



U.S.-Russia Relations

Trust and Decision Making in the Twenty-First Century

a resource for high school and community college educators

Prepared by
The Davis Center for Russian and
Eurasian Studies
at Harvard University

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This curriculum module is one of a series of topical resources created on a variety of historical, political, and sociocultural themes relating to Russia and Eurasia. In order to access additional modules and multimedia content, please visit the Davis Center website at <http://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/outreach>.

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Introduction and Approach

Relations between the United States and Russia are in a period of heightened tension, making it all the more significant for students of history, current events, and international relations to understand the dynamic between these two world powers. This set of video resources uses the lens of trust and trust-building to examine the U.S.-Russia bilateral relationship in the post-Cold War era. The videos feature members of the [Working Group on the Future of U.S.-Russia Relations](#), a group of experts from leading Russian and American institutions coordinated by Harvard's Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies and the National Research University—Higher School of Economics in Moscow, Russia.

When engaging with these resources, students will be prompted to consider the following questions and dilemmas:

- *How can trust be defined in the context of post-Cold War U.S.-Russia relations?*
- *Is trust necessary for cooperation to occur between nations?*
- *Is trust possible in current contexts between these nations?*
 - *If so, how might trust be built or rebuilt in future U.S.-Russia relations?*
 - *What conditions make trust possible?*

Each video includes perspectives from American and Russian experts. In the accompanying viewing guides, students are asked to 1) restate the positions they hear and voice their own reactions; 2) reflect on the underlying values and circumstances that inform these positions; and 3) reflect on possibilities for reconciliation between these positions.

The relationship between trust, cooperation, risk, and power is central to questions about U.S.-Russia relations past, present, and future. To prompt student thinking about strategic decision making, this sequence also includes a game theory activity in which mathematician Benjamin Allen encourages further reflection on the relationship between trust and cooperation.

Background and Readings

Lasting roughly from the end of World War II in 1945 to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union was marked by extreme political and military tension. The 1990s saw a more cooperative, if unbalanced, relationship during which the Russian Federation struggled to transition to a market economy and a democratic system. Despite the influence of U.S.-driven reforms and monetary aid to Russia, the new asymmetry of power in the bilateral relationship, combined with Russia's political turmoil and ongoing economic crises, created fertile ground for tension and misunderstanding. In 2014, Russia's annexation of the Crimean peninsula and its encouragement of pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine heightened these tensions further, raising questions about the prospects for potential U.S.-Russian cooperation in the future.

Are Russia and the United States now adversaries? Can the two countries overcome the lack of trust between them—and must they do so for the sake of geopolitical stability? How do interpretations of the post-Cold War period influence our understanding of U.S.-Russia relations today? In our globalized world, Russia and the United States could do much together to counter common threats; but must the two countries “trust” each other to work together? What does trust between countries look like, anyway?

The Working Group on the Future of U.S.-Russia Relations has published [several joint reports](#), and its members have [written extensively](#) on the bilateral relationship. These materials can help students explore these questions before or after watching the videos. Several are highlighted below:

[Stepping Past the Cold War's Shadow](#) (Alexandra Vacroux, 2012)

This short article outlines perspectives characteristic of post-Cold War U.S.-Russia relations. Why might notions of the United States and Russia as part of a “zero-sum” game, in which victory for one nation signifies loss for the other, persist and how might they be overcome?

[U.S.-Russia Relations in Post-Soviet Eurasia: Transcending the Zero-Sum Game](#)

(Samuel Charap and Mikhail Troitsky, 2011)

This paper examines in greater depth how the dynamics between the United States and Russia can be identified and transformed. During the Cold War, the two superpowers saw their struggle as a “zero-sum game.” Have we returned to zero-sum thinking, or can we imagine cooperation despite tensions? The sources and solutions described here are building blocks for thinking about how trust-building and cooperation might happen.

[Russia-Ukraine Conflict 101](#)

This *Huffington Post* summary of a talk by Matthew Rojansky provides a useful overview of an urgent issue in present U.S.-Russia relations. For a longer reflection on Cold War dynamics and the Russia-Ukraine conflict, see [“Consequences of a New Cold War.”](#) by Samuel Charap and Jeremy Shapiro.

Video 1: What is trust?

This opening video invites students to consider how trust is defined in the context of international relations. There are many possible points of entry to this critical question. One option is to ask students to think about how they understand trust in their own lives. How do they know when they trust a person or institution? Once someone has betrayed their trust, is it possible to gain it back? If so, how? If they were asked to work on an issue of importance with a group or individual they did not trust, would they do it? Why or why not? Alternatively, students could begin with the Prisoner's Dilemma activity included in the video resources.

When viewing Video 1, students will need to know the following terms:

- Bilateral relationship: The relationship between two nations, as opposed to “multilateral relationship,” which involves a greater number of countries.
- Rhetoric: Language that is used to persuade or impress the intended audience, and that may be perceived as insincere.
- Joint military exercises: Military training exercises orchestrated by two branches of one country's armed services or by two different nations' armed services.
- Costly measures/costly signalling: Behavior that requires sacrifice or other significant “costs,” such as demonstrating risk or vulnerability, and that shows commitment to a relationship or a course of action.

