

POLICY BRIEFS FROM

**RUSSIA POLICY
UNDER THE NEXT
U.S. PRESIDENT**

Conference on Oct. 15 - 16, 2019

**SCOWCROFT
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The
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TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY 

**“Russia Policy Under the Next U.S. President”
October 15-16, 2019**

In the United States, a presidential election kicks into full swing after Labor Day. With party conventions in the rearview mirror, and with the summer winding down, the candidates begin campaigning in earnest. On the stump, in interviews, and during debates, they outline their policy positions on a wide-range of issues, including national security. This year, President Trump and his challenger, former Vice-President Joe Biden, have focused on the challenges posed by the pandemic, the struggling economy, protests over police shootings and the disorder that has accompanied them.


A perennial issue facing presidents is American policy towards Russia. Specifically, the next President will need to address some recent Russian moves: interference in our elections, intervention in Syria, support for Taliban attacks against U.S. forces in Afghanistan, assistance to insurgents in Ukraine, and difficult negotiations over a new START Treaty.

With these challenges in mind, the Albritton Center for Grand Strategy and the Scowcroft Institute of International Affairs at the Bush School of Government and Public Service hosted a conference last fall that asked experts to advise the next U.S. president on Russia policy. The gathering provided a forum for practitioners, journalists, and scholars to outline the issues they believed will shape the future relationship between the United States and Russia. We organized the conference around three panels that addressed the following questions:

- What drives Russian foreign policy?
- What is the future for the U.S.-Russia security relationship?
- What are the foundations of Russia’s economy?

After the conference, we asked our panelists to provide a summary of their comments and the subsequent discussion. This volume collects the answers to these questions from our experts. As we disseminate this volume throughout the policy community, our aim is to contribute to the debate about what course the next U.S. president should take on the country’s Russia policy.


Jasen Castillo
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John Schuessler
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National Security Correspondent, *The New York Times*

Vladimir Putin grew up during “a period of relative peace, rising prosperity and scientific accomplishment.” By the time he came to power, however, Russia was in a period of chaotic transition after the end of the Cold War. During these years, Putin grew to be a pragmatist. He believes that the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the twentieth century was the fall of the Soviet Union, and sees himself as a “protector” of the Russian people. Cognizant of the ethnic Russians living in post-Soviet Union countries, Putin is able to act as a “mirror”—allowing others to see what they wish—by effectively wielding various ideologies at the same time. Through reference to historical Russian institutions, the goal of restoring the Russian state to the glory of days past appears to drive his pragmatic decisions.

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Carol R. Saivetz
Senior Advisor, MIT Security Studies Program

The dissolution of the Soviet Union was a tremendous psychological blow to the Russian people and the lingering anti-American and West sentiment fuels Putin’s two major foreign policy goals: demonstrate geopolitical strength; and addressing internal weakness. Establishing a buffer zone in Europe, preventing NATO expansion, and thwarting the spread of the European Union’s influence all support the first. Yet these efforts challenge both the West and the liberal international order and combatting them should be a top priority for the U.S. government. Despite Putin’s seeming affinity for a kind of “perpetual geopolitics,” he has genuine fear of popular discontent caused by things like economic stagnation and his foreign policy goals reflect a desire to address these issues, as well. The United States should counter Russia by ensuring elections are secure from Russian interference, strengthen commitments to NATO, and continue to find areas of genuine agreement between the two nations.

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Brian D. Taylor
Professor of Political Science, Syracuse University Maxwell School

Vladimir Putin is the ultimate pragmatist. To properly analyze him, it is important to understand that he is driven not by ideology, but by a four-fold code: anti-Americanism; suspicion of the West at large; deep-seeded resentment for Russia’s treatment after the Cold War; and the desire to be a strong state internally and a great power externally. Putin’s pursuit of a “New World Order” is not to create a “New Rome,” but rather to replicate Yalta with the “Big Three” - U.S.,

Russia, and China. Despite the historically tumultuous relationship between the United States and Russia, it is possible to do some of what Russia wants in isolated subject areas such as arms control, climate change, and Arctic issues. Above all, the United States should continue to pursue meaningful engagement with the Russian people themselves through whatever means possible.

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Doug Bandow
Senior Fellow, CATO Institute

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Ulrich Kühn
Arms Control and Emerging Technologies Program, University of Hamburg

The United States has fallen back into a Cold War paradigm with Russia. However, this is not the Cold War of the 20th century as there are no large-scale Russian conventional forces in Eastern Europe, and the United States is no longer the undisputed leader of the international order. Further, sustaining America's current foreign policy toward Russia is challenged in two ways: the INF crisis, which has the potential to further strain relations with European allies; and the emergence of China as a major global power. The U.S. has the potential to strengthen relations with Russia, thereby strengthening its own position, but it must take a number of tricky steps, such as continuing nuclear treaties and encouraging European allies to spend wisely on their own defense. America's actions, more than its rhetoric, will grow the trust needed to improve relations with Russia.

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Olga Oliker
Program Director for Europe and Central Asia, International Crisis Group

The belief in deterrence, primarily nuclear deterrence, as a security strategy has faded in the United States in the 21st century. Younger generations question the relevance of both deterrence as a theory and nuclear weapons themselves. This carries significant consequences for relations between the U.S. and Russia, notably, the possibility of misreading signals sent by both sides.

For instance, if conflict due to miscalculation were to break out between the United States and Russia, the U.S. may attribute the cause to a Russian war of choice, despite the fact that Russian strategy does not provide for wars of choice with the United States. Two potential paths for the United States vis-a-vis Russia seem possible with renewed study of neglected fields. First, the United States could retrench and focus on domestic issues in order to avoid the potential for international conflicts; however, U.S.’ “red lines” must be clarified. Second, the United States may choose to actively deter Russia in Europe; this approach, while carrying significant risk of escalation, is possible through clear communication.

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Chris Miller

Assistant Professor, Fletcher School at Tufts University

The relationship between Russia and the United States sharply declined in 2014 with the crisis in Ukraine. Presently, both sides claim the other is losing. Russia sees the U.S. continued rebalance toward China and the election of Donald Trump as evidence the U.S. is an overextended power. For its part, the United States is quick to highlight present struggles in the Russian political economy, which can be characterized by three Ss: stagnation, (in)stability, and (in)security. Declining demographics, little foreign investment in the Russian economy, steadily declining Russian incomes for six years running, and military spending that is almost as high as that of the United States, mark Russia’s contemporary economy and society. Since both sides can impose significant costs on the other, the United States should utilize allies, limit foreign interference in domestic U.S. politics, evaluate tradeoffs on the global stage, and work to achieve—and not just limit - Russia’s goals, cooperating where it can.

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Paul Gregory

Research Fellow, Hoover Institution

Vladimir Putin will likely remain in power after what is supposed to be his final term in 2024. It is therefore important that Americans understand the critical role of the Russian oligarchy and the historically-derived concerns about regime survival. The Putin Russian regime perpetuates the 100 year-old notion that the United States and her allies will forever try to relegate Russia to the status of a second-tier power. While the removal of Vladimir Putin from office might seem the best option to improve relations, this is a rash judgement for two reasons. First, the United States could not possibly predict a sustainable response of the Russian people. Second, Putin has kept a lid on regional rebellion as with his brutal response to Chechnya crisis, and has engaged in forms of “lessor terror” to forestall the rise of dissidents.

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Andrew Natsios

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Bush School of Government and Public Service, Texas A&M University

Putin's Russia is not simply a strategic competitor of the United States. It is an adversary, albeit a weak one, which threatens America and its allies in Europe through its rapidly rearming military and use of asymmetrical warfare. This concluding essay shows how much of an outlier state Russia has become and why; reviews the ideology of Putin and the oligarchy which runs Russia under him; and suggests a policy for the United States to deal with the threat in the future.

Contributor Biographies

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Eurasianism, Nationalism, and the Third Rome: Is Russia's Strategy Based on Ideology?

The (Weak) Roots of Putin's Ideology

Stephen Lee Myers

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In September 2019, Moscow held an election for its regional legislature, or city Duma. The pro-Kremlin political party known as United Russia has dominated the legislature for years, as it has on the national level, but the party's reputation has become so toxic among liberal-minded Muscovites that its candidates all chose to run as independents, rather than under their own banner. The reason is that party, created in 2001 at the inception of President Vladimir Putin's reign over Russia, today articulates no agenda, no platform, no ideology to speak of. It is bereft of any meaningful ideas except the one that matters most: supporting the Russia leader. United Russia lost a third of its seats, but the "independents" still clung to a majority, almost certainly because the most the Kremlin's most prominent political opponents were barred from the ballot.¹

The election reflected a fundamental, and often misunderstood, aspect of Putin's rule, and that is the absence of a political ideology that guides Putin, at home or abroad. Putin is not like his predecessors who lead the Soviet Union, which for seven decades, offered a system of governance and economic organization starkly at odds with democracy and capitalism. For all of Putin's efforts to disparage the West and the United States in particular, he does not, for example, present an alternative to capitalism, which has taken firm root in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. He does not even oppose democracy (thus the elections that were just held), though the Kremlin has so manipulated the process of holding them that democratic competition has been all but eliminated. Broadly speaking, the Russian people see themselves as part of a larger European continent, oriented culturally toward Europe, even if they embrace the Russia nation – or the Russian soul – as an island unto itself.

There is no question Putin has in recent years positioned himself as a bulwark against the domination of the West. His harsh criticism of Europe and the United States has made him a champion of many inside and outside Russia's borders, even in the places he has targeted. Putin's barbs have found especially fertile ground on the far right, whose adherents complain that liberal democracies have few answers for the most pressing challenges in the world today. Putinism, however, offers no more answers than they do to those challenges. Russia may have reemerged as a revisionist power and a major adversary of the United States, as defined by the Pentagon and the National Security Strategy, but it has not done so because it offers a political vision ideologically at odds with it. To the extent that Putin stands for anything, he stands for the preservation of the political system that he has built over 20 years in power.² There are cracks emerging in his power but few signs that he will be significantly threatened before 2024, when he reaches the constitutionally mandated end of his current presidential term. Understanding

¹ Andrew Osborn and Gabrielle Tétrault-Farber, "Russia's ruling party loses a third of seats in Moscow election after protests," Reuters, Sept. 9, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-election-moscow/russias-ruling-party-loses-a-third-of-seats-in-moscow-election-after-protests-ria-idUSKCN1VU0DF>.

² The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C.: The White House, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

Putin's quest for self-preservation before and after 2024, more than any ideological motivation, is the key to developing a policy to govern relations with a more assertive Russian government.

The roots of Putin's world view

Putin once described himself as "an utterly successful production of the patriotic education of a Soviet man."³ Born in Leningrad in 1952, a year before Stalin's death, he came of age during what was arguably the Soviet Union's heyday, a period of relative peace, rising prosperity and scientific accomplishment, including putting the first man in space. Although he was probably being ironic about his education, Putin was nurtured on propaganda that portrayed the Soviet Union as a resounding success but then, like so many Russians, watched it all unravel. His father was a Communist Party member, even a party steward at the train factory in Leningrad where he worked after World War II. His mother was an Orthodox believer, who later told him that she baptized him as an infant, though secretly because of the state's repression of religion. Putin, by all accounts, evinced little interest in either faith: secular or spiritual. He was a misfit in elementary school, delaying his acceptance into the party's youth league, the Pioneers, and only found his passion in sambo, a Soviet martial art, and then judo. He joined the Communist Party because it was a prerequisite of his calling as a teenager: joining the KGB. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, he simply put his membership card in a drawer, as disillusioned as millions of others at the failures of the socialist workers' paradise.

Back in his hometown, by now renamed St. Petersburg, he stumbled into a job working for one of the most prominent democrats of the newly independent Russia, Anatoly Sobchak, very likely on his last assignment for the KGB, but he showed no more enthusiasm for the democratic ideals and practices then blossoming. On the contrary, he came to view those with suspicion, especially the checks and balances of democratic government. As Sobchak's deputy he was embroiled in legislative disputes and subjected to legislative inquiries for abuse of power and corruption. His disdain of the democratic process only hardened when Sobchak lost his reelection campaign in 1996, leaving Putin out of work. Putin was, in short, never an ideologue, never a revolutionary. He was never even a politician himself until, having relocated to Moscow, he was elevated to the office of the presidency by Russia's first democratically elected leader, Boris Yeltsin. He campaigned for office for the first time in 2000 as an incumbent, with all the administrative resources of the Kremlin.

Two prominent Putin biographers, Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, noted that Putin rose to power at a time when the country was in search for a national identity after the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁴ There were panels commissioned, papers written, fierce debates waged. What did it mean to be Russia after 70 years of authoritarian Communist rule? To be Russian? A lot of ideas emerged, and a lot of them were old ones that the Soviets had suppressed. Russia as a democracy, finally opening itself to Europe, as Peter the Great had envisioned three centuries before. Others were based in the revival of Christianity, anchored by the Russian Orthodox Church. In the first years after the Soviet collapse, Russia's comfortable place in a newly democratizing world seemed within reach. Russia signed up for the Council of Europe (from

³ Vladimir Putin, *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia's President Vladimir Putin* (New York: Public Affairs, 2000), 42.

⁴ Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), <https://www.brookings.edu/book/mr-putin-new-and-expanded/>.

which it was suspended after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 until being restored in 2019). As a candidate in 2000, Putin himself mused in a BBC interview with David Frost that Russia could one day join NATO.⁵ The Communist Party still existed, pining for the restoration of the Soviet Union, but so did liberal parties in the middle and nationalist ones on the right. Russia, like Putin, was a blank page, ideologically. What filled in the empty space was, more and more, the man himself.

