The Albritton Center for Grand Strategy and the Scowcroft Institute of International Affairs hosted the “Russia Policy under the Next U.S. President” conference to discuss policy concerns the next administration must address regarding Russia and their place in the world. Over a day and a half, several insights were presented regarding Russia, its relations with the United States, and possible responses the next administration could make. The conference began on October 15, 2019 with Dr. Evelyn Farkas, a Senior Fellow with the German Marshall Fund and a national security contributor with NBC/MSNBC.

Farkas’s main point in her talk was that Russia should be viewed as a geopolitical threat and that Vladimir Putin has one objective: to stay in power. She argued that Putin and other Russian officials do not want nor believe in the liberal international order established by the United States after World War II and want to see a return to nineteenth century balance of power where autocracies are unchallenged and the great powers call the shots in the world. She cited examples like Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008, the invasion of Crimea in 2014, causing instability in eastern Ukraine, interfering in both European and American elections, and assisting autocratic regimes like Syria and Venezuela to demonstrate Putin’s drive to both strengthen his status in the world and weaken that of the liberal West.

Until a more pragmatic government comes about in Russia, according to Farkas, the United States must stand firm. Her policy recommendations for the next administration would be the following:

- keep providing support to the Ukrainian government,
- prepare Bosnia for NATO membership,
- encourage NATO members to live up to their promise of setting aside two percent of their GDPs for military spending,
- increase cyber and information operations,
- deepen and broaden sanctions on Russia,
- increase media funding dedicated to anti-corruption, and
- continue outreach to the Russian people in their quest to increase their rights.

On October 16, the first expert panel session, “Eurasianism, nationalism, and the Third Rome: Is Russia’s strategy based on ideology?” included panelists Stephen Lee Meyers, a national security correspondent with the New York Times,
Carol Saivetz, a Senior Advisor with the MIT Security Studies Program, and Brian Taylor, Professor of Political Science at the Maxwell School-Syracuse University with moderator, Amb. Larry Napper, a Professor of Practice at the Bush School. Each speaker found common ground on the topic while still providing their own specific perspective.

Steven Lee Myers argued that Putin has a lack of ideology and it is not at the center of his politics. This has been a main feature throughout his life. For example, his father was a member of the Communist Party and his mother was Orthodox Christian. While Putin eventually became both, he did not seem enthralled with either. What drives Putin more than anything else, according to Myers, is the idea of restoring the Russian state. It has often been cited that Putin believes that the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the twentieth century was the fall of the Soviet Union. Many people argue that Putin wants to restore the old Soviet Union but that is not the case, Meyers said. Putin sees himself as a ‘protector’ of the Russian people, and he is very cognizant of the segments of ethnic Russians living in post-Soviet Union countries.

Carol Saivetz focused on what drives Russia’s foreign policy. In her view, it is a blend of Eurasianism and Orthodoxy. There is an attitude that the Russian people hold supremacy over those in the former USSR and that a type of ‘Russian exceptionalism’ exists. She notes that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was a tremendous psychological blow to the Russian people. There remain constant reminders of their loss of world status and a motivation to seek revenge against the perpetrator (i.e. the United States). According to Saivetz, Putin’s foreign policy can best be described by three goals: establishing a buffer zone in Europe, preventing NATO expansion, and preventing the spread of the European Union’s influence.

Brian Taylor sees Putin as the ultimate pragmatist. To properly analyze him, it is important to understand that the man is driven not by ideology but by a code. The code includes anti-Americanism, a suspicion of the West, resentfulness for how Russia was treated by the United States after the Cold War, and a country driven by statism-being a strong state internally and a great power externally. Putin’s “New World Order,” according to Taylor, is not the creation of a “New Rome” but a recreation of Yalta from World War II with the ‘Big Three’ now being the United States, Russia, and China. Taylor notes that Russia is certainly “punching above its weight,” so to speak, given the great power status they are trying to achieve while having less than two percent of the world’s population and a GDP comparable to that of the state of New York.

Each panelist was asked what their recommendations would be to the next administration based on their talks. Myers believes that we need to better understand the consequences of the actions we take in Europe as they relate to
Russia. Saivetz argues our response should be based on pragmatism and forming a policy that pursues our national interest but is more sensitive to Russia’s fear of insecurity. Taylor believes in a more transactional foreign policy with Russia and not to create a new bold attempt of a ‘reset with Russia’ or ‘neo-containment.’

The second panel session, “Nuclear Weapons, Conventional Inferiority, and Influence Operations: What future for the U.S.-Russia security relationship?” included speakers Doug Bandow, a Senior Fellow with the CATO Institute, Ulrich Kuhn with the Arms Control and Emerging Technologies Program at the University of Hamburg, and Anya Loukianova Fink, a research analyst with the Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland. Dr. Jasen Castillo, CGS Academic Director and Associate Professor at the Bush School, served as moderator for the panel discussion.

