
Elevation and Calibration: *A New Russia Policy for America*

Andrew C. Kuchins



CGI CENTER ON GLOBAL INTERESTS

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

As Chairman of the Board of the Center on Global Interests (CGI), I'm pleased to present this timely report which provides a comprehensive set of recommendations on Russia policy for the incoming presidential administration. The foundation for this collaborative effort between Dr. Andrew Kuchins and CGI was built on an exhaustive series of interviews with leading American and Russian policymakers and analysts, who have deep personal and professional experience in the bilateral relationship. Whenever possible, this report aims to transmit their collective wisdom to the incoming administration in a way that emphasizes both the continuities and the novelties of contemporary U.S.-Russia relations.

Unfortunately, it is not lost on the author or the interviewees that, at the edge of the 25th anniversary of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, U.S.-Russia relations are now in such crisis that we must look back to the early 1980s for comparable danger. Although risks and threats abound across the entirety of the relationship, none are as acute as the deliberate or inadvertent use of nuclear weapons. New vulnerabilities resulting from the digital connectedness of command and control systems combine with the corrosive effects of influence operations in the wide open digital information space to further complicate executive decision making in the event of a crisis of nuclear escalation. The new administration is in many ways entering uncharted and dangerous territory in respect to crisis management.

This report continues the work of recent efforts such as the Global Zero Commission on Nuclear Risk Reduction 2015 Report on *De-Alerting and Stabilizing the World's Nuclear Force Postures* in identifying ways to prevent this kind of crisis escalation. Dr. Kuchins' efforts facilitate a better assessment of the risks and challenges that Russia poses to U.S. interests, and offer an understanding of how this assessment should inform balanced policies of deterrence and engagement.

It is our hope that this report will help the new administration to steer U.S.-Russia relations towards a direction that serves the interests of the United States and its allies by reducing the risk of conflict and discovering ways to engage on overlapping mutual interests.

Bruce G. Blair
Chairman of the Board, CGI and Co-Founder of Global Zero
Washington DC

November 30, 2016

PREFACE

This report seeks to explain how and why U.S.-Russia relations have developed in the 25 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union and provide a framework for the incoming administration to move forward in relations with Russia. To inform this analysis, the author has conducted interviews with more than 40 leading policymakers and analysts in the United States and Russia, who have deep experience in the bilateral relationship over the course of this period.¹ I am very grateful to those who gave their time to be interviewed. Of course, the final analysis, interpretation, and recommendations of the report are my sole responsibility.

No single report of this length can cover all issues or seek to describe and resolve all debates in this complex relationship, and that is not the goal here. Rather, this is an effort to build a narrative incorporating both Russian and American perspectives on how and why the relationship has reached the present impasse, and to outline an approach for how the new U.S. administration should approach Russia beginning in January 2017.

I am grateful to the Center on Global Interests and its director, Nikolai Zlobin, for the opportunity to undertake this project during such a challenging time in our bilateral relations. The Center's extremely competent staff, including Olga Kuzmina, Michael Purcell and Alec Albright, have contributed greatly both substantively as well as administratively in bringing this report to publication. I also want to thank Georgetown University research assistants Katherine Baughman and Eva Kim for their indispensable contributions to this project. I am particularly grateful to the Carnegie Corporation of New York and Georgetown University for their support that made taking on a project of this magnitude possible.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to those who read drafts of the report and provided invaluable feedback: Harley Balzer, William Courtney, Thomas Graham, Vadim Grishin, Julia Gurganus, Nikolas Gvosdev, Steadman Hinckley, Andrey Kortunov, Robert Legvold, Wayne Merry, Matthew Murray, William Pomeranz, Rachel Salzman, Angela Stent, Daniel Treisman, Mikhail Troitskiy, and Igor Zevelev. Any remaining oversights are mine alone.

Andrew C. Kuchins
Washington DC

November 15, 2016

¹ The list of interviewees can be found in appendix 1. The interviews were conducted on a not-for-attribution basis with agreement that quotations could be used in the report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

U.S.-RUSSIA RELATIONS IN CRISIS

As a new administration prepares to enter the White House, the U.S.-Russia relationship is in crisis. Russia's violations of international law in Ukraine, followed by its entry into the Syrian civil war and alleged interference in the U.S. presidential campaign, have led Washington to abandon its longtime policy of integration in favor of deterrence. Since 2014, most formal channels of cooperation with Russia have been closed.

The United States and Russia are not exactly in a "new Cold War." But the present conflict is potentially more dangerous. Both sides are pursuing nuclear modernization programs and remilitarizing Europe in the virtual absence of dialogue on issues of nuclear and European security. Meanwhile, new threats and challenges to the United States that have emerged since the Cold War—including terrorism and stability in the Greater Middle East, cyber security, and the rise of China—are exacerbated by a hostile relationship with Russia.

To a considerable extent, Russian domestic politics have driven the current conflict. The modernization of the Russian armed forces since 2008 has heightened military tensions in Europe. Russia's key foreign-policy driver—the desire to restore its great-power status after perceived humiliation by the West—has resulted in assertive actions taken in defiance of the United States.

And under the leadership of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who faces a presidential election in 2018, Russia's anti-Western posture has become a source of domestic political strength.

The difficulty of working with Russia is great, but the risks of escalation are still greater. Deterrence or isolation alone is unlikely to be effective, because it fuels the ongoing security conflict while consolidating Moscow's resolve around its chosen policy course. It is time to try a new policy—one that combines enhanced deterrence of Russia with deeper engagement to promote U.S. interests in the long-term—for the simple reason that the current approach is not working well.

INTERVIEWS: DIVERGENT NARRATIVES, COMMON CAUSE

The author's interviews with more than 40 leading American and Russian experts and officials, which are excerpted in this report, reveal two divergent narratives about the trajectory of U.S.-Russian relations since the collapse of the Soviet Union. These discussions point to a lengthy list of unresolved issues—including European security and the role of NATO, ballistic missile defense, and regime change—that are genuine and deep. Despite voicing mutual grievances and regrets, speakers on both sides agreed on the urgent need to reestablish communication channels between Washington and Moscow to pull the relationship back from the brink. Their insights inform the recommendations in this report.

TOWARD A NEW RUSSIA POLICY

The arrival of a new administration presents an opportunity to clearly evaluate the significant risks the United States and its allies face in a hostile relationship with Russia. These are primarily:

- **Nuclear risk:** the United States and Russia are at the highest risk of nuclear conflict since 1983. The two sides remain locked into the threat of mutually assured destruction (MAD), with short decision times in the event of a military escalation, accident, or misperception. This is set against the recent collapse of arms control agreements and the closure of bilateral nuclear discussions.
- **Security dilemma:** Moscow and Washington are in a security dilemma whereby one side sees the efforts of the other side to enhance its national security as coming at its own expense. This dilemma is most acute in Europe, where Russia and NATO view each other as a direct security threat, leading to further military escalation. Renewed rivalry poses a risk to the United States and its European allies, particularly the states caught in the “grey zone” between Russia and NATO.

The nuclear risk alone necessitates renewed engagement: as one former U.S. official put it, “We are sleepwalking on nukes.” Combined with the militaries of the United States, NATO allies and Russia increasingly operating in close proximity, the chance of an accident sparking a broader conflict is simply too great to ignore. And while many are calling for a stronger policy of deterrence and isolation of Russia, this approach is unlikely to be effective, because it exacerbates the ongoing escalation of the security dilemma, as well as underestimates the extent to which domestic pressures drive Putin’s behavior.

RECOMMENDATIONS: CALIBRATION AND ELEVATION

To mitigate the current risks, Washington must adjust—or **calibrate**—its policy to simultaneously enhance deterrence of Russia where it threatens U.S. interests, while pursuing deeper engagement with Russia on issues where progress can be made. The new administration must also **elevate** its engagement with Russia to the highest level as incentive for Moscow to adjust and accommodate.

As a preliminary step, the new administration must adopt a new tone towards Russia. Casual but denigrating remarks from U.S. leaders incite deeper anti-Americanism and do nothing to advance the pursuit of U.S. foreign and security policy goals that require Moscow’s cooperation. Likewise, positive or complimentary statements should be deliberate and focused so as not to be misinterpreted as a blanket endorsement of the Russian government or its policy. The new president must set a new tone, abandoning gratuitous denigration or excessive praise of Russia and its leader.

Key Recommendations

- **Elevate dialogue with Russia** to the level of sustained presidential engagement in order to assuage Russia’s sense of status deprivation vis à vis the United States and alleviate any concerns Putin may have about the U.S. desire for regime change. This alone may have the effect of moderately diffusing current tensions. In the long-term, presidential engagement makes it harder for the Kremlin to demonize U.S. policy and is justified by the magnitude of risks that a hostile Russia could pose on critical issues of nuclear security, terrorism, cyber security, and European security.
- **Propose a bilateral strategic dialogue** to explore options for an off-ramp from the current escalation of the security dilemma.

This engagement should focus on a narrow agenda of nuclear arms control, counter terrorism, and cyber security issues, without the expectation of short-term deliverables. Within this dialogue:

- **Renew talks on nuclear security and nonproliferation**, starting with the modernization of nuclear arsenals to mitigate the risk of further MAD entrenchment, managing the expiration of the New Start Treaty in 2021, and developing a framework for a future agreement on missile defense and new conventional technologies that could have first-strike capabilities.
- **Elevate and institutionalize a bilateral format for reducing the threat of international terrorism**, beginning with addressing the threat of nuclear terrorism in third countries.
- **Revive the bilateral working group on cybersecurity issues** established in 2013 and reaffirm each side's commitment to the use of direct communication channels to reduce the risk of misperception, escalation, and conflict in the case of a major cyber attack.
- **Ensure NATO capacity and reinforce Article V commitments** to deter potential Russian aggression in Europe. The new U.S. president should make his first foreign trip to Europe as a statement of Washington's commitment to its allies. The United States should continue to support the implementation of the European Reassurance Act and possibly other measures to ensure that NATO's capacity to fulfill Article V commitments are viewed as fully credible in Moscow.

- **Lead the way in developing a new format for an agreement in Ukraine** that includes the United States as a principal negotiator with Europe, Ukraine, and Russia. The Minsk II agreement is increasingly unimplementable due to changes on the ground in the Donbass and serves to further destabilize Ukraine. The United States and its allies must maintain sanctions on Russia and maintain Minsk II until the successful negotiation of a new agreement.
- **Selectively re-open channels of communication** that were closed after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, beginning with the military-military track and the NATO-Russia Council. Rather than a reward for good behavior, these channels are a safeguard against further escalation that is in the interests of both sides.

TIME FOR A NEW APPROACH

This is not a call for a “reset” or a “strategic partnership,” but a reevaluation of the excessive risks the United States is running with the current downward trajectory of U.S.-Russia relations. Containment or deterrence alone cannot mitigate these risks. A policy of calibration offers an alternative approach to Russia and its leadership, combining continued deterrence with high-level engagement beginning with the presidential track.

While there is no quick fix or “grand bargain” for the current state of relations, we must keep in mind that a stronger U.S.-Russia relationship in the long term would be a net positive for the security of the United States and its allies, as well as for global security at large.

I. INTRODUCTION: U.S.-RUSSIA RELATIONS IN CRISIS

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and ensuing support of separatist activity in eastern Ukraine transformed what was a deteriorating U.S.-Russia relationship into a full-blown crisis. In response, the Obama administration imposed economic sanctions on Russia as punishment for its violations of international law, and supported a European-led diplomatic effort to resolve the Ukraine impasse. President Obama announced that U.S. policy would seek to isolate Russia in the international community while offering the Kremlin an off-ramp should it cease undermining Ukrainian sovereignty.