Teachers may wish to pause the video after each speaker's remarks to allow students time to record their observations for the given segment.

Video 1: Viewing Guide

State, in your own words, how each of the following speakers defines trust:

Speaker 1: Yoshiko Herrera

What *distinction* does she make when defining trust? What does she think trust *is* and what does she think trust *is not*?)

Speaker 2: Fyodor Lukyanov

Speaker 3: Dmitry Suslov

According to him, what *three factors* are necessary for trust to be present?

What similarities and differences do you notice in how these speakers define trust? Which of these definitions corresponds most closely to how you understand trust? Is trust between countries the same as trust between people? What are the differences?

State, in your own words, whether each of these speakers believes trust is necessary for cooperation.

Speaker 1: Yoshiko Herrera

According to her, how does trust enable leaders to cooperate?

Speaker 2: Samuel Charap

He distinguishes between cooperation on different kinds of issues. What is the distinction he is making here?

State, in your own words, what each speaker says is necessary to build trust in the future.

Speaker 1: Dmitry Suslov

Speaker 2: Yoshiko Herrera

What does *one side* need to do first in order to build trust?

Speaker 3: Samuel Charap

He *distinguishes* two levels at which trust can be built between nations. What is that distinction? What *two factors* does he name that might build trust?

What differences or similarities do you see between their statements? Whose perspective emphasizes the role of action by **one side**? Whose perspective emphasizes the role of actions taken by **both sides**? Whose perspective emphasizes the role of **outside events or context**? How do you think individuals or nations with different perspectives might work together to build trust or cooperation?

Video 2: Where are we and how did we get here?

This video invites students to consider the context for current levels of trust and future trust-building. The interviewees discuss what they believe to be the current state of U.S.-Russia relations and its origins. **Before or after viewing, students can be asked to consider how the past, and differing perspectives on the past, influence future opportunities to build trust or engage in cooperation.** Prior to viewing, ask students to recall a time when their understanding of past events differed from someone else's. What contributed to this difference and what was its effect? How did it make them feel about the other person and their relationship to them? They might also be asked to read "[Stepping Past the Cold War's Shadow](#)" to consider different perspectives on the legacy of the Cold War and the years following.

When viewing Video 2, students will need to know the following terms:

- *Post-Soviet space*: The non-Russian regions that were previously part of the Soviet Union. Includes now-independent nations such as Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan (fifteen in total).
- *Territorial integrity*: The idea under international law that one country should not seize territory from another country, or support secessionist movements within that country. (A secessionist movement is when a group of people within a particular region want to break away from the rest of the country and the ruling government. e.g. the Confederacy in the South during the U.S. Civil War.)
- *Norms of behavior*: Informal rules that guide how people or groups of people interact.
- *Costly measures/costly signalling*: Behavior that requires sacrifice or other significant "costs," such as demonstrating risk or vulnerability, and that shows commitment to a relationship or a course of action.

Video 2: Viewing Guide

State, in your own words, how each speaker describes the current state of U.S.-Russia relations.

What do they see as characterizing or contributing to the current state of this relationship? How do they describe the effects of the Cold War and the years following it?

Speaker 1: Dmitry Suslov

He describes very different perspectives on the Ukrainian conflict. What is Russia's view of Ukraine? What is the United States' view of Russia's intervention in Ukraine?

Speaker 2: Fyodor Lukyanov

Why are current tensions between the United States and Russia different (and riskier) than during the Cold War?

Speaker 3: Samuel Charap

How do the "ghosts of the Cold War" affect today's bilateral relationship? Why might both sides feel that they have been "betrayed" after the Cold War?

Speaker 4: Yoshiko Herrera

How did Mikhail Gorbachev build trust? And how has bilateral trust eroded?

What similarities and differences do you notice in their statements? What do you think might be the sources of those differences?

How do you think perspectives on the Cold War might impact future cooperation and trust-building measures?

Video 3: What tools can be used at this point?

This video evaluates different tools of international relations that might be employed, given the current low level of trust between the United States and Russia. Prior to viewing, students can be asked to brainstorm the different types of responses that nations might employ when in conflict or when attempting to reframe their relationship. Which tactics do students think might be the most effective or appropriate and why?

When viewing Video 3, students will need to know the following terms:

- **Sanctions:** Economic restrictions placed on one country by another nation or nations for perceived bad behavior. They may come in the form of limitations on trade, travel, or other economic activities.

Extension or Background Reading

[“Why Sanctions on Russia will Backfire”](#) (Samuel Charap and Bernard Sucher, *New York Times*, 2015).

Video 3: Viewing Guide

State, in your own words, how each speaker evaluates strategies of *diplomacy* and *isolation*. What is the cost of trying to isolate a country? Who pays the price?

