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The United States and Russia

A companion piece to the article by Ambassador Sergey Batsanov - *Time to Return to the Spirit of Reykjavik (1986)* – featured in AP Insights on 13 October 2016.

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I recently returned from a week in Moscow and read with great interest the *AP Insight* written by Sergey Batsanov, whose views and analysis I much respect.

I came back from Moscow with several impressions:

Russia and the United States are on different courses. The great danger for both is serious mistakes or miscalculations. These could take them down the road to greater conflict even leading to nuclear use. The chances are not high, something south of 1 percent. However, any such chance is not worth taking. Use itself might seem to some to be containable; but one premier analyst of the nuclear equation tells me we must guard against getting started because no one can tell us how to stop!

The good news from Moscow is that all Russians I spoke with were sure that President Putin does not want a war with the United States. President Obama echoes that sentiment emphatically. President-elect Trump also seems to hold that view, and in his recent telephone conversation with President Putin they spoke about the need to improve Russia-US relations.

However the character of the relationship has become more confrontational. Some of Trump's national security appointments reflect a view that Russia bears responsibility for that. The truth is the onus is shared. My diplomatic background leads me to conclude that both sides have done things which give the other real pause.

There are two solid reasons for moving forward– nuclear and non-nuclear - intertwined. The goal should be more stability and security in the relationship and on the globe.

Rehearsing a litany of differences is never very useful. It ends up in an argument that “you are one too”. However, the pinnacle of current differences on the one side rests on NATO expansion against the backdrop of Russian expectations about no troop presence and nuclear weapons in Eastern Europe; withdrawal from the ABM treaty; and interpretations of colour revolutions. On the other side, Crimea, Ukraine and threats and actions in and around and the Baltics are un-nerving. The reason for presenting these points is that some of them show us a path for change.

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Trump has said he seeks change. Hopefully, President Putin is also so inclined. Russia's declining economy and his personal isolation should encourage that.

The next steps will be hard, long-term and require considerable commitment. The great absences now are trust and confidence. The two leaders have much to do to bring their publics along. Propaganda, a revival of Cold War thinking and a disdain for facts and truth make that harder. The restoration of those two key parameters, trust and confidence, ought to form the basis of a strategy of rebuilding.

How can rebuilding begin? The first, post-election exchange has set the stage for a new and revised approach.

Adopting two principles now may be worth thinking about. First, it should be time to shut up in public - if you cannot be constructive, don't say anything. Second, accept the ancient Greek principle for budding physicians: "First, do no harm".

But these passive and unilateral steps, important as they are in conditioning the environment, need some quiet and early reinforcing during the coming year. Here several possibilities come to mind, not all equal. With Iran, reportedly, messages at the highest level played a useful part in improving the environment for future, closer talks. Then, also with Iran, the role of Oman, on good terms with Tehran and Washington, certainly helped. Finally, many in the diplomacy business look at individuals like Dr Henry A Kissinger, who meets with Putin and met recently with Trump, as having the knowledge, wisdom, trust and confidence to carry forward initial contacts.

In the case of Russia, Norway, Indonesia, India, Canada and Finland come to mind as having capacity to serve as intermediaries.

Messages and their content relate to each of the three ways I have set out above and are most important in reaffirming or strengthening person-to-person contacts.

Early messages may help to reassure that certain home truths are accepted, beginning with the unthinkability of engaging in a nuclear exchange, and may lead to steps to guard against that. The next step is the first face-to-face meeting between the two leaders. It should be carefully prepared, seek to avoid miscalculation and accidents, and set reachable and constructive goals.

The early exchanges might serve to concretize an agenda around issues that show early promise – low hanging fruit. But they might also define areas of future agreement in a larger show-window of differences.

The most pressing issue from the US side should be a way of moving ahead on security. This does not have to start at the top level of concern. Maybe fixing differences over INF Treaty compliance, dealing with sea and air contacts between military forces, or a non-proliferation initiative that is built on the basic ideas, explicit in the Iran accords, on uranium enrichment could help.

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Ukraine presents challenges but also opportunities. Closer adherence to the Minsk agreements should be key. Then, since Ukraine began in large part as an economic problem, perhaps a large and focused economic aid program, in which Russia could participate if it wished, to build Ukrainian recovery and critical reform, would be worth pursuing. In return, Kiev would deal firmly with corruption, treat fairly both major language groups and define autonomy for the east. Ukraine should respect its long-standing economic relationship with Russia and its newer one with the West. Politically and economically, Ukraine could be better seen now as a “bridge” nation, staying out of any security arrangements for an agreed period.

The next steps are critical. The opportunity should not be wasted. The working out of the relationship and the rebuilding of it have significance for the future of Russia, the United States and the planet.

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