Despite instances of cooperation between Washington and Moscow in advance of and during this conflict—notably, the removal of Syria's declared chemical weapons and agreement of the Iran nuclear deal—the U.S.-Russia relationship has continued to tailspin. NATO and Russia have both taken steps to re-militarize the European theater, while reports of mutual violations of air and sea space have increased. Recent diplomatic efforts over Syria have resulted in two failed cease-fire agreements amidst mutual accusations of bad faith. In October 2016, relations took an unprecedented turn when the Obama administration publicly accused the Russian government of cyberattacks designed to influence the U.S. presidential election.

For more than two decades, U.S. policy sought to integrate Russia into the economic, political, and security institutions of the liberal international order. These efforts were designed to promote

Russia's transition to a democratic society and a free-market economy. Today the United States must acknowledge that Russia does not seek integration into Western-led institutions, but rather works to undermine them.

Sanctions demonstrate that U.S. policy has moved away from the integration paradigm. Instead, Washington has begun to place greater emphasis on strengthening its capacity to deter Russian threats and aggression, particularly in Europe. Yet Russia's assertiveness, combined with greater U.S. deterrence, has sharply raised the threat of nuclear and military conflict to its highest level since before the end of the Cold War.

The arrival of a new presidential administration presents an opportunity to reevaluate the high risks in the U.S.-Russia relationship as it presently stands. To mitigate these risks, Washington must adjust—or “calibrate”—its policy to Russia to simultaneously enhance deterrence of Russian threats to U.S. interests as well as propose deeper engagement on issues of mutual threat. In some cases, like European security and cyber security, the dual approach of stronger deterrence needs to be combined with stronger efforts to engage Moscow. The next U.S. president will also need to elevate the priority of relations with Russia, granting them more sustained attention in an effort to defuse the current level of hostility.

The current president-elect was correct in asserting on the campaign trail that a stronger relationship with Russia is in U.S. interests. But

he must be careful not to underestimate the deep-seated differences that have accumulated in the relationship over more than two decades, and especially in the past several years. The new administration will need to proceed with caution so as not to unnecessarily raise expectations in Moscow, and also to remain sensitive to the interests and concerns of U.S. allies and partners in Europe and beyond.

II. THE CURRENT IMPASSE: NOT A NEW COLD WAR BUT POTENTIALLY MORE DANGEROUS

WHY NOT A “NEW COLD WAR”?

After overcoming a period of nearly five decades of strategic rivalry, it is tempting to label any significant downturn in U.S.-Russia relations as a “new Cold War.”² The current impasse is certainly more serious than a cyclical downturn in relations. Nevertheless, this label is counterproductive for two reasons. First, it does not accurately reflect the scope and the substance of the current disagreement. Second, and more importantly, it does not serve as a strong foundation for a new Russia policy.

The following key aspects of the Cold War make the “new Cold War” paradigm unsuited to the present conflict:

- **Scope:** the Cold War was a bipolar rivalry that divided the international system into two camps, which fought each other in proxy conflicts around the globe. Today’s confrontation takes place in a multipolar environment, with military conflict mainly limited to Eurasia and neighboring regions but complicated by a complex struggle in cyberspace.

- **Substance:** the Cold War was rooted in a deep ideological rivalry between the capitalist and communist/socialist camps which competed to reshape the world under their respective systems. Today Russia has abandoned the communist ideology and adopted capitalism (albeit imperfectly) as its guiding model.
- **Intent:** the Cold War was a competition in which each side explicitly sought to extinguish the other as an opponent, and had the means to carry this out. Today the economic and military balance has shifted dramatically in the United States’ favor, making Russia’s ability to directly confront the United States and its allies significantly more constrained.³ Rather than attempting to overturn the existing order, Moscow now seeks to limit the influence of the West while increasing its own role and that of other non-Western powers in global decision making.

Present Cold-War Like Dangers

The differences in today’s environment from that of the Cold War require U.S. policymakers to think beyond the previous prescriptions of containment and détente. At the same time, several features

² Robert Legvold recently provided an analysis of the similarities and differences between the current situation and the Cold War that strongly influenced the approach recommended in this report. See Legvold, *Return to Cold War* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016).

³ The economic balance of power between Washington and Moscow has dramatically shifted in favor of the United States in the last 35 years. In 1980, the World Bank placed the Soviet economy in U.S. dollar terms at slightly less than 50% of the size of the U.S. economy (See Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* [New York: Random House, 1987] and the World Bank’s “World Development Report,” 1982). In 2015 the World Bank placed Russia’s GDP at less than 7.4% of U.S. GDP in dollar terms, and at 19.2% of the United States in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP). In terms of military balance, despite recent increases in Russian military spending as a part of GDP, the 2015 Russian military budget (\$66 billion) amounted to just more than 10% of U.S. defense spending (\$596 billion). (See Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Military Expenditure Database 1988-2015).

of the Cold War have persisted or re-emerged in the current U.S.-Russia relationship, making the present situation potentially more risk-prone than before.

Security dilemma: Like the Cold War, Moscow and Washington have descended into a security dilemma whereby one state sees the efforts of the other state to enhance its national security as coming at its own expense. This dilemma is most acute in Europe, where Russia perceives the presence of NATO and the U.S. missile defense shield as a direct security threat. At the same time, NATO and Russia view each other's military deployments in the region as targeted at one another, leading each side to pursue further military deployments.

The security dilemma has re-emerged due to the failure of the United States and Russia to establish a mutually agreeable European security arrangement after the end of the Cold War. It has been made more acute by the modernization of the Russian armed forces since the 2008 war with Georgia. Russia remains on the periphery of the Western-led security system, an outcome that it has recently sought to revise through force. The result is a partial return to the former strategic rivalry, in which Moscow and Washington increasingly identify one another as their primary threat.

The urgency of mitigating the security dilemma has amplified as the two sides remain locked in the Cold-War nuclear posture that dramatically increases the risk of conflict, be it inadvertent or intended. As one highly experienced former U.S. official stated, "We are sleepwalking on nuclear

"We are sleepwalking on nuclear weapons."

weapons."⁴ Russia has significant conventional, nuclear, cyber, intelligence, and other assets that the Kremlin has shown far less restraint in deploying in recent years, in defiance of U.S. interests and those of its allies. It also has the advantage of geography throughout Eurasia in being able to deploy military power quickly.⁵ With the militaries of the United States, NATO and Russia increasingly operating in close proximity, the chance of an accident sparking a broader conflict is simply too great to ignore.

This renewed rivalry poses a risk to the United States and its European allies, particularly those states caught in the "grey zone" between Russia and NATO.⁶ To prevent the growing likelihood of a military incident, the incoming U.S. administration must take measures to arrest the escalation of the security dilemma. The first step is to re-open some existing channels of communication between Russia and the NATO alliance.

Nuclear security and strategic stability: Although Moscow and Washington have significantly reduced their nuclear weapons stockpiles, the bilateral security relationship remains centered on strategic nuclear deterrence. The two sides remain locked into the threat of mutually assured destruction (MAD), with short decision times in the event of a military escalation, accident, or misperception. Given the current

⁴ The term "sleepwalking" is an intentional allusion to Christopher Clark's masterful account of the genesis of the First World War in *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper, 2013).

⁵ Nikolai Sokov presented an excellent analysis of Russia's improved military capacity and geographic advantages in his talk, "Emerging Russian Modern Conventional Strike Capability: Implications for Eurasia," at the PONARS Eurasia Policy Conference in Washington, DC, September 2016.

⁶ The "grey zone" refers to six countries where the West and Russia vie for influence: the Caucasus states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, as well as Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine. See John E. Herbst, "Forsaken Territories? The Emergence of Europe's Grey Zone and Western Policy" in *The Eastern Question: Russia, the West, and Europe's Grey Zone*, Daniel S. Hamilton and Stefan Meister, eds. (Washington, DC: Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2016).

security environment—driven by uncertainty and a substantial asymmetry of power—the risk of a nuclear conflict may be higher today than at any time since the 1980s.⁷

Nuclear arms control emerged in the 1960s as the first area of extended U.S.-Soviet negotiations to bring greater strategic stability, reduce arsenals, and jointly promote components of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. Today the arms control effort is on “life support,” according to one former U.S. official interviewed for this project. The United States withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2001, and both the United States and Moscow are engaging in costly nuclear modernization programs that would extend the dangerous Cold War nuclear legacy for decades.

More worrisome is that since the breakdown in strategic stability talks between Moscow and Washington in the summer of 2013, there have been no channels of bilateral nuclear discussions. Each side is making allegations of violation of the 1987 INF Treaty. The Russian side suspended the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program in 2012 and suspended the Plutonium Management and Disposition Agreement with the United States in 2016. The incoming administration must re-engage Moscow on a wide variety of nuclear security issues lest we risk returning to an unrestrained nuclear arms race.

New Post-Cold War Risks

A number of new risks and challenges to U.S. interests have emerged since the Cold War. These are exacerbated by the current hostile relationship with Russia.

- **The rise of China:** Since the Cold War, China has rapidly ascended to the rank of

the world’s second largest economy; it ranks second, albeit distantly, behind the United States in military spending; and in recent years has adopted a far more threatening posture towards its neighbors. Although Russia is also wary of the rapid growth of Chinese economic, political, and military power on its border, Moscow’s alienation from the West since the Ukraine crisis has accelerated and deepened the Sino-Russian strategic partnership through arms sales, economic deals, and political and diplomatic cooperation that are counter to U.S. interests.

- **Islamic terrorism and instability in the Greater Middle East:** Islamic terrorism was a challenge in the late Cold War period, and the United States and the Soviet Union also competed for power and influence throughout the Greater Middle East. However, the nature of the threat has increased dramatically in the decades since, with serious implications for the homeland security of the United States, Russia and Europe. U.S. and Russian security cooperation briefly peaked in Afghanistan in the fall of 2001, but growing Russian opposition to U.S. military interventions as well as difficulties in reaching agreement on defining who is a “terrorist” have contributed greatly to the mutual failure to address the disaster in Syria.
- **Cyber security and a common information space:** The reliance of states, companies, non-governmental institutions and individuals on digital communications networks creates new and serious vulnerabilities to espionage practices. It also poses grave threats to critical physical, financial, and information infrastructures. The increasingly common information space creates new opportunities

⁷ At the time of this writing, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists’ Doomsday Clock was set to three minutes to midnight, putting the risk of a nuclear confrontation today as being at its highest level since 1983, when the United States and the Soviet Union narrowly avoided a nuclear war. That year, the Soviet leadership under Yury Andropov was convinced that the Reagan administration was planning a nuclear attack, and a false alert in the Soviet early warning system illustrated the extreme risk of an accidental nuclear conflict. For an excellent account of that period see David Hoffman, *The Dead Hand: The Untold Story of the Cold War Arms Race and its Dangerous Legacy* (New York: Doubleday, 2009).

for effective influence operations across countries and societies by state and non-state actors. The hacking and selective dissemination of Democratic National Committee e-mails during the U.S. general election demonstrated the unprecedented challenge this evolution presents. Given the massive vulnerabilities as well as the significant capabilities that the United States and Russia have in this rapidly expanding field, the absence of dialogue on cyber security issues increases the risk of an incident that could easily escalate into or become an integral part of a military conflict.

- **Global governance:** The international system is transitioning from a period of U.S. unipolar dominance after the Cold War to a multipolar format, with new power centers and emergent non-Western institutions contesting for economic, political, and military influence. Russia is increasingly challenging and undermining U.S. and Western structures of global governance as its own interest in Western integration has waned, particularly after Moscow was placed under Western economic sanctions.

For all the focus on ISIS in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, terrorism does not present nearly the existential threat to the U.S. homeland that a nuclear confrontation with Russia would. As egregious as Russian violations of Ukrainian sovereignty have been since the annexation of Crimea, they also do not threaten the U.S. homeland. It is likewise an exaggeration to call Russia's actions in Ukraine a "threat to the international system"—a violation of norms of global governance, absolutely; a threat to global order, no.

