
U.S.-RUSSIAN RELATIONS BEYOND UKRAINE

Realities and Recommendations Moving Forward

Richard Weitz



CGI CENTER ON GLOBAL INTERESTS

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I. INTRODUCTION¹

The U.S.-Russia relationship remains one of the most important in world affairs. The ability of either country to achieve many of its priorities depends on securing a modicum of support from the other. The two states possess the most powerful militaries, exert substantial global diplomatic influence, and play major roles in the world economy.

However, their influence is asymmetrical; Russia's power assets are concentrated in Eurasia, where Moscow enjoys military primacy and has a network of allies comprised of the former Soviet republics that now belong to the Collective Security Treaty Organization and Eurasian Union (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan). Furthermore, Russia's role in the global economy is smaller than that of the United States, though Russia's economic potential is especially significant in the important spheres of energy, arms sales, basic research, civilian space services, and sports and entertainment.

But thanks to its enormous geography, Russia is a pivotal player for Asia-Europe commerce and energy transportation. Russia also shares with the United States the right to veto resolutions in the UN Security Council.² In the future, Russia could be the swing state in the balance of power between China and the United States. Meanwhile, the ability of the United States to achieve many of its highest priorities—particularly in the fields of nonproliferation, regional security, and counterterrorism—

often depends on Moscow's cooperation. U.S. policies can also have a major impact on Russia's ability to realize its important foreign policy goals in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere.

Yet both states find it difficult to manage a relationship in which they are neither adversaries nor allies. This ambiguity is reflected in polls that show mixed attitudes regarding how Russians and Americans view each other. Indeed, both states' political leaders, whether in their presidential administrations or their legislatures, do not get along well.

Rather than hostility, the main driver of U.S. policy is American indifference toward Russia.

Setting aside genuine policy differences, the most enduring problem is that Russian leaders tend to attribute excessively hostile motives to the United States, while U.S. leaders typically think too little about Russia and its

interests when making decisions that at times have severely harmed the relationship. For example, in recent years, Moscow has exaggerated the anti-Russian intent and impact of U.S. policies, framing them as plots to overthrow the current presidential administration and replace it with one more pliable to Washington.

Rather than hostility, the main driver of U.S. policy is American indifference toward Russia, which also hurts ties. Nonetheless, both governments have shown that they can achieve unemotional pragmatic transactional bargains in pursuit of mutual interests—when they make an effort to identify them and take them into account in their decision making.

II. SOURCES OF THE PRESENT CRISIS

U.S. President Barack Obama came to office determined to improve relations with Russia, which his team believed had become strained over secondary issues. The Russian government under then-President Dmitry Medvedev was also open to expanding cooperation where possible, and managing conflict where not. The resulting “reset” policy yielded improvements in mutual rhetoric and brought concrete cooperation regarding Afghanistan, non-proliferation, counterterrorism, entry visas, orphan adoptions, and the New START strategic arms control agreement. Cooperation also improved regarding Iran, North Korea, and other issues, though without major results, often due to the intractability of the problem. Indeed, the world has moved far beyond the time when Moscow and Washington could decisively determine all major global issues.

But despite these initial improvements, the upward momentum first stalled and then went into reverse. Following the negotiation of the New START agreement, the two governments did not have a high-profile issue that demanded their cooperation. Russian-U.S. relations deteriorated due to mutual tensions between Moscow and Washington concerning U.S. primacy and alliances in Europe and Asia; mutual concerns about activities in the former Soviet republics; diverging threat perceptions regarding Iran, North Korea and other problematic states; Russian shortcomings in the areas of human rights and democracy; and sharp disputes over U.S. missile defense plans for Europe and elsewhere.

For a while, the Obama administration tried to de-link issues and keep disagreements from preventing cooperation in other areas. But the domestic environment in both countries became more hostile towards compartmentalizing their relationship, resulting in the policy of issue linkage becoming common in both countries. A few years ago, the parties could make progress on some issues while criticizing each other's actions on others, but increasingly differences on some questions have spilled over to irritate others. New tensions over Libya, Syria, human rights, and the Russian decision to grant asylum to former NSA contractor Edward Snowden joined longer-running feuds over Georgia, NATO enlargement and missile defense.

After the Congress enacted the Sergei Magnitsky Accountability and Rule of Law Act of 2012, which intended to punish the Russian officials responsible for the death of Russian lawyer Sergei Magnitsky and other human rights violations by restricting their access to visas and U.S. business opportunities, the Russian government retaliated by denying Americans the right to adopt Russian children. The Russian authorities also ended longstanding law enforcement and nonproliferation agreements through which the United States provided financial assistance to Russian agencies and programs. For example, Russia did not renew the umbrella framework agreement for the U.S. Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) Program, which until 2013 had provided billions of dollars to the Russian government to help dismantle its nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons complexes, whose elements might come under the control of rogue states, criminals, or terrorists that might threaten the United States and its allies.

Russian officials launched a sustained campaign to curtail U.S. involvement in Russia's affairs, as well as cutting back cooperation between Russian and U.S. NGOs, and various academic exchange programs. Furthermore, the Arab revolutions alarmed Russian leaders that Washington's policies were promoting global regime change through either a general desire to promote democracy or more deliberate action. Russian President Vladimir Putin blamed the United States for instigating the mass street protests that arose in Russia after he announced that he would return as president in September 2011.

For their part, U.S. officials sharply criticized the Russian government's policies at home, in the former Soviet republics, and regarding Syria and other regional hotspots. President Obama canceled a planned bilateral summit with Putin in Moscow in September 2013 after Putin's decision to grant asylum to Snowden.³ Obama subsequently declined to attend the opening of the Sochi Olympic Games the following February. Since then, both governments have regularly blamed each other for the violence in Ukraine, with Moscow accusing U.S. diplomats of complicity in the protests that overthrew of the Ukrainian government in late February 2014 and the United States denouncing Moscow's subsequent annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and its support for militant ethnic Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, whom U.S. officials hold responsible for the downing of the Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over Ukraine on July 17 that killed almost 300 people. The United States and its European allies have also imposed a wide range of sanctions on Russian officials. Russian countersanctions have applied mostly to EU goods, but the Russian armed forces has stepped up its global aviation patrols near Japan, the United States, and other NATO states.⁴

Russian-U.S. relations are unlikely to improve anytime soon. Although Russian and U.S. officials can envisage various short-term tactical deals, their long-term aims for Ukraine, Europe, and other global issues are very different and often incompatible. Russian and U.S. leaders also profess to believe that they can manage a prolonged period of cold ties. U.S. officials think they can achieve many of their global goals without Moscow's active support, while Russian leaders claim that they can minimize the impact of Western sanctions by expanding economic ties with other partners and boosting Russia's own domestic production to compensate for Western export controls. As a result, social and economic relations between Americans and Russians remain underdeveloped given the size of their populations and national economies. Their diplomatic engagements remain focused on managing the Ukrainian conflict but have otherwise become episodic and shallow.

Whereas the Obama administration made improving relations with Russia a priority in its first term, it has focused more on the Asia-Pacific in its second term, with Russia playing a minor role in the

administration's Asia Pivot even before bilateral relations deteriorated. Russians resented the treatment of their country as a second-rate player in East Asia and the Middle East, and responded by deepening security ties with China, Syria, and other countries whose policies clashed with those of Washington.

The revised Russian military doctrine adopted at the end of 2014 makes evident Russian leaders' alienation from the West. The text describes NATO as becoming a more serious problem for Russia due to its growing capabilities, both in general and in Russia's vicinity; NATO's expanding membership, which is encompassing many former Soviet bloc countries; and its perceived grasp for "global functions" in "violation of international law," a reference to the alliance's military interventions in Kosovo and Libya without Moscow's explicit approval in the UN Security Council. It also presumes that the United States and its allies are plotting to subvert governments friendly to Moscow through "social revolutions" engineered by Western diplomats, intelligence agencies, information campaigns, private military contractors and paramilitary groups, local fascists or terrorists, and other instruments—with the ultimate goal of overthrowing Russia's own government.⁵

The Obama administration's rhetoric regarding Russia has also become harsher over the past year. In his January 2015 State of the Union address, Obama said that he would oppose "Russian aggression" and boasted that "today...Russia is isolated with its economy in tatters. That's how America leads—not with bluster, but with persistent, steady resolve."⁶ Meanwhile, the revised U.S. National Security Strategy released in February 2015 referred to Russian "aggression" and related terms a dozen times and stated that, "Russia's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity—as well as its belligerent stance toward other neighboring countries—endangers international norms that have largely been taken for granted since the end of the Cold War."⁷

The current tone differs sharply from the Obama administration's previous National Security Strategy, issued in May 2010 during the heyday of the "reset" policy, which saw many more opportunities for

cooperation in trade, arms control, and countering WMD proliferation and terrorism.⁸ For example, whereas the 2010 version spoke of the administration's backing of "efforts within Russia to

promote the rule of law, accountable government, and universal values," the 2015 edition does not express any aspirations to make Russia more democratic, despite a general lament that "many of the threats to our security in recent years arose from efforts by authoritarian states to oppose democratic forces," giving as an example "the crisis caused by Russian aggression in Ukraine."⁹ However, according to media reports, the Obama administration is still open to cooperating with Russia on priority issues and is trying to offer Putin an "off-ramp" from the current crisis through a mutually acceptable compromise.¹⁰

Even before the Ukrainian crisis, the original "reset" had exhausted its potential because it lacked a broader and more enduring foundation to become a sustained partnership between Russia and the West. But we are not in a new Cold War—the ideological differences between Americans and Russians are considerably weaker than during the Soviet era. Russia and the United States remain in a mixed relationship in which they cooperate in some areas and disagree in others, though the disagreements have grown considerably in the past year. Most often, the two countries pursue independent unilateral policies. There is no desire for confrontation, but also no deep interest in comprehensive cooperation, especially when it requires difficult compromises from either side. Russian leaders can consolidate their hold over the former Soviet republics without Washington's support, while U.S. policymakers do not believe that Russia has the capacity to have a major impact, for better or for worse, on critical U.S. foreign policy goals beyond Eurasia.