Doug Bandow views U.S.-Russia relations through the lens of a libertarian perspective but still sees Russia as a country America must address prudently. He stated that Russian foreign policy is assertive, aggressive, and confrontational, but limited with a main goal of preventing American world domination. In regards to nuclear weapons, Bandow believes that when they are combined with a country’s determination to achieve greatness, it turns out to be a bad combination.

Ulrich Kuhn focused on three main points: the United States is back in a Cold War with Russia, the INF crisis has the potential to continue straining relations with European allies, and the West’s relationship with Russia holds significant potential but structural constraints prevent near to mid-term changes. He argued that tensions have risen to Cold War levels between the U.S. and Russia there is an unwillingness to talk with each other, emphasis on deterrence, oversized military exercises, and significant nuclear rhetoric. However, Kuhn noted, this is not the same Cold War of the twentieth century. There are no large scale conventional forces in Eastern Europe, and, unlike the days of the Cold War, the United States is no longer the undisputed leader of the West. He also believes that the INF crisis will deepen. Europe is split on security issues. Eastern Europe sees Russia as its main threat, Western Europe believe the Russians are not as frightening as they were decades before and South Europe is concerned about Islamic terrorism. Thirdly, Kuhn believes there is potential for strengthened relations between the U.S. and Russia but a couple of assumptions must be made first. One, the twenty-first century is a multi-polar system with Russia being one of the great powers and there is potential for the European Union to be a great power, too. Second, the great power competition between Russia and China will continue.

Anya Fink described the relationship between the United States and Russia as “competitive, adversarial, and cooperative.” She said that the United States saw the bilateral relationship with Russia decline following the invasion of Crimea and
the 2016 presidential election. Russia, on the other hand, saw the relationship decline well before that, demonstrating how differently the two nations view the relationship with one another. Fink believes that the bottom line to understanding Russia is to understand that they want respect. The Russian military is engaged in the worst case scenario mindset, and Americans should care about this because it is the military that helps shape what is presented to Putin when he makes policy recommendations. Fink believes that we do not have a strategy to manage the relationship with Russia effectively, and if we are not careful, there could end up being a China-Russia entente against the United States.

Some interesting recommendations came from this panel. Bandow believes that America must do a better job taking into account how the Russians perceive us. He argues that both sides must try to settle, accommodate, and learn how to live with each other for the sake of peace. Kuhn states that Western allies must do a better job asserting confidence against Russia and that there is a choice between America taking care of Europe or the Europeans taking care of themselves. Finally, Fink makes the following points for the next presidential administration: consider retrenchment and focusing on internal affairs, work on making good negotiations with Russia, and understand that sometimes it is good to be deterred.

The third panel, moderated by Prof. Andrew Natsios, Director of the Scowcroft Institute and Professor of Practice at the Bush School, focused on the topic “Between globalization and autarky: Where are the foundations of Russia’s political economy?” Panelists included Agnia Grigas, a Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council and the McKinnon Center for Global Affairs, Christopher Miller, Assistant Professor at the Fletcher School at Tufts University, and Paul Gregory, Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.

Agnia Grigas spoke on Russia’s use of natural gas as an instrument of foreign policy. Her newest book, *The New Geopolitics of Natural Gas*, explores Russia’s reliance on oil and natural gas and links America’s shale gas revolution to both a massive global transformation of energy markets and the resurgence of great power conflict. In her presentation, Grigas denied the claim that Russia is a declining energy superpower; instead, she pointed to ambitious pipeline plans, such as Nord Stream 2 and Turk Stream, as well as Russia’s cessation of natural gas to Ukraine in November 2015.

Christopher Miller characterized the Russian political economy with “three S’s”: Stagnation, Stability, and Security. With respect to stagnation, Miller discussed declining demographics and the little foreign investment in the Russian economy. In terms of stability, he noted that Russian average incomes have declined steadily over the previous six years without public revolt. Lastly, Miller
noted that Russia’s security is seen in the increases in military spending; today, Russian spending is almost as high as the United States.

Paul Gregory spoke on Putin’s motivations and our lack of understanding of the Russian political system. He emphasized the critical role of the Russian oligarchy and the overarching historical concerns of Russian regime survival. Echoing some of the comments made by Miller regarding stability and support, Gregory noted that we do not understand how the Russian people would go about removing Putin if such an event were to come to pass.

The panel concluded with a discussion of the uncertainty of domestic support for Russian president Putin. In particular, Miller and Natsios discussed the inaccuracy of polling data and the measures the Russian government has taken to artificially raise President Putin’s approval ratings by changing the questions ask to citizens. The overarching theme of the panel was the need for a thorough understanding of Russian history while simultaneously having an understanding of the uncertainty of Russian domestic politics.