So the good news is that this is not a new Cold War. The bad news is that we live in a world where the nuclear legacy of the Cold War still exists; where

re-militarization of Europe is taking place in the virtual absence of dialogue on conventional and nuclear arms reductions; where dangerous new conventional technologies are blurring the roles of conventional and nuclear arms, and where new cyber offensive military capabilities further increase the risks of great damage to critical physical and financial infrastructures.

The new administration must bring a greater sense of urgency to address the fundamental risks to U.S. security and foreign policy goals that have arisen from the breakdown in relations with Russia. Despite significant disagreements, Russia is perhaps the most important partner for the United States on challenges of nuclear security and preventing proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). It is also a key partner in addressing challenges in European security, international terrorism and cyber security. While it may sound simplistic, it is fundamentally true that a stronger U.S.-Russia relationship would be a net positive for U.S. interests, European interests and those of our Asian allies, and the interests of global security at large.

But to the extent that it is possible to improve ties with Russia, the U.S. administration should be prepared to engage in a trying diplomatic process. Our substantive differences on Ukraine and European security, missile defense and strategic stability, Islamic terrorism and securing stability in the Greater Middle East are deep and difficult to bridge. And while much attention was drawn to the Kremlin's role in the recent U.S. election, it has almost been forgotten that Russia is in the midst of its own electoral cycle with scheduled presidential elections in March 2018. Since Russian President Vladimir Putin's assertive foreign policy and increased anti-Americanism play a significant role in his domestic political strategy, the incoming administration should prepare for a challenging period ahead.

III. DRIVERS OF RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

THE INITIAL SET-UP OF U.S.-RUSSIA RELATIONS: FATED FOR DISAPPOINTMENT AND MISUNDERSTANDING

Starting conditions are of fundamental importance for the future development of any relationship, and it is hard to imagine a worse set-up for U.S.-Russia relations than the one that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The long “twilight struggle” of the Cold War was concluded through a negotiated settlement by the last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, with the United States and its allies over the re-unification of Germany in 1990. This dramatic development was underscored in early 1991 by Soviet support for the U.S. Operation Desert Storm against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Unfortunately for Gorbachev, his hopes for a “Common European Home” were dashed by the collapse of the Soviet Union just one year later.

The collapse of the Soviet Union fundamentally altered Washington’s relations with Moscow.

The collapse of the Soviet Union fundamentally altered the nature of Washington’s relations with Moscow and the rest of the former Soviet space. Before the collapse, the United States was negotiating with a weakening but equal partner that had a shared vision in transforming European

and global security. With the disappearance of the Soviet Union, as one former U.S. official put it, Russia and its neighbors became a “project” for Washington. This was a dramatic paradigm shift for the relationship that, in the eyes of Washington, placed responsibility for improving ties largely on Russia and its ability to rise up to Western standards. At the same time, the collapse reinforced the U.S. belief in the primacy of its own domestic system as well as the Western-led global order. As the results of the Russian “project” increasingly deviated from Washington’s prescribed vision, American elites grew increasingly irritated, disillusioned, and at times dismissive of Russia.

On the Russian side, a sense of unfulfilled expectations and promises mounted as the Yeltsin government was overwhelmed by economic freefall and growing political opposition. Both the George H. W. Bush and the Clinton administrations were

sincere in their effort to provide assistance, but an unprepared and under-resourced U.S. government bureaucracy was virtually ensured to provide too little, too late for an enormous country working through a revolution. As one former U.S. official put it, “We had good intentions, but we underestimated the magnitude of the problem. We were anticipating that Russia would do something it had never done before. It was also a good lesson on the limitations of our power.”

But there was a deeper problem from the Russian standpoint, as one former U.S. official stated:

“Russian elites believed implicitly in an informal deal that with Russia essentially abdicating the Cold War conflict, the United States and its allies would not take geostrategic advantage of Russia’s weakness.” As another former U.S. official put it, “We underestimated the scars of collapse and also Russia’s sense of exceptionalism and the key importance of being a great power. Our efforts to ameliorate Russia were never going to scratch that itch, and Putin has tapped right into this.” While this gets ahead of the story, it is the implicit sense of betrayal on the Russian side that has continued to underlay the bilateral relationship from its beginning to the present day.

The years 1991-93 marked the greatest openness on the part of Moscow to Western advice, and Boris Yeltsin’s aspirations for Russia to become a “normal country” essentially corresponded with the idea of a market democracy integrated into Western economic, political, and security institutions. But neither he nor anyone else inside or outside of Russia had a clear road map for how to get there. Given the magnitude of the economic calamity that engulfed Russia’s early reformers and the subsequent political backlash against domestic reforms, it is unlikely that greater assistance from the West could have fundamentally altered Russia’s trajectory and ultimately created a better foundation for U.S.-Russia relations.

Many Russians and Americans interviewed for this report criticized the United States for lacking a long-term strategy for Russia. But others questioned whether this is a fair critique, given the magnitude of the challenges that Russia faced and the tremendous uncertainty about Russia’s future in the 1990s. Supporting the transitions of East-Central European states was a much better fit for the kinds of economic, political, and institutional

tools that the United States and its European allies had to offer. One cannot have a strategy without an effective toolkit to match.

Russian National Identity and the Status Dilemma

The ideological competition of the Cold War has given way to an identity clash in which both countries today increasingly frame their national identities in adversarial terms. As Russian scholar Igor Zevelev has argued, the principal change has come from the evolving Russian national identity.⁸

As recently as five years ago, it was common to hear Russian officials describe Russia as one of three branches of Western civilization: American, European, and Russian.⁹ This formulation has largely disappeared from the Kremlin’s lexicon as Russia has emphasized its unique Eurasian, Slavic and Orthodox identity in contrast to a decadent Europe and an imperialist United States. Putin latched on to this trope in the elections of 2011-2012 as a key element of his domestic legitimacy. Today the Russian leadership has decisively positioned the country as an alternative to the West, to widespread resonance among the Russian population.

On the global stage, Russia’s national identity is deeply rooted in its sense of being a great power. As such, Russia seeks an equal role with other great powers (namely the United States) in resolving international conflicts, and demands respect for what it sees as its primacy in the former Soviet space. These tendencies have become viewed as a potential threat to U.S. interests, as a stronger Russia increasingly asserts itself in areas where it believes its rightful influence has been undermined.

⁸ See Igor Zevelev, “The Future of Russia: Nation or Civilization?” *Russia in Global Affairs* 7, no. 5 (2009), in Russian; 7, no. 4 (2009), in English; and Zevelev, “The Russian World Boundaries,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, no. 2 (2014), in Russian.

⁹ The idea of Russia as a branch of Western civilization has been promoted in particular by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who reiterated this point even into the year 2016. See Lavrov, “Russia’s Foreign Policy in a Historical Perspective,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, March 30, 2016, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Russias-Foreign-Policy-in-a-Historical-Perspective-18067>.

Russia's assertive behavior has given rise to the *status dilemma*, a new concept defined by one Russian scholar as

a situation in which an actor is seeking status upgrades that other actors could concede at an acceptable cost to their security, but instead—because of the uncertainty surrounding the status seeker's intentions—develop unnecessary fears of an attack being prepared against them and begin responding. Failure to recognize the status dilemma can lead to material consequences, such as heightened tensions, arms race or even an open conflict.¹⁰

The status dilemma is clearly observed in Russia's effort to reassert its decision making power alongside the United States in Europe. This effort has been interpreted by its European neighbors, particularly the Baltic states, as an attempt to expand Russian political or military control in the region, even up to and including the restoration of the Soviet state.

If we accept that Russia is motivated by a sense of status deprivation in its relations with the United States, the challenge for policymakers is to identify areas where the United States can assuage the status demands of Moscow without compromising core national interests. As Leslie Gelb wrote in 2015,

An effective diplomatic strategy has to be rooted in what matters most to Russian leaders—their historical sense of self and their passion to be treated as a great power. Moscow deserves no less, given the troubles it can cause and the problems

it can help resolve. The West need not silence its complaints about the Kremlin's brutality, nor concede vital interests. It is totally unrealistic, however, to think that the West can gain desired Russian restraint and cooperation without dealing with Moscow as a great power that possesses real and legitimate interests, especially in its border areas.¹¹

One cost-free approach that could make an immediate impact is to adopt a more diplomatic tone towards Russia. Statements by U.S. officials that Russia is “just a regional power” or a “gas station masquerading as a country” do nothing to further U.S. interests with that country, and may indeed strengthen Moscow's resolve to defy these characterizations. Meanwhile, ad hominem attacks against Putin set a negative backdrop against future U.S. efforts to seek his cooperation should the need arise.

The Putin Factor

There is a heated debate in the United States about the extent to which the character and inclinations of the Russian president determine Russian foreign policy. For some, Russia's increasingly aggressive foreign policy stance is attributed mainly to the person of Vladimir Putin.¹² For others, Putin draws on powerful conservative and traditional themes in Russian and Soviet history that naturally resonate with the Russian public.¹³ Yet another perspective suggests that Putin's turn to nationalism and assertiveness is broadly explained by a different domestic political strategy that has evolved since his return to the presidency

¹⁰ Mikhail Troitsky, *Massaging Egos: Can Status Politics Facilitate U.S.-Russia Cooperation?* Policy Memo for the Annual PONARS Policy Conference, Washington D.C., September 24-25, 2016. For more on the status dilemma see T.V. Paul, Deborah Larson and William Wohlforth, eds., *Status in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹¹ See Leslie Gelb, “Russia and America: Towards a New Détente,” *The National Interest*, June 9, 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/russia-america-toward-new-detente-13077>. Of the many recent publications regarding U.S.-Russia relations, this powerful and thoughtful argument by Gelb, the President Emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, most closely corresponds to the approach recommended in this report.

¹² For a recent powerful statement of this argument, see Strobe Talbott, “The Making of Vladimir Putin,” *Politico*, August 19, 2014, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/08/putin-the-backstory-110151>.

¹³ See Thomas Graham, “Europe's Problem is with Russia, not Putin,” *Financial Times*, May 31, 2015, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/foff7324-03b5-11e5-a70f-00144feabdco.html>; and Clifford Gaddy and Fiona Hill, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013) (revised and expanded in 2015).

in 2012.¹⁴ The author of the present report has argued that over the past 15 years, Putin's own assertiveness has grown as his confidence in the competence of U.S. foreign and security policy has fallen, particularly after Washington's response to the Arab Spring.¹⁵

There are degrees of truth to all of these explanations, and this reflects the general problem with mono-causal explanations for complex phenomena: they tend to obscure the essential role of contingency. Putin's personality and evolving domestic political strategy undoubtedly play an important role in Russian foreign policy. But the fact that his leadership has coincided with a time of increasing Russian capabilities to project power deeply complicates this explanation of Russian behavior, and suggests a degree of inevitability about actions that likely does not exist.

Most Russian and American interviewees agreed that Putin is not an ideologically motivated leader and generally is pragmatic (if not always correct) in his assessment of the risks and rewards of competing policy actions. However, most also agreed that over time Putin's view of U.S. policy has become more skeptical. Meanwhile, the increasing economic difficulties in Russia have led Putin to place greater emphasis on a strong foreign policy to maintain his credibility as Russia's leader.

The new administration must also keep in mind Putin's suspicious mindset regarding Washington's intentions toward his regime. The extent to which Putin simply manipulates anti-Americanism for domestic political gain or actually believes his own narrative is unknowable, and perhaps not all that relevant for now. His actions suggest he does

believe the United States poses a threat to his rule, a suspicion that has strengthened since the fall of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich in 2014.