The 2015 U.S. National Security Strategy, unlike the 2010 strategy, does not express any aspirations to make Russia more democratic.

III. DOMESTIC POLITICS IN U.S.-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

Still, despite calls among leading U.S. foreign policy experts in favor of arming Ukraine, there is little possibility of a direct U.S.-Russian clash of arms happening anytime soon. Indeed, both Russian and U.S. officials recognize that the Russian Federation, despite its renewed military power and determined leadership, is a regional power with global ambitions rather than a superpower rival of the United States.¹¹ Furthermore, they understand that the United States does not intend to intervene militarily in Ukraine against Russia beyond training and assisting Ukrainian government troops, just as Washington declined direct military intervention on behalf of the Georgian government in 2008.

However, an enduring improvement in bilateral relations will not occur until both governments see more of their interests aligned with the other country. Scholars who have closely studied the U.S.-Russian relationship find that both countries tend to react to the other's policies, often based on worst-case scenarios.¹² Russian and U.S. policy makers have never ceased to express their goals regarding the other country primarily in negative terms—that is, to make the other side stop their disagreeable behavior. In addition, due to their limited economic cooperation and past history of antagonisms, there are few stakeholders in either country that strongly promote better relations.

Just as the limited extent of social and economic ties has deprived the U.S.-Russian relationship of ballast, the role of specific individuals and institutions appears to have had a minimal impact as well. Over the past 25 years, the relationship has seen wildly varying degrees of cooperation and conflict—from post-Cold War partnership, to strains over NATO enlargement in the late 1990s, to a renewed partnership against global terrorism after 9/11, to growing clashes over influence in the other Soviet republics that have extended beyond Georgia and Ukraine. These trends have occurred irrespective of the people in power. George Bush, Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin have all been in office during times of both good and bad relations. Throughout this time, public opinion has tended to follow rather than shape relations.

Within the governments of both countries, overall policy toward the other is considered a vital national security issue that should be decided by the president and his closest aides. The Russian Constitution formally mandates the head of state to direct all foreign policy and represent Russia in international relations. The Constitution also allows the Federal Assembly of Russia, including the State Duma and the Federation Council, to set the “legislative frameworks” for foreign policy.¹³ The Security Council, one of the consultative bodies of the president, assesses the efficacy of past policies and develops new foreign

and military policies for the president's consideration. The Foreign Ministry primarily executes the Kremlin's ultimate foreign policy decisions.¹⁴

Under Putin, the Kremlin has made all major foreign policy decisions and increasingly controls the country's broadcast media, which it uses to support its policy preferences. Analysts have divided the key Russian policy makers into various groups, but even more so than in the United States, they derive power through their relationship with the president as well as their constitutionally defined roles.¹⁵

From Yeltsin to Putin: Russian Policy towards the United States

Boris Yeltsin, Russia's first president after the demise of the Soviet Union, was eager to improve relations with the United States but faced a hostile legislature and proved erratic and ineffective as a national leader, limiting Moscow's influence in Washington and elsewhere. Moreover, Yeltsin was by necessity preoccupied with orchestrating Russia's triple transformation—from a communist to a post-communist political system, from a socialist to a free-market economic system, and from a multinational empire to a modern nation-state with large ethnic minorities. The United States supported all three goals but provided only modest resources to attain them, failing to offer much beyond rhetorical assistance and symbolic gestures, such as inducting Russia into the G8.

In addition, U.S. officials pursued some policies that made Yeltsin look weak, such as pushing for the enlargement of NATO despite Yeltsin's public and private opposition to such a move. They also regularly downplayed Yeltsin's personal failings, such as his empowering loyal but corrupt oligarchs and his departure from democratic principles, since Americans were more fearful of a return of the Russian Communists to power or of a government led by the new movements of anti-American Russian nationalists. The White House also accepted Yeltsin's appointment of Putin as his successor and was open to working with the new, unknown Russian president.

During his first few years in power, Putin pursued generally cooperative policies toward the United States. The two governments partnered against Islamist terrorists, which were viewed as a threat by both countries. Russian authorities publicly backed the U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan while offering little more than rhetorical objections to the U.S. decisions to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and invade Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which aroused stronger opposition from France and Britain. However, for reasons that are still unclear, U.S.-Russian relations deteriorated in the late 2000s when the Kremlin turned the U.S. decision to deploy a few missile defense systems to Eastern Europe into a major bilateral crisis.

Putin now regularly accuses the United States of exploiting Russia's weaknesses during the 1990s, as well as still striving to decrease Russia's influence in global affairs and overthrow its regime. He believes that Americans fail to respect his country's core national interests, such as its presumed sphere of influence in the former Soviet space.

In general, Putin makes comments that misinterpret U.S. policies, and tends to exaggerate U.S. capabilities and anti-Russian intent—such as accusing the United States of aiming to overthrow governments friendly to Moscow so as to weaken Russia's influence.

Though emotional and stubborn, however, Putin is a pragmatic leader who has shown a willingness to compromise with other countries to advance Russia's interests abroad. Importantly, he has used his power to resolve or avert disputes with the United States by making concessions for the sake of pursuing more important shared goals. Putin made such a choice with the ABM Treaty, Afghanistan, and Iraq in order to avoid upending the new U.S.-Russian partnership against global terrorism. In

Though emotional and stubborn, Putin is a pragmatist who has shown willingness to compromise to advance Russia's interests abroad.

the future, he might decide to accept compromises regarding Ukraine and missile defense for the sake of better bilateral relations—concessions that, regardless of domestic opposition, would be much easier for Putin to enact than for the current U.S. president.

Centralization within the White House: U.S. Policymaking toward Russia

In the United States, the relative influence of the State Department, the Defense Department, and other executive branch agencies along with the White House-led National Security Council (NSC) has varied considerably over the years. Each president has used the NSC in different ways and given the NSC staff, which includes many people seconded from the rest of the U.S. bureaucracy, varying levels of authority. Like many of his predecessors, Obama's managerial practice has been to rely on the advice of a small, tightknit circle of advisors, regardless of title or rank, for important decisions—including those regarding Russia.

The centralization of decision-making within the White House has made the NSC a powerful player within the executive branch and has limited congressional influence on foreign and defense policies. One factor driving such centralization is that, unlike senior cabinet officials,

White House staff do not require congressional approval and cannot be compelled to testify before Congress. At times, this centralization has led to accusations of presidential micromanaging in the bureaucracy, though all administrations struggle to direct and coordinate interagency policy while leaving execution to the departments.¹⁶

Under Obama the National Security Council has become a powerful player in foreign policymaking.

Obama has typically sided with his NSC advisors and other White House staff in their conflicts with even senior cabinet secretaries, such as former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, former CIA Director Leon

Panetta, and former Defense Secretaries Robert Gates and Chuck Hagel, though these differences do not appear to have involved policy toward Russia.¹⁷ Some of these sidelined officials have had more extensive knowledge regarding Russia than others. For example, Hagel had been involved in think tank projects designed to improve relations with Russia after he retired from the Senate during Obama's first term.¹⁸ While Hagel developed cordial relations with his Russian counterpart, Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu, he loyally supported the harder line the administration adopted toward Russia during his last year in the administration, which coincided with the crisis in Ukraine.¹⁹ However, Hagel never penetrated Obama's inner circle, so his retirement had little influence on the U.S.-Russia relationship.²⁰

There is little correlation between the expertise of the President's Russia advisers and the state of U.S.-Russia relations.

Limited Impact of Personality

There is little historical correlation between the background of the NSC advisor and relations with Russia. In the past, some NSC advisors have been Russia/Soviet experts, such as Condoleezza Rice and Zbigniew Brzezinski, and relations were nonetheless strained. On the other hand, ties have also been poor, or good, when non-experts held the position. Within the U.S. bureaucracy one finds individuals who hold a variety of views regarding Russia, and these probably change over time, though the Russian media tends to focus on certain individuals deemed hostile toward Russia, such as current Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland. Even when Gates and then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice—both trained as Soviet experts with deep knowledge of the Russian language and politics—had more authority to determine policy toward Russia, as in the 2007-2008 period, relations sharply deteriorated.

