addressing not only the humanitarian dimensions

of the recent violence in Kyrgyzstan, but also on developing joint plans in case of a natural disaster compounded by political or sectarian violence in the region.

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**USE THE KREMLIN'S FOCUS ON MODERNIZATION TO STRENGTHEN THE SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY WORKING GROUP'S JOINT EFFORTS ON INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND E-GOVERNMENT.**

As part of Russia's modernization drive, the Kremlin has called for all Russian government agencies to comply with an e-government (information and online services) mandate by 2013. Although this deadline is probably too ambitious, the pace of advances in information technology by Russian government agencies can be substantially increased by sharing best practices with the United States. Likewise, the Innovation Dialogue should continue functioning as a forum for demonstrating to Russia how U.S. businesses benefit from streamlined, electronic communication with consumers and government regulators. This type of e-government initiative can help over time to eliminate the interference of corrupt officials in the provision of government information and services.

# CONCLUSION

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Russia matters. Since the 1950s, each successive U.S. administration has recognized the importance of direct engagement with Moscow, even during periods when the relationship was characterized more by distrust and competition than by cooperation. In the Soviet Union and in Russia, the state has always played a defining role in shaping opportunities for citizens to interact with foreign counterparts. Thus government-to-government structures have long been necessary to support and manage those interactions. Even after the Cold War, when the government's total monopoly on international engagement was broken, the Russian state remained the key player in Russians' interactions with Americans. A flexible, opportunistic, and modern version of the U.S.-Russia bilateral commission remains an essential tool for leaders on both sides to ensure that they do engagement right.

From the 1950s through the 1970s, presidents, secretaries of state, and ambassadors managed U.S.-Soviet bilateral engagement through traditional high-profile summits and often through highly circumscribed diplomatic channels. Yet even during this time, limited direct contacts developed under the auspices of educational and cultural exchange programs with official supervision and sponsorship. By the 1980s, however, a shared agenda based on strategic stability, economic development, the prevention of regional conflicts, and basic human rights facilitated a new type of direct dialogue between senior officials that gave way to more fluid interactions to manage the seismic political, social, and economic upheavals caused by the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union itself.

In the 1990s, the United States committed to an ambitious and expensive program of financial and technological assistance explicitly aimed at remaking Russia as a free market democracy and geopolitical ally. The Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission was a necessary and useful mechanism for U.S. and Russian officials to jointly steward the unprecedented reforms in which both sides had heavily invested

themselves and to forge personal ties between officials at the senior and working levels. However, the endeavor suffered a political backlash from Russians who believed that privatization and “shock therapy” were an American plot to destroy Russia’s economy (borne out, in their view, by the 1998 ruble crisis). There was also a backlash from Americans who resented the high cost of bailing out a longtime adversary. Finally, though the involvement of Vice President Gore and Prime Minister Chernomyrdin guaranteed top-level attention for most of its existence, the Commission was still hampered by the inherent tendencies of bureaucracies to move only when forced to by the calendar, and to orphan unsuccessful programs.

The post-9/11 years of the George W. Bush administration were characterized by a schizophrenic attitude toward Russia. Part of the administration believed that Russia was an important ally in the struggle against the common enemy of global Islamic extremism; the other part believed in a “freedom agenda” that left no room for cooperation with Kremlin autocrats. Early initiatives to structure bilateral engagement through a high-level, closed-door strategic dialogue were promising, and they demonstrated that U.S.-Russia cooperation on shared interests was not merely an optimistic, post-Cold War delusion of the previous Democratic administration. However, by Bush’s second term, turnover among senior officials on both sides and the U.S. focus on Iraq and Afghanistan allowed the strategic dialogue to atrophy into nonexistence.

On the heels of a dark period following Russia’s war with Georgia in 2008, the Obama-Medvedev “reset” and the launch of the Bilateral Presidential Commission in 2009 marked a turning point in U.S.-Russia bilateral engagement. The BPC appears to draw on many of the best and most important features of past institutions, including the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission and the Bush-Putin Strategic Dialogue.