This situation recalls Ronald Reagan's epiphany in 1982-83, as he struggled to understand how the Soviet leadership could sincerely believe the United States was preparing a pre-emptive nuclear strike. Once Reagan accepted that this was a genuine fear on the part of the Soviet leadership, especially under Yuri Andropov's brief rule, he found the implications so dangerous that he felt motivated to reach out to Moscow even before his ultimate partner, Mikhail Gorbachev, came to power.¹⁶ This point is something the new administration needs to take seriously: the U.S. frame of reference is obviously not that of Vladimir Putin, and while his fears of U.S. efforts to promote regime change in Russia may appear to Washington as paranoid fantasy, to dismiss them out of hand would be a mistake.

Finally, U.S. policymakers must realize that Putin's Russia is not monolithic. The absence of Western democratic pluralism in Russia belies the fact of ongoing competition among Russian elites, or what Winston Churchill described as "bulldogs fighting under the rug." Studies of the Kremlin elite have shown the presence of considerably more hard-line nationalists in Putin's circle, such as current head of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, Nikolai Patrushev, who have both pulled Putin to the right and have been empowered in the current political climate.¹⁷

Putin's own style of rule is relatively moderate by Russian historical or comparative standards, as his policies are largely enforced through cooptation

¹⁴ For example, Kathryn Stoner and Michael McFaul argue that the decision to annex Crimea and intervene in the Donbass in 2014 can be explained by Putin's domestic political strategy. See Kathryn Stoner and Michael McFaul, "Who Lost Russia (This Time)? Vladimir Putin," *The Washington Quarterly*: Summer 2015, 167-186.

¹⁵ Andrew Kuchins, "What's to Follow the Demise of the U.S.-Russian 'Reset'?" *Current History*, October 2012.

¹⁶ Hoffman, *The Dead Hand*.

¹⁷ For valuable insights into Putin's inner circle see Mikhail Zygar, *All the Kremlin's Men* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016).

rather than outright coercion.¹⁸ Whether Putin is able or willing to move his policy stance back towards the center—or rather, move the center towards a less hostile posture regarding the United States and the West—largely depends on his ability to do so without losing domestic political legitimacy among his inner circle and the Russian population at large.

¹⁸ This point was made by M. Steven Fish, a comparative political scientist at the University of California Berkeley, during a discussion hosted by the Center on Global Interests in Washington, DC on September 12, 2016. Fish noted that Putin's preference for using incentives over punishment has created a devoted rather than a fearful Russian populace, thereby ensuring stability for his "elegant dictatorship."

IV. RUSSIAN AND AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES ON THE U.S.-RUSSIA RELATIONSHIP

The following section presents key takeaways from interviews with Russian and American experts and policymakers about the history and current state of U.S.-Russia relations.¹⁹ The findings from these interviews both enrich our understanding of how and why the relationship developed as it did, and offer key insights for the new administration in crafting its policy towards Russia.

Perspectives from Russia

RUSSIA AS A “NORMAL GREAT POWER”

While all Russians interviewed acknowledged that the bilateral relationship is in unprecedented disrepair, few referred to a new Cold War. Russians seem well aware that a global confrontation with the United States is not in their interests and is unfeasible given the disparities in economic and technological power. Yet this capabilities gap should not be taken as Moscow conceding to U.S. supremacy. As one interviewee put it, “We do not exaggerate our power, but we have national interests. This is normal. Russia is a great power, especially given its nuclear weapons, but the socio-economic situation in the country is not excellent.”

In short, Russia sees itself as an equal partner with the United States on the global stage. However, the Russian consensus is that Washington has relegated Moscow to junior-partner status beginning with the Clinton administration’s support of Russian reform, through the George W. Bush administration’s strategic partnership, and finally to the Obama administration’s reset. “Don’t teach Russians how to live; deal with the real

polycentric world; strengthen areas of common interests such as counter-terrorism. The Russian position is open,” concluded one interlocutor.

Even today, most interviewees stressed that Russia wants good relations with the United States and respects American economic, scientific, and technological achievements. One interviewee went further to say, “A real modernization process for Russia cannot happen without the United States, not to speak of Europe. With stronger economic ties [to Russia], the United States could become more influential. After all, efforts like Skolkovo, Rosnano, and others are in some way inspired by U.S. experience, even if the U.S. experience is poorly understood.”

But one official with significant experience working with the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations expressed a more jaundiced view. When asked about key turning points in relations, he responded that he sees no watershed moment, but rather that the American political mainstream is generally hostile to Russia. In his view, the United States became a “monopolist” in

¹⁹ The interviews were conducted in Moscow, Washington, and California between April and July 2016.

“A real modernization process for Russia can’t happen without the United States or Europe.”

international relations as the sole superpower after the Cold War, and there is still a strong feeling in U.S. strategy that to weaken Russia is good.

Despite a critique of post-Cold War U.S. policy that “showed a total lack of wisdom and a seeming unawareness of the consequences of [U.S.] actions, as in Libya,” the speaker concluded that these are not insurmountable obstacles to cooperation, and that “certainly more U.S.-Russian cooperation would be good. We can cooperate, but do not ‘teach us;’ do not act like you know Russia’s interests better than we do. If Putin promises something, he delivers, so in that regard he is a good partner.”

Many also expressed frustration that both Washington and Moscow have failed to develop a broader mutually understood strategic framework to replace the Cold War paradigm. Without such an understanding, the relationship is comprised of selective engagement, which leaves U.S.-Russia relations excessively vulnerable to the crisis *du jour*. According to one official, who has spent significant time in Washington,

Why do our differences bring us to crisis time and time again? We have been trying to build relations as separate sovereign countries since 1991-92. We still view each other strategically because of nuclear weapons, the UN, etc. We reach agreements, but it never creates sustained better bilateral relations; they do not accumulate in a positive way. They do not deepen trust...

A majority of interviewees acknowledged that expectations on the Russian side for relations with Washington were excessive at the time

of the Soviet collapse. But a broader, more inclusive strategic vision may have mitigated differences over NATO expansion, Yugoslavia, and Russian domestic politics. Concerns about nationalism and a “boomerang” effect in Russian politics always existed. As one individual stated, Russia’s “great-power syndrome” has inhibited it from generating a more modern national idea that is not so embedded in Tsarist and Soviet narratives. For example, the victory in World War II remains the bedrock event for contemporary Russian identity, just as it was during Soviet times.

NATO AS A HOSTILE ACTOR

Not surprisingly, NATO remains a sore topic in Russia. One interviewee asked, “Why did you have to expand NATO? Russia was dealing with serious domestic problems, and [NATO expansion] was interpreted as a hostile act. By the end of the 1990s (after the Kosovo War), almost nobody in Russia considered America a friend.” As another veteran policymaker put it, “The Clinton administration started the unipolar world with the 1999 Yugoslav war when NATO went beyond [its own borders], and could do so because Russia was in a weakened position, a fact well understood by Russians.”

Despite disagreements over NATO, Russia, the United States, and Europe scored a number of significant diplomatic achievements in the late 1990s and into the first George W. Bush administration. But as several Russian interviewees noted, Russia’s accelerating economic recovery during Putin’s second term (2004-2008), based mainly on rising oil prices, allowed Moscow to focus more on foreign policy. Thus, “what had previously been irritating became more serious.” As another former policymaker stated, “Bringing in Ukraine and Georgia into NATO was interpreted by Russians as geopolitical aggression. Russia may not have the right to veto, but it does have the right to exercise its national interests.”

THE OBAMA RESET: A GOOD ATTEMPT

Generally speaking, Russian assessments of the reset were quite positive. To some extent the demise of the policy was a result of its successes. As one interviewee put it, “Once the New START Treaty, WTO accession, the U.S.-Russian 123 Civilian Nuclear Power Agreement, the Iran nuclear deal, and the Northern Distribution Network were accomplished, the reset ran out of its mission. Neither side had the imagination to go beyond the older model of relations.”

Several Russians pointed to the spring of 2011 as the turning point in relations. Differences over Libya and later Syria, missile defense, and the looming Russian presidential succession all conspired to derail the relationship. One Russian speaker suggested it may have been a mistake on the American part not to brief then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin along with President Dmitri Medvedev (whom the Obama administration did brief) on NATO’s plan to intervene in Libya. This episode became a point of criticism against Medvedev and affirmed Putin’s suspicions that Medvedev was too naïve and inexperienced to deal with the United States.

“Neither side had the imagination to go beyond the old model of relations.”

One interviewee pointed to the trip of Vice President Joe Biden to Moscow in March 2011, when Biden urged Putin not to return to the presidency. This held strong symbolism within

Russian society, which the interviewee compared to Putin’s open support for Viktor Yanukovich in the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election that resulted in the opposite outcome.

The failure of negotiations over missile defense, also in the spring of 2011, further contributed to weakening Medvedev’s position. This breakdown carried considerable significance because an agreement would have symbolized a genuine break-out from the Cold War relationship. One interviewee, in contrast to many U.S. views on the topic, de-emphasized Putin’s return to the Kremlin as the main cause for the reset’s collapse. The policy was vulnerable, he said, because it failed to establish a new strategic foundation for relations.

Another interviewee said he expected the reset to continue after Putin returned to the presidency in 2012. At the first meeting with Obama in June 2012, Putin pointed to the recent Rosneft/ExxonMobil deal as the most significant achievement of the policy. More generally, Putin’s comments about the United States were less aggressive after he was inaugurated than during his presidential campaign in 2012. The will to continue with the reset appeared to exist in Washington as well; recall Obama’s famous hot mic comment to then-Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev in September 2012 to tell “your boss” that once he [Obama] was re-elected in November, he would have more flexibility on missile defense.²⁰

The Obama administration reached another key milestone in the reset when it helped to finalize Russia’s historic entry into the World Trade Organization in late 2012. But this achievement was undercut by the administration’s subsequent endorsement, albeit reluctant, of the Magnitsky Act that established a targeted-sanctions mechanism in response to Russian domestic human

²⁰ Obama’s exact words were, “This is my last election... after my election I have more flexibility.” To this Medvedev replied: “I will transmit this information to Vladimir.” (“Microphone Catches a Candid Obama,” *The New York Times*, March 26, 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/27/us/politics/obama-caught-on-microphone-telling-medvedev-of-flexibility.html?_r=0). The author was skeptical at the time that President Obama would, in fact, have much more flexibility as he would still likely be dealing with a Congress that was not enthusiastic about compromises and cooperation with U.S. missile defense programs.

rights abuses. The Russian State Duma retaliated with the Dima Yakovlev Bill banning U.S. adoptions of Russian orphans. Several Russians interviewed said the administration's failure to stop the Magnitsky Act served as a preview of Obama's later turning away from Russia policy as part of his historical legacy.

Still, even as the reset was waning, one Russian official noted that Russian and American experts were encouraged by their governments to work on a project that would move the U.S.-Russia relationship beyond mutually assured destruction.²¹ Participants were encouraged to go beyond missile defense cooperation to a broader framework, but the last time this project was discussed was in October 2013.

Russians acknowledge that Putin's refusal to extradite former NSA contractor Edward Snowden deeply soured the Obama administration's stance on Russia, and contributed significantly to the decision to cancel the Obama-Putin summit after the G-20 meeting in St. Petersburg in September 2013. Some still question why Putin refused. Formally speaking, Russian officials point to the lack of a bilateral extradition treaty as the main reason behind the Kremlin's logic, but some acknowledge that Putin could have made a different decision without a legal framework in place. Others of a more skeptical bent asked whether the United States would extradite a Russian Edward "Snowdenov" under similar circumstances.

UNEASE ABOUT UKRAINE

Russian officials and experts were largely critical of how the EU handled negotiations with Kiev about establishing a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) in 2013, as well as of Brussels' alleged refusal to engage Russia or the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in the talks. But several interviewees criticized Moscow

for overreacting to Kiev's readiness to sign the DCFTA, and said this was not worth risking a major political conflict with Europe.