Michael McFaul was able to impart positive momentum to the relationship when he was the senior NSC official for Russian affairs during Obama's first term, but he oversaw their deterioration while serving as U.S. Ambassador to Russia in the first years of Obama's second term. Vice President Joseph Biden served as the lead spokesperson of the reset policy at the 2009 Munich Security Conference, only to announce its demise at the 2015 conference.²¹ Secretary of State John Kerry now exercises what has been described as the "last remaining functioning diplomatic channel" between Washington and Moscow.²² But official bilateral relations have deteriorated despite the fact that Sergei Lavrov's personal ties with Kerry are reportedly better than any the Russian Foreign Minister has had with previous U.S. Secretaries of State.²³ Of note, analysts have also not found a strong correlation between changes in the composition of senior U.S. policy makers and U.S. dealing with China.²⁴

One might suppose that the personality of the presidents of both countries matters, though even in this case one has seen major changes in bilateral relations even as the same top leaders remained in charge of both governments. U.S. presidents since the Cold War have generally not considered Russia an adversary, and have tried to induce Moscow to embrace an American-led international order. On the other hand, U.S. presidents have generally not made Russian concerns a decisive factor that has prevented their taking major foreign policy initiatives despite opposition from Moscow, such as enlarging NATO's membership (which Yeltsin warned would undermine the domestic foundations of his Western-oriented policies²⁵) or deploying missile defenses near Russia (primarily for technical reasons, to position mid-course interceptors in a location from which they can intercept missiles launched at the United States from Iran). Whatever their other merits, and these may have warranted priority, these U.S. decisions undeniably harmed relations with Russia.

Of course, the Kremlin made the same calculations to discount U.S. objections when Moscow decided to intervene militarily in Georgia and in Ukraine; when the Russian government curtailed U.S. government

ties with Russian society; or at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, when Putin unexpectedly lambasted U.S. foreign policy for seeking global domination, apparently out of a genuine belief that others in the room silently shared his views. Although Obama does not know Russian, he did develop a personal interest in nuclear disarmament in college and, while a senator, visited Russia to see several U.S.-funded CTR projects first-hand. Obama has never been a Cold Warrior and sees Russia's capabilities for disruption as limited. However, Obama visibly preferred dealing with former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, and the Kremlin noticed that the White House did not welcome Putin's return to the presidency.²⁶ With Putin back in power, Obama seemed to lose interest in expanding diplomatic engagement with Russia and focused his foreign policy efforts on Asia and the Middle East.

Obama has never been a Cold Warrior and sees Russia's disruptive capabilities as limited.

The Role of the Treasury Department

With the current emphasis on sanctioning Russia, the influence of the Treasury Department on Russian policy is likely growing, but the impact of this shifting balance is uncertain. The Treasury staff has worked with Russia to curb money-laundering and terrorist financing operations, while enforcing sanctions and law enforcement measures against Russian nationals, businesses, and government agencies—such as those engaged in arms trafficking and criminal behavior—even before the Ukraine dispute.

The Treasury Department's approach towards these issues has been technical and non-ideological, though rolling back sanctions has been a problem since other entities, especially commercial ones like banks, fear damage to their reputations if they engage with a foreign institution or group that had previously been sanctioned for violating U.S. laws. The executive branch can remove some measures on its own authority

and slacken enforcement of others through discretionary action. But it is difficult to garner congressional support for repealing legislative sanctions, as evidenced by the years that the Jackson-Vanik Amendment had remained a U.S. law even after the original reasons for its enactment had been redressed and the legislation had ceased having practical effects on U.S.-Russian commercial relations.

Channels of Cooperation: Broad But Shallow

Despite their differences, the Russian and U.S. bureaucracies have worked well on some issues, though such cooperation has generally been broad but shallow. Under Obama, the U.S.-Russian Bilateral Presidential Commission had overseen more than 20 working groups consisting of Russian and U.S. cabinet and sub-cabinet officials. These recurring meetings ensured a modicum of focused bureaucratic interaction between both governments. Russian officials have regretted the U.S. decision to suspend the Commission over the crisis in Ukraine. Presidential Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov lamented that, “Effectively, we are losing channels of bilateral communication in all kinds of topical issues.”²⁷

Until recently, even the ties between the two countries’ law enforcement, military, and energy agencies have generally been good. The U.S. Department of Defense and the Russian Defense Ministry share many challenges in reducing the size of the Cold War-era armed forces to correspond to lower budget outlays. Their 2014 Work Plan, adopted before the Ukrainian crisis, identified dozens of joint activities.²⁸ Until recently, Russian-U.S. military exercises and exchanges occurred on a regular basis and without the stop-and-go dynamics that have marred China-U.S. defense relations. The Pentagon also purchased Russian helicopters and other weapons for Afghanistan’s armed forces. Some Russia-U.S. collaboration has also occurred on addressing international health challenges and other common interests.²⁹

The Russian and U.S. nuclear energy establishments have also worked well together, though this partnership was weakened by the end of the Nunn-Lugar and Megatons for Megawatts programs. At present, the

Russian government no longer allows U.S. threat reduction projects to support security enhancements within the Russian Ministry of Energy’s civilian nuclear energy complex (a decision that ended the monitoring of previously funded CTR projects); to strengthen Russian border interdiction capabilities through the U.S. Second-Line-of-Defense programs; or to continue the Materials Consolidation and Conversion (MCC) projects with the Department of Energy, which have moved Russia’s highly-enriched uranium from smaller sites to a few larger facilities that can dilute or downblend the highly enriched uranium (HEU) into a less concentrated form, making it easier and less expensive to store or use in civilian power reactors.

For now, Russia and the United States continue some technical exchanges, including several joint regulatory activities, as well as their cooperative “global cleanout” of HEU from Poland, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and other former Soviet bloc countries. Although the Russian government is not participating in preparations for the 2016 Nuclear Security Summit, Russian and U.S. representatives continue to work together on nuclear safety and security issues within the International Atomic Energy Agency and other multilateral bodies.

Domestic Roadblocks to Partnership

There is much speculation, though little evidence, that powerful interest groups in Russia or the United States have promoted conflict with the other country for their own ends. In the United States, military programs have been justified mostly by citing threats from terrorists, rogue states like Iran and North Korea, or sometimes China, but Russia was not viewed in Washington as a plausible military threat prior to the Ukrainian crisis. Russian leaders cite Western threats to justify defense expenditures, but in practice spending has gone mostly to systems for fighting local wars against separatists and terrorists, and has been closely tied to the health of the Russian economy, which only in the last few years has been able to generate sustained increases in defense spending. Indeed, Russian analysts now argue that they need to sustain military outlays to boost the overall Russian economy, whose civilian

sectors have suffered heavily from Western sanctions and the fall of world commodity prices such as oil and gas, dispute historical and other evidence against this recommendation.³⁰

A more serious and enduring source of bilateral difficulties may be the consistently flimsy ties between the Russian and U.S. national legislatures, business communities, and cultural institutions. Russian business elites frequently visit the United States and send their children to American schools, but their main commercial partners are typically in Europe and Asia. Meanwhile, U.S. companies find easier and more lucrative commercial opportunities outside Russia, and the United States does not buy Russian oil, gas, or weapons, which are the main Russian exports. Although U.S. investment in Russia is relatively large, various regulatory, security, and political impediments limit economic exchanges. Like other foreign investors, American firms generally perceive the Russian market as an unfair playing field in which the bureaucrats, laws, and policies favor well-connected local elites. Nevertheless, some U.S. entrepreneurs are willing to accept the risks for speculative gains, and at times the Russian stock market has performed better than other foreign indexes. If Russian policies were to become more attractive to foreign investors, especially in the strategic energy sector, the U.S. private sector would see more value in partnering with Russian companies to develop improved clean coal, oil recovery, and fuel cell technologies.

The Impact of Public Opinion

Public opinion is not a major constraint on foreign-policy makers in either country. Russian public opinion regarding the United States is extremely volatile and strongly influenced by elite messaging transmitted through the state-controlled media. In the past, Russian perceptions of the United States have been considerably more favorable than they are today.³¹ Russian popular hostility towards the United States has grown exponentially following the Ukrainian crisis. In January 2014, when relations between Russia and the United States were already poor, 44 percent of Russians expressed negative attitudes towards the United States and 4 percent termed bilateral relations hostile. By February

2015, these figures had risen to 81 percent and 44 percent, respectively.³² While the deterioration in bilateral relations has also been accompanied by a rise in Putin's domestic popularity, Russians do not want the Ukrainian crisis to escalate, and few believe that the United States and its allies present a direct military threat to Russia.³³

American public opinion regarding Russia has become just as volatile. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the American public has generally viewed Russia as friendly or at least non-adversarial, except when Russia is seen as behaving aggressively towards its neighbors. For example, Russia enjoyed a 56 percent favorable rating in the United States in 1998, but the military conflict in Chechnya in 1999-2000 contributed to a precipitous decline to 33 percent favorable and 59 percent unfavorable.³⁴ Still, Mitt Romney was seen as having made a gaffe in the 2012 presidential election when he cited Russia as a more serious threat to the United States than international terrorism.³⁵ That year, more Americans viewed Russia positively than negatively.

Russian public opinion regarding the U.S. is extremely volatile and strongly influenced by elite messaging.

