



# Time for jaw-to-jaw with Moscow

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For the first time since 1943, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has no representative at the Embassy in Moscow. Think of it. USDA had agricultural attaches in the Russian capital during the final decade of Stalin's rule, for the entirety of the Cold War and for three decades after the end of the Soviet Union, but no more. As someone who served at the Moscow Embassy as a political affairs specialist during both the Cold War and afterward, I can testify that our USDA staff performed first-class work of considerable value to the American taxpayer.

The problem is not just agriculture. The United States of America and the Russian Federation are not in communication on almost anything — not just because we are not on speaking terms, but because we have reciprocally eliminated our actual capacities to communicate. Through mutual expulsions of diplomatic staff and other measures, Russia and America are not just in as bad shape for dialogue as in the worst days of the Cold War (I know, I was there) but in even worse shape. Worse than the worst of the Cold War. This is madness, and it is damn dangerous.

I recall the pervasive fear of nuclear war during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 as a middle school student in Oklahoma. I vividly recall even more intense fear while serving in Moscow in 1983, when the two countries nearly blundered into nuclear conflict out of simple ignorance of the other's purposes and intentions. Since then, I have known personal fear many times, but nothing like the dread that my country might die from the sheer inability of the two capitals to speak with each other. There may be reasons to resort to major war (though I cannot think of many), but being oblivious is not one of them. Yet that is where we are now, or very close.

Diplomacy is not about receptions and protocol; it is the vital business of managing international disputes so they do not produce war.

At its core, diplomacy is about listening, often to things you do not like or do not understand. At the moment, Washington and Moscow have jointly eliminated many of the instruments and means of diplomacy between them. Our consulates — three in Russia to listen to the country outside of Moscow — are all shuttered; our ambassadors have gone home for "consultations"; the embassies are on such skeleton staffs that ours in Moscow will no longer process visa requests except in life-threatening circumstances, while we have eliminated all but emergency American Citizen Services.

The protection and welfare of U.S. citizens abroad is the first duty of American diplomacy and a legal requirement, but we now do not provide basic support for the large number of Americans who live and work in Russia.

The fault lies on both sides, although only a fool would not notice that similar reciprocal expulsions of diplomats are underway between Russia and many European governments. The basic reality is that the Russian *derzhava* ("great state") is turning inward on itself and away from much of the outside world, and especially from the West. The deliberate self-isolation of the Russian leadership and their pointless search for autarchy in a globalized world are not our responsibility, nor can we engage Moscow in what we may think are its own best interests. However, the self-interests of the American Republic and its citizens are very much our business, as is our ability as a great power to reflect the interests of our allies and partners.

It is simply stupid to imagine we serve our interests by "punishing" Russia by refusing to communicate with it. The leadership in Moscow does not feel punished; it feels justified and even strengthened.

We cannot wait for Russia to reform — as we may not live that long even without a war — nor expect any gestures on their part that are not equivalent to our own. We are not equal as powers (we never were), but in diplomacy the appearance of equal sovereignty is essential (something Moscow often forgets with its own neighbors, to its cost).

To begin to restore communication means starting at the top, if only because in Russia everything must start at the top; it is not a bottom-up political culture and never will be. That means a summit meeting of the two presidents, and the sooner the better. Putin has already suggested a summit, which the White House is at least considering. The first thing to put aside is the silly notion that if President Biden sits down with his Russian counterpart it will convey approval or even submission to Putin. Silly is not a strong enough word. What is needed is not a face-saving "photo op" between the two leaders, but what the Soviet Communist Party used to refer to as a "frank and comradely exchange of views." Frank because there is no need for pretense about how bad our relations are, but comradely because the world's two major nuclear-weapons states share responsibility for peace at many levels, including the highest.

It has been three years since the disastrous summit at Helsinki of Presidents Trump and Putin, but the disaster was at the press conference after the summit itself. By reliable accounts, the actual meetings of the leaders and their teams went reasonably well. The press conference was a fiasco because it sank into the competing domestic American narratives about Trump's election. That would not happen between Biden and Putin. Yes, Biden does have a long record of gaffes (including since assuming the Presidency); and while listening is never his strong suit, he can be counted on to maintain self-discipline during the public aspects of a summit.

A vital reason for the two men to meet is to allow Putin to reevaluate Biden. The Kremlin propaganda machine portrays the American leader as senile and unfit for his job. This is dangerous because Kremlin occupants often tend to believe their own propaganda. We should not assume they understand us any more than we do them; that is very dangerous. Putin needs to escape his isolation for at least several hours (or a couple of days) for direct encounter with Biden. They both have much to learn.

A genuine face-to-face meeting of Biden and Putin would not repair relations that have spiraled to lower levels than in the Cold War, but it could initiate the start of the resumption of semi-normal contacts. Such a modest aspiration shows just how necessary a summit now is. If President Biden truly believes he and the United States deserve to lead the democracies of the world, then he must lead in engaging Russia. Do not outsource this to Europe. Early in the Cold War, when hardliners advocated no dialogue with Moscow, Winston Churchill advised that "meeting jaw to jaw is better than war." It still is.