This moderate position, however, lost out to the highly nationalistic faction led by Sergey Glazyev, Putin's advisor on trade and Ukraine. Some of the Russians interviewed expressed a more fatalistic attitude about Ukraine, suggesting that an implosion seemed inevitable because "no Ukrainian president going back to 1992 has really taken on the task of building a unified nation-state."

No one put forth, or was willing to put forth, a complete explanation of why Putin decided to seize Crimea, but many suggested there was considerable contingency and spontaneity to the decision. One interviewee mused whether it would have made a difference if Western leaders had not boycotted the 2014 Sochi Olympics that took place during the surge of street violence in Kiev. Ironically, this person noted that Russian authorities were very satisfied with U.S.-Russian intelligence cooperation to help ensure the safety of the Games.

CAUTIOUS HOPES FOR IMPROVED TIES

There was strong consensus that the breakdown in the U.S.-Russia relationship is counter to Russia's interests and is dangerous for global security. Although several interviewees expressed appreciation that Washington recently applied more pressure on Ukraine to live up to its Minsk II commitments, no one expected a rapid breakthrough in the final months of the Obama presidency or after a new administration takes office. As one interviewee commented, "It is good that the United States is pushing more on Ukraine, since this is the biggest frozen conflict in Europe and the post-Soviet world. Beginning in 2015, both sides have become a bit more pragmatic.

²¹ The project, titled "From Mutually Assured Destruction to Mutually Assured Stability," was coordinated by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) in Washington, D.C., and the Institute for USA and Canadian Studies (ISKRAN) of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow. See <https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/NRDC-ISKRAN-Nuclear-Security-Report-March2013.pdf>.

Russian domestic politics are a bit more flexible on Ukraine as [Russian separatist leader Igor] Strelkov and his ilk are gone.”

Russian interlocutors agreed, however, that the next administration needs to be more engaged with Russia than Obama was during his final years in office. Personal ties are key to getting things done in U.S.-Russia relations, and this is especially true with Putin. Several also acknowledged, however, that the circle of engagement needs to be widened, specifically in military-to-military relations, to prevent accidental or unintended conflict, as well as to facilitate intelligence sharing on mutual terrorism challenges.

The most oft-repeated goal for the relationship noted by Russians was “normalization,” but all acknowledged this will likely be a slow process. As one interviewee put it, “There is so little trust, so little readiness to give the other the benefit of the doubt. Look at how the Russian intervention in Syria was interpreted. This was not an effort to displace the United States in the Middle East, but again we tend to look at each other as enemies. Now the situation is more difficult than in 1991 or 2001.” As another Russian put it, “After [Russia’s] 2018 elections, if the United States stands aside, a chance for normalization, not a ‘reset,’ may be possible. If sanctions can be removed over time, this opens the possibility for more business ties. It will be a long road; maybe in 10-15 years we can get back to 2009.”

Several noted there is slightly more fluidity in Russian domestic politics today, including more open discussion about economic reforms in light of the ongoing recession. No one expressed doubt that Putin will be re-elected as president in 2018, but as one person put it, “A lot depends on the future of Russia, and after Putin gets re-elected he will have to start thinking about real prospects for succession, his legacy, and a real modernization

program, which requires Western involvement. The United States should be more confident in its relative position of strength vis-à-vis Russia. The positions are very asymmetric and the United States should think more strategically, otherwise Putin will not be incentivized to do much. The United States has a lot less to lose and therefore should have more flexibility.”

Perspectives from the United States

NUCLEAR SECURITY ON THE BRINK

The nuclear danger may be higher today than during the Cold War, yet Russian and American societies seem blissfully unaware.²² At the time of this writing, the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists “Atomic Clock” was set at three minutes before midnight, indicating that we are at the lowest point in nuclear security since 1984. Today both countries are on a path of modernizing their nuclear forces that appears to ensure the MAD relationship will endure at least well into the coming decades.

The United States must re-establish a nuclear security dialogue with Russia.

Those with direct experience on nuclear issues agreed that the United States must re-establish a nuclear security dialogue with Russia. The absence of engagement risks not only the increase of the danger with Russia, but the collapse of non-proliferation and arms control regimes altogether. “For the first time in decades, it appears arms control is dead. We must try to correct this,” said one official. As another former official put it more grimly, “We are sleepwalking on nukes.” We are still in a Cold War launch-on-warning posture,

²² Former U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry recently wrote a moving and insightful memoir illustrating the dangerous path we are on. See William J. Perry, *My Journey at the Nuclear Brink* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2015).

and both the United States and Russia appear focused on nuclear modernization programs with a semblance to the Cold War arms race.

Some expressed hope that economic constraints on both sides would lead to the reconsideration of plans for nuclear modernization. Still, there is little domestic political demand for addressing nuclear risks in either country, unlike during the 1980s. Moreover, the generation of negotiators and technical experts with adequate training to conduct and support such agreements is dwindling.

Like their Russian counterparts, a number of U.S. interviewees expressed deep pessimism about near-term prospects for further bilateral nuclear reductions. After the Obama administration's failed attempt to reach an agreement on missile defense, the Russian position has hardened significantly. As one former official noted, "We were kidding ourselves on missile defense cooperation in 2010-2011, and this fed Putin's narrative that we wanted to keep him down."

Several U.S. interviewees suggested Russia will be more ready in 2018 to engage in talks about the extension of the New Start Treaty. But there was also agreement that Moscow and Washington need to resolve allegations of violations of the 1987 INF agreement before Congress would be prepared to approve any significant U.S.-Russian arms control agreement in the coming years.

While the United States may be able to reach an agreement on the extension of New START to 2026, moving forward on further offensive reductions will be exceedingly difficult. As one former official put it, "There is a fundamental asymmetry in our security postures. With [U.S.]

"There is a fundamental asymmetry in our security postures."

conventional weapons advantage, nukes are Russia's natural offset strategy. That is why they keep so many tactical nukes and an aggressive rhetorical policy."

There was also agreement that if the United States were to discuss further offensive reductions, the Russian side would demand that other factors of strategic stability, including missile defense and new conventional technologies that increase first strike vulnerability, will have to be on the table. This was already the case in discussions on strategic stability in 2013 before they broke down.

Although the landscape looks bleak for Washington and Moscow to return to a bilateral agenda for strategic stability, several interviewees noted greater optimism on working together to prevent nuclear terrorism. On this issue both sides see cooperation as useful, not discounting the challenge of bilateral intelligence-sharing. The most successful U.S. approach to nuclear issues will be "through the back door" of securing nuclear materials in third countries.

Interviewees acknowledged the instrumental role of Russia in the 2015 P5 +1 Iranian nuclear agreement, although some expressed skepticism that it was a good deal and questioned its longevity. Nevertheless, the next administration will need to work closely with Moscow to ensure that Iran abides by the agreement and fulfills the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). North Korea will be the next big problem for the new administration, noted several interviewees, and while Russia's role is not as key here as that of China or South Korea, Washington must keep Moscow engaged.

NATO-RUSSIA RELATIONS AS THE KEY CHALLENGE TO EUROPEAN SECURITY

The re-emergence of competing spheres of influence in Europe led many of the Americans interviewed to conclude that the United States and Russia are in a new Cold War. Like the Cold War, the focal point of this conflict is Europe, although

the fault line is farther east. At the core of this challenge is the relationship between Russia and its neighbors with NATO, and more recently, as the origins of the Ukraine crisis showed, the EU.

For more than two decades, U.S. policy sought to promote Russia's integration with Western economic, political, and security institutions, but as one former official noted, "Russia never wanted to be a junior partner in the Common European Home." Given its deep-seated identity as a great power, Russia's political will towards Western integration was far more ambivalent than that of its smaller neighbors in Eastern and Central Europe.

On the Russian side, the belief that the George H. W. Bush administration "promised" Gorbachev and the Soviet leadership that NATO would not expand during the negotiations over German reunification contributes to a sense of being deceived by the United States. But as one former member of the Bush administration noted, "Nobody at the time was thinking seriously about NATO expansion...the issue became more salient in the early 1990s because the EU was moving too slowly."

At the same time, the prospects for the Russian reform process were growing dimmer. As one former official stated, "With the defeat of Russian reformers in parliamentary elections in December 1993 and the start of the brutal Chechen war in 1994, both the demand for membership from East-Central European countries and the inclination towards hedging against a possible Russian revanche within the Clinton administration increased."

No American interviewed suggested NATO expansion was wrong in principle. Very diverse views, however, were expressed about its initial timing, the scope of the process, and the advisability of the prospects of Ukrainian and Georgian membership discussed at the Bucharest Summit in 2008.

As interviews confirmed, the Clinton administration was deeply divided on the question of NATO expansion. Some members, including Defense Secretary William Perry, viewed nuclear security cooperation with Russia as the top priority and were concerned that premature NATO expansion could disrupt progress. They and others saw no immediate threat from Russia at the time, and NATO's Partnership for Peace Program was working successfully to bring Russian and other post-Soviet military structures together to enhance interoperability. Perry and others were not categorically opposed to NATO expansion; the issue was its timing.

Several former officials suggested that momentum for NATO expansion acquired a life of its own, and that the George W. Bush administration may have "overloaded" the relationship with Russia by pushing simultaneously for missile defense deployments in Europe, NATO expansion to Georgia and Ukraine, and independence for Kosovo. As one person commented, "This trifecta of problems amounted to multiple train wrecks simultaneously; we need to be more careful about picking our train wrecks." Or, as another put it, "If you want to build a sustainable relationship, you have to be ready to compromise on something, but this was a problem in 2007-08 as the Bush administration was going full-court press on NATO, missile defense, and Kosovo."

Some interviewees suggested the United States skirted the fundamental questions of military alliances and—in the case of NATO—the question of ever needing to enforce Article V. Even after the 2008 Russian-Georgian War, Washington avoided the latter issue. It was not until after the Russian annexation of Crimea and the crisis in Ukraine that NATO began to more seriously examine its capacity to fulfill Article V obligations.

Russians have complained for years that NATO expansion has brought the alliance closer to its borders and is hence a de-facto threat to its military security. But while NATO may have been

expanding closer to Russia for nearly two decades, NATO and U.S. military forces had been reducing steadily in Europe (as had Russian forces) for more than two decades, a trend that has only recently reversed. There was a strong consensus amongst former U.S. officials that NATO needs to continue taking measures to affirm that the alliance's commitment to mutual defense is credible.

UKRAINE CRISIS: TOP-LEVEL ENGAGEMENT NEEDED

Many Americans were critical of U.S. policy on the Ukraine crisis and the Obama administration's preference to let Europe take the lead in negotiations. As one critic stated, "We completely mishandled the Ukraine crisis. Our behavior undermined any capacity we could have had to act as an honest broker." Others suggested that Obama should have been more hands-on with Putin, especially as the crisis was reaching a crescendo in February 2014.

All interviewees acknowledged that the way forward in Ukraine and increasing European security will be very difficult. As one interviewee noted, "There is no easy fix for Ukraine...the relationship has again been militarized, and it will be difficult to get off that trajectory." Still, others stressed that the next administration needs to be directly involved in negotiations with its European partners, Ukraine, and Russia to reach a new and broader agreement than Minsk II. Others questioned whether the Kremlin is ready to increase compliance with the agreement, and called for more efforts to ensure that Ukraine carries out the economic reforms that are fundamental to its sovereignty.

Regarding European security more broadly, one former official suggested the United States should work hard "to take away the possibility of Putin achieving his key goals in Europe: 1) splitting the United States from Europe; 2) displaying that NATO's Article V is a dead letter; and 3) further fracturing of the EU. Europe must be hardened

"Europe must be hardened to Putin, and NATO reaffirmed."

to Putin, and NATO reaffirmed. We believed for nearly 25 years that European security was resolved with the end of the Cold War. Putin is testing this proposition, and his efforts need to be clearly contained."