In contrast, current U.S. opinion of Russia is at a record low since the end of the Cold War. According to Gallup, Americans consider Russia the greatest enemy of the United States, with the Ukrainian crisis elevating Russia over the previously leading China, North Korea, and Iran. In 2012, only 2 percent of Americans gave Russia such a designation, but that grew to 9 percent in 2014 and rose to 18 percent in early 2015. Americans view Putin in particular even more negatively, as 72 percent of the respondents have an unfavorable view of the Russian president. The Russian Ambassador has attributed this to the "demonization" of Putin in the U.S. media.³⁶ However, while fears of Russian military power have risen, Americans still rank Russia as a lesser threat than international terrorism or Iran's future possession of nuclear weapons.³⁷

In addition, the state of U.S. relations with Russia has not historically been an important issue for the American public, which is more focused on domestic issues.³⁸ Although some members of Congress make Russian issues one of their areas of focus, and Putin was unpopular on Capitol Hill even before his return to the presidency, they likely do this out of personal conviction since the relationship is not something that affects American voters in most elections.³⁹ According to an NBC poll, only 19 percent of voters stated that issues such as Russia's actions in Ukraine determined how they voted in the 2014 midterm congressional elections.⁴⁰

Comparing Constraints on U.S.-Russia Policy Making

It is true the Russian president faces fewer constraints in making foreign policy than his American counterpart, who must deal with a Congress that is often controlled by the opposing party and also must manage relations with U.S. allies and friends, whose support is useful for legitimizing policy and supporting U.S. military initiatives and economic measures. Yet like their Russian counterparts, U.S. presidents can take many actions regarding the other country that do not require immediate legislative approval, as well as block or ignore legislative initiatives that they oppose. This is often the case, since presidents in principle resist legislative measures that constrain the flexibility of the executive branch.

For example, after resisting congressional pressure to support legislation like the Magnitsky Act for several years on the grounds that it encroached on the executive administration's foreign-policy prerogatives, Obama reluctantly accepted the Act but has until recently limited the application of human rights sanctions on Russia to only a few individuals.⁴¹ Obama has also resisted congressional and other calls to provide weapons to the Ukrainian military.⁴² Moreover, although the U.S. Congress is more powerful and independent than the Russian legislature, it too generally defers to presidential leadership on urgent national security issues. Should extreme circumstances require it, the U.S. government, despite its system of checks and balances, can act with

alacrity. For example, following the invasion of Ukraine, Congress did not challenge Obama's executive orders to invoke sanctions on those involved by citing the International Emergency Economic Power Act and the National Emergencies Act.

However, because the United States relies on the international community to such a large extent in its relations with Russia, it is often unable to respond to developing issues as quickly as Russia. For example, during his confirmation hearings, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter stressed the need to stay in step with U.S. allies in shaping the U.S. response to Ukraine. Although Carter said he would consider supporting the provision of lethal weapons to Ukraine, he described the West's economic sanctions as the core of Western policy and thereby implicitly weakened the argument for providing arms to the Ukrainian government as long as most European governments opposed such action.⁴³ The 2015 U.S. National Security Strategy also emphasizes the importance of acting in concert with U.S. allies on Russia and other issues.

In contrast, while Russian officials have sought foreign governments' approval of their foreign policies for symbolic reasons, Moscow has proven that it will act alone on critical questions if necessary. For example, Moscow has not coerced even its closest allies among the former Soviet republics to back Russia's wars in Georgia or Ukraine.

The centralization of political power in the Kremlin permits Russia to initiate new policies more easily, which can allow Russia to be the driver of policy in its relationship with the United States. But an even more important factor is that the U.S. government since the Cold War has often given higher priority and more attention to other issues, while

While Moscow has sought foreign approval of its policies for symbolic reasons, it has proven that it will act alone if necessary.

Russian leaders seem more consistently attentive to U.S. policies and views. This asymmetry in attention and interest makes it more likely that Moscow will initiate a deliberate change in the relationship, whereas Washington most often drives policy with Russia through its action on other issues, such as missile defense or NATO expansion.

IV. SANCTIONS AND BEYOND

In recent years, the main U.S. policy instrument towards Russia has been the use of diplomatic and economic sanctions. Until last year, U.S. sanctions applied mainly to the human rights, commercial, and nonproliferation practices of various Russian individuals and companies. But after the Russian government annexed Crimea in March 2014 and supported separatists fighting for autonomy in eastern Ukraine, the United States and its allies adopted more comprehensive sanctions against Russia. Along with the declining world prices of Russian exports, most notably oil, and the collapse of the value of the Russian ruble, the sanctions have severely harmed the Russian economy. In the long run, this will reduce the Russian government's ability to sustain high military spending and other elements of national power. Thus far, however, these sanctions have not coerced the Russian government into abandoning the separatists in east Ukraine or into making other concessions on issues of concern to the United States.⁴⁴

Even so, the Obama administration appears determined to continue the heavy use of economic, diplomatic, and other sanctions in its Russia policy. For instance, the 2015 National Security Strategy states that the United States “will continue to impose significant costs on Russia through sanctions and other means.”⁴⁵ The document mentions sanctions on nine occasions (which is nine times more than the 2010 strategy); they are seen as a cure-all for many of the major foreign-policy challenges facing the United States for which the Obama administration does not want

to use military force.⁴⁶ U.S. allies also support sanctions as preferable to U.S. military action, to include supplying U.S. weapons to the Ukrainian armed forces.⁴⁷ In justifying his policy of “strategic patience” toward

Russia, Obama has indicated that it could take some time for the sanctions to place enough pressure on the Kremlin to change its policies; the long-term goal is that Russians will eventually blame their own government, rather than the West, for their hardships.

Sanctions are seen as a cure-all for many of the major foreign-policy challenges in which the Obama administration does not want to use military force.

Beyond sanctions, the Obama administration will continue policies designed to strengthen NATO and isolate Russia. The former include the administration’s European Reassurance Initiative (renewed in the proposed FY2016 defense budget) and the NATO Readiness Action Plan, while the latter encompasses limits on military exchanges and scientific cooperation with Russian representatives. In his recent Munich Security Conference speech, Biden said the Obama administration would change focus “from resetting this important relationship to reasserting the fundamental bedrock principles on which European freedom and stability rest.” Biden denied that the United States seeks “to collapse or weaken the Russian economy,” but he warned that, should Moscow persist in violating international norms in Ukraine and elsewhere, Washington and its allies would continue to impose economic and diplomatic costs on Russia for its actions, as well as counter Russian attempts to exploit corruption in foreign governments or other countries dependent on Russian energy deliveries.⁴⁸

Opposition to imposing additional sanctions against Russia, and support for repealing existing ones following some progress in Ukraine, could grow in some EU countries that have strong economic ties with Russia.

For example, Germany and France export billions of dollars’ worth of goods to Russia, while many Central and Eastern European countries import large volumes of Russian oil and gas, and some right-wing and left-wing European governments such as Hungary and Greece are sympathetic to the Kremlin’s perspectives.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Russia is by far the largest single supplier of oil and gas to the EU. Unless the EU makes radical changes in its energy policies, Europe could become even more dependent on Russian gas in coming years as Norway’s gas production continues to decline. This situation deprives EU members of bargaining leverage while making them vulnerable to external supply shocks and political blackmail. Even if European governments end their support for Russian sanctions, the United States can impose some punitive measures that do not need their support, such as the Magnitsky Act.

U.S. criticism of Russian human rights policies increased after Putin returned to power in 2012.⁵⁰ Although the Russian authorities soon introduced new regulations to constrain U.S. government engagement with Russian society, the Obama administration tried to maintain ties with Russia’s liberal opposition while avoiding making them appear like a U.S.-sponsored fifth column. The U.S. approach resulted partly from the expectation that Putin could remain in power for years, since he faces a weak political opposition that lacks strong leaders or deep financial and media resources. As a result, Washington has demonstrated its disapproval of Russian policies primarily with symbolic acts and sanctions. For instance, Obama canceled a planned summit in Moscow with Putin that was to follow the 2013 G20 summit in St. Petersburg and did not attend the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. In this regard, Obama’s actions simply followed the precedent set by Putin, who failed to attend the G8 and NATO summits held the year before in the United States.

Many Russians resent what they see as U.S. preaching and hypocrisy, pointing to deficiencies in U.S. human rights practices in the war on terror and the National Security Agency’s extensive cyber surveillance.⁵¹ Yet, these clashes over values and domestic policies have not escalated tensions significantly. Until recently, the Obama administration did the

minimum necessary to enforce the Magnitsky Act in order to avert stronger congressional action that might have produced a harsher Russian counteraction. At the end of 2013, Putin also adopted a softer line on issues of concern to the United States by freeing some of Russia's most high-profile prisoners, including Mikhail Khodorkovsky and the members of the punk-rock band Pussy Riot. However, the effects of the Russian president's new course of action on U.S.-Russian relations was vitiated by the Ukrainian crisis, especially reflected in U.S. criticisms of Moscow's annexation of the Crimean peninsula and support for separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Looking ahead, further U.S.-Russia confrontations over human rights seem unavoidable. The Russian political system has yet to evolve into a genuine multiparty democracy without predetermined election outcomes. In addition, Putin has increasingly supported traditional conservative values in Russia regarding sexual orientations and other issues on which

Washington holds Russia to a higher standard on human rights issues because many Americans perceive Russia as essentially a European country.

Americans have become increasingly tolerant. While the United States has little influence over Russian domestic policies in the short-term, American values and domestic politics require some U.S. government support for democracy and human rights in foreign countries.