From his first days in office as Boris Yeltsin's prime minister, Putin committed himself to the restoration of the state, which he believed was dangerously to collapse. He moved to crush the separatist movement in Chechnya, and did so indiscriminately, and he reined in regional governors and powerful oligarchs who had openly defied Yeltsin's Kremlin. He blamed the political, economic and criminal disorder of the 1990's on the chaotic transition to democracy, believing that the whims of voters and the corruption of campaigns amounted to little more than mob rule – hence the personal sting he felt over Sobchak's defeat. The primacy of state authority – the need for the firm hand to guide politics, the economy and the people, is what came to define Putinism. And the people, battered by a decade of hardship that was underappreciated in the West, more or less accepted the new paradigm Putin offered, especially since it coincided with an era of economic stability and growth. Still, the Putin's tactics – the brutal execution of the war in Chechnya, the creeping restrictions on political opponents, the crackdown on the private business empires in favor, we would later learn of old comrades and cronies from the KGB – all raised concerns. It was only then that Putin's advisers and supporters began to search in earnest for the political ideology – or at least the slogans – that would rationalize the actions that he was taking. In some ways, that process is still underway.

In 2003, during his first term, Putin famously referred to the collapse of the Soviet Union as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe” of the 20th century. Setting aside the exaggeration of the claim, given the tolls of the two world wars, his statement has been widely misunderstood. He was not lamenting the loss of the Soviet Union, nor pining for its return. Instead, he was noting the fact that the collapse of the Soviet Union left 25 million Russians living outside the new Russian Federation – especially in Ukraine, Kazakhstan and the three Baltic nations, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia – through no choice of their own. In the same speech in 2003, Putin referred to Ivan Ilyin, a White Russian political philosopher who fled the Bolshevik Revolution and excoriated its ideology from exile for the rest of his life. Ilyin was a fierce champion of Russian patriotism and Orthodoxy, while arguing that the law and private property, not collectivism, should be the foundation of the Russian Orthodox nation. He romanticized a Russian leader who would emerge from the Soviet darkness and be “a living source of cheer and joy,” a man whose “very name sounds like victory.”⁶

Putin is a student of history, though how deeply read into Ilyin's works is unknown. He did, as president, orchestrate the reinternment of the man's remains in Russia, along with other Russians. That has led many, including the Central Intelligence Agency, to scour Ilyin's writings for clues to Putin's frame of mind. Others have done the same with living writings, including globe-trotting nationalists like Aleksandr Dugin, whose ideological views are attributed to Putin,

⁵ BBC Breakfast with Frost, “Interview with Vladimir Putin,” March 5, 2000, retrieved from http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/static/audio_video/programmes/breakfast_with_frost/transcripts/putin5.mar.txt.

⁶ Steven Lee Myers, *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Vintage Books, 2016), 279.

despite a dearth of evidence that he has embraced their views, or even met them. On the contrary. During Putin's first two terms as president, from 2000 to 2008, Putin was careful to contain outbreaks of nationalism in Russia, which often took shape in neo-Nazi and anti-Semitic violence. Russia is a multinational, multi-confessional society, and Putin understands that stoking ethnonationalism would be as dangerous in Russia as it was in Yugoslavia in the 1990's.

The Evolution of Putin's world view

Even so, Putin's views, or at least his rhetoric, appeared to shift significantly when he returned a second time to the presidency after a four-year interregnum in which he served as prime minister. Putin's displacement of his own handpicked successor, Dmitri Medvedev, was widely criticized, and he needed a new rallying cry. He began then to refer more frequently to core cultural and civilizational values that, implicitly, Russia represented. His embrace of the Orthodox Church became more pronounced, and the bureaucracy responded to the mood from the top with a variety of measures, including the prosecution of the punk art group, "Pussy Riot," for a brief musical protest in Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral. The State Duma, a mere rubber stamp of the executive, adopted new laws prohibiting the dissemination of homosexual "propaganda." Putin began to denounce the West as decadent, even morally bankrupt. His views, echoed on state television and amplified on the internet, made him a champion of conservatives in Europe and the United States – and on the radical, racist fringes of the far right. This became especially pronounced after the annexation of Crimea and the consequent sanctions from the United States, then led by Barack Obama. One of his most prominent cheerleaders in criticizing Obama at the time was Donald Trump. Putin's outspoken opposition to the United States as a global hegemon imposing its will on the world order fell on willing ears across the ideology spectrum.

"The so-called liberal idea has outlived its purpose," Putin said in an interview with *The Financial Times* ahead of the Group of 20 summit in Osaka in 2019.⁷ "Some elements of the liberal idea, such as multiculturalism, are no longer tolerable." He singled out the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, and the migration crisis in Europe and declared that "the core interests of the population should be considered." Putin, of course, rarely allows the Russian population much say in what the country's core interests are, and that is essential to understanding his "ideology." Putin is simply trolling the German chancellor, undercutting her standing, or trying to, by pointing to the controversies her policy decisions have generated. He does the same on social issues, not because he feels strongly about them – on the question of homosexuality, for example, he has elsewhere said people should be able to love as they choose – but because he is able to stoke the divisions in democratic societies. The goal, as was shown in the Russian interference in the 2016 American election, was to create what Alina Polyakova of Brookings has called "a concert of chaos." The Kremlin's propaganda apparatus aims to disrupt democracy as much as it aims to advance Russia's political system as an alternative model of governance.

Similarly, while Putin's remarks suggest he would happily lead an anti-globalization crusade, he is in fact committed to preserving the institutions of the multinational global order, especially the United Nations, because that would be the best check against unilateralist

⁷ Lionel Barber, Henry Foy, and Alex Barker, "Vladimir Putin says liberalism has 'become obsolete,'" *The Financial Times*, June 27, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/670039ec-98f3-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36>.

American power. Like the Chinese, he would simply prefer to have the United States knocked out of its privileged position as the sole arbiter of the global order. Putin is, in fact, too pragmatic and too cynical to be an ideologue. In his interview with *The Financial Times*, he went on to say, “purely liberal or purely traditional ideas have never existed.” He argued for a diversity of ideas, rather than the imposition of one set of values over the other.

Putin undoubtedly believes that he is defending Russia’s interests. It is fair to say that he is increasingly motivated by what a Russian novelist, Vasily Aksyonov, called “a Russian messianic future” in his novel *The Island of Crimea*, but the path to it traverses through more practical concerns. Those include the business interests of his family, friends and allies, many of whom have profited enormously from his rule. Putin treats ideology history like a smorgasbord, sampling here and there depending on his mood and the political moment. It is not that he lacks any ideology, but that he is able to wield many ideologies to effective political use. His views have evolved and could easily shift again. One of his early political advisers once described him as a “zero,” a cypher or mirror, in whom we see what we want.

Russia and the West: Advice to the President

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Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia disappeared as a central focus of US foreign policy decision-making. In the 1990s, although US-Russian relations seemingly flourished, Moscow was clearly the lesser power. And then in 2000, Vladimir Putin became president, determined to restore what he saw as Russia's rightful position in the world. His policies are designed to chip away at the power of the West and to ensure that Moscow is a power to be reckoned with. In 2014, Russia invaded and then annexed Crimea and fomented a war in the Donbas. A year later, President Putin sent Russian troops to Syria to protect the regime of Bashar al Assad. And then in 2016, Russia interfered in the US election—according to some to weaken Hillary Clinton and to others to ensure that Donald Trump be elected president. There is no question that Putin's policies have been successful.

Russia's challenge to the West and to the liberal international order should be a top priority for the US government. This is a difficult challenge because Russia is resorting to non-traditional means to confront the West. In the words of Robert Person of West Point, Russia's policy is one of "asymmetric subtractive balancing."¹ In short, Putin understands that Russia for now cannot confront the US directly. Instead, Moscow must implement policies that weaken the US and make the pursuit of our objectives more expensive for us. US policy must focus on this threat, but first must understand the drivers of Russia's and Putin's policies in order to craft effective strategies. This policy memo will provide some historical background and then analyze these drivers of foreign policy. It will conclude with policy prescriptions for whoever is elected in November 2020.

Background

Many scholarly and popular analyses attribute Russian foreign policy choices to Russia's uniqueness, whether size or geographic location. Both Eurasianism and Orthodoxy seem to build on this sense of distinctiveness. There is no exact definition of Eurasianism—it seems to include ideas of the organic unity of the Eurasian landmass, economic autarky, and a fundamental contradiction between Russia and the West. Importantly, this view means that Ukraine, as an independent entity, makes no sense.

A second pillar of Russia's uniqueness is the centrality of the Orthodox Church. According to Alicija Curanovic, Patriarch Kirill repeatedly praises Russia for being among the few states in the world that base their foreign policy on moral values.² Perhaps most important for this discussion of the drivers of Russian foreign policy is the Church's claim that Russia is predestined to be guardian of the global balance.³ On the one hand, this prophesies a major role

¹ Robert Person, "Gray Zone Tactics as Asymmetric Balancing," Paper presented at the 2018 American Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Boston, MA, 2018, https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/0e5eb0_85217a615a624d4fada62f24b4d4d172.pdf.

² Alicija Curanovic, "Russia's Mission in the World The Perspective of the Russian Orthodox Church," *Problems of Post-Communism* 66, no. 4 (2019): 257-258.

³ Curanovic, "Russia's Mission in the World The Perspective of the Russian Orthodox Church," 259.

for Russia in world politics; on the other, it is unclear whether this refers to acting as a mediator between/among or a balancer against other powers.

Especially if it is latter, then we must consider the role of NATO expansion in Russia's thinking and in Moscow's reaction to events in Ukraine. There are vast numbers of works representing multiple positions as to whether or not the West should have expanded NATO or whether the EU should have implemented the Eastern Partnership.⁴ Some argue that the enlargement of NATO triggered everything that followed; still others contend that no promise regarding NATO expansion was ever offered to Boris Yeltsin. Both sides would agree, however, that the Soviet collapse exacerbated feelings of insecurity and humiliation.

Thus, the context for understanding what propels Russian policy is a blend of exceptionalism—maybe messianism—and a sense of grudge against the West. The next section will lay out in more detail the driving forces of Moscow's foreign policy.

The Drivers of Russian Foreign Policy

Arguably the fundamental driver of Moscow's policies is the quest to regain great power status, lost when the Soviet Union collapsed. As was mentioned above, feelings of insecurity and humiliation were a direct result of the disintegration of the USSR, and these views were reflected in public opinion polling. For example, a 2002 poll conducted by the Levada Center revealed that only 42 percent of respondents felt that Russia was a great power; 68 percent agreed that Russia had *lost* its role in the world as a great power.⁵ According to Blema Steinberg, "There is no more humiliating experience than to have one's relative lack of power, in relation to another, continually rubbed in one's face."⁶

Redressing this humiliation is integral to the restoration of status. Stephen Kotkin, writing in *Foreign Affairs*, argued that Russia, keenly aware of its inherent weaknesses, has always punched above its weight. In Kotkin's view, this leads to a kind of "perpetual geopolitics," that is a chipping away at the status of others as Moscow constantly plays geopolitical games.⁷ In the twenty-first century, those games are being played with military (invasion of Crimea) and non-kinetic tools, usually referred to as hybrid warfare.

Some people have argued that what Russia is looking for is a "new" concert of Europe, or Yalta 2.0.⁸ The late Yevgeny Primakov (both foreign minister and prime minister under Boris Yeltsin) envisioned a multipolar world. With more powers, Russia would be more equal, if not *coequal*, and would have a say in and set the rules for the global order.

⁴ See for example, James Goldgeier, "Promises Made, Promises Broken? What Yeltsin Was Told About NATO in 1993 and Why it Matters" *War on the Rocks*, July 11, 2016; Joshua Shiffrin, "Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion," *International Security* 40, no. 4 (2016); John Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (2014).

⁵ Poll taken in May 2002. Available at www.levada.ru.

⁶ Blema Steinberg, "Psychoanalytical Concepts in International Politics: The Role of Shame and Humiliation," *International Review of Psychoanalysis* 18, no. 1 (1991): 65-85.

⁷ Stephen Kotkin, "Russia's Perpetual Geopolitics," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 3 (2016).

⁸ Aaron Kowera, "Putin's Goal is a New Yalta," Atlantic Council, December 5, 2015, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putin-s-goal-is-a-new-yalta/>.

A second driver of Moscow's policies is the perceived need for a buffer between Russia and the West. As noted above, from Putin's perspective, NATO expansion—especially to the states of the former Soviet Union—damages that buffer. For many years, Putin urged the Baltic states to join the EU, but not NATO. At some point, though, he began to conflate the two organizations. It is difficult to understand where the exact threat to Russia lies. In 2014, Ukrainian citizens were not seeking NATO membership. It would seem that the only possible military threat at the time could have been the loss of the naval base at Sevastopol should the post-Yanukovich government pursue closer ties with the West. The current NATO posture of rotating forces in northern Europe does not pose a military threat to Russia either.⁹ Therefore, it is a figurative not literal threat presented by NATO expansion: Russia's loss of status. Putin wants the US and the West more generally to "acquiesce to a 'grand bargain' on the international order that is more favorable to Russia's status aspirations."¹⁰

The Eastern Partnership represents an interesting dilemma of perception: Is the threat to Russia Europe's rules and institutions? Or is it the attractiveness of the West? Russia's attempts to balance against the EU particularly in the form of the Eurasian Economic Union have failed. It is not a post-Soviet EU; but, rather it is a Russia-dominated organization that is much weaker without Ukraine.