Speaker 1: Yoshiko Herrera

*She gives arguments both **for** and **against** different forms isolation. What are they?*

Speaker 2: Samuel Charap

*He explains that the relationship between the United States and Russia has **not** been characterized by isolation. How so?*

Speaker 3: Dmitry Suslov

He says there is “no alternative to diplomacy.” What reasons does he give for this?

State, in your own words, what each speaker thinks about *economic sanctions*.

Speaker 1: Yoshiko Herrera

What does she say about *why* sanctions are imposed and their impact on *trust building*?

Speaker 2: Dmitry Suslov

What *two effects* of sanctions does he describe?

Based on these statements, what are **your** thoughts on the use of diplomacy, isolation, and sanctions in U.S.-Russia relations?

Video 4: What is the role of individual leaders in building trust?

International relations involves the relationships between nations over many decades or even centuries. What role do the personalities of individual leaders play in these relationships and what are the implications for trust building? In this video, speakers discuss the role of U.S. and Russian leaders in general, as well as reflect on the specific role of the heads of state in each nation today. Before or after viewing this video, students can be invited to consider the different roles they believe heads of state, other government officials, as well as private citizens (e.g. students, artists, or business people), play in building trust between nations.

Extension and Background Readings

[“Debunked: Why There Won’t Be Another Cold War”](#) (Matthew Rojansky and Rachel S. Saltzman, 2015)

This article argues that “what distinguishes the contemporary situation from the conflict that governed the second half of the twentieth century—and the reason this cannot be called a New Cold War—is the profound difference in **interpersonal relations**.”

Video 4: Viewing Guide

What do each of the speakers say about the role of leaders in building trust? How has the relationship between the United States and Russia been affected by the personalities of Bush, Obama, Putin and Medvedev?

Speaker 1: Yoshiko Herrera

How does she define “trustworthiness” and what is its relationship to trust building between nations?

Speaker 2: Fyodor Lukyanov

Speaker 3: Samuel Charap

What is the “test case” that he references and how might it illuminate the role of leaders in building or damaging trust?

Speaker 4: Dmitry Suslov

He references “objective” and “subjective” explanations for the relationship between President Obama and President Putin. What are these? How does he describe Putin’s perception of American leaders? How does he describe American leaders’ perception of Putin?

After viewing these statements, what do you think are some of the most significant ways that leaders impact U.S.-Russia relations and trust building? What limitations do leaders have in building or damaging trust? What other factors support or mitigate their influence?

Videos 5 & 6:

Trust and arms control

Prisoner's Dilemma activity

In Video One, students heard four definitions of trust in the context of U.S.-Russia relations. Now focusing more on the dynamic of these nations as nuclear-equipped powers, Dmitry Suslov states, “You cannot trust the country [...] that you observe through the prism of a rifle.” The Prisoner’s Dilemma activity, explained in Video Five by mathematician Benjamin Allen, is to prompt student thinking about the questions of trust and cooperation that play out when two nations or individuals must consider taking a short-term risk to promote longer term mutual gains.

The original Prisoner’s Dilemma game puts players in the place of two criminals who are arrested and are each given the choice to either remain silent or to reduce their own prison sentences by betraying the other. Their options are as follows:

- If A and B each betray the other, each of them will serve 2 years in prison
- If A betrays B but B remains silent, A will be set free and B will serve 3 years in prison (and vice versa)
- If A and B both remain silent, both of them will only serve 1 year in prison (on the lesser charge)

Though there is incentive for each to pursue their own self-interest by betraying the other, the result is a greater reward for the group if they risk cooperating and remain silent. This model has been applied to the Cold War dynamic in which nations had the option to arm or disarm nuclear weapons. The greater reward is for both sides to disarm, and eliminate the need to maintain stockpiles of weapons, but if one side disarms alone, it will be vulnerable. The short activity has students repeat the choice to arm several times, reflecting on how their decisions play out in the context of their own and their partner’s actions over time.

Students can be asked to view Dmitry Suslov’s statement on trust and arms control before or after taking part in this activity.

When viewing these videos, students will need to know the following terms:

- ***Arms Control***: The regulation of weapons, including nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. It can involve diplomatic negotiations and international agreements about the development, proliferation, and reductions of weapons.
- ***Nuclear Deterrence***: The strategy of accumulating nuclear weapons to deter enemy attack by demonstrating the ability to retaliate.

When debriefing they can be asked to consider:

- *What does Suslov mean when he says that nuclear deterrence excludes trust from the very beginning?*
- *How does he differentiate between building trust and managing mistrust?*
- *When reducing or managing weapons capabilities, what possibilities do you see for cooperation or trust?*
 - *Is cooperation possible without trust or vice versa?*

After taking part in the Prisoner's Dilemma activity, students can be asked to consider:

- *What did you and your partner take into consideration when deciding whether or not to disarm?*
- *In later rounds of the game, did past behavior influence your choices? How did this impact your ability to trust or cooperate with your partner?*
- *How did your own experiences making these decisions inform your thinking about the choices that nations make when deciding whether to trust each other, or whether to cooperate in the absence of trust?*