In denouncing U.S. double standards on these issues, Russian officials correctly complain that Washington holds Russia to a higher standard on these issues than, for example, the Arab states or China. But that is because many influential Americans

perceive Russia as essentially a European country that should evolve into a Western democracy—and they perceive Putin as thwarting this evolution, and endangering it in other countries, in order to retain power.⁵² Over the long term, the United States might exert a greater

impact on Russia's political evolution by integrating Russia more deeply into international institutions that enshrine liberal democratic and free market values, but at present Russia is working with China and other non-Western partners to build alternative multinational structures based on authoritarian values. Meanwhile, Russian legislators sometimes make reciprocal denunciations of U.S. human rights abuses, but whatever their validity, these are not taken seriously by either side and do not appear to constrain either government's policies.

The Limits of Isolation

U.S. officials acknowledge that Western sanctions and other tools of pressure have failed to coerce Russia into ceasing its support for the insurgents in eastern Ukraine.⁵³ Defending his policy of "strategic patience," Obama has argued that this may be just a matter of time—that it will take a while for the Russians' economic pain to lead them to blame the Putin administration, rather than the United States, for their problems. Until now, however, Russian diplomacy has often negated efforts to isolate Moscow. In a November 23, 2014 interview with the Russian Tass News Agency, Putin insisted that Moscow would not allow Russia to fall behind a new "Iron Curtain."⁵⁴

In recent months, Russian diplomacy has achieved noticeable gains with Pakistan, Iran, and other partners. For example, in November 2014, Sergey Shoigu became the first Russian Defense Minister to visit Pakistan since 1969. The two defense ministries signed an unprecedented agreement that could establish a framework for joint military exercises, reciprocal port visits, and a wide-ranging dialogue on regional security issues. The Russian government has also agreed to sell Pakistan as many as 20 Mil Mi-35 'Hind E' heavy attack helicopters.

Until now, the Russian Federation has refrained from such sales due to concerns about damaging Russia's extensive arms sales and other important ties to India. But the Russia-India relationship has also become stronger in important respects in recent years, particularly regarding Afghanistan and nuclear energy. When Putin visited India

in December 2014, the two countries signed \$100 billion worth of contracts, of which approximately \$90 billion involved deals in the oil, gas, and nuclear energy sectors.⁵⁵

Russia and Iran have also announced plans to deepen economic and security ties.⁵⁶ For example, Moscow signed an agreement that will ensure that Russian firms will remain the dominant foreign players in Iran's civil nuclear energy sector even if an Iranian nuclear deal ends Western sanctions on Iran.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, various U.S. attempts to break the Russia-Iran-Syria axis have repeatedly failed.⁵⁸ Lastly, Russian diplomacy regarding the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has made considerable progress in the past year. In 2014 Russia hosted more senior DPRK leaders than any other country; the pair's declared economic projects include building a natural gas pipeline and electricity power lines through the Korean Peninsula and developing North Korea's possibly extensive mineral riches.

Thus far, Russian actions have mostly complicated U.S. diplomacy in the aforementioned countries by reducing U.S. influence and giving key regional actors an alternative to conceding to Washington over disputed issues. The Russian government has not broken with the international consensus demanding that Iran and North Korea not develop nuclear weapons and that Pakistan not assist transnational terrorist movements. But Moscow has made clear to Washington that Russia could block progress on these issues should Putin become sufficiently annoyed over U.S. policies regarding Ukraine, Georgia, or other high-priority issues for his government.

V. LOOKING AHEAD

Russia and the United States share overlapping interests in many areas. At a minimum, these common interests will keep the relationship from become too adversarial. At best, they could provide a foundation for surmounting some of the impediments to deeper or broader cooperation described above. But the constituencies favoring strong bilateral ties in both countries are small, consisting mainly of arms controllers and foreign policy experts. These conditions have meant that the U.S.-Russia agenda is still dominated by the issues that policy makers grappled with during the Cold War—nuclear deterrence, arms control, claimed spheres of influence, and concerns about their international credibility. This situation positions the two parties in the kind of adversarial relationship that prevailed during the Cold War.

Constituencies favoring strong bilateral ties in both countries are small, meaning the U.S.-Russia agenda is still dominated by issues dating back to the Cold War.

Only by moving away from this orientation can both sides begin to overcome the mutual confidence gap that reinforces many of their other differences. In terms of regional security, a recurring fear in Washington

is that other countries such as China may be tempted to achieve their territorial goals by using the same types of tactics that Russia used in Georgia and Ukraine. These tactics involve applying steady pressure against a targeted state, preparing to unfreeze a conflict when a favorable opportunity presents itself, and expecting the United States not to respond with robust military power, since Washington has not enforced previous “red lines” against Iranian and North Korean nuclear activities or Syria’s use of chemical weapons. Fortunately, Russian officials have not encouraged China to engage in military confrontations with its neighbors, and instead they have continued to join Beijing and Washington in discouraging North Korean and Iranian provocations and nuclear weapons tests.

Bilateral Arms Control Progress Unlikely

Rather than renewing their bilateral arms control relationship, the New START agreement between Russia and the United States has been followed by protracted stalemate. Although the Obama administration has been eager to begin negotiating the next treaty, the Putin administration has shown no interest in making deeper cuts in Russia’s nuclear forces. Even before Ukraine further alienated the U.S. Congress from Russia, Russian officials doubted whether the Obama administration could secure Senate ratification of any agreement the two countries might negotiate.

The main Russian objection is that the U.S. government has refused to accept the binding constraints on U.S. missile defenses that Moscow is demanding. Other contentious arms control areas where Moscow and Washington’s views differ include Russian concerns about U.S. conventional superiority, Washington’s desire to reduce Russia’s large inventory of tactical nuclear weapons, mutual unease at each other’s cyber and military space capabilities, and Russia’s demand that the next nuclear arms control treaty place limits on the nuclear forces of other countries. The Russian government and the U.S. Congress will most likely resist new bilateral arms control treaties until shortly before the expiration of the New START agreement, in 2021. The administration

is no longer actively seeking Russia’s acceptance of U.S. or NATO missile defense plans and has lost hope of negotiating major reductions in Russia’s large tactical nuclear weapons stockpile, which means the Pentagon is unlikely to withdraw the U.S. nuclear bombs based in several NATO countries, despite Russian claims that this “nuclear sharing” violates the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.⁵⁹

Although neither country welcomes the mutually assured destruction paradigm that still shapes their strategic nuclear policies and doctrines, Russian and U.S. leaders have differed sharply in their views of how the bilateral arms control relationship should develop. Moscow’s main concerns focus on constraining U.S. ballistic missile defenses (BMD), U.S. conventional superiority, and U.S. security alliances such as NATO. Russian officials also cite concerns about U.S. space, cyber, and precision-strike weapons that allegedly threaten Russia’s deterrent and defence capabilities.

Nonetheless, both countries have reaffirmed their commitment to implement their New START reductions and, though the U.S. government accuses Russia of having violated the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, Russian and U.S. officials continue to negotiate their differences regarding this agreement rather than abandon the treaty. For the next few years, however, U.S.-Russian arms control efforts can at best focus on achieving limited deals in areas of common interest that would not require any ratification of new formal treaties or even legally binding agreements.

While neither country welcomes the mutually assured destruction paradigm that shapes U.S.-Russian arms control, they differ sharply in their views on how to move forward.

Since the 2008 Georgian War, Russian leaders have vocally complained about being marginalized in Europe's NATO-dominated security architecture. Russian discomfort with the prevailing European security environment is evident on several levels, from concern about certain Western security concepts to opposition to specific NATO policies. At the conceptual level, Russian diplomats believe the primacy of NATO, over which Moscow has little influence, negates the core principle of indivisible and equal security by placing non-members like Russia at a disadvantage. They also object to the alliance's use of military force without the approval of the UN Security Council, such as in Kosovo, which circumvents Moscow's veto power. Indeed, Russian policy makers view their country as a major European power that should be consulted on all important continental issues. Some of Russia's neighbors see this stance as Moscow's demanding a sphere of influence in the former Soviet bloc, and certain East European leaders openly expressed concern during Obama's first term that the United States would sacrifice their interests to reach an accommodation with Moscow on missile defense or other issues.

Returning to a recurring Russian complaint, Lavrov told the 2015 Munich Security Conference that the crisis in European security began well before recent events in Ukraine. The Russian Foreign Minister insisted that the international system had been broken for years, if not decades, due to the West's undermining of the UN Charter and Helsinki principles through unilateral military actions, the eastward expansion of NATO and the EU, and the Western belief that, having won the Cold War, they could ignore Russia's legitimate security interests and force Russia's neighbors to turn against Moscow. In his words, "The project of building a 'common European home' failed because our Western partners were guided by illusions and beliefs of winners in the Cold War rather than the interests of building an open security architecture with mutual respect of interests. The obligations, solemnly undertaken as part of the OSCE and the Russia-NATO Council, not to ensure one's own safety at the expense of others' remained on paper and

were ignored on practice."⁶⁰ Lavrov said the parties need to "abandon the custom of considering every problem separately" and instead, with a comprehensive assessment of the situation, recognize that "a real Europe may not exist without Russia," and that a common European home must be created based on the principles of indivisible and equal security.