Another interviewee acknowledged that arms control discussions in Europe are needed given the intensifying rhetoric, deployments, and the increasing danger of escalation. But this person added, "Ukraine is a precursor problem that may need to be resolved first, mainly because of domestic politics in the US. It is probably not possible to create a parallel universe."

SYRIA CHEMICAL WEAPONS REMOVAL

Perhaps the most underrated recent success story in U.S.-Russia relations was the 11th hour agreement for the joint removal and decommissioning of the entire Syrian declared chemical weapons arsenal by a June 2014 deadline. This remarkably complex operation took place mainly during the first half of 2014, when virtually all attention was on the growing conflagration over Ukraine, including the annexation of Crimea and the then-growing conflict in the Donbass.

The chemical weapons removal process received almost zero coverage in either the U.S. or Russian media, despite its significance for global security. It is also likely that without this agreement—and therefore with the higher likelihood of a U.S. military strike on Syria—the effort to reach agreement with Iran over its nuclear program would have been a much more difficult, if not impossible task.

One study of the Syrian chemical weapons removal effort suggested that without the imminent threat of a U.S. military strike, the Syrian government never would have agreed to the removal (a finding unlikely to be welcomed by Russia).²³ The removal of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal is therefore a valuable case study in coercive diplomacy. It is also a textbook case of how a very significant achievement in U.S.-Russian cooperation can go completely unrewarded in the domestic political contexts of both countries.

²³ International security scholar Amy Gordon discussed the lessons from the Syrian chemical weapons removal in her presentation "U.S.-Russia Nonproliferation Cooperation: Making Headway in Turbulent Times," Georgetown University, May 23, 2016.

TURNING POINTS: COLOR REVOLUTIONS AND ARAB SPRING

The interviewees' approaches to post-Soviet "color revolutions" and the Arab Spring exposed the divergence between Moscow and Washington's respective world views. Russian interlocutors tended to ascribe much more influence to external forces in revolutionary processes than to internal social, economic, and political conditions. American policymakers and experts, while not negating the impact of outside influence, generally ascribed more power to domestic forces.

Several officials pointed to the color revolutions, and especially to Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution, as the "key turning point in the shift of Putin's perceptions of the United States." As another put it, "Putin took our decisions to withdraw from ABM and expand NATO quite calmly in 2001-2002. Where we lost him was on the color revolutions. Putin's view that the United States supported the color revolutions [shaped] his mindset, and he really wanted his sphere of influence." Similarly, with the Arab Spring in 2011,

one interviewee stated that "the Russians foolishly let themselves believe that we caused it."

As one interviewee put it bluntly, "The Arab Spring hurt the U.S.-Russia relationship badly, and we are still reeling from it in Syria." The U.S. war in Iraq, in the view of many, was a minor problem in the relationship compared to the fallout over the NATO-led intervention in Libya and the beginning of the major dispute over Syria in 2011. As one former official put it, "[A] lot of negative things were happening to the relationship simultaneously: failure to agree on missile defense, Libya intervention resulting in the death of Gaddafi, the Syrian civil war, and the Russian presidential succession question."

Joint efforts to address terrorist threats have met sporadic success. The most visible achievement was the collaboration after 9/11 to remove the Taliban from power in Afghanistan. But the Russian hope at the time (and again in the fall of 2015) that Washington and Moscow could build relations around the issue of terrorism has foundered over whom the two sides identify as

the principal enemy and the most effective means of addressing the challenge. As one interviewee put it, “Afghanistan was the perfect fit, but I was always skeptical about our different definitions of terrorism and terrorists.” Another interviewee noted that more could have been done on the anti-terrorism front, “but momentum after 9/11 was lost despite some useful work done on the Trubnikov-Armitage track.”²⁴

RESET FRUSTRATED BY RUSSIAN DOMESTIC FACTORS

American interlocutors were in agreement that the attempt at a U.S.-Russia reset advanced initiatives that were in Washington’s interests. One critique was that the Obama administration “pivoted too quickly” in the wake of the Georgia war, sending the wrong message to Putin about the costs of such an action in the future. But several former officials stressed that “Obama inherited a horrible relationship and there was a real urgency to move forward on several issues like the Iranian nuclear problem, Afghanistan, and the imminent expiration of the START Treaty.”

What does the American perspective say about the reset’s failure? Like the Russians, one interviewee noted that after two years of achievements, “the reset ran out of agenda.” Another pointed out that several difficult issues emerged in 2011-2012, notably missile defense and Syria, on which agreement proved impossible. And as one former official put it, “The Russian interest in a closer relationship diminished, and they made it clear that they would pursue their national interests rather than our interpretation of what we think their national interests should be.” This interpretation harkens back to the late Bush period, as one former official said: “[I]t is probably fair to say that we did not anticipate that Russia would come back as such a forceful player so fast. Here we were caught off-guard by the Munich speech, Georgia, etc.”

But several former officials believed the reset ended because of “Russian domestic politics.” One compared Putin’s anti-Western turn to the domestic backlash against Russian reformers in the 1990s, which similarly made U.S.-Russian cooperation more difficult. As another official put it, “Putin repositioned his domestic political strategy from first seeking credibility through economic growth and prosperity during his first two terms, to deriving authority in his third term from being a tough Russian nationalist who defends Russian interests against the West in the wake of deepening economic stagnation.” This turn began with Putin’s 2012 presidential campaign, but dramatically shifted with the Ukraine crisis and the annexation of Crimea. As one interviewee put it, “Ukraine broke the model of the reset.”

“Ukraine broke the model of the reset.”

Several interviewees suggested Obama should have reached out more to Putin, but as others noted, Putin would often say “that you need to speak with [Medvedev] about that.” After Putin returned to the presidency, several interviewees acknowledged that the lack of chemistry between Obama and Putin was a problem, one that was only exasperated by the Snowden debacle in 2013.

All former officials with experience in the Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama administrations acknowledged that Putin has always been a challenging interlocutor. “He seems to have two tracks: the United States is the enemy, but we can work together,” said one interviewee. Officials also expressed frustration and concern that Putin is operating under an information base that at times seems to be divorced from reality, and more broadly

²⁴ The Trubnikov-Armitage group was a U.S.-Russian working group on combating threats from Afghanistan, headed by Russian First Deputy Foreign Minister (and former head of Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service) Vyacheslav Trubnikov and U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage.

manipulated by conservative and nationalistic advisors whose authority in the Kremlin has grown. Other officials were more adamant in their view of Putin as the core of Washington's Russia problem as they described Yeltsin's succession decision in fatal terms.

Nevertheless, many felt there has been a market over-correction on Putin among the U.S. political elite and media, with opinion against him swinging too far in the negative direction. As one experienced U.S. official noted, "You have to remain engaged with Russia on the highest level. Without it you will get nothing done and will be playing defense as we have been for the last two-three years."

MOVING FORWARD WITH RUSSIA

Like their Russian counterparts, Americans see no quick fix for the relationship. As one person ruefully described U.S.-Russia relations, "It is not as bad as it seems; it is worse." Nevertheless, the United States needs to keep in mind "that we can make each other's problems a lot worse," and that "this is an important relationship that we need to develop as constructively as possible." Another stated that "taking the Hippocratic Oath would be a useful starting point." While there was no consensus on what is to be done, there was consensus that we are in a very dangerous place with Russia that is damaging for U.S. interests on both the regional and global level.

"You have to engage with Russia on the highest level. Without it you will get nothing done."

Now is not the time to come forward with a bumper-sticker approach. Washington must take

a hard look at U.S. vital interests with Russia, and get back to the basics. As one former official put it, "There is no presumption that we can or cannot work together. Recognize that Russia has interests, and do not diminish or demonize them. The principles should be respect and dialogue; consult without expectations that we will often agree. The agenda will probably be narrower, but that is also fine."

One interviewee stated that, "The incoming administration will need to be more fundamentally engaged with Russia. We have lost the habit of communication, and we need to try to restore that at multiple levels." The first and the most important track to repair is the presidential track, made essential given the deep centralization that has taken place during Putin's 16 years in power. Having a strong personal relationship with the Russian leadership is essential to getting things done.

Several interlocutors pointed to restoration of high-level military ties, nuclear security, and international terrorism as key areas for re-engagement. Another pointed to cyber security, voicing deep concerns: "We have great capabilities but great vulnerabilities because of dependency, and I am not confident we can design effective defense, as it appears that offense always has the advantage as in an ICBM attack."

Several interviewees noted that Russia's weakened economic position may over time contribute to some rapprochement with the West. As one former official put it, "Lack of reform is the key obstacle not only for Russia's economic recovery but also for improving ties with the West. This may be a long game, but I am confident that the demand for reform will grow. Russian businessmen are already very nervous about the Kremlin's decision making."

At the same time, several former officials indicated the need to move away from the "Russia is weak" paradigm. Russia may well be in long-

term decline, but simply dismissing it as “weak” deadens U.S. sensitivity to how Russian actions can and have hurt American interests in recent years in ways that continuously “surprise” U.S. policymakers. Also, weakness is a relative term; Russia will “always want to be dominant in its own neighborhood.”

Thinking about the longer term future of the relationship, interviewees said Washington should increase funding for younger Russians to visit and study in the United States. Several also addressed the need to increase funding for Russian studies at home. According to one speaker, “Russians know more about us than we know about them. We need to very systematically study the country and the region.”

“Russians know more about us than we know about them. We need to very systematically study the country and the region.”

Finally, the decision to shut down the work of bilateral channels to isolate Russia for its behavior in Ukraine was viewed by some as counter-productive, as it further consolidated Moscow’s resolve around its chosen policy course. Closing off a number of channels in response to Ukraine was a prime example of, as one former U.S. official put it, “cutting off your nose to spite your face.” The risks posed by a hostile and aggressive Russia require steady, calm, and firm engagement that takes a longer view of the potential for change within Russia itself, as well as acknowledging the need for immediate changes to the U.S. approach, for the simple reason that it is not working well.

V. CALIBRATING AND ELEVATING U.S. POLICY TOWARDS RUSSIA

In response to the dangerous level of the current crisis, the new U.S. administration should pursue a strategy of **calibration** toward Russia. This approach involves four parts:

1. Conducting a clear assessment of the risks and challenges that Russia poses to U.S. interests in the global context;
2. Identifying the motivations for Russia's foreign-policy behavior towards the United States;
3. Implementing this assessment to inform specific policies of deterrence and engagement on concrete issue areas;
4. Elevating and sustaining the level of presidential and administration engagement with Russia policy.

As discussed earlier, the areas in which Russia presents the most pressing risks and challenges to U.S. interests include:

- Nuclear security and non-proliferation
- European security
- Islamic terrorism and stability in the Greater Middle East
- Cyber security
- Rise of China

The current adversarial nature of U.S.-Russian relations creates the greatest risk for Washington

in the first two areas of nuclear and European security, and their interlinkages raise the risk level to one that is possibly greater than during the Cold War. Newer challenges of terrorism, instability in the Greater Middle East, cyber security, the rise of China, and global governance are meanwhile exacerbated by conflict with Russia.

Mutual actions taken by Russia and the United States have resulted in the return of an acute security-dilemma dynamic to the relationship. This is playing out in the absence of trusted channels of communication between the two governments. U.S. policies are simply not working, calling to mind the old adage, "When you are in a hole, stop digging."

Motivations for Russian Foreign Policy Behavior with the United States

Russia's approach to the United States is guided by three main factors:

- Respect for its status and interests as a peer, if not equal, sovereign great power;
- Perception of threat on missile defense, foreign intervention, NATO/European security, and U.S. dominance in core institutions of global governance;
- Anti-U.S./Western posture for consolidation of domestic political authority.

