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ONCE AND FUTURE PARTNERS?¹

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Experts disagree if the current state of US-Russian relations represents a new Cold War. Most concur, however, that the relationship between Moscow and Washington has deteriorated to a dangerous degree, arguably worse than any period since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. As such, the summit meeting next week in Helsinki between the US and Russian presidents will present a significant opportunity to halt, if not reverse, the downward spiral in relations.

What are the most pressing issues requiring attention and how are they addressed? As the list of problem areas is very long, our assessment is restricted to a number of contentious issues related to arms control and nuclear nonproliferation.

The United States and the Soviet Union were the chief architects of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which this year celebrates its 50th anniversary of the opening for signature. During most of this half century, Washington and Moscow found it in their mutual interests to cooperate in preventing the spread of nuclear weapons to other states. Today, at a time when the NPT is under particular stress, that cooperation is in jeopardy.

Although Russia and the US worked together closely and with other states to negotiate the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran, the recent US decision to disavow the Plan has the potential to stimulate not only the development of an Iranian nuclear weapons capability but also proliferation in other states in the Middle East region.

For the first time in decades, Washington and Moscow are not engaged in bilateral nuclear arms control negotiations, and prospects for their resumption are dim. Moreover, disagreements over compliance, has placed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in jeopardy, and it is uncertain if it will be possible to renew the New START Treaty before its scheduled expiration in less than three years.

¹ The original article has been published in Russian in the Kommersant daily newspaper on July 10, 2018, under the title 'Agenda for Two Presidents', and is available online at <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3681924>.

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Russia and the US would appear to have convergent interests in preventing all forms of nuclear terrorism. In fact, historically, they often cooperated in with respect to enhancing nuclear security and even co-chaired the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism. This cooperation, however, has diminished in recent years, and jeopardizes past achievements at a time when new forms of nuclear terrorism, including those involving cyber, are emerging.

Finally, although the immediate risk of military confrontation on the Korean Peninsula appears to have receded, denuclearization in the region is at best a distant goal, and significant dangers of miscalculation and conflict continue to jeopardize international peace and security.

All of these nuclear proliferation challenges require US-Russian cooperation at least of the kind that occurred during the Cold War. The Helsinki Summit could be the first step in that direction if it leads the leadership in both countries to better appreciate their shared interests in strengthening the NPT, promoting nuclear arms control and strategic stability, and combatting nuclear terrorism. While it is important for heads of state to meet on a regular basis, it is equally vital for senior representatives from the US and Russian defense, foreign ministry, and energy establishments to meet routinely as was the case in the not too distant past. One potential framework for such meetings is the reincarnation in a new form and under a new umbrella of suspended US-Russian Presidential Commission Working Groups, including those devoted to “Nuclear Energy and Nuclear Security”, “Arms Control and International Security”, and “Counterterrorism”. Resumption of their routine work, if necessary, under revised headings and with an adjusted scope of coverage, would be useful in its own right, and might help past partners in nonproliferation recall their habits of cooperation.