Recurring waves of NATO enlargement have generated the most longstanding Russian complaints about the alliance.⁶¹ Russian officials claim that NATO leaders pledged never to establish military bases in former Soviet bloc countries in exchange for Moscow's decisions to allow Germany's unification within NATO and to dissolve the Warsaw Pact.⁶² They dismissed NATO's professions of friendship by demanding to know why NATO was enlarging its membership. They viewed with skepticism NATO assurances that the alliance was actually strengthening Moscow's security by creating a belt of prosperous liberal democracies around Russia.⁶³

Russian officials believe that, rather than establish a more benign European security environment for Russia, NATO membership enlargement has created more dividing lines and unnecessary political tensions in Europe. In return, NATO governments insist on maintaining an open-door policy regarding further membership for any European democracy; indeed, the Helsinki Act guarantees the right of any country to join a defensive alliance. In practice, however, the 2008 Russo-Georgian War has made NATO policy makers more reluctant to offer membership to countries under threat of Russian military attack. Since then, NATO has not invited another country to join the alliance.⁶⁴

Nonetheless, the Ukrainian conflict has plunged the Russia-NATO relationship to new depths. This is evident from the increasingly

Russian discomfort with the European security environment is evident; meanwhile, the leaders of the United States no longer trust Russia.

harsh criticisms made about NATO at the annual Moscow Security Conferences, hosted by the Russian Ministry of Defense. In 2013, Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov, the master of ceremonies at the event, highlighted the sharp Russia-NATO differences regarding Europe's security architecture and missile defense, the lack of trust between the parties, and Moscow's demand for more transparency and predictability in NATO's policies. But he said that Russia-NATO cooperation had improved since the Georgian War and praised the absence of fundamental ideological differences between Russia and the West, along with their mutual economic interests, collaboration regarding Afghanistan, and growing academic, business, and cultural exchanges. In contrast, the 2014 Conference was dominated by Ukraine. Foreign Minister Lavrov accused NATO of establishing dividing lines in Europe and promoting "zero-sum games" by forcing former Soviet bloc countries to choose between Russia and the West in order to limit Moscow's influence. At the most recent conference in April 2015, the Russian criticism extended beyond Ukraine to blame Western leaders for pursuing anti-Russian policies that had the effect of destabilizing global security in other regions as well.

For their part, the leaders of the United States no longer trust Russia. Arguing that "too many times President Putin has promised peace, and delivered tanks, troops, and weapons," Vice President Biden insisted at the most recent Munich Conference that the West would judge Russians by their actions "on the ground, not by the paper they sign." Claiming that Moscow could end the insurgency in Ukraine at any moment, Biden demanded, "Don't tell us. Show us, President Putin."⁶⁵ In his own speech in Munich, Senator John McCain called for recognition of "the harsh reality" that Putin "may make tactical compromises here or there, but just as a prelude to further aggression."⁶⁶

Managing Regional Rivalries: Challenges and Opportunities

Squeezing the West out of Eurasia

Despite the focus on Europe, many of the most serious clashes between NATO and Russia still occur in broader Eurasia. Whereas the Baltic states were the site of several U.S.-Russian diplomatic contests in the 1990s, Moscow and the West have clashed most recently over Georgia and Ukraine. Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan could be the site of future East-West disputes. Although the United States since the Cold War has sought to assist the former Soviet republics to remain politically independent of Moscow, Russia under Putin has managed to reestablish its superior position in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, which it lost in the 1990s, through a combination of bilateral and multilateral initiatives, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the trilateral Customs Union, and now the Eurasian Union, to consolidate the Eurasian states. Russia's efforts have overwhelmed various Western attempts to link Eurasia to Europe, including the EU's Eastern Partnership Program (EaP) and the U.S. New Silk Road initiative.

NATO has refused to deal directly with the CSTO for fear of legitimizing Moscow's primacy in the former Soviet space.

U.S.-Russian cooperation regarding Afghanistan increased significantly during Obama's first term. The Russian government allowed NATO countries to send personnel, equipment, and other goods through its territory to support their forces in Afghanistan. Russia also contributed small arms and ammunition to the Afghan National Security Forces, collaborated with the Pentagon to sell helicopters and provide training to the Afghan Air Force, and cooperated with NATO in training counter-narcotics personnel from Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Pakistan. But

Russian government representatives constantly criticized NATO forces for not suppressing Afghan narcotics trafficking and for shunning cooperation with the CSTO. NATO has refused to deal directly with the CSTO; instead the Alliance has engaged only bilaterally with individual CSTO members for fear of legitimizing Moscow's primacy in the former Soviet space. For the past year, NATO has continued its train, advise, and equip mission in Afghanistan without any visible cooperation with Russia.

Conflict and Cooperation in the Middle East

Except in the case of Iran, the Obama administration did not initially treat Russia as a major factor in its Middle East policies. U.S. officials withdrew from Iraq and promoted Israel-Palestinian reconciliation with little attention to Moscow. Then the Arab Spring, NATO military intervention in Libya, and U.S. threats against Syria heightened tensions as Russian diplomats blocked U.S. efforts to secure various supporting UN resolutions and accused the United States of abetting extremism by attacking secular governments allied to Moscow, and thereby creating security vacuums in which illegal military groups could spread crime, weapons, and terrorism to other regions. U.S. officials led by Susan Rice employed some of their harshest rhetoric to denounce Moscow's support for the Bashar al-Assad's regime in Damascus, which includes large Russian arms deliveries to Syria.

Nevertheless, U.S. officials have acknowledged Russia's important role in securing the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal. The growing influence of extremists in the Syrian opposition—which Russians claim they have warned the West about for years—has helped move U.S. opinion regarding Syria closer toward that of Moscow in practice if not in rhetoric. In Iraq, Russian officials have faulted the U.S. military efforts against Islamic State militants without really offering an alternative solution.

Competition in Asia

In East Asia, Russia has resumed its large-scale arms sales to China, and the two countries have engaged in annual marine and land force exercises in recent years. Polls also show that Russians like China much more than they like the United States or the EU.⁶⁷ Russia eschews any formal cooperation with the United States directed at containing China, but Washington and Moscow share an interest in keeping Beijing's rise from

Russian diplomacy has generally avoided trying to exploit China-U.S. tensions, but this could change.

threatening regional security and global stability. Russian diplomacy has generally avoided trying to exploit China-U.S. tensions, but this could change. Moscow and Washington are also competing for influence in New Delhi, where the Modi government is moving India away from its traditional security alignments. India now spends more money on U.S. weapons than it does on Russian arms. Meanwhile, Russia has improved ties with Pakistan and had sought to do likewise with Japan, though the Ukrainian crisis compelled the Japanese government to join the United States and Europe in imposing sanctions on Russia

Frozen Projects in the Arctic

Until now, Russia and the United States have not engaged in open confrontation in the Arctic region, seeking instead to establish an environment conducive to its economic development. Russia, the United States, Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden have cooperated within the framework provided by the Arctic Council, which has taken on an expanded mandate to include managing climate change, protecting sea routes, and developing energy assets (oil, gas, and minerals).

Russia needs access to Western technologies and capital to fully exploit its Arctic riches. Many Western companies have created joint ventures with Russian firms to explore and extract oil, gas, and minerals from the territory. However, sanctions have tampered with these efforts, forcing Western companies to halt some projects. For example, Exxon was planning to join forces with Russian energy giant Rosneft to exploit a massive oil and gas reserve in the Russian Arctic, but due to sanctions Exxon was forced out of the venture.⁶⁸ U.S.-Russia disputes persist over Moscow's ambitious territorial claims and primacy over the Northern Sea Route.⁶⁹ The Russian government has announced plans to increase its military presence in the Arctic.⁷⁰

U.S.-Russian Relations: 3 Scenarios for the Short Term

Although the relationship could proceed in many directions in the next few years, one can posit three plausible scenarios based on varying levels of cooperation and conflict between Moscow and Washington.

1. Limited Partnership and Conflict

In the best possible scenario, Russia and the United States would cooperate on some issues while agreeing to differ on others. Their collaboration would be based on shared interests rather than common values, which could still generate limited gains for both countries. In effect, relations would, as after the 2008 Georgian War, largely return to the prewar status quo once the Ukrainian conflict freezes. Probable areas of cooperation would include counterterrorism, WMD nonproliferation, joint development of the Arctic through U.S.-Russian private-sector partnerships, U.S.

support for Russia-Japan reconciliation and other indirect means of balancing China's growing power, and collaboration on civil nuclear energy and outer space research.

In the best scenario, U.S.-Russia collaboration would be based on shared interests rather than common values.

Moreover, one might see renewed U.S. purchases of Russian weapons for the Afghan military and other cooperation in Afghanistan as the U.S. military presence in that country declines, which could decrease Moscow's concerns about U.S. influence in the region.

In Europe, the two sides would sustain their existing confidence and security-building measures, such as the data exchanges and constraints on military activities associated with agreements like Open Skies, New START, and the Vienna Document, which aim to expand mutual transparency and mutual reassurance about potential threats. They might even strengthen some of these measures or apply them to new regions, including Asia and the Middle East. However, Russia and the United States are still unlikely to make much progress on formal arms control treaties, such as making deep cuts in their nuclear forces or resurrecting the suspended Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty—which, in addition to its earlier problems, would now have to address Russia's annexation of Crimea. The other former Soviet republics would prefer this scenario to either of the two following ones, since it would give them more freedom to pursue independent foreign policies.