The third driver of Russia's policy is Vladimir Putin's "fear of people power." In the time that Putin has been president, there have been any number of so-called color revolutions beginning with events in Georgia in 2003. The ones however that have had the greatest impact were the Arab Spring of 2011, the demonstrations in Moscow and other cities to protest rigged Duma elections in late 2011, and finally the Maidan (Ukraine) in 2013-2014. In the Arab Spring and Maidan, people took to the streets to overthrow corrupt, authoritarian regimes. Libya was perhaps the turning point. It was after the NATO intervention that Putin swore there would be no more Western-led "regime changes." Indeed, he saw then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's backing for the demonstrators in Moscow as US support for "regime change" in Russia itself. Those two episodes particularly framed the Russian reaction to Maidan: people power forced Viktor Yanukovich from power and Putin feared the loss of Ukraine to the West. In the Syrian case, protests against the brutality of the Assad regime severely weakened Assad's hold on power to the extent that Russia intervened in September 2015 to prevent yet another "regime change." One can also argue that Putin's fear of the people extends to the whole idea of liberalism as we understand it. In an interview with the *Financial Times*, the Russian President said: "The liberal idea has become obsolete. It has come into conflict with the interests of the overwhelming majority of the population."¹¹

By March 2020, Putin will have been in power for twenty years. During that time—even as Russia's enduring interests remained the same—the actual policies changed. In the early years, Putin made the best of a weak hand. If at first he sought to work with the US, his tactics

⁹ See the Rand Corporation study, "Assessing the Conventional Force Imbalance in Europe," RR 2402, 2018, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2402.html.

¹⁰ Andrej Krikovic, "Russia's Challenge: A Declining Power's Quest for Status," PONARS Eurasia, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/russia-challenge-declining-power-quest-status>.

¹¹ Lionel Barber, Henry Foy, and Alex Barker, "Vladimir Putin says liberalism has 'become obsolete,'" *The Financial Times*, June 27, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/670039ec-98f3-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36>.

changed after his return to power in 2012. Since then, and despite sanctions, Russia has regained some relative power vis-à-vis the US. In his speech to the Federal Assembly in February 2019 he stated: “Russia will be forced to create and deploy weapons that can be used not only in the areas we are directly threatened from, but also in areas that contain decision-making centres for the missile systems threatening us.”¹² Putin is signaling that the Kremlin will move to protect what he sees as Moscow’s core interests, whether at home or abroad.

How long Russia and Putin can maintain these policies is an open question. There is no question that if Russia is to become a *true* great power, it needs to modernize. Instead what we’ve seen is the same corrupt practices as before and the continuing reliance on oil and gas exports. Simultaneously, Russia has sought both long-term and short-term allies to balance against the West.

The population is wary of Putin’s foreign adventures and over the past year there has been an increasing number of demonstrations to protest the stagnation of the Putin era. A recent Russian study of public opinion noted that “Continuing stagnation in the economy and lower incomes have undermined confidence in the regime, and foreign policy mobilization and propaganda no longer compensate for the ‘economic negative.’” Similarly, Levada Center polling data indicate that 51 percent of those asked said that Russia should end its Syrian adventure.¹³ The persisting weaknesses of the Russian economy and polity and lack of clarity about what happens when Putin’s presidential term ends in 2024 all portend that Putin will continue his and Russia’s policy of “asymmetric balancing.”

Policy Prescriptions

We should note that recent Russian successes may well be ephemeral. One might argue that they are the result of splinters in the Western alliance (possibly helped along by Russia) and by the unorthodox policies pursued by the current US administration. Either way, Russia and its president Vladimir Putin are currently emboldened. Therefore, future US administrations must understand that Russia’s policies are driven as much by weakness as by strength. Washington must match the strength, even as it is careful not to exacerbate Russia’s self-perceived humiliation and weaknesses.

Specifically, Washington and other Western powers should ensure that elections are secure. This entails strengthening cyber security in municipalities around the country and pressuring the social media companies to block Russian trolling operations. Policies should also include ensuring that Russian money does not make its way into any electoral cycle. Importantly, it should be made clear to Russia that any interference will merit more sanctions and retaliation.

The US should also make clear its commitment to NATO. Russia would like nothing better than to sow divisions within the alliance. Yes, burden sharing is an issue; but, any

¹² Vladimir Putin, “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly,” February 20, 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/messages/59863>.

¹³ Harley Balzer, “Public Opinion Paradoxes? Russians are Increasingly Dubious About the Costs of Putin’s Foreign Policies,” PONARS Eurasia, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/public-opinion-paradoxes-russians-increasingly-dubious-costs-putins-foreign-policies>.

imbalances in contributions should not be allowed to sunder the organization. By the same token, further enlargement into the former-Soviet zone should not be considered at this time. Both Ukraine and Georgia currently have association agreements with the EU; but NATO membership should be deferred. This is not because their joining the alliance would threaten Russia militarily, but as was argued above it would further exacerbate Russia's sense of humiliation and loss of status. That does not mean that the US and the EU should refrain from aiding both countries as they attempt to root out corruption and disrupt corrupt networks that are the legacy of the Soviet Union.

On the positive side, the US should work to find issues on which we and the Russians can agree. One such issue is arms control. At the least, the new START treaty should be extended even as Moscow and Washington attempt to work out their differences. Indeed, Putin has indicated that Russia supports an extension. The Trump administration proposals to bring China into the treaty only complicate the problem. If an agreement can be negotiated, it could potentially present a stepping off point for other—however small—areas of understanding.

In the final analysis, while the US counters Russia's "asymmetric subtractive balancing," it must also seek a framework that allows disagreements to remain controlled and controllable. The challenge is building an architecture of US-Russian relations that prevents disagreements from getting out of hand. With Russia emboldened, that is more difficult than it might have been prior to 2016.

One last note: we don't know whether or not President Putin will leave office in 2024. There are three scenarios. Will he amend the constitution so he can stay in power? Will he step aside with his fortune and anoint a successor? Or will he pursue the so-called union-state with Belarus? Russia has enduring interests. We don't know how they would be pursued by a different president. Putin is very vested in the bravado that "Russia is back!" There is always the possibility that a new president might implement a modernization program to benefit the population. More likely and if Stephen Kotkin is correct, Russia is doomed to those perpetual geopolitics and thus "symmetric subtractive balancing."

US-Russia Relations in the Era of High Putinism

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Two decades into Vladimir Putin's rule as leader of Russia, US-Russian relations waver between abysmal and merely poor. US sanctions enacted after the Russian annexation of Crimea and military incursion into Eastern Ukraine remain in place more than five years later. Russia's interference in the 2016 US presidential election completely poisoned the relationship for many American political elites and led to further sanctions. The bi-lateral arms control regime is collapsing, with only the New START Treaty still (barely) hanging on. These are only the most prominent and consequential differences in a long list of US-Russia disagreements. This policy memo argues that the poor state of US-Russian relations is unlikely to change as long as Putin rules Russia. The person elected US president in 2020 should have modest expectations for the relationship and prioritize key national security challenges that require engagement with Russia.

The Blame Game

Who is to blame for the poor state of US-Russian relations? Both sides tend to completely blame the other. As American Russia expert Robert Legvold has observed, this is reminiscent of the Cold War, even if in other respects the current situation is markedly different. When asked in October 2007 what mistakes Russia had made in its relations with the West, the only thing Putin could come up with was that "we trusted you too much. You interpreted our trust as weakness and you exploited that."

There doesn't seem to be much evidence that Putin ever trusted the US too much, but several steps taken by the United States since the end of the Cold War certainly did harm US-Russia relations. From the Russian point of view, policies like the 2001 withdrawal from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the policy of NATO expansion, threatened its national security interests.

Putin's objections to US policies towards Russia and the post-Soviet region goes well beyond these issues, however. More fundamentally, Putin seems to believe that there is an aggressive American campaign to weaken and undermine Russia from within. He has said that the US was backing Chechen terrorists in the North Caucasus and claimed that the US sponsored Russian opposition movements and protests. One of his closest political allies, Security Council head Nikolay Patrushev, has claimed that the US is trying to overthrow Putin's government and "dismember our country." Similarly, Putin and his close associates have accused the US of causing the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, the 2014 Ukrainian revolution, and other mass protests around the region. He has labelled the Internet a "CIA project." He and his spokesman implied that leaked documents about offshore accounts – the so-called "Panama Papers" – was also a US-directed scheme; one of his close friends was among those whose suspicious financial flows of over two billion dollars was identified in the reporting.

Putin's suspicion of potential meddling by the West and his conviction that the US is out to get him has decisively shaped Russian foreign policy.¹ One of Putin's greatest priorities as

¹ The discussion of Putin's foreign policy outlook in this memo draws on my book *The Code of Putinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

ruler has been the strengthening of Russian “sovereignty.” His fear of Russian vulnerability to American interference led to the expulsion of the US Agency for International Development (AID) in 2012, the adoption of a law that same year that requires non-governmental organizations (NGOs) receiving foreign money and engaged in “political activity” to register as “foreign agents,” and another law in 2015 authorizing the shutdown of “undesirable” foreign organizations. Although the Russian internet has remained largely free so far, the 2019 “sovereign internet” law has Russian democrats concerned that the state is moving towards greater online control.

This conviction that Russia is a “besieged fortress” threatened by an aggressive West led by the United States has helped stimulate a more active foreign policy approach, especially since Putin’s return to the Kremlin in 2012. Although most Western observers would characterize Russian foreign policy as aggressive, pointing to the annexation of Crimea, the sponsorship of armed rebellion in Eastern Ukraine, the military intervention in Syria, the use of a nerve agent in an assassination attempt in the United Kingdom, and the systematic interference in the 2016 US presidential election, Putin and his associates believe these policies are justified responses to aggressive American efforts to weaken Russia and undermine its position in Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

What Putin Wants

Putin’s preferred vision a new US-Russia relationship would involve three commitments from the United States that would be difficult for any US president to give: a great power arrangement to determine a new international order; a Russian sphere of influence in the former-Soviet space; and a commitment to not interfere in Russian internal politics. Perhaps none of those three commitments sound unreasonable on their face, but unpacking what these commitments would mean from Putin’s point of view shows what they would cost.

Specifically, the type of international order that Russia and China would favor would mean dispensing with the support for democracy and human rights that is central to American foreign policy identity (if not always foreign policy practice). Second, recognition of a Russian sphere of influence in its neighborhood would deny the governments and people of smaller states the right to choose their own foreign policy orientation. There is a reasonable case to be made both for not taking on commitments the US cannot uphold, and for not needlessly antagonizing Russia, but there is also no need to actively encourage Russian imperial ambitions toward its neighbors. Third, a non-interference commitment would mean something very different to American and Russian leaders. The US would be hoping to avoid a repeat of the 2016 electoral interference carried out by Russia. Russia, on the other hand, would define “non-interference” much more broadly, expecting a commitment by the US to refrain from promoting democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, including support for NGOs working in this sphere.

A Minimalist Agenda for US-Russia Relations

Given the mentality of Putin, which is widely shared by the central members of his team, what would it take to build a more cooperative US-Russia relationship? A wholesale improvement is out of the question, unless the US gives up on long-standing foreign policy commitments. There are some distinct realms, however, where some progress can be made that

mutually benefits both countries. This more limited agenda should occupy the Russia portfolio of a new American administration.

The clear and obvious priority should be nuclear arms control, for two reasons. First, this is the area where Russia matches the US in power, despite its faltering economy, and where the US has the most to gain – most dramatically, lowering the risk of nuclear war. Second, the entire architecture of bilateral arms control is in danger of collapsing. The US withdrew from the ABM Treaty in 2001, and then the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019, having accused Russia for years of violating the Treaty.² The one remaining bilateral nuclear treaty, New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty), is set to expire in February 2021 unless extended. In December 2019 Putin again stated Russia’s interest in such an extension. The next US administration should embrace this goal. Treaty extension will require some detailed discussions, but the first step is the political decision to keep nuclear arms control alive. Extending New START will keep in place numerical limits and verification procedures that have served US interests by reducing the costs and security risks of an unconstrained arms race.

Other areas for meaningful US-Russia cooperation – or at least meaningful dialogue -- going forward include a range of fundamental security challenges for the US, including climate change, counter-terrorism, space, and the Arctic. The trick for the next US administration will be to try to isolate discussions and potential progress in these areas from the ups and downs of the broader relationship. Over the last 5-8 years the relationship has had more downs than ups, which means it will be important to have realistic expectations about how much progress is possible. For example, visions of a new grand bargain on European security architecture, or even a rapprochement with Russia in order to mutually balance against a rising China, would almost certainly remain unrealized, and should therefore be downplayed.

Finally, a core component of US-Russian relations for the next administration should be a continued commitment to engaging with Russian society, in particular its younger generations. Vladimir Putin will not rule Russia forever. Indeed, according to the current Russian constitution his term as president will end before that of the next US president; speculation is rampant about whether he will figure out a way to remain in charge after 2024. Regardless, even at a time of poor US-Russian relations, it is in the US interest to create opportunities in realms such as culture, education, science, and sports for Russian citizens to travel to the US and for American citizens to travel to Russia, as well as other ways of learning about the other country and its society and culture. Given evidence of mutual Russian-American ignorance at the societal level, minor steps to promote greater understanding are worth investing in, especially since they are relatively cheap.³ Such steps can help pave the way towards greater mutual engagement in a post-Putin world.