It is difficult to identify clearly the extent to which each factor may affect any given Russian foreign policy position. But decades of experience has

shown that these factors—particularly Moscow’s great-power mindset—are ingrained in the Russian approach to foreign policy, regardless of the current leadership.

In the past Washington has dismissed Russia’s great-power posturing, citing the country’s long-term internal problems and diminished global role, only to be unpleasantly surprised by Moscow’s assertive behavior. While Russia is indeed beset by many problems, the point is that it sees itself as a great power *and acts on this perception*, creating new facts on the ground for the United States. If the new U.S. administration wants to make headway with Russia—and with Putin in particular—it will need an approach that takes into account Russia’s baseline negotiating position as that of a great power, with interests in its immediate sphere that it will accommodate to the United States and Europe only through very skillful diplomacy and deterrence.

Russia sees itself as a great power and acts on this perception.

In the longer term, the U.S. administration must directly engage with the Russian leadership to mitigate the pernicious dynamics of the current security and status dilemmas. This high-level engagement is justified, first, by the tremendous problems that Russia can cause for any successful pursuit of U.S. foreign and security policy goals, be it in nuclear security, European security, international terrorism, cyber security, or a host of strategic areas ranging from China to the Arctic to Afghanistan.

Engagement must also be highly visible, as it is designed to acknowledge Russia’s desire to be attributed great-power status with the goal of gradually defusing the extraordinary tensions accumulated in recent years. The leverage for Washington derives precisely from this visibility. As Leslie Gelb wisely noted,

The Kremlin has to realize that to receive great-power treatment, it’s got to behave far more responsibly and accept responsibility for joint solutions. Putin can’t go on trying to dominate and intimidate his neighbors, just as the U.S. president can’t be seen as seeking to pull these neighbors out of the Russian orbit.²⁵

The new administration should move away from the U.S. rhetoric post-Ukraine crisis of isolating “Russia” or the “Russian regime.” Isolating Russia is simply not possible because the “international community” is far broader than Washington’s European allies and Japan (who also have mixed enthusiasm at best for an isolation policy). Most other major and emerging powers have little interest in cutting ties with Moscow, especially the smaller ones on its border who stand to suffer the most from such a policy. It is also a misnomer to say that U.S. policy post-Ukraine was one of isolation; more accurately it was a combination of efforts to punish Russia for violations of international norms in Ukraine with selective engagement on issues of mutual concern, including Iran and Syria.

The first step for the president-elect is to talk about Russia and its president in a respectful, disciplined, and business-like manner. Casual but denigrating remarks from U.S. leaders are red meat for inciting deeper anti-Americanism in Russia, and are not constructive for the pursuit of broader U.S. foreign and security policy goals that require Russian cooperation. As Henry Kissinger noted, “Demonization of Vladimir Putin is not

²⁵ Gelb, “Russia and America: Towards a New Détente.”

a policy; it is an alibi for the absence of one.”²⁶ Likewise, positive or complimentary statements should be deliberate and focused so as not to be misinterpreted as a blanket endorsement for the conduct and character of the Russian government and policy. The United States cannot control how Putin manipulates American rhetoric to his political benefit, but we are able to make greater efforts on our part to insulate the business of U.S.-Russia relations from excesses in our own domestic politics and media.

At the same time, the new administration must emphasize that it will work with allies and key partners to deter threats to their security from Russia or any other country. Words matter, and a balanced rhetorical effort at reassurance of Russia and our European allies and partners is a good place to start. The new president must set a new tone, abandoning gratuitous denigration or excessive praise of Russia and its leader.

How to Calibrate Policy towards Russia

The key to a successful calibration of U.S. policy towards Russia is to find the right combination of enhanced deterrence and deeper engagement that will promote U.S. interests in the long-term. Many are calling for a stricter policy of deterrence and isolation of Russia. This is unlikely to be effective, because it fails to address—and instead exacerbates—the ongoing escalation of the security dilemma, as well as underestimates the extent to which domestic political factors drive Putin’s behavior.

The main interest for the United States is to reduce the risk of conflict in the current areas of acute crisis—nuclear and European security—and, secondly, to work towards mutual agreement on key issue areas where U.S. and Russian interests overlap. This approach is not static and calls for a periodic recalibration, or fine-tuning,

of the most effective combination of deterrence and engagement, in response to changes in Russian behavior or developments in the global environment.

The new administration should be ready to propose direct engagement with Putin and relevant top officials from both administrations in a **bilateral strategic dialogue** to explore options for an off-ramp from the security dilemma that is currently spiraling out of control. Discussions should prioritize the following key areas: nuclear arms control, security, and non-proliferation; counter-terrorism and stability in the Greater Middle East; and cyber security. The United States should enter into this dialogue with no set expectations or pressure for near-term deliverables. History indicates that Washington and Moscow have many deep-seated differences in each area but that our capabilities, concerns, and mutual vulnerabilities necessitate engagement to mitigate these threats, even if this does not lead to agreement in the short-term.

Some aspects of the nuclear dialogue may be delayed pending a nuclear posture review of the new administration as well as a review of the existing plans for deployment of missile defense systems. The potential for greater cooperation in Syria will depend on what happens on the ground before January 20, 2017, when the administration takes office, as well as the degree to which that administration is willing to be more flexible than its predecessors about the role of Bashar Al-Assad in negotiations for post-conflict political arrangements in Syria. Cyber security is the most nascent area that calls for bilateral engagement, but efforts to deter threats from Russia or other state or non-state actors and reduce U.S. vulnerabilities will far outweigh what can be achieved through diplomacy in the near- to mid-term.

²⁶ See “Henry Kissinger: To Settle the Ukraine Crisis, Start at the End,” *The Washington Post*, March 5, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/henry-kissinger-to-settle-the-ukraine-crisis-start-at-the-end/2014/03/05/46dad868-a496-11e3-8466-d34c451760b9_story.html?utm_term=.2b4e763cf315.

European security and Ukraine are excluded from the bilateral security dialogue because these issues must be negotiated in concert with our European partners. These areas require both stronger deterrence measures, as well as deeper U.S. presidential engagement. The new U.S. president's first foreign trip should be to Europe to reassure our allies as well as consult them about how to manage relations with Russia. In the meantime, the new president must pivot from his campaign rhetoric questioning the value of NATO, including the U.S. commitment to Article V. There may come a time to review the European security framework, but now is exactly the wrong time given Russian actions in Ukraine and generally threatening posture towards Europe.

The new U.S. administration must take greater leadership in revamping Western policy on Ukraine. The Minsk II agreement—which was negotiated hastily at a time when Ukraine was desperate to prevent a further Russian advance—has long outlived its usefulness, and the continued stalemate over its implementation is deeply corrosive to Ukrainian statehood. Most importantly, Minsk II is increasingly impossible to implement in its current form: the demographic and security situation in the Donbass has changed so much in the past two years that, as one Ukrainian scholar recently said in Washington, “The DNR and LNR basically report to Moscow on separate tracks of subordination...and the idea of holding elections there under the auspices of the Ukrainian government is surreal.”²⁷ Russia has meanwhile continued to flagrantly violate the border with ongoing military supplies. Mikhail Gorbachev described the Soviet war in Afghanistan as a “bleeding wound” for the USSR; likewise, the conflict in Ukraine is a “bleeding wound” for Russia-West relations and for Russia itself, not to speak of Ukraine.

The new administration must ensure, however, that any higher-level diplomatic engagement with Russia on Ukraine is not carried out over the heads of Ukraine or key European allies. It must likewise be wary of any Russian offers of a quid pro quo agreement regarding Syria and Ukraine. These are separate problems, and Washington should work to secure Russian cooperation on Syria without compromising the U.S. position in Ukraine.

Finally, the new administration should selectively re-open the bilateral and multilateral channels of communication that were closed after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Since Washington initiated these closures, and because the United States is in a considerably stronger position than Russia, it may be incumbent upon the U.S. side to reach out first. This would not be done as a reward to Russia. Rather, these channels serve as a safeguard against further escalation that is in the interests of both sides. It is precisely at times when tensions are high that more channels of communication are needed. The United States should be clear that its participation in these channels lasts as long as they serve U.S. interests and those of its allies.

²⁷ This insight was delivered by Kiev-based expert Oleksandr Sushko in his presentation titled “Two Years after the Minsk Agreements: Is There a Way Out of the Deadlock?,” PONARS Eurasia Policy Conference, September 23, 2016.

VI. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations aim to de-escalate the current situation and lay the groundwork for potential future cooperation with Russia on issues of mutual concern.

Nuclear Security and Non-Proliferation

1. **Renew dialogue on a framework for discussions on mutual nuclear security.** Begin with reassurance on the status of respective nuclear arsenals, with the goal of increasing launch decision times. Discuss plans to modernize nuclear arsenals to enhance transparency and mitigate risk. Propose discussions on how to manage the approaching expiration of the New Start Treaty in 2021. Work to resolve differences over the 1987 INF Treaty.
2. **Renew bilateral talks on strategic stability that were shut down in the summer of 2013.** The primary goal is to develop a framework for continued discussions aimed at greater transparency and improved management of differences in the pursuit of a future agreement. Any chance to agree on another round of offensive nuclear reductions can only come in the context of a broader approach that includes agreement on missile defense and new conventional technologies that could have first-strike capabilities.
3. **Work with Russia and other partners of the P5 + 1 group** to ensure timely fulfillment of the Iran Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).
4. **Engage Russia in efforts to curtail the North Korean missile and nuclear programs.** North Korea may be the next crisis for U.S. foreign policy. Russia is not as key a player here as China, South Korea, or Japan, but it is in U.S. interests to have Moscow adopt a position closer to that of the United States than of China.
5. **Explore opportunities to restore scientific cooperation** between U.S. and Russian nuclear scientists working on mutual security challenges.
6. **Explore opportunities to restore the U.S.-Russia Plutonium Management and Disposition Agreement (PMDA)** or establish a workable alternative to mutually dispose of weapons-grade plutonium. The United States and Russia own the world's two largest stockpiles of plutonium that can be used for nuclear weapons.

European Security

7. **Ensure NATO capacity and reinforce Article V commitments.** The United States should continue to support measures such as the European Reassurance Act to ensure that NATO's capacity to fulfill Article V commitments are viewed as fully credible in Moscow. If NATO appears as a weak and moribund institution, Russia will continue to test it and see little incentive to work with it.
8. **Propose European security enhancement talks under the auspices of the OSCE.** This forum, which includes NATO and CSTO members as well as "grey zone" states that are not members of either security alliance, will undertake discussions of measures to increase transparency of military deployments and exercises to reduce the possibility of accidents and unintended conflict. This forum could develop into negotiations on broader European comprehensive security arrangements, but its initial mandate should be modest.
9. **Restore and revitalize the NATO-Russia Council.** This forum facilitates dialogue between military, as well as civilian, leaders to reduce the dangers of incidents of close proximity and possible inadvertent contact. The NATO-Russia Council can also serve as a transatlantic security forum for intelligence sharing on international terrorism and cyber-security.

Ukraine, Minsk II, and Economic Sanctions

10. **Increase U.S. leadership with allies in efforts against Russian violation of international law.** The failure to implement Minsk II is a major factor in the continuing destabilization of Ukraine. As neither Kiev nor Moscow appears willing or capable of fulfilling its obligations under the current agreement, the United States should initiate a new format for discussions in concert with its European allies, Ukraine, and Russia. However, Minsk II cannot be abandoned until a new agreement is reached to take its place. The United States must become a principal negotiator in seeking a broad and comprehensive agreement with all involved parties, consistent with the principles of the UN charter, for a more secure future for Ukraine. Anything short of a new agreement will result in the continued freezing of the conflict, where Russia continues to hold outsized leverage over Ukraine's future.
11. **Make clear to Moscow that sanctions relief will not precede the successful implementation of a new agreement.** In order to maintain leverage on Russia, the United States must also encourage its European partners to review EU sanctions on an annual rather than biannual basis.²⁸ However, a new agreement can and should include provisions for phased lifting of economic sanctions on Russia.