2. Indifference and Regional Retrenchment

In this scenario, Russia would continue to develop the Eurasian Union, the CSTO, and other instruments of primacy in the former Soviet republics, excluding the special case of the Baltic States. Russian control over regional media and energy assets, along with Russia's local military superiority, would reinforce Moscow's primacy. The U.S. influence in the former Soviet Union would continue to decline due to limited resources, weak partners and competing U.S. priorities, such as limiting conflicts with Russia and advancing U.S. goals in other regions. European governments also would not contest Russia's regional primacy. In practice, both EU and NATO membership enlargement in the former Soviet Union would cease. The United States and Russia would treat Ukraine as a de facto divided buffer state outside of either's military alliances.

In other regions, Moscow would effectively abandon aspirations for integration into the West, while the United States would relegate Russia to a troublesome regional player and develop global partnerships with key European and Asian partners. The Russian government may denounce U.S. policies in Asia and the Middle East without offering more than diplomatic backing and limited arms sales to the main U.S. adversaries in those regions. Russia's ties with China would remain healthy, but fall well short of an anti-U.S. alliance. Russia's role in Africa (an area of EU primacy) and the Western Hemisphere (where U.S. primacy continues) would remain small, since Moscow would still lack the means to offer much economic or other support to these regions. Russia would expand its economic presence in the Arctic without major cooperation or conflict with the other major countries active there. Russian-U.S. conflicts in these third areas would remain constrained due to the limited stakes that the weaker of the two countries (most often Russia) would have in these contested regions.

3. Sustained Mutually Harmful Confrontation

The most pessimistic of the three scenarios would see the current Russia-U.S. crisis deepen and broaden to become more intense and affect more geographic and functional areas. The United States could sustain its sanctions (which, unlike those of the EU, do not have an expiration date) and add new ones, even indirectly by excluding Russia from U.S. regional trade and security initiatives. More directly, the United States could provide military assistance to Ukraine and other countries near Russia. The United States could encourage these states to join NATO, reinforce U.S. military deployments in Europe to deter Russian threats, try to keep Moscow isolated, and weaken ties between Russia and Western Europe, India, and Japan.

Russia could respond by annexing more Ukrainian and Georgian territory and by supporting pro-Russian militants in other parts of these countries. Moscow could also compel Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and other former Soviet republics to enter the Eurasian Union and the CSTO in order to institutionalize Moscow's influence in the former Soviet Union.

Russia could persist in its limited hybrid wars for limited objectives and continually probe for weaknesses in the Baltic States, hoping to damage NATO by demonstrating the Alliance's inability to manage Moscow's non-Article 5 challenges.

In Europe and elsewhere, Putin could continue to appeal to adherents of traditional conservative values and those uncomfortable with social modernity, which includes both left- and right-wing activists as well as some religious fundamentalists.

Russia is a critical swing state in shaping the world's future, that could become either a pillar or a spoiler of international security.

Beyond Europe, Russia could break with the United States regarding Iran, backing Tehran's hardliners in the hopes of averting a U.S.-Iran reconciliation. Moscow could also devote resources to security partnerships with countries alienated from Washington in South America, Africa, and Asia. Russia could seek more consistent support from China against the West by selling Beijing its most advanced weapons, augmenting its communications campaign of warning Beijing and other authoritarian regimes about the threat of U.S.-backed social revolutions, and backing China's territorial claims against Tokyo and other countries to worsen ties between Beijing and Washington. In the security domain, Russian-Chinese military ties and joint exercises could grow in size and frequency while the two countries pool their assets (such as Russian basic science and China's industrial prowess) to overcome U.S. defense capabilities.

Russia is a critical swing state in shaping the world's future. A Russia that truly embraces the principles of liberal democracy and the free market could become a pillar of a safer and more prosperous world. However, if Russia and the West continue down their current path, Russia could remain alienated from the West and become a potential

spoiler to international security and prosperity, while U.S. policy makers would focus on confronting Russia while neglecting more serious challenges elsewhere.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

The fate of the latest ceasefire in Ukraine remains precarious. Should the current truce unexpectedly endure, a lasting settlement to the Ukrainian conflict will still prove elusive given the players' conflicting strategic aims: Russia aims to keep Ukraine weak and divided; the Ukrainian government, backed by the United States, intends to rule a reunified country that includes Russian-occupied Crimea; while many in Europe would welcome any settlement that ends the fighting and the costly economic sanctions. But a truce, if successful, could buy time for progress on other issues and, at a minimum, contain the damage from the war in Ukraine.

For Russia:

- **Improve information flow in foreign-policy decision making:** Russian President Vladimir Putin is unlikely to change his character even if he remains in power for many years, but he could more plausibly change his operational procedures. For example, in making decisions about foreign policy, Putin uses limited information sources, filtered through the intelligence services, and appears to believe his own propaganda. He could improve his decision making by expanding his data sources and more actively listening to foreign leaders and experts.⁷¹
- **Strengthen nuclear material security cooperation with the United States:** Russia should rejoin the National Security Summit

process. Notwithstanding Russian concerns about the utility of the summits and U.S. domination as host of the 2016 meeting, the summits are a high-profile event that could provide a mechanism for direct dialogue between Obama and Putin on nuclear material security and other common interests. Russia would exert more influence on the construction of a better nuclear security architecture by joining the summit process than by being the only country to skip it. At a minimum, Russia should not encourage other countries to also boycott the event, which would prove self-defeating for Russian security and further worsen U.S.-Russia security cooperation.

- **De-dramatize the missile defense threat:** Moscow needs to rationalize its ballistic missile defense policies. U.S. missile defenses cannot seriously threaten Russia's nuclear deterrent for at least the next decade. Exaggerating U.S. capabilities worsens the overall relationship. Russia can best limit U.S. missile defense programs by helping resolve their main drivers—the missile development programs of Iran and North Korea. An aggressively negative stance against missile defenses will continue to complicate Russia's relations with all of Washington's Asian and European allies that are cooperating with the United States on this issue. Moscow must also recognize that even non-adversaries such as India and China are pursuing missile defense capabilities. Indeed, Russia has its own BMD program. Missile defenses will continue to proliferate; Russian and U.S. efforts should focus on limiting their possible negative effects on strategic stability, such as may occur should a government incorrectly presume that it could use BMD systems as a shield behind which it wields military power as an offensive sword without fear of retaliation. Concerns for strategic stability should also drive the Russian and U.S. approaches towards other potentially disruptive strategic technologies, such as cyber and hypersonic weapons.⁷²

- **Be cautious with China:** Russians need to be more wary of mortgaging Russia's future to China simply to weaken the U.S.-led order that, whatever its defects, offers many benefits to Russia. China is a rising power relative to Russia and could, as it is already

doing with its other neighbors, seek to redress territorial and other disadvantages that it had to accept when it was weaker. Even if the Chinese indefinitely accept *de facto* control over the Russian Far East rather than explicit territorial transfers, Russia can hardly welcome becoming a raw materials appendage to China and becoming entrapped in clashes between China and its other neighbors.

For the United States:

- **Control the sanctions spiral:** The United States should follow the European example and include sunset provisions with its sanctions on Russia, so that they would automatically expire by a certain date unless renewed. It would be risky to require an affirmative congressional vote or even executive branch decision for their termination, since mobilizing political support behind their repeal can be difficult, as shown by the Jackson-Vanik saga. In other words, sanctions tend to be “sticky:” they are easy to enact but hard to revoke. Short-term sanctions can signal U.S. disapproval of Russian actions in ways that are more visible than diplomatic demarches and less risky than military measures, but they encourage retaliation and rally targeted people behind their government. In the long term, as with Iran, they can slow the growth of a country's economic and military potential. But long-lasting sanctions reduce Russia's integration with the West, which is bad for Russia and for European stability.

- **Maintain credibility among military allies:** With respect to military matters, the United States should make clear to Russia that Washington will defend its NATO allies from any Russian aggression. NATO's strongest asset is its credibility; failing to uphold an Article 5 guarantee could rupture the alliance and undermine its many benefits for Europeans, Americans, and even Russians. Putting more NATO troops in the alliance's more vulnerable eastern members that border Russia is useful for reassuring them, and thereby bolstering the alliance's credibility. Having more American soldiers deploy in Europe offers a good compromise between being provocative and

looking weak, the latter of which invites further Russian probing. The United States also needs to sustain pressure on its European allies to increase their defense spending. According to the newly released 2015 issue of *The International Institute for Strategic Studies' Military Balance*, European defense budgets continue to decline despite the resumption of armed conflict in Europe.⁷³

• **Develop non-military responses to long-range challenges and opportunities:** While any U.S. policy toward Russia will have a military component, it will not have a primarily military solution given Russia's portfolio of myriad non-military tools for exerting influence in other countries and the imperative of avoiding a war between Russia and the West. Despite its actions in Georgia and Ukraine, the Russian government has never attacked a NATO member. The United States and other NATO countries need better tactics as well as better non-military tools to match Russia's hybrid tactics, which include media manipulation, energy extortion, and other coercive instruments. Western policy makers must not be so focused on managing economic sanctions against Russia that they neglect the need for an integrated long-term strategy to manage a resurgent Russia—promoting energy diversification could take years, and the United States also needs to develop policies to engage and educate the next post-Putin generation of Russian leaders, who could take another decade to gain power in the Kremlin.