² The dispute about Russia’s alleged INF Treaty violation is highly technical, like many arms control disputes. The US and its NATO allies insist that Russia has violated the Treaty, Russia insists it has not. Further discussion about the allegations would have been warranted, but that ship has now sailed, especially since Russia preferred for the Treaty to end anyway.

³ Brendan Helm, Arik Burakovsky, and Lily Wojtowicz, “Americans and Russians Are Mostly Disinterested and Disengaged with Each Other,” The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, August 2019, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/lcc/americans-and-russians-are-mostly-disengaged>.

Nuclear Weapons, Conventional Inferiority, and Influence Operations: What Future for the U.S.-Russia Security Relationship?

Genuine Reset to Policy Toward Russia

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President Donald Trump has spent his entire presidency confronting allegations that he is overly friendly with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Yet U.S. policy is more hostile to the Russian Federation today than during the Obama administration. More Russian diplomats have been expelled, more economic sanctions have been imposed, more European nations have joined NATO, and more lethal aid has been provided to Ukraine.

But to no obvious end. Moscow has refused to yield to America. To the contrary, Russia has become more active and successful in opposing U.S. policy. Certainly in Syria. Europe is at most a draw for America, with Europeans tiring of sanctions and Ukrainians hoping that President Volodymyr Zelensky finds a formula for peace. Perhaps of greatest concern, Russia has drawn closer to China, which is likely to be America's most serious competitor, even peer superpower, in the decades and maybe years ahead.

The Russia-U.S. relationship has been made more dangerous by both parties' possession of nuclear weapons. The fear of nuclear Armageddon was a constant of the Cold War. Fears of a nuclear confrontation faded after the Soviet collapse. However, the ongoing development of a Cold War-lite between Washington and Moscow has revived the possibility. The next president should adapt policy to reduce the potential for catastrophic conflict which we prefer not to imagine.

The Soviet Union came late to nuclear weapons, desperate to match the U.S., which had demonstrated their potential in World War II. Over time the two sides developed roughly equivalent arsenals, though Russia emphasized size and quantity while the U.S. compensated with quality and accuracy. Both countries also sought advantage through geography, stationing weapons in Turkey and Cuba, which would leave target states with little time to respond. The Cuban Missile Crisis was the result, which led to withdrawal by both sides.

Mutual Assured Destruction governed superpower nuclear relations. Ronald Reagan demonstrated qualms with MAD in two ways. One was concern that a "window of vulnerability" had opened during which Moscow might attempt a first strike. The West later learned that the Soviet leadership had similar fears. False alarms led to dangerous moments ultimately resolved by cautious intelligence and military officers.

Reagan also objected to the immorality of a doctrine which relied on the threat to commit mass slaughter. That led to his support for missile defense, which he titled the Strategic Defense Initiative. Although his broad vision never came to fruition, the U.S. has continued to work on developing and improving defense against missile attack. Such a system is unlikely to ever stop a full assault by Russia or similar power but might be able to handle fewer missiles launched by a minor missile state (or mistaken launch by anyone).

With the end of the Cold War and global military confrontation, Washington and Moscow initiated several arms control treaties. Most important, these pacts dramatically reduced the number of nuclear weapons. They also symbolized both governments' reduced willingness to rely on weapons of mass destruction. Whatever Moscow's and Washington's future disagreements, no one expected their nations' very existence to again be at risk.

Unfortunately, this framework is breaking down. Most significant may be America's withdrawal last August from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces treaty, governing medium range missiles. The U.S. charged Russia with cheating, which the latter denies, and is concerned about the role of China, which was not a party to the treaty. There is fear, especially in Europe, that the end of the INF might spark a new arms race. That would occur as the geopolitical stakes of conflicts between Russia and America are rising.

Another factor increases nuclear dangers today. After World War II nuclear weapons acted as equalizers for the weak. In 1954 the Eisenhower administration began talking of "massive retaliation" should the Soviet Union use its conventional superiority to invade Western Europe. The threat to initiate nuclear Armageddon, it was hoped, would prevent Moscow from initiating lesser conflicts.

Today the principle remains, but the two nations' positions have reversed. Although Putin has rebuilt Russian conventional strength—the army's performance in the short 2008 war against Georgia was disappointing—Moscow's capabilities continue to lag well behind those of America and especially NATO collectively. Russia's military outlays are comparable to those of France and about a tenth of those of America. Of course, such expenditures are imperfect measures of actual power, but the U.S.-Russia gulf remains wide.

Which means the issue of employing nuclear weapons primarily lies with Moscow.

Russian official military doctrine allows the use of nuclear weapons in other than strategic situations and for retaliatory purposes. Six years ago Moscow formally eliminated its policy of no first use. There is some variation in explanations as to when nukes might be used. But Russia appears willing to deploy nuclear weapons in a conventional clash.

The ongoing improvement of Moscow's conventional forces may reduce pressure in a crisis to "go nuclear." However, America's advantages, especially when including other NATO members, remain too big to allow anything approaching conventional equality. So nuclear weapons are likely to remain of outsize importance to Russian decisionmakers.

This factor has important implications for Washington's approach to Russia. Despite sharp Western criticism of Putin's policies, he is evidently no Hitler or Stalin. Putin's foreign policy has been assertive, confrontational, and aggressive. However, his objectives have been quite limited. Under him Russia appears to have returned to a pre-1914 great power, concerned about respect for its borders and interests. His predation has been cautious, fully consuming only Crimea, which long was part of Russia. He has forcefully expanded influence where no other

great power is interested: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Ukraine's Donbass. That's not much of an empire, and nothing suggests he plans to change his approach.

Some of Putin's foreign policy moves reflect serious if not existential concerns. Preventing important borderlands, Georgia and Ukraine, from joining the Western alliance. Maintaining Moscow's one long-term ally in the Middle East, Syria. Other moves looked more tactical, primarily intended to discomfit Washington. Support for Cuba, North Korea, and Venezuela, for instance. Also intervening in America's election, as Washington has done in scores of nations, including Russia in 1996.

Moscow's overall objectives seem obvious. One is preventing complete U.S. domination of international affairs. Washington dismisses the idea of spheres of influence while treating the entire world as America's sphere of interest. Also establishing credibility. U.S. officials constantly justify bizarrely foolish interventions as necessary to preserve credibility. It is even more important for smaller powers to demonstrate their willingness to accept high costs and risks to preserve their position. Acting tough helps compensate for weakness, military and otherwise.

Although Russia cooperates with the People's Republic of China, they have very different perspectives. Beijing is a rising power with a widespread commercial influence and a growing economy. China exhibits a successful development model. The PRC's ambitions have grown along with its economy, making it the potentially more dangerous state from America's perspective.

However, Moscow presents a uniquely combustible mix: past greatness, present weakness, determination to regain prior influence, and willingness to use nuclear weapons for nonstrategic purposes. While Russia might see the latter as defensive, its presumed willingness to escalate to deescalate or deter could be highly provocative. And the presence of nuclear weapons makes every confrontation more dangerous.

This concern is not purely hypothetical. In August 2008 the Bush administration seriously considered intervening in the Russia-Georgia war; the issue reportedly went to the cabinet. One proposal was to bomb the tunnels through which Moscow was funneling troops. Such an action would have been simply mad, almost certainly triggering war over an issue seen as important if not vital by Russia but barely even peripheral by America.

During the 2016 Republican Party's presidential primary several candidates advocated imposing a "no-fly" zone on Syria and applying restrictions to Russian planes. At one point New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie ran through an imagined riff with Putin, capped by his insistence that the Russian leader not "test me." Of course, Putin would have no choice but to challenge the imagined President Christie, since the former could not submit to the U.S. over issues of great and long-standing interest to Russia.

In both cases, even what started out as a limited confrontation could quickly spiral out of control. Russia, even more than America, would feel the need to avoid appearing weak, but instead to strengthen credibility. In any escalatory cycle Moscow might feel the need to move to

nuclear weapons sooner than the U.S. The result could be catastrophic, an originally unintended nuclear exchange.

Perhaps American policymakers and analysts were not as serious as their rhetoric suggested. Yet today there is an unhappy confluence of Republicans motivated by ideology, rabid hawks determined to micro-manage international events, with a special disdain for select authoritarian powers, including Russia, and Democrats motivated by partisanship, onetime doves determined to discredit President Donald Trump using any available tools, including his bizarrely expressed affection for Putin. The result has been a rare bipartisan race to be ever “tougher” on Russia. Washington has even been pressing Europe, with more at stake and generally favoring de-escalation, to join in a veritable mini-Cold War against Moscow.

Russia will naturally respond to what it reasonably sees as increasing hostility from the West. It doesn't matter whether American policymakers believe Moscow is to blame or should feel threatened. In this case perception is reality. And Putin is no outlier. He represents many Russians—nationalists and traditionalists with a sense of history—who see the U.S. as an aggressive, ideological power determined to remake the world, including the Russian Federation, and to do so militarily if necessary.

Thus, policy in Moscow is unlikely to change any time soon. Putin has announced a political reorganization expected to extend his stay in power, though more likely as prime minister than president. If he was unexpectedly replaced, his successor likely would broadly share his international perspective. And the democratic opposition is not liberal: some who know Alexei Navalny warn of his authoritarian, nationalist views.

A great tragedy of U.S.-Russia relations is the fact that Putin never appeared to be particularly antagonistic to the West. KGB officers like him tended to be the most worldly but cynical Soviets. He seemed far more practical than ideological, even though illiberal. The U.S. and Europe have made common cause with plenty of unpleasant but unthreatening thugs around the world. There is no obvious reason that they could not forge a similar relationship with Putin's Russia.

Given Moscow's status as a great nuclear power, current U.S. policy is irresponsible. Russia has the unique power to destroy America, though it almost certainly would be destroyed in return. The Russian Federation also has numerous sub-strategic nuclear options, and a greater incentive than Washington to use them.

Which suggests the value of what George W. Bush originally called for, a “humble” foreign policy, or at least humbler approach than today's push for domination everywhere, even along Russia's border. With the potential cost of a confrontation over peripheral or minimal interests so high, the U.S. should make an extra effort to avoid, compromise, and settle issues of lesser importance.

Today Congress, especially, appears to have been captured by a peculiar form of moral vanity. Almost anything that angers one or more members, including what should be uncontroversial, such as construction of a Russia-German natural gas pipeline, leads America's

legislators to mount their sanctimonious high horses, lecture the world, and impose sanctions on offending parties far and wide. Rarely is an off-ramp designed and failure—as all of them applied to Moscow so far have only reinforced Russian behavior—merely results in newer and tougher sanctions being applied. With the same result.

As a result, the U.S. and Russia are slouching toward a new Cold War. And Moscow is taking advantage of any opportunity to undermine Washington's policies. It is hard to see Russian involvement in Cuba and Venezuela as anything but intended to undermine its great antagonist, creating angst and frustration in American policy circles. So, too, Moscow's renewed contacts with North Korea. Indeed, the Putin government has no obvious reason to cooperate anywhere on anything with the U.S., since Washington's hostile stance appears permanent.

The only way to break today's impasse is to reconsider policies which today are implemented without challenge in Washington. One is NATO expansion. America becomes less secure as it adds more impotent security dependents, such as Montenegro and North Macedonia. Including Georgia and Ukraine would bring conflicts with Russia into the alliance. Washington should seek a modus vivendi Moscow—for instance, no further NATO expansion in return for Moscow's disengagement from the Donbass and regularization of relations with Ukraine.

Recognizing reality in this way would not prevent criticism of the Russian Federation's brutish behavior, at home or abroad. However, continuing to base policy toward Moscow on castles in the sky will achieve nothing. For instance, Russia will not surrender Crimea short of defeat in a catastrophic war. Maintaining sanctions until Moscow gives in ensures permanent confrontation. The West could offer to accept though not formally recognize the annexation unless Russia holds another, internationally monitored, referendum to settle the territory's status. Or in return for recognition the U.S. might request Moscow's recognition of NATO's admittedly illegal dismemberment of Serbia and Kosovo's status as an independent state.

Washington should accommodate important and long-held Russian interests as America expects Russia to do for the U.S. Moscow has better cause than Washington to be involved in Syria. Russia has greater interest in Central Asia than does America. No Russian government wants to see a foreign alliance encompass a land, Ukraine, that once was heartland to both the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. Washington should address these issues as matters of prudence rather than morality.

And both nations should work across issues to defuse tensions. Equally important, both governments need to seek to increase opportunities to expand economic and political cooperation. Counter-terrorism is an obvious area. So, too, addressing the challenge posed to both nations by China. Putin's Russia is an unpleasant, even dangerous power. But not the most unpleasant and dangerous.

A positive response from Moscow is not guaranteed, but a better relationship should be possible. Unlike the Cold War, today's struggle is not ideological. Putin's perspective appears to be more anti-U.S. foreign policy than anti-U.S. Moscow retains significant ties with Europe, economic, political, and historical. And Putin is in the autumn of his career. He may begin thinking more about legacy as potential successors consider policies they would adopt.

U.S. policy toward Russia should be about far more than Donald Trump. Perpetual hostility toward Moscow does not serve America's interests. The Cold War is over. It should be fully buried, as Washington pursues a genuine reset in relations.

American policymakers should abandon the pursuit of the perfect, to turn Russia into what they believe it should be, and advance the good, to create a less confrontational and dangerous relationship today. That result would benefit both nations.

A New Cold War – But We Can Get Out of It

Ulrich Kühn

The United States and Russia are back in a new Cold War. The good news is, even though the two main players are somewhat back to square one, they are at least familiar with the concept. They know how to play the game because they have done it before. Even though the new Cold War has a number of significant differences as compared to the original, there are still ways to successfully steer us through the renewed conflict and avoid catastrophe altogether.