²⁸ The former secretary-general of NATO recently proposed this measure as a way to maintain transatlantic unity on sanctions. See Anders Fogh Rasmussen, "Extend European Sanctions to Keep Russia in Check," *Financial Times*, October 13, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/980274f4-9123-11e6-a72e-b428cb934b78>.

- 12. The United States must take additional steps in enhancing Ukraine's military forces and their capacity to deter Russia.** This will include readiness to sell or support sales by third parties of defensive military equipment to Kiev if the security situation worsens. At this time, however, the significant improvements in Ukrainian military capability do not justify moving forward with defensive weapons delivery.

International Terrorism, The Greater Middle East, and Syria

- 13. Elevate and institutionalize bilateral format for reducing the threat of international terrorism in the context of the proposed Strategic Dialogue.** In particular, U.S.-Russia dialogue should focus on nuclear and other WMD terrorism given considerable interest on both sides. A separate aspect of the dialogue should address the need to find a common operational definition of terrorism and criteria for identifying terrorist groupings. The Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism could become the basis for enhanced bilateral cooperation, in addition to ongoing multilateral work.
- 14. Place emphasis on humanitarian aid and diplomacy in Syria.** Russia's support for an all-out assault on Aleppo and resulting suspension of U.S.-Russian ceasefire negotiations has limited the United States' immediate options. Likewise, a U.S.-backed no-fly zone remains untenable, given the conflict potential with Russia. Washington must reconcile these realities with the need to engage Russia with President Assad and what is left of the Syrian government. In the short-run, this means focusing on the delivery of humanitarian aid, while pursuing new avenues of diplomacy.

Cybersecurity

- 15. Revive bilateral working group on cybersecurity issues established in 2013 by a joint presidential declaration.** After re-opening dialogue, a new joint statement should reaffirm each side's commitment to the use of direct communication channels, including the use of the nuclear hotline, as well as information sharing to reduce the risk of misperception, escalation, and conflict in the case of a major cyber attack.²⁹ A frank but substantive dialogue should also aim to reestablish red lines on hacking and information operations.

Domestic Politics and Democracy Promotion

- 16. Adopt an informal policy of non-involvement in Russian domestic politics.** The United States' ability to influence Russian domestic politics from within is virtually sub-zero. Programs funded through USAID and other U.S. government initiatives to promote civil society in Russia have been shut down amid the Kremlin's suspicion of foreign interference, while the reputations of Russian partner-organizations have been tarnished. Leading Russian opposition figures have advised that their association with the U.S. government can be counter-productive to the growth of Russian pluralism and can be physically dangerous to themselves. The next administration should take pause and adopt a stance of non-involvement in Russian domestic politics, particularly in advance of Russia's presidential election in 2018.

²⁹ The United States and Russia established a bilateral working group to address threats in the use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) within the framework of the U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission, which was suspended during the Ukraine crisis.

17. Set a realistic tone on the Russian government's stability. The United States must take a more reality-based approach towards Putin and domestic support for his leadership more broadly. For now, regime collapse does not appear imminent, and if it were, it is highly unlikely that Putin's immediate successor would take a more pro-Western approach. Meanwhile, independent polling organizations have confirmed that Putin enjoys broad-based support among the Russian population.³⁰ In this context, publicly questioning the durability or support of the Putin administration only serves to consolidate anti-Western resentment in Russia, which in turn constrains Putin's ability to seek compromise with Washington.

18. Maintain calls for Russia to observe its commitments under the Helsinki Accords and the Council of Europe. The new administration must make clear that respect for human rights and the rule of law remains the basis for a sustained improvement of relations between Moscow and the United States.

Education, Society, and the Next Generation

19. Increase funding for the new generation of Russia and Eurasia experts. The U.S. intelligence community recently announced a planned increase of attention to Russia, but already there is a shortage of highly trained experts with language and in-country experience in the field.³¹ For example, approximately half of new hires to follow Russia and Eurasia at the CIA do not have adequate Russian language skills. At the

same time, Title VI funding for Russian and Eurasian area studies and language training has been cut by nearly 40% since 2011. This problem is further aggravated by the ongoing retirement of the large cohort of experts trained during the Cold War.

20. Increase funding for educational and societal exchange programs. There is no substitute for in-country experience for both Russians and Americans to break down stereotypes. Initiatives like the Fort Ross Dialogue, Alfa Fellowship Program, and the Fulbright Program serve as leading examples of such programs. These opportunities are personally transformative, with benefits far beyond the initial mandate of the exchange.

³⁰ For example, the leading independent Russian pollster Levada Center placed Putin's approval rating at 84% in October 2016. See <http://www.levada.ru/eng/indexes-o>.

³¹ The CIA and other U.S. agencies plan to devote up to 10 percent of their budgets to Russia-related activity, a percentage that has risen over the past two years. See "As Russia Reasserts Itself, U.S. Intelligence Agencies Focus Anew on the Kremlin," *The Washington Post*, September 14, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/as-russia-reasserts-itself-us-intelligence-agencies-focus-anew-on-the-kremlin/2016/09/14/cc212c62-78fo-11e6-ac8e-cf8e0dd91dc7_story.html.

CONCLUSION

This is not a call for a “reset” or a “strategic partnership,” but rather a review and reevaluation of the excessive risks the United States is running with the current downward trajectory of U.S.-Russia relations. The stated recommendations aim to mitigate these risks in the months and years ahead. But it is not a final prescription: continuous recalibration of our approach will be necessary, to take into account changes in Moscow’s own behavior, as well as to adjust for external events that can place the value of stronger cooperation with Moscow in a different light—or, conversely, call for stronger measures to contain and deter.

There is no magic bullet for the near-term repair of U.S.-Russia relations. As the previous narrative suggests, we have 25 years of post-Soviet experience that has repeatedly dashed the hopes of successive administrations in both capitols to improve ties. In Russia, we have an experienced leader in Vladimir Putin who has felt personally aggrieved by Washington policy, undermining whatever reservoir of trust he had initially about U.S. designs. The domestic sentiment in both countries among the leadership as well as broader society is more negatively disposed towards each other than perhaps at any time since the early Cold War.

A policy of calibration offers an alternative psychological approach to Putin and Russia. If successful, it could lead over time to a pivot away from an adversarial posture that accentuates unnecessarily high risks and dangers, to one in

which we re-learn, or perhaps learn for the first time, the value of partnership and accommodation of interests to mutual benefit.

There has never been anything easy about the U.S.-Russia relationship, and certainly nothing “normal” about it for at least the last 100 years. That is why the first goal for the new administration should be to clear the smoke of mutual acrimony, before making a longer term appraisal of what is possible to achieve. It will take significant wisdom, forbearance, and ultimately political will to pull away from our dangerously mutual adversarial posture.

The United States should push hard on areas where we can agree to cooperate, and strive to mitigate the risks of conflict on issues where we disagree. We must keep in mind the relative strength of the U.S. position and the basic truth that over time, an adversarial relationship with Russia makes little sense for the interests of both countries. There will likely come a time when either Putin or a successor will be more focused on the domestic challenges of modernization in Russia, and stronger ties with the United States and the West will be essential for that task.

LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

Interviews with the following individuals informed the writing of this report:

UNITED STATES

John Beyrle, Steve Biegun, Chip Blacker, William Burns, James Collins, William Courtney, Paula Dobriansky, Gloria Duffy, Toby Gati, James Goldgeier, Amy Gordon, Thomas Graham, Stephen Hadley, Fiona Hill, Steadman Hinckley, Michael McFaul, William Perry, Thomas Pickering, Steven Pifer, Eugene Rumer, Dan Russell, Charles Ryan, Stephen Sestanovich, Dmitri Simes, Angela Stent, Strobe Talbott, Andrew Weiss.

RUSSIA

Georgi Borisenko, Alexander Dynkin, Vladimir Frolov, Sergei Generalov, Igor Ivanov, Andrey Kortunov, Vladimir Lukin, Fyodor Lukyanov, Sergei Stankevich, Oleg Stepanov, Dmitri Trenin, Yuri Ushakov, Fedor Voitlovsky, Alexander Voloshin.

APPENDIX

COLD WAR VS. TODAY

Cold War vs. Today



Population (1991)

	293,000,000
	253,000,000

Population (2014)

	146,000,000
	319,000,000

Source: CIA World Factbook estimates



GDP (1991)*

	\$2,660,000
	\$6,174,000

GDP (2015)*

	\$1,326,000
	\$18,000,000

Source: World Bank and CIA World Factbook estimates
* USD millions at current \$



Defense Spending (1988)

	\$246,010,000,000
	\$293,093,000,000

Defense Spending (2015)

	\$66,000,000,000
	\$596,000,000,000

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute estimates



Nuclear Arsenal (1986)

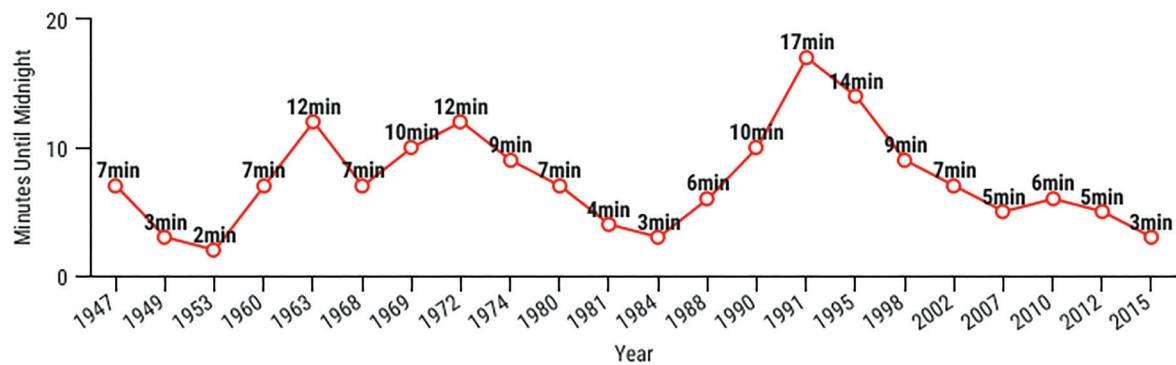
	40,159
	23,317

Nuclear Arsenal (2014)

	4,300
	4,760

Source: Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists
Total nuclear warheads

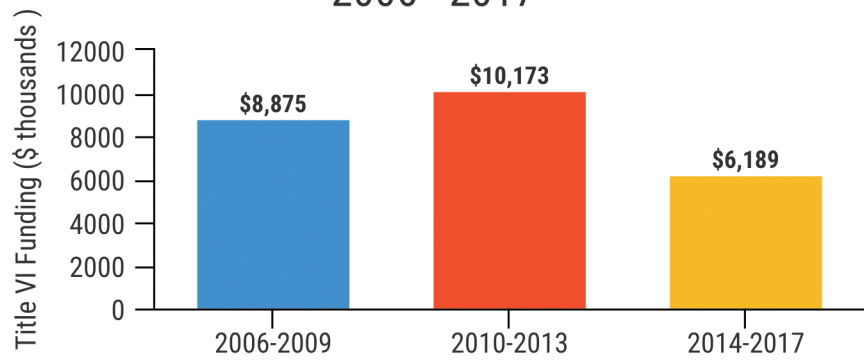
DOOMSDAY CLOCK



Source: Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists
Note: The Domsday Clock conveys how close we are to