• **Adopt a policy of strategic engagement with Russia's neighbors:** In partnership with its allies, the United States needs a more active policy of engagement in Russia's periphery aimed at resolving frozen conflicts, reducing public corruption, overcoming democracy defects, and decreasing other vulnerabilities that invite Russian involvement by offering opportunities for exploitation.⁷⁴ The United States should insist on and accept the right of Russia's neighbors to freely join the Eurasian Union and other Russian institutions provided that Moscow respects their economic and political freedoms. Moreover, the United States should take more care to avoid inflicting collateral damage on these countries through

sanctions targeted at Russia. Many Central Asian migrants are losing their jobs and are unable to provide the remittances their families depend on, while their national currencies are suffering due to their links with the Russian ruble. Rather than pressure Russia to change its policies, for now they are blaming the West for their misery, which is easy to do given the Russian domination over the media in many of the former Soviet republics. Moreover, the United States needs to develop some policy toward the CSTO, Eurasian Union, and Shanghai Cooperation Organization and other Moscow-dominated institutions that include Russia's neighbors. The United States could find it increasingly difficult to ignore these institutions if Russia continues to strengthen their capabilities and deepen their ties with nonmembers. If opportunities arise, the United States should try to work with some of the members of these Moscow-led bodies to advance U.S. interests that might otherwise be challenged by uncontested Russian domination of their policies.

• **Maintain support for Ukrainian sovereignty and development:** Even beyond the current crisis, the United States should make keeping Ukraine independent of Russia an enduring priority, since Moscow's disruptive power-projection potential in Europe is limited by the resulting geographic barrier and the constrained access to Ukrainian resources. The optimal U.S. strategy toward this end would mostly include substantial economic and good-governance assistance. The European Union is a natural partner in this. However, some Russian-Ukrainian interactions, which are inevitable given the deep ties between the countries, will help promote Ukraine's economic development and social stability. Furthermore, the United States needs to think more creatively about how to give Russia a greater stake in the European security order—perhaps by taking up Medvedev's idea of a European Security Treaty to arrange a conference that would force Russia to renew its commitments to the Helsinki Principles, the CFE Treaty, and affirm their security assurances to countries that have eliminated their nuclear weapons (at least for Belarus and Kazakhstan, if not Ukraine).

• **Encourage positive relations between Russia and U.S. allies in Asia to balance against China:** In East Asia, the United States should encourage Japan to reconcile with Russia to help balance Chinese pressure against Tokyo and influence in Moscow. Until now, neither Russia nor China have backed the other's territorial claims against Japan. While long-standing territorial disputes between Russia and Japan over the Kuril Islands are unlikely to be resolved in the near future, U.S. officials should encourage their Russian and Japanese counterparts to keep diplomatic doors open. Thus far, the Japanese government has reluctantly supported U.S. sanctions against Russia, but excessive U.S. pressure could backfire and alienate more people in Japan, the United States' main ally in Asia. The United States should also avoid heavy-handed pressure on South Korea to sustain sanctions against Russia; many in Seoul see Moscow as a helpful partner in managing North Korea. Further, Washington should accept Russia's deepening ties with North Korea as a potentially positive development if it decreases the risk that North Korea might resume its nuclear weapons tests or military provocations.

For Both:

Russia and the United States share enduring, overlapping interests that require some level of cooperation, or at least coordination, to achieve. The prevention of WMD terrorism or proliferation is the most obvious area, but the two states also want to avoid the emergence of a security vacuum in Afghanistan or other potential terrorist safe havens. They also share the negative goal of keeping their differences over Ukraine and other issues from escalating into a direct armed conflict. These common interests will help keep U.S.-Russia ties from becoming too adversarial pending the advent of stronger incentives for future cooperation. These could include challenges from a more assertive China or more intense transnational threats, such as WMD terrorism.

• **Cooperate on reducing the threat of aspirant nuclear states:** Russia and the United States do not want Iran, North Korea, or other countries to acquire nuclear weapons. In the case of Iran, Russia and

the United States generally concur that a good settlement would see the international community recognize Iran's right to pursue peaceful nuclear activities under comprehensive international monitoring. In return, they would remove many if not all proliferation-related sanctions on Iran. In November 2014, a senior NSC official said that "the Russians have played a very helpful role during these negotiations," especially since they have "put forward creative and reasonable ideas that preserve our objective of cutting off any possible pathway Iran might have to a nuclear weapon."⁷⁵ Furthermore, Russian diplomats have traditionally worked well with their U.S. counterparts regarding North Korea.

Yet, the two governments frequently differ on the best tactics to counter proliferation as well as on the gravity of WMD threats. The crisis in Ukraine has further damaged the possibility of Russia-U.S. cooperation in this realm. For example, the current tensions have impeded hopes of intensifying U.S.-Russian WMD threat reduction cooperation in other countries now that the original Nunn-Lugar program in Russia has expired. Russian officials have periodically suggested that they might even reduce their cooperation with the United States on New START, Iran, and North Korea in response to Western sanctions and other measures. At the end of last year, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich expressed anger at the latest round of U.S. human rights sanctions and threatened that, "As Washington could have seen previously, we don't leave such unfriendly acts without an answer."⁷⁶

Moscow has responded to Western sanctions by imposing countersanctions in the form of a ban on some Western food imports and the Russian Ministry has cautioned that "[U.S.] actions ... are putting in doubt the prospects of bilateral cooperation on solving the situation around the Iranian nuclear program, the Syrian crisis and other acute international problems."⁷⁷ Even without such retaliation, this year's Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference looks to be more contentious than the 2010 session, due to Ukraine and other issues. Several additional adverse

developments are impeding global nonproliferation efforts, such as the stalemated Russia-U.S. nuclear arms control talks, the failure to convene the planned conference on making the Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction, and the impeded progress of the Iran nuclear negotiations. Russian-U.S. collaboration on regional proliferation challenges remains critical since both countries are veto-wielding members of the U.N. Security Council, have produced most of the world's nuclear materials and technologies, and retain intellectual leadership in many WMD-related areas.

• **Restore cooperation on arms control:** Furthermore, Russia and the United States need to adhere to existing arms control treaties if they hope to develop new ones. The United States can pressure Russia into returning to compliance with the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) Treaty by warning that the Treaty's demise would allow the Pentagon to deploy large numbers of intermediate-range missiles in the Middle East and East Asia. These would aim to counter Iran's and China's growing missile threat, but Russian territory would also come within their range. Russian diplomats can convincingly cite the Ukrainian and Georgian wars as evidence that the European and Eurasian security order needs a renewed CFE-type agreement as well as other institutional repairs to reduce the prospects of further armed conflicts.

• **Promote the safe use of nuclear energy:** The United States and Russia want to revive the civilian use of nuclear power, but only if it will be safe and secure. They can jointly assist countries that are considering starting nuclear energy programs to understand how to avoid accidents and secure their nuclear material. Russia and the United States have a bilateral framework agreement that permits Russian and U.S. firms to cooperate on specific civil nuclear energy projects, such as researching and designing new types of nuclear power reactors that would be less proliferation-prone and perhaps more efficient and safer than existing models.⁷⁸ Such collaboration could prove useful in developing new commercial stakeholders

in both countries that have an interest in maintaining good U.S.-Russian relations.

• **Build economic ties to increase demand for positive relations:** The economic relationship between Russia and the United States is pitifully small. Americans do not buy Russian oil, gas, or weapons, which are the main Russian exports, and various impediments hobble mutual investments. Now the Ukrainian crisis is leading the United States to restrict cooperation in outer space exploration.⁷⁹ Such limited commercial ties mean that neither country has a large group of influential commercial actors that lobby for improved relations to advance their economic interests. The constituencies favoring strong bilateral ties in both countries are small, consisting mainly of arms controllers and foreign policy experts. As a result, the relationship lacks an economic shock absorber to temper the inevitable ups and downs in their political ties. These conditions also mean that the Russian-U.S. agenda is still dominated by Cold War-type issues, including nuclear arms control, which position the two parties in an adversarial relationship. Whatever Russia may hope, the world's emerging economies cannot fully substitute for the investment flows and high technology that Western companies and countries can bring to the Russian economy.⁸⁰

• **Expand existing avenues of diplomatic and cultural exchange:** Diplomatic and Track II dialogues need to continue despite official differences. At the societal level, few Americans learn the Russian language or study in Russia, while many Russians have a superficial and misleading understanding of U.S. politics and society—a misperception furthered by the unbalanced, negative, and conspiratorial depiction of the United States in Russian media.⁸¹ There is an urgent need for more academic, sub-national, and NGO-led efforts at dialogue and engagement.⁸² U.S. government funding for promoting academic and cultural exchanges with Russia has been declining since the Cold War, while Russian government funding for U.S. studies seems aimed at manipulating opinion of the United

States rather than understanding American policies and practices. Such engagement by itself is unlikely to overcome differences, but it can help counter misconceptions in the Kremlin and indifference in Washington. It is important to prevent hostile perceptions from becoming mutually reinforcing, leading to a downward spiral of confrontation.

Notes

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