The New Cold War ... Not That New

At first glance, the new Cold War seems similar to the bipolar battle of the 20th century. (1) Both sides are increasingly unable or unwilling to engage in meaningful dialogue. Instead, policymakers and officials are talking past each other. (2) The end of bilateral and multilateral arms control heralds also the beginning of a new round of arms racing, much to the disadvantage of the American taxpayer. (3) Talk (and walk) of deterrence and defense is on the rise on both sides. The frontline of the new Cold War runs through Eastern Europe with both sides being concerned about their ability to defend precarious geographical pockets in the Baltics and the Russian Kaliningrad exclave. (4) Strategic signaling for the purpose of intimidation and resolve comes in the form of plans to develop new strategic and sub-strategic systems, aggressive nuclear rhetoric, risky military maneuvers in and over the Baltic and Black Seas as well as oversized military exercises. (5) As during the Cold War, Russian influence operations are aimed once more at undermining Western cohesion. (6) Any suggestion of compromise is seen as strategic weakness and as appeasing the other side.

At the same time, there are also significant differences. (1) Europe has, so far, not experienced the buildup of large-scale conventional forces along the line of conflict. Instead, NATO has set up a modest deterrence approach – the so-called tripwire force in the three Baltic states and Poland – which, in fact, is more of an assurance measure to calm the badly exposed allies. Russia, in turn, has not significantly reorganized its forces bordering the Baltics, also because it already holds the upper hand in the wider Baltic theater. (2) There are also, so far, no signs of a quantitative arms race with thousands of warheads and missiles. (3) However, that might change because the new Cold War has already led to an abrogation of almost all arms control agreements in both the nuclear and conventional domains. (4) In addition, Russian influence operations have become more sophisticated, which is also a product of Moscow successfully harvesting 21st century technology in the form of hacks and bots. (5) In addition, NATO is politically much less united than in previous times. This is mostly the product of nationalist/populist leaders in Hungary, Poland, Italy, Turkey or the United Kingdom openly or secretly imitating Putin's autocratic, anti-liberal policies to reap domestic gains. The United States, under the leadership of Donald Trump, has joined that camp. (6) And that is perhaps the biggest difference: Washington is not anymore the undisputed leader of the West – particularly not when it comes to upholding an international order based on liberal values.

Even though Russia is still playing a major role in U.S. domestic politics, the geopolitical U.S.-Russian relationship, entering the crucial year 2020, has somewhat stabilized – stabilized as compared to the shock of Crimea (2014), the period of NATO's hectic activism in Eastern Europe (2016), the Russian interference in the U.S. elections (2016), and the subsequent

sanctions from Washington and its allies. At the same time, the renewed conflict with Russia threatens to impact two long-term strategic U.S. interests: maintaining NATO unity and balancing China's rise.

Maintaining NATO Unity

By pulling out of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, Washington made not only a strategic mistake – it unnecessarily handed the Kremlin an unexpected win. Europe is already split on most security issues. NATO allies to the East and North see Russia as the main threat. Western European countries are less alarmist. Meanwhile allies to the South have other priorities, such as terrorism and migration emanating from the Middle East and Africa. All that translates into divergent preferences. Poland and the three Baltic states for instance see little value in arms control. Instead, they would like to bolster deterrence and defense *against* Russia. Germany, France, and others see little need for further military commitments to the East in the current environment. Instead, they would like to either pivot to the South (France) or emphasize conventional and nuclear arms control *with* Russia (Germany).

The INF crisis promises to deepen these differences. Poland and the Baltic states would probably welcome the deployment of future U.S. intermediate-range missiles to Europe, even if Russia were to stick to the currently estimated number of roughly 80 such missiles in its possession. Germany and a number of other allies fear the likely negative domestic ramifications of yet another deployment debate. Meanwhile, the Kremlin can turn up the heat anytime it wants, simply by adding more INF-range missiles to its growing arsenal.

That all seems to recall NATO's dual track decision from the 1970s/1980s. Back then, in response to the Soviets introducing new intermediate-range missiles, NATO decided for a combined strategy. It threatened to deploy its own new intermediate-range missiles to Europe and coupled that threat with an arms control offer to the Soviet Union to get rid of all such missiles on both sides of the iron curtain. The big difference to today is that, again, and largely by its own fault, America is not the undisputed leader anymore. The Trump administration did not listen to the concerns of its European and Asian allies warning the White House that pulling out of the INF Treaty would be a mistake. In general, the current administration seems not to care too much about the interests of its allies. Nowhere does this ignorant policy become more obvious than on arms control. Be it the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions, the United Nations' Arms Trade Treaty, INF or, most recently, the Open Skies Treaty – wherever there is an arms control agreement constraining America's still unparalleled military power, the hawks in the White House already have a plan to get rid of it. This does not go down well with a number of key allies such as Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Japan or South Korea.

Particularly on INF, the next administration has to exercise careful leadership. In order to bring allies on board to support potential missile deployments to Europe or Asia – should an urgent military need arise – Washington has to closely consult with its allies, listen to their concern, and table a serious and viable arms control offer to Russia (and perhaps China). That way, America can provide its allies with a real prospect of getting out of the current quagmire at some point in the future. The INF crisis holds massive disruptive potential for the American

alliance system. If Washington still cares about its allies, it should rediscover the instruments of diplomacy and, for that matter, arms control.

Balancing China's Rise

America will need allies in the unfolding great power game. As it looks right now, the 21st century will be multipolar in nature and Russia will continue to be a pole in that system – though, a much weaker one than the Soviet Union was. That also means that the great power struggle between Washington and Beijing will take place in a trilateral setting. So far, Washington was able to balance against both actors combined. Its policy of containment in Eastern Europe and the South China Sea has drawn Moscow and Beijing closer together. While a true military alliance between the two erstwhile Communist contenders is not yet in the cards, it might become reality in the years ahead. A Russo-Chinese alliance, combining the world's second and third largest militaries and giving it a nuclear, economic, geographic, and population backbone outnumbering the United States should be a serious concern in Washington and in all allied capitals.

In order to prevent such a Eurasian behemoth from forming, Washington needs to better play its cards in the European theater and thus vis-à-vis Russia. In fact, America's relationship with Russia holds enormous potential for cooperation, but its current alliance politics continue to impede progress. They promise to tie its hands in the looming struggle with China. Without being clairvoyant, America's current policy of containing both Russia and China while guaranteeing the freedom and security of dozens of allies in Europe, the Middle East, and in the Asia Pacific is hardly sustainable over the long run. Washington's capabilities underwriting the Pax Americana are already stretched thin. This is why the Trump administration and its successors have repeatedly pushed for stronger European buy-in in the form of increased defense spending and military support for America's various interventions around the globe. In a nutshell: if the United States are seriously pivoting to East Asia then Europeans will have to take care of European security and, thus, of Russia. At least, that seems to be the predominant view in the current White House. But what if some European heavyweights such as Germany or France are reluctant? What if they continue to see Russia not as an imminent threat while others, such as Poland, are freaking out about the prospect of America withdrawing? If America still cares about stability on the old continent in that scenario, it will have to maintain its costly engagement in Europe. But in doing so, its hands would remain tied.

Instead, America could seek to court Russia not to bandwagon with China. Perhaps, some might anticipate, Russia could become a neutral pole in the strategic triangle with China. Russia itself might have an interest in such a strategic turn given its deep-seated skepticism towards Beijing, its fear of not being able to defend its vast land mass in Asia, and its obvious junior role in an alliance with China. But for that to happen, Washington would not only have to offer something significant to Moscow; America's allies would have to have confidence that any arrangement with Russia will not be to their detriment. Given the centuries-old insecurities in Eastern Europe and the generational memory of decades of Soviet occupation, a critical number of European allies would probably veto or undermine any rapprochement with Russia, particularly if it was driven by U.S. considerations of pivoting away to Asia. As it stands right now, the only way those states feel safe is with U.S. boots on the ground. Even a serious

military-industrial effort by Europeans to take care of Europe's defense themselves would probably not convince Warsaw or Vilnius.

That way, whatever the United States chooses its relationship with Moscow to be – containment or rapprochement – its hands will likely remain tied in Europe. That does not bode well for America's ability to push back against China. Therefore, America not only needs a new Russia policy, it also needs a new approach towards its European allies. The Trump administration has tried it with pressure, threats, blackmail, public shaming, ignorance, and divide and rule tactics. In short: America tried a decidedly destructive approach, aimed at undermining European institutions. In order to regain leverage over reluctant allies, Washington should try a constructive approach instead.

The next administration should continue to encourage Europeans to focus more on their own security – but not by clinging to an artificial number of national defense spending. The problem is not that Europeans are spending too little on defense; the problem is they are spending it wrong. Washington should encourage the pooling of European forces, the merging of key defense industries, and the development of joint procurement projects such as the next-generation Franco-German fighter platform. Politically, Washington should stress that deeper European integration is not only in Europe's but also in America's interest.

In order to start changing its relationship with Russia, Washington needs a long-term strategy – one that does not come with grandiose but empty reset gestures. Instead, America should take a dull but steady step-by-step approach aimed at recreating trust. Because Moscow cares about strategic stability, the next administration could start with repairing the arms control relationship, first by extending the New START agreement, which expires in February 2021. Later, it could seek to alleviate Russian concerns with regards to U.S. missile defense installations in Eastern Europe in exchange for Russia verifiably destroying its SSC-8 cruise missile. While that might sound already like a stretch today, the further road ahead will be even more difficult. When it comes to the institutional and geopolitical struggle over the post-Soviet space manifesting itself most prominently in the war in Eastern Ukraine, Washington will have to carefully balance the interests of its Eastern European allies with Russia's own understanding of its role as a great power.

Actions speak louder than words. Therefore, America needs to reevaluate its relationship with Russia and with its European allies. It will need to follow up with a number of diplomatic initiatives if we are to get out of the new Cold War.

The Future of U.S.-Russian Deterrence

Olga Oliker

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The first nuclear weapons were bombs. Their explosive force may have been new, but the methods of delivery and the logic behind how they were designed and used were old. Soon enough, nuclear weapons were put on missiles. But then, too, the logic that guided developers and war and deployment planners in both the United States and the Soviet Union was a conventional war logic.¹

In the 1940s, some of the scientists who helped build the American nuclear bomb felt differently and warned of their creation's implications.² Bernard Brodie, well ahead of the curve, argued that nuclear weapons represented a revolution, something Brodie characterized as the ultimate weapon.³ But just because Brodie made this argument did not mean that military planners took it on board.⁴ They had been given a weapon, and what you do with a weapon is fight wars.

Except, of course, that's not entirely true, and never has been. While one fights wars with weapons, one also deters wars with weapons. The logic of deterrence was not born with the nuclear age. Countries avoided war with other countries for fear of both defeat and unacceptable damage long before Hiroshima and Nagasaki. If risk outweighs reward, the rational actor doesn't act.

Brodie's argument was that nuclear weapons changed things because they brought with them very high values for risk. And the risk was not just of failure, or of a very painful success, it was a risk to continued existence as a country. Even at very low probabilities, that should make any state's leaders think twice.⁵

Over time, the concept of nuclear deterrence attained increasing acceptance in both the United States and USSR. But this had two components. One was one's own deterrent capacity—the ability to deter an adversary with the threat of a nuclear strike. The other was that one would oneself be deterred, and in the case of the US-Soviet standoff, that the deterrence was mutual. To the extent that this meant a mutual capability to wipe one another off the face of the earth, this was termed mutual assured destruction, or MAD. But even short of that, in Moscow and Washington, as the Cold War evolved, leaders accepted that mutual unacceptable damage was a real risk of war.⁶

¹ See Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

² Paul Ham, "As Hiroshima Smoldered, Our Atom Bomb Scientists Suffered Remorse," *Newsweek*, August 5, 2015, <https://www.newsweek.com/hiroshima-smoldered-our-atom-bomb-scientists-suffered-remorse-360125>.

³ Bernard Brodie, "The Development of Nuclear Strategy," *International Security* 2, no. 4 (1978).

⁴ Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*.

⁵ Brodie, "The Development of Nuclear Strategy."

⁶ Aleksei Fenenko, "Transformatsiia Sderzhivaniia," *Rossii v Global'noi Politike* 7, no. 6 (2009).

To some, this became a virtue, and they argued that nuclear weapons kept the peace and prevented escalation (beyond a certain point).⁷ This acceptance underpins the value of the ABM treaty of 1972. By signing on to the treaty, and forswearing defenses against ballistic missiles, both sides were acting to preserve a mutual second-strike capacity and eliminate the risk that defenses create an incentive for an adversary to strike first, when they can be overcome. This, proponents argued, was more stable than seeking advantages by building such defenses. Opponents found the idea of forswearing defenses and leaving oneself vulnerable counterintuitive, at best.⁸

Then as now, many who doubted that deterrence worked quite as well as promised. Nuclear weapon states fight wars. Non-nuclear weapon states start wars with them.⁹ Countries that have nuclear weapons try to coerce countries that don't with nuclear threats.¹⁰ From an analytical perspective, one quickly concludes that the data set presented by the United States and the Soviet Union (and now Russia) is too small and specific to conclusively evaluate the implications of such a large-scale, mutual standoff. American officials and warplanners, as well as their Soviet and Russian counterparts, continued to plan and think about nuclear war in ways that weren't fully compatible with deterrence concepts, and to voice a certain discomfort with it as a guiding principle.¹¹

But we also know that officials over the past decades have thought of nuclear weapons, their own and others', as deterrent weapons, and we know that, for the most part, they haven't wanted to die and take the whole world with them. There has therefore been some reason to believe that the threat of escalation to nuclear war deters, and therefore constrains, at least some of the time.