Like Gore-Chernomyrdin, the BPC attracts regular high-level attention, engages senior officials from multiple agencies and offices, with the State Department and the National Security Council playing coordinating roles as needed, and holds working groups accountable for progress through clear reporting requirements and regular publication of updates from the Coordinators. Like the Bush-Putin Strategic Dialogue, the BPC presumes that the United States and Russia share interests across a wide range of security, economic, and technical issues, and that, as major powers, both sides must contribute resources globally to address global challenges. At the same time, the BPC organizers wisely emphasize the need for flexibility in planning meetings and activities, taking advantage of e-mail, videoconferencing, and other new technologies whenever possible, so that cooperation develops fluidly, results come steadily, and success is not held hostage to the calendar of official meetings.

The BPC still faces real obstacles. In many fields, the impediment to enhanced cooperation is not a lack of knowledge or opportunity; it is simply the gap between U.S. and Russian interests, especially when it comes to political or legal reforms

on the Russian side, or activities the Kremlin might perceive as empowering hostile groups. Even if the working groups continue to meet and produce joint work plans and concrete programs, there is a danger that the next crisis for U.S.-Russia relations—be it another spy scandal, a conflict in the post-Soviet space, or a shock to global energy markets—could derail the BPC altogether. If the official framework for government-to-government engagement disappears, the real test will be whether business and nongovernmental groups can pick up the slack. A major electoral change on Capitol Hill could also torpedo joint priorities that require Congressional funding or authorization, or provide a platform for endless partisan sniping and posturing in oversight hearings aimed at uncovering the administration’s “unacceptable concessions” to Russia.

Serious challenges will inevitably arise within the Commission itself, as well. Although the BPC Coordinators and working-level organizers currently enjoy strong support from the White House and top cabinet officials, this could change if new, competing priorities arise. Some leaders may simply set aside their obligations under the BPC, and organizers will have to engage in perilous bureaucratic battles to keep the working groups active and hold onto funding for joint programs. With each successive mid-year and annual report, working group participants will face the inevitable bureaucratic pressure to demonstrate improvement and progress, even when they have not occurred. Over time, this pressure can result in meetings held for their own sake, ever longer fact sheets and reports, and distractions from the Commission’s core purpose: advancing U.S.-Russia cooperation through concrete steps. How the Commission organizers and the working group co-chairs manage relationships with far-flung elements of the bureaucracy will be a major test for the institution in the second year and beyond.

The Obama administration has made it clear that this “reset” in U.S.-Russia relations is not merely a facelift to be followed by business as usual. Coming into office so soon after the relationship’s lowest point in recent history, President Obama and his top advisers seem to recognize that there is still a real risk of a dangerous drift that could damage U.S. and Russian interests. This recognition explains the White House’s focus on concrete results from the reset and the new Commission. Fortunately, the Commission’s first year has been largely successful.

To continue its success, and to deliver the results that both sides hope for, the BPC will demand attention from the very highest levels. But not only must Presidents Obama and Medvedev maintain regular, direct communication with one another, they must also constantly remind their own officials of the importance of the process they have initiated. The Commission Coordinators, organizers, and working group co-chairs should encourage every participant to front-load their investment in the working groups’ agreed agendas and work plans, so that every group can move from the planning stages to concrete programs as quickly as possible.

Naturally, both sides will need to exhibit flexibility and patience, but these attributes should not be treated as excuses to engage in endless discussions and negotiations on sticking points. Officials should simply agree to disagree when necessary and move on to more fruitful agenda items. Lastly, senior officials should do everything they can to empower the groups developing joint programs in nontraditional areas of cooperation such as health, environmental issues, and civil society. Even if they start small, these programs will create indispensable relationships between Americans and Russians and will likely do more than anything else to promote mutual understanding as a foundation for long-term cooperation across the board.

Through more than four decades of bilateral cooperation, Americans and Russians have learned much about one another. The top priorities, format, and personalities of cooperation between Moscow and Washington have evolved from an era of formal agreements and summit pageantry to one of informal phone calls, emails, and videoconferences among government officials at all levels. What has not changed is the need for reliable institutions and mechanisms to serve as a bridge between the Russians and Americans who bear responsibility for the future security and prosperity of two great nations, and whose efforts, as we are often reminded, are instrumental to global peace and security.

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