

The U.S.-Russian Diplomatic Dance: Is It Too Late to Stop the Music?

By [James F. Schumaker](#)

September 04, 2017



Anton Novoderezhkin / TASS

On Aug. 31, the U.S. State Department announced that it was ordering the [closure](#) of the Russian Consulate General in San Francisco and two other annexes, an act designed to respond to the Russian reduction of 755 staffers at U.S. missions in Russia.

Heather Nauert, the State Department spokesperson, said that this action was taken "in the spirit of parity invoked by the Russians." The Russian Foreign Ministry has thus far kept its counsel, [noting](#) only that "Moscow will closely study the new measures announced by the U.S., after which we will announce our reaction."

In making its position known, the State Department expressed the hope that this would end the matter and "avoid further retaliatory actions by both sides." Unfortunately, it will do anything but, and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov seemed to confirm this when he recently [told](#) students at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations that "it takes

two to tango."

We need a timeout so both Russians and Americans can go to their respective corners and consider what might happen next. Americans and Russians have been involved in a cycle of retaliation for close to a year, a series of tit-for-tat expulsions sparked by Russia's attempted intervention in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. As the level of retaliation has increased, each side has sought to up the ante, and only dug itself deeper into a negative cycle that will end badly for both parties.

The latest U.S. action is a case in point. Closing down a Russian Consulate General, while not expelling additional Russian diplomats, may seem like a way to end the cycle of retaliation — but only to those who do not know diplomatic history. In fact, by closing San Francisco, the U.S. has conducted a further escalation that will most likely lead to a very harsh Russian response.

"We need a timeout so both Russians and Americans can go to their respective corners and consider what might happen next."

Here's the history that the State Department, and evidently, President Donald Trump, has ignored. The Russian Consulate General in San Francisco and U.S. Consulate General in Leningrad were established in the early 1970s, a process that was formalized in an agreement between General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev and President Richard Nixon in June 1973.

The process of negotiations to open the Consulates, which took place in the middle of the Cold War, was an enormous achievement. It flowed directly from the arduous negotiation of the 1964 U.S.-U.S.S.R. Consular Convention, and years of work thereafter by diplomats on both sides. As a result, these two Consulates are inextricably linked in terms of reciprocity.

Given this history, what do you think the logical Russian response would be to the closure of its Consulate General in San Francisco? One guess only.

I do not know what the Russian government will decide, but I find myself in the curious position of hoping for moderation from Moscow, as none is forthcoming from Washington.

Russia's new Ambassador to the U.S., Anatoly Antonov, has [said](#) that "we need to sort this out calmly, very calmly and act in a professional manner...we don't need any hysterical outbursts." I couldn't agree more. It's time to stop the music.

.....
.....

James F. Schumaker is a retired Foreign Service Officer, who served as a Bilateral Affairs Officer on the State Department's Soviet Desk (1981-85) and as Deputy Principal Officer in Leningrad (1985-87).

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/09/04/the-us-russian-diplomatic-dance-is-it-too-late-to-stop-the-music-a58838>