But a funny thing seems to have happened as we've settled into the 21st century. If the acceptance of deterrence in the United States, at least, was slow and somewhat grudging, today, it seems to be fading. This has important implications for US-Russian relations in a time of shifting balances of power.

⁷ Stephen Waltz encapsulated this argument in *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979) and in "More May Be Better" in Scott Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, eds., *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995).

⁸ See Michael Nacht, "The Politics: How Did We Get Here?" *The Washington Quarterly* 2000, pp. 87-94.

⁹ Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

¹⁰ Some, for instance, like Matthew Kroenig in *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy: Why Strategic Superiority Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), argue that this works. Others, such as Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann in *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) argue that it does not. It is clear, however, that whether or not nuclear coercion is effective, government officials often think it's worth a try. Colin Kahl makes this point in "How Worried Should U.S. Policymakers be About Nuclear Blackmail?" *Washington Post*, The Monkey Cage Blog, July 9, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/07/09/how-worried-should-u-s-policymakers-be-about-nuclear-blackmail/>.

¹¹ See Joshua Pollack, "From LeMay to McMaster: the Pentagon's Difficult Relationship with Deterrence," *War on the Rocks*, December 29, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/12/lemay-mcmaster-pentagon-difficult-relationship-deterrence/>.

Let's start with the Russians. They inherited the Soviet nuclear arsenal. They did so at a time when they couldn't spend much on conventional capabilities. In the 1990s, they thought a lot about how nuclear weapons could be used to deter conventional aggression. This thinking was not wildly original: a lot of it came back to the ways people thought about nuclear weapons back in the 1960s. But the fact of all this thinking is important: Russian analysts and warfighters were starting from the premise that the best way to deter conventional aggression is with conventional capabilities. They did not have those conventional capabilities, so they saw nuclear weapons as a second-best approach, in part because the threat might not be credible.¹²

Initially, Russia felt extremely insecure and worried about a broad range of possible conflicts. But over time, the conflicts it worried about, and sought to deter, narrowed a bit. This happened because although Russia was mainly fighting its own conflicts within and near its borders, it saw its most dangerous (if not its most probable) adversary developing advanced conventional capabilities and using them in conflicts around the world, in wars of choice. Russia could not match those capabilities, so Russian planners and analysts had to ask how nuclear weapons could fill in the gap if they became that adversary's next war of choice.

The famous de-escalatory strikes concept comes out of these discussions and debates. There's nothing new about de-escalatory strikes—one could argue that most strikes are de-escalatory, being intended to either attain victory directly or force an adversary to back down. But this takes it somewhat further, arguing that one can calibrate both the strikes and their de-escalation capacity, and that careful use of nuclear weapons can send useful signals to an adversary. In modern Russia, the idea was formulated most clearly in a 1999 article by Levshin, Nedelin, and Sosnovskiy.¹³ However, the idea of a clear ladder of escalation and signaling with nuclear weapons use is familiar to anyone who remembers poring through Herman Kahn.¹⁴

But it is no less important to understand that many Russians were not comfortable with this idea. While I believe that this general approach became Russian policy in the late 1990s, it didn't sit easily. Russian analysts and officials went back and forth over the decades on what could and could not be done, what was and was not credible. Soon after Moscow issued a doctrine that seemed in line with limited nuclear use under conditions of conventional weakness,

¹² This debate is reflected in contemporary writings: "Interesy Rossii. Makhmut Gareev: Iadernoe Oruzhie v Sovremennom Mire," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, June 29 1994; M.A. Gareev, "Voina i Voennoe Iskusstvo v Meniaiushchemsia Mire" (War and Military Art in a Changing World), *Mezhdunarodnaia Zhizn'*, no. 3 (1994); Gareev, "Kontury Vooruzhennoi Bor'by Budushchego," (Contours of Future Armed conflict) *Mezhdunarodnaia Zhizn'*, no. 4 (1994); Gareev, *Esli Zavtra Voina* (Moscow: Vldar, 1995). The latter is summarized in English in Jacob Kipp, "Russian Military Forecasting and the Revolution in Military Affairs: A Case of the Oracle of Delphi or Cassandra?," 25-40. See also "Forecasting Future War: Andrei Kokoshin and the Military-Political Debate in Contemporary Russia. Andrei Kokoshin: Scholar and Bureaucrat," *Foreign Military Studies Office Paper* (1999), <https://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/agency/990100-kokoshin.htm>. "Novaia Kontsepsiia Natsional'noi Bezopasnosti Rossii: Vopros Iadernogo Oruzhiia," (Russia's New National Security Concept: The Question of Nuclear Weapons) *Voprosy Bezopasnosti* 22, no. 2 (1998): 3-6; "Novyi Sekretar' Soveta Bezopasnosti Andrei Kokoshin i Ego Proekt voennoi Reformy," (New National Security Council Secretary Andrei Kokoshin and his Military Reform Plan), *Voprosy Bezopasnosti*, no. 5 (1998).

¹³ V.I. Levshin, A.V. Nedelin, and Mikhail Sosnovskiy, "Use of Nuclear Weapons to Deescalate Military Operations," *Voennaiia Mysl*, no. 3 (1999).

¹⁴ Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960).

in 2000, spoken rhetoric backed away from it.¹⁵ And when money started flowing back into Defense Ministry coffers, a lot of it went to developing conventional capabilities, to match what the Americans could do.

Throughout the last two decades, these debates continued, playing out in the pages of Russian military publications. In 2010, with a much-delayed military doctrine due to come out, rumors held that it would further lower the nuclear threshold. It didn't—it raised it, reserving the first use of nuclear weapons to conditions of existential threat. The 2014 doctrine, issued in the heat of the early stages of the Ukraine crisis, confirmed this and also talked about the importance of non-nuclear deterrence.¹⁶ However, before we conclude that Russians see nuclear weapons exclusively as weapons of deterrence of other nuclear weapons and existential threats, we should consider some countervailing evidence.

Even as Russian doctrine was pushing up the threshold for nuclear first use, Russian officials and pundits were playing up dual-capable non-strategic nuclear weapons and talking about Russian nuclear capabilities somewhat coercively, including in ways that seemed to threaten countries from Denmark to the United States. All of this led a lot of Western analysts to decide that Russia had gone back to, or had never left, an overall plan to use nuclear weapons early in a conflict it might lose, to signal resolve and to get an adversary to back down.¹⁷

Leaving aside what this means for the realities of Russian doctrine, note that all of this was happening at a time when U.S. policy was also in a state of flux. After two decades of fighting those wars of choice that made the Russians so nervous, Washington and its combatant commands were wrestling with a concept that wasn't new in the history of warfare, but was new to most of America's young officers: adversaries who could defend themselves. Russian and Chinese capabilities to use air and naval forces to limit American freedom of movement in a given theater of operations got their very own acronym: A2AD—anti-access area denial. However, if we unpack that terminology, and ask where, exactly access and areas are being denied, it becomes clear that A2AD is actually adversary defenses. Moreover, if those defenses are likely to be effective, this means adversary capacity to deter the United States.

Ulrich Kühn, Negeen Pegahi, and others have written about the recent U.S. tendency, perhaps in line with past tendencies, discussed above, to show a certain discomfort with deterrence as a framework for defense policy.¹⁸ But most of these discussions have to do with

¹⁵ "Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation: Approved by Order of the President of the Russian Federation on April 21, 2000, Order No. 706," (Security Council of the Russian Federation, 2000). On rhetoric, see Jacob Kipp, "Russia's Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons." *Military Review*, May-June 2001.

¹⁶ I discuss this in Olga Olikier, "Russia's Nuclear Doctrine: What We Know, What We Don't, and What That Means," Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 2016 https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/160504_Olikier_RussiasNuclearDoctrine_Web.pdf.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*.

¹⁸ Ulrich Kühn, "Deterrence and its Discontents," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 74, no. 4 (2018): 248-254; T. Negeen Pegahi, "Deterrence in Retreat: How the Cold War's Core Principle Fell Out of Fashion," *War on the Rocks*, December 7, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/12/deterrence-retreat-cold-wars-core-principle-fell-fashion/>; See also Joshua Rovner, "Nobody Loves Deterrence, But We'll Keep Doing it Anyway," *War on the Rocks*, October 9, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/10/nobody-loves-deterrence-but-well-keep-doing-it-anyway/>.

America's capacity to deter adversaries. Kühn mentions, but does not dwell, on the flip side of this—the acceptance that the United States is itself deterred, in some cases.

If the United States is suspicious of the benefits of deterring, it is even more unhappy at the prospect of being deterred. Indeed, the way that American analysts and warfighters are talking about A2AD seems to suggest that an adversary seeking to defend itself is somehow nefarious and inappropriate.¹⁹ In the nuclear arena, of course, this is a clear refutation of any notions of nuclear weapons and mutual deterrence keeping the peace.

This context also helps explain how Americans and other Westerners who believe that Russia has an “escalate to deescalate” strategy. Many of these arguments posit conflicts in the Baltic countries, Russian wars of choice, invasions. Specifically, they expect that Russia will seize territory and then use or threaten to use nuclear weapons to prevent victims and their American allies from fighting back.²⁰ This leads some of them to argue that the United States needs to be able to respond in kind, by threatening or using nuclear weapons of their own, of similar size and destructive power, to demonstrate that the US is not, in fact, deterred.²¹

Let me underline that Western analysts start from the assumption that Russia would be fighting a war of choice, and would use a nuclear weapon to prevent the US from winning that war of (Russia's) choice. Therefore the US needs a similarly sized and weighted nuclear weapon to demonstrate its own desire to win that war, which it (the US that is) would then go on and win conventionally (I admit I get somewhat confused by this logic myself).

Embedded in this is confidence that the Americans would win in a purely conventional fight. Under many circumstances, this may be true. I have personally been asked by US military personnel whether there is a way to model a war with Russia that does not include the threat of nuclear use. Which, of course, there is, but begs the question of how realistic a model would result. But again, the main concern with the possibility of Russian nuclear use in the posited scenario, from a US perspective, is not the threat of escalation in and of itself. It is that the threat could work, and that the US might be deterred.

Inconveniently, this is not quite how the Russians, including those Russians who see nuclear use as possible, see things evolving. Russian scenarios for nuclear use tend not to be wars of choice. They tend to start with US attacks, with all that high precision conventional capability the US brings to bear. In many scenarios, the US is attacking Russia, and eliminating Russia's nuclear retaliatory capability early on. Russia does not posit scenarios in the Baltics as the beginning of the war; it posits scenarios in Ukraine, or Belarus, with US aggression, and it assumes the US would then move on to Russia (including via the Baltic region, which is to say

¹⁹ See, for example, Ian Williams, “The Russia-NATO A2AD Environment,” CSIS Missile Defense Project, January 3, 2017, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/russia-nato-a2ad-environment/>.

²⁰ Jüri Luik and Tomas Jermalavičius, “A plausible scenario of nuclear war in Europe, and how to deter it: A perspective from Estonia,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 73, No. 4, 2017, pp. 233-239

²¹ U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense. *Nuclear Posture Review* (February 2018), <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>; Matthew Kroenig, “The Case for Tactical U.S. Nukes,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 24, 2018.

Kaliningrad). It posits this because this is how it has seen the US fight in several large-scale conflicts over the three decades.²²

True, most countries, when they model their scenarios, make their adversaries the aggressors and themselves the defenders. Some of those countries go on to attack other countries. So we cannot conclude from Russia's tendency to play defense in its own games that it is never aggressive. There is, after all, plenty of evidence to the contrary. But what's relevant here is that Russia does not see wars in Europe as wars of choice. Any war in Europe against the United States quickly becomes existential to Russia, because they cannot count on U.S. restraint. There are certainly Russians, as there are Americans, who believe in escalation ladders and nuclear signaling.²³ But I meet few of them among former missileers, and Vladimir Putin does not seem to be of this school.²⁴ So when Russia resorts to nuclear use, in most of its scenarios and planning, it's because it's escalating to survive. It's not just demonstrating resolve, it's demonstrating, as Putin has said, that if it's going to go down, it's going to take everyone with it.²⁵

All of this is quite worrying, of course. Deterrence is, at its core, a sort of influence operation, and it's one that relies on the other party reading one's signals accurately, and all evidence seems to suggest that in the U.S.-Russia context signals may be badly misread. I will add to this an additional worry. If the U.S. military establishment doesn't like thinking about nuclear weapons because it doesn't want to be deterred, the broader security establishment, including its next generation, may dislike thinking about them because they're not trendy. My recent interactions with junior scholars and students (Russian, American, and from various European countries) indicate that many feel that discussions of strategic stability are outdated, and they wonder if nuclear weapons are still relevant. I do not know what that means for the future of deterrence, but I think it's a question worth asking.

I close by asking what this might mean for the next presidential administration in the United States. I see two possible evolutions. In one, the US in the 20s will be retrenching somewhat, focused domestically, and carefully prioritizing its foreign policy actions and involvements. This will probably mean that it is easily deterred from many conflicts, because it does not want to pay the costs of resources or attention. On its face, this would seem to limit risk of conflict with Russia. However, the United States will not entirely give up its interests, and the question of where it will draw its red lines remains unanswered. If Moscow and Washington communicate

²² I discuss this in Olga Oliker, "U.S. and Russian Nuclear Strategies: Lowering Thresholds, Intentionally and Otherwise," in Caroline Dorminey and Eric Gomez, editors, *America's Nuclear Crossroads*, (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 2019)

²³ Sergei Brezkin, "Rossii Nuzhna 'Lestnitsa' Ne Eskalatsii, a Deeskalatsii," (Russia Needs a 'Ladder' for Deescalation, not Escalation," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, November 27, 2015, http://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2015-11-27/1_stairway.html.

²⁴ See Oliker, "U.S. and Russian Nuclear Strategies: Lowering Thresholds, Intentionally and Otherwise." in Caroline Dorminey and Eric Gomez, editors, *America's Nuclear Crossroads*, (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 2019)

²⁵ "Putin Shares His Thoughts About 'Aggressors' and 'Martyrs' in any Nuclear Strike Against Russia," *Meduza*, Oct. 18, 2018, <https://meduza.io/en/short/2018/10/18/putin-shares-his-thoughts-about-aggressors-and-martyrs-in-any-nuclear-strike-against-russia>.

poorly with one another, conflict remains possible. If I was advising that President, I'd argue for careful prioritization and clear communication.

It is also possible that the United States of the 2020s will be more involved and engaged in Europe, and actively trying to constrain and contain Russia. This poses different, and likely higher risks, although it is possible that, again, if the United States communicates clearly, it may successfully deter Russia.

My bottom line, however, is that being deterred may not be the worst thing in the world, for both the United States and for Russia. If one is fully undeterred, if one sees the costs of most likely conflict as bearable, one risks seeing those costs build up, and one easily spreads oneself too thin. If one has priorities, one will sometimes be deterred, but the odds of attaining those priorities might be better.

Between Globalization and Autarky: Where are the Foundations of Russia's Political Economy?

From Misperception to Opportunity: Possibilities for U.S.-Russian Relations

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The standoff between Russia and the United States, which began in its current, intense phase after the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2014, has spread from Eastern Europe to Syria to Venezuela. Yet the basic disagreement remains the same. The United States thinks that Russia is a second-tier power and does not believe that the Kremlin deserves a veto over international security matters, especially in Europe. Russia, by contrast, thinks that it merits a position equivalent to that of the United States and demands that Washington defer to its preferences in the post-Soviet space. Russia has proven willing to use force to defend its interests, while the U.S. has responded with economic and diplomatic pressure.

Many international disagreements are resolved via compromises. The U.S.-Russia confrontation has not been resolved, at least not yet, because both sides believe the other is losing. Most U.S. analysts consider Russia a declining power, pointing to the Kremlin's falling influence in its neighborhood, its long-term economic challenges, lack of allies, and potential fragilities in its political system. Russian analysts, however, see the U.S. as an overextended superpower, a country with hegemonic ambitions in an increasingly multipolar world. Russian analysts believe that multipolarity will force the U.S. to retrench, and sees intensifying U.S.-China confrontation as a priority that will induce Washington to pull back from other regions and cut deals with powers like Russia. The Kremlin interprets the election of U.S. President Donald Trump as evidence both that the U.S. is becoming less committed to asserting hegemony and that it is turning its focus toward containing China at the expense of confrontation with Russia. So long as each side believes the other's hand is weakening, neither country has reason to cut a deal.

Assessing U.S. Strategy

Which country is right in its analysis of current trends? Russian analysts are not wrong to identify emerging isolationist trends in U.S. foreign policy thinking, which extend beyond Trump. Yet this is nothing new in U.S. foreign policy. Most U.S. presidents come to office promising to assess more carefully U.S. commitments overseas, but most also end up preserving America's global role. Russian analysts are also correct to note the intensification of U.S.-China competition, though much depends on how costly and confrontational this competition becomes. Even within the Trump Administration, there are diverse views about how aggressively the U.S. should contain China.

U.S. analysts, meanwhile, are correct to see weaknesses in Russia's position, notably its long-run economic stagnation and the repeated threats it levies against its neighbors—from small states in the post-Soviet space to the most substantial European powers—thereby guaranteeing the existence of a coalition against it. Given the diplomatic, military, and economic asymmetries between the U.S. and its allies on the one hand, and Russia on the other, Washington has reason to see a substantial chance that Russia will eventually decide that the costs of continuing the confrontation at the current level of intensity are too high. Some analysts think that economic

stagnation might cause social unrest that forces a policy change in the Kremlin, but it would be wrong to bet on immediate concessions from Russia. If the current U.S. strategy toward Russia is to work, it ultimately requires shifts in Russian thinking over time, perhaps over the course of a decade. U.S. policymakers must also realize that there are obvious trade-offs between a hawkish China policy and a hawkish Russia policy, and it is difficult to pursue both at high intensity.

To understand the structure of the current U.S.-Russia standoff, start with the costs the U.S. and its allies are imposing on Russia. The most explicit cost is that of the economic sanctions that the U.S. and EU imposed on Russia after the start of the war in Ukraine, which reduce Russian GDP growth by around 1% per year. A second cost is political—sanctions on prominent Russians and their partial ostracization from Western society—which have no economic cost but which Russian elites deeply dislike. A third cost is in terms of security, as the Russian military spends more resources to focusing on the U.S. rather than other potential threats to Russia, such as terrorism. A fourth cost is that the U.S. and EU oppose Russian initiatives in most other spheres, stymying much of Russia’s diplomatic agenda.

Russia can, of course, impose substantial costs on the U.S. in exchange. The Kremlin has begun several wars along Europe’s borders, most notably in Ukraine, undermining European security. It has imperiled the nuclear arms control architecture by developing missiles that violate the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces agreement. Because of the U.S.-Russia confrontation, the U.S. military is spending more time thinking about Russia, distracting attention and resources away from the Asia-Pacific. Russia is working to oppose U.S. initiatives worldwide, whether in Syria, Venezuela, or in the growing number of African countries where Russian political operatives are increasingly present. Most controversially, Russia has injected controversy into the American political process via its intervention in the 2016 presidential election. Some of this might have happened even in the absence of an intensification of the U.S.-Russia antagonism in 2014, but the costs to the U.S. would certainly have been lower.

Assessing the Risks Russia Poses

What risks does Russia pose to the U.S.? The most dangerous downside is a direct military clash—and potential nuclear war—between the two powers, though this risk has declined since the peak of tensions after 2014 as both sides have settled into a pattern of long-run competition. Other risks, however, are far more likely to materialize. First are the wars in countries such as Ukraine, Georgia, and to a lesser extent Syria, where the U.S. and Russia support opposite sides. Continuing to do so requires both money and diplomatic energy. Second is the likelihood that the Kremlin will look to undermine U.S. initiatives worldwide, on the grounds that such ‘spoiler’ activity is likely to induce Washington to compromise with Russia.

Many of the risks Russia poses, however, are due as much to Western weakness as Russian strength. The Kremlin is adept at walking through open doors. For example, so long as the U.S. has few laws governing political ads on social media and a weak system of ensuring the electoral system integrity, the Kremlin’s decision to meddle via these means are not surprising. Russia’s forays into European politics—for example, via its relations with Hungarian autocrat Viktor Orbán or its destabilization efforts in the Balkans—take advantage of existing weaknesses, whether of divisions within the European Union or of weak governments on Europe’s borders. If Orbán were pressed to govern less corruptly, he would be less susceptible to

Russian influence via business dealings, for example. And if the disputes in the Balkans were resolved, Russia would not have local militias to fund and arm. Solving such problems is not easy, but it is smarter to address root causes. Russian influence is far less of a problem in stable, well-governed countries than it is in countries with weak rules and limited transparency.

Russia also plays a substantial—and at times disruptive—role in other spheres that are peripheral to U.S. interests. Russian political operatives linked to Evgeny Prigozhin have been appearing in a growing number of African countries, from Mozambique to the Central African Republic, offering arms and political support. Such Russian efforts can transform these countries' politics, whether by bolstering weak leaders or even throwing elections in a certain direction. Yet such spheres are far from U.S. core interests, and it is not clear that an increase in Russian influence in, say, the Democratic Republic of Congo matters much for the United States. The risk to the U.S. is that it loses focus on its own priorities, and spends energy instead confronting Russia in countries that are only marginally important.

Recommendations

So long as the U.S. intends to pursue its current strategy of refusing to recognize a Russian sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and containing Russian power, it must realize that such a strategy is likely to require substantial time to work, and that it will require careful prioritization if it is to be sustainable. To maximize pressure while minimizing cost, five priorities stand out.

1. Alliances are the key to U.S. strength, because they magnify U.S. power. Alone, the U.S. constitutes 24% of the world economy. With allies in Europe, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and others, it constitutes, 55%. President Trump is not the only U.S. politician to complain that European countries do not spend enough on defense. Yet the right response is not to denigrate alliances but to reinvigorate them. Above all, this means focusing on the United States' two most important alliances, with NATO and Japan. Both European allies and Japan should be encouraged to spend more, and spend more effectively, on defense. Europe also must be pushed to resolve some of its internal problems, reducing the scope for countries like Hungary and Germany to provide open doors to Russian influence via energy projects. Yet this requires working with U.S. alliances rather than undermining them.
2. Russia's main capability is in taking advantage of existing problems in Western politics. The more that the U.S. and the West can resolve internal problems, the less chance Russia will have to take advantage of internal divisions. Within the U.S., this means strengthening regulation of social media to limit foreign interventions in U.S. politics, and strengthening oversight and transparency to reduce the money laundering that makes much of this malign influence possible. The European Union, meanwhile, has its own divisions to address, both within countries and between EU member states. The biggest openings to Russian influence are visible in the countries on Europe's edge, in places such as the Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova, where Europe should do more to bolster pro-reform forces. The more that these states and societies can be strengthened, the harder it becomes for Russia to cause problems.

3. U.S. policy makers must recognize tradeoffs between confronting Russia and China. The current U.S. strategy vis-à-vis Russia is not particularly costly. But efforts to contain China are placing new strains on America's diplomatic, military, and economic position. Even within the Trump Administration there is substantial debate about how to address the worrisome effects of growing Chinese power. Meanwhile, the Trump Administration's refusal to work with allies has only magnified the cost to the U.S. Those who want a complete decoupling from the Chinese economy, an aggressive assault on Chinese tech firms, or a diplomatic full-court press on Chinese influence must realize that such efforts would tax America's ability to deploy similar resources to address the challenge posed by Russia. Pursuing a policy of confrontation with China and Russia simultaneously is possible only if the costs of such a policy are minimized and if tools are used judiciously. If not, those Russian analysts who believe that the U.S.-China antagonism will force the U.S. to offer concessions to Russia could be proved correct.
4. When devising policy toward Russia, the U.S. should focus on achieving its own goals, rather than stymying Russia's. The Kremlin has shown it can deploy resources and influence politics in many different countries, from Europe to Latin America to the Middle East. Rather than playing whack-a-mole with Russian influence, the U.S. should focus on what matters most: securing America from Russian intrusions in our political, financial, and tech systems; reinforcing alliances with our most important partners in Europe and Asia; and bolstering countries most vulnerable to Russian influence, especially those such as Ukraine, which face the greatest challenges from Russian influence and whose fate will shape European security. Trying to confront Russia wherever Russian influence emerges is a policy that lets Russia set the agenda.
5. The U.S. should not expect Russia to surrender all its interests. The goal of the U.S. strategy is to convince the Kremlin that it cannot achieve its current aims at an acceptable cost. American policymakers should not expect that Russia will capitulate on all its geopolitical goals, or recognize that the United States is correct on every issue. The main U.S. goal should be to win Russian recognition of principle that European borders are not to be changed by force and that European countries are free to choose their own path provided that they don't pose a threat to their neighbors. If Russia moves toward accepting that principle—for example, by withdrawing its forces from the Donbas—the U.S. should be open to working with Russia in other spheres.

Russian Regime Survival: Implications for the Present

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Putin will likely serve beyond his 2024 “final” term. Any successor regime would use him as a scapegoat and reveal his hidden wealth. Therefore, he will create some arrangement to serve for life. As his term approaches a quarter of a century, dissatisfaction will grow. He will preserve his regime by increased political repression. Whether that could lead to an overthrow by the Maidan-like revolution that he so fears remains to be seen.

U.S. Domestic Policy

Russia has been the major beneficiary of the Trump Russian collusion investigation. It has been an even bigger winner in the case of the Trump-Ukraine impeachment inquiry. Russia used the Russian collusion investigation to tell its people that the crooked U.S. establishment will destroy anyone who tries to change the system. The turn of impeachment efforts to Ukraine creates great difficulty for the new Ukrainian regime by giving Ukraine’s U.S. and European potential allies excuses not to assist Ukraine and even to push Ukraine into an unfavorable peace agreement which will spell the end of an independent Ukraine.

The policy point: U.S. politics must put this Trump-Russia-Ukraine business behind it. This will happen perhaps automatically if Trump is not re-elected but it could bleed over into his second term if he is re-elected.

Russian Domestic Policy

Putin has established a criminal oligarchy with most “national Champion” companies either owned or controlled by his inner circle. It operates without a rule of law. We do not really understand how it works. We are back in an age of Kremlinology. Putin’s economy is stagnant. Living standards have not risen, since 2008, and Putin has backtracked on pension promises. The absence of a rule of law is driving Russia’s most innovative people to leave.

Putin is now in his 20th year. His claim to legitimacy has been his high approval rating, which is now falling, and he lacks the targets (Crimea, Ukraine) to restore his job performance and trust ratings. Putin’s excursions into the Middle East have brought foreign policy successes but do not register well with the Russian people. The one measure of good will that Putin retains among the Russian people is that he has reestablished Russia as a “great power.”

Fissures in Putin’s “power vertical” system are becoming apparent: revolts in the regions, big-city demonstrations about municipal elections, nuclear accidents, disdain for Putin’s party, and the divorce of the Ukrainian church. With a power vertical system all blame goes to Moscow. There are not local or state officials to take the heat.

With his decline in popularity and the last good economic performance dating back to 2007, the Putin regime relies on lesser terror to control the population. The lesser terror system is a carryover from the Soviet period. It punishes any type of anti-regime activity with a deprivation of “life chances.” Dissidents will lose their place in school, their job opportunities, or even jail

sentences or house arrest. Putin is counting on controlling the Russian people by a Chinese-like surveillance system (much less elaborate) that punishes those presumed to be “disloyal.”

Foreign policy

Putin’s biggest successes have been his use of hybrid warfare to punch above his weight. He routinely intervenes in foreign politics either to elect friendly parties or to create disarray. He spreads disinformation through social media. Unless the West develops effective counter measures, Putin will continue to achieve successes on the field of hybrid warfare. There is no way to negotiate with Russia to bring Russia into the Western fold. Putin’s regime is based on the narrative that Russia is surrounded by a hostile U.S. and its puppet NATO. The narrative is that the Western world is intent on breaking up Russia and taking its natural resources.

Russia cannot build up its military much beyond what it has done in the past decade. With a stagnant economy and declining living standards, it must limit itself to around 5 percent of GDP, which equals about seven percent of U.S. defense spending. To make up for its economic disadvantage, Russia engages in show projects, loose talk about using tactical nuclear weapons, and of course hybrid warfare.

Just as Putin must deal with “Putin fatigue” at home, so must the Western world deal with Ukraine/Crimea fatigue. The major countries of NATO (France and Germany) seem to yearn for a return to business as usual with Russia. As a portend of this, Russia has been reinstated in the Council of Europe. There are few signs of a settlement for Russia’s downing of MH17. The Nordstream 2 pipeline, designed to exclude Ukraine from gas transmission, has cleared its final hurdles despite strong opposition from most of the EU. Ukraine fatigue could force Ukraine into a disastrous peace agreement that would, in effect, return Ukraine to Russia’s sphere of influence.

Sanctions have hurt the Russian economy, the Russian people, and the Russian elite. They are renewed every six months by Europe, and with Russian interference, these sanctions are at risk. The U.S. sanctions appear more secure insofar as they are acts of Congress. As time passes, there will be more calls to cancel the sanctions, especially by Europe, arguing that they do not work and that “rogue” Russia should be reinstated into the Western world.

Russia and China will likely continue in the short run their courtship, but in the long run they are more likely to be enemies. Chinese are increasingly colonizing resource-rich Eastern Siberia. China’s belt and road initiative is taking place in Russia’s declared sphere of influence in Central Asia. The energy deals that Putin entered into are unfavorable to Russia and may even lose money. In its dealings with China, Russia is treated as a junior party who should obey the dictates of the senior party.

A new administration (Trump or a Democrat) may want to cautiously attempt a new reset to see if there has been a change in thinking. I think any reset will fail because the Putin regime is based on the notion that the U.S. and NATO are its enemies. For this reason, Russia must devote substantial resources to defense and it needs a strong leader like Putin.

Stability of the regime

Just as we did not foresee the collapse of the Soviet Union, so we will not foresee the collapse of the Putin regime if it happens. It could come from various directions – the periphery, Muslim Russia, revolt within the oligarchy, a popular uprising, or some reasons of which we do not even know.

The collapse of the Putin regime will have positive and negative effects: On the positive side, it will give Russia a chance to start over, both domestically and in foreign policy. It may allow a democratic leader to emerge. On the negative side, many regions will attempt to break away, Chechnya could heat up, and chaos would spread. Putin has eliminated any true democratic leaders. The Hof Liberals who survive in the Putin regime have lost their credibility; so the field of democratic candidates would be small or nonexistent, and there would be plenty of oligarch money to determine the outcome in favor of continuing oligarchic rule. The point: the removal of Putin will not solve the above problems.

The Threat Posed by Putin's Russia

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Putin's Russia is an outlier nation that does not fit into the existing categories of other countries which make up the world order. Many of its unique characteristics are weaknesses, not strengths. Russia is not an advanced democratic capitalist state, nor does it have much in common with Brazil, India or China, with which it is often grouped as one of the so-called BRIC countries. These countries have growing industrial and technologically based economies, and two are evolving democracies. China remains an autocracy, but the Chinese Communist Party does have an organized structure through which it governs. Putin rules without any functioning party system, Politburo, or Central Committee, and is certainly the most powerful Russian leader since Joseph Stalin, though he does not exercise anywhere near the same level of control over Russian society as Stalin did. Brazil, India, and China are all experiencing aggressive and very public anti-corruption campaigns. The Russian government represents the embodiment of systemic corruption on a kleptocratic scale, and faces no accountability, no investigations, and no genuine efforts at reform. Putin's Russia is not simply a strategic competitor of the United States; it is an adversary--however weak from an economic, governance, demographic and geographic perspective--which threatens America and its allies in Europe through its rapidly rearming military and use of asymmetrical warfare. This concluding essay will show how much of an outlier state Russia has become and why; reviews the ideology of Putin and the oligarchy which runs Russia under him; and suggests a policy for the United States to deal with the threat in the future.

The roots of the oligarchy which has taken over the Russian government under Vladimir Putin are explored in Karen Dawisha's heavily documented 2014 book *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* She argues that Putin and other former KGB agents associated with him gradually took control of major Russian corporations so that 110 Putin oligarchs now control 35% of the wealth of the country. Aslund Anders, in his book *Russia's Crony Capitalism: The Path from Market Economy to Kleptocracy*, makes similar arguments, as does Ann Applebaum in her investigative reporting. This view of Putin and his oligarchs would suggest that their motivation and foreign policy are focused more on self-preservation, regardless of Russian vital national interests, because they fear if they lose control of the Russian government they will be at risk of prosecution for grand corruption or worse. While self-preservation is certainly part of Putin's motivation, it does not alone explain the foreign policy of the Russian government over the past 20 years. Other forces in Russia were at work while this economic takeover was occurring.

In early fall 2005, the first of five volumes of *Project Russia* was published and widely distributed to Russian government officials and members of the elite (none of the books have been translated into any other language). The books have multiple anonymous authors, but one well-connected Russian billionaire, Yuri Shalyganov, has been publicly associated with the first book. The book is an attack on the western democracies, an analysis of the conspiracy to destroy the Soviet Union by these democracies, a screed against the decadence of the West, a denunciation of the West as the enemy of Russia, and an explanation of the coming world

economic crisis. Shalyganov argues a monarchy is the best form of government, but that given that is no longer plausible, an autocrat with a “strong hand” is what the world needs. The first book in the series argues Russia is not strong enough to attack the West using military force, but that it must use information as a weapon “and harness the power of protest.” This 2005 book appears to foreshadow the Russian government’s cyberwarfare campaign against the advanced capitalist democracies which has been underway for many years, most notoriously during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. It is also important to note the first of these books was published a decade before the annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine, so the book is predictive rather than retrospective. The book later became a best seller, according to Ann Corum in her article “Project Russia: The Bestselling Book Series of Putin’s Russia” (*South Central Review*, Spring 2018). Moskva Books reports the collected volumes have been read by three million people

While some scholars and analysts argue that Putin is a pragmatist with no ideology, the evidence presented above suggests that Russia began its own Cold War against the U.S. and Europe well before the Ukraine crisis. Scholars such as Timothy Snyder argue that Putin and his oligarchs have over time developed an ideology which is a form of contemporary Russian fascism, with Russian Orthodox overlay. Snyder wrote a compelling article published in the *New York Review* (April 5, 2018 in an expanded version) entitled “Ivan Ilyin: Putin’s Philosopher of Russian Fascism”. He expands this research in his book *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe and America* (May 2019). Ilyin was a self-identified Russian fascist who left Russia in 1922 because of his militant opposition to Bolshevik ideology and died in exile in 1954. He was a prolific writer, so his views are no mystery: he (like Putin) believes that the “rule of law” is a delusion. Ilyin was an admirer of Mussolini and Hitler and was enthusiastic about the latter’s suppression of the Jews. (While Putin’s oligarchy regularly uses anti-Semitic rhetoric, he himself has avoided it because--as Steven Lee Myers reports in his biography of Putin--growing up he and his parents lived in a Moscow apartment with an elderly Jewish couple who became his adopted grandparents). Ilyin only withdrew his support for Hitler later in the 1930’s because of the Nazi party’s racist view of Russians as sub-human. Ilyin clearly remains a figure of major significance to Putin. Putin had Ilyin’s remains moved from Switzerland to Russia in 2009 with an elaborate burial by the Russian Orthodox Church--whose leaders have often quoted Ilyin’s writing--that involved Putin himself consecrating Ilyin’s grave. Putin has quoted Ilyin more than once in his annual addresses to the people, including using Ilyin’s theories as a justification for the invasion and annexation of the Crimea, and has quoted Ilyin from memory in Russian media interviews. While the Kremlin’s propaganda regularly attacks fascism publicly--no doubt because of the 20 million Russians who lost their lives in World War II--he has embraced modern far-right-wing, ultra-nationalist Russian writers who are self-identified fascists, such as Alexander Prokhanov.

Like Japanese, German, and Italian fascism of the 1930’s, in which race is a central preoccupation of the worldview, the ideology of the Russian state is also obsessed with race and nationality. Putin has thus set as an implicit foreign policy objective the absorption of the 25 million Russians (and the territory they live in) who found themselves outside the Russian state when the Soviet Union ceased to exist in 1991. This was the justification used for the invasions of the Abkhazia region of Georgia and eastern Ukraine, and the annexation of the Crimea. The three Baltic states, which are member states of NATO, are now particularly at risk since they all

have ethnic Russian populations, particularly Latvia and Estonia whose populations are both more than a quarter ethnic Russian and who border Russia. In 2015, just a year after the invasion of the Crimea, Putin's office of the Russian Attorney General issued a ruling that the Russian government's recognition of the independence of the three Baltic States in the 1990's was illegal and invalid. Subsequently, the Russian navy deployed in the Baltic Sea off the coast of the three countries, and Russian army units moved troops close to the border of Latvia and Estonia.

The argument that these countries on the border of Russia all fall within the Russian "sphere of influence" and thus suggest that Putin is acting defensively ignores the Russian government's cyber and espionage activities around the world, particularly in Europe and the United States. Russian banks, reportedly controlled by the FSB intelligence service, made a \$9 million loan to Marine Le Pen's campaign for President of France. She and her party campaigned against France's membership in the European Union and NATO; she was pro-Russia and hostile to the United States.

Putin has attempted to destabilize the European political system by using refugees as weapons, according to the testimony of the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Dunford. AFP reported that Russian trucks moved thousands of refugees through Russia from the Middle East to the Russian borders with Finland and Norway, which they crossed, precipitating political crises in both countries.

Russia's cyber campaigns extend far beyond Western elections. Scholars at George Washington University published research on Russian trolls sending anti-vaccine messages on Twitter in Europe and the United States between 2014 and the present. The research shows these messages are divided between pro-vaccine and anti-vaccine tweets and appear to be designed to create maximum confusion over the efficacy of vaccines to prevent disease by giving the impression that science cannot be trusted and there is no objective scientific truth (Broniatowski et al. 2018). (Vaccines are among the greatest inventions of modern medical science and are one of the most important factors in the dramatic increases in life expectancy and suppression of disease in the 20th century). The recent drop in vaccination rates in Europe and the United States, and now in Africa, is attributable in part to the success of this anti-vaccine cyber campaign and thus threatens the very health and safety of the Western democracies (and developing countries) against which the campaign is directed.

Russian Objectives and US Foreign Policy

Russia has a variety of political goals, but they are all alike in that they aim to harm the United States and undermine the liberal international order. These include the breakup of the EU, the destruction of the NATO alliance, isolating the US, and stoking disunity and fear through their support for far-right and far-left-wing political movements in Europe. Putin's Russia is not just a strategic competitor, as is the case with China. It is an adversary, though a weak one given its anemic economy which is dependent on oil, gas, and mineral revenues; its dysfunctional system of government; and its declining population, which has among the worst health indicators of any educated society in the world according to a demographic study by Nicholas Eberstadt published in the Spring 2018 edition of the South Central Review.

Russia is a fragile state, but one which is rapidly rearming. It is a threat because of its use of asymmetrical warfare, particularly cyber, which the US has not yet organized itself to combat.

It should not be an objective of US foreign policy to collapse the Russian state. This would be not only a humanitarian and governance disaster, but it would potentially unleash chemical, biological and nuclear weapons to rogue forces around the world. Our policy should be similar to the one pursued during the Cold War against the Soviet Union, and that is containing and countering the threats Russia poses.

We must deal with Russia because we should deal with the world as it is, not as we want it to be, but we should have no illusions about what Russian intentions are. The only agreements we should negotiate with the Russian government are those which are verifiable including potentially one on nuclear weapons. We should combat Russian efforts to destabilize our country domestically and our allies around the world, particularly in Europe, while strengthening our existing alliance system which is one of our greatest strengths. We should be cultivating and cooperating with our allies, not undermining them. Russia's own profound internal dysfunctions and weaknesses will act as a break on their external ambitions, but until the regime evolves to one which is less hostile we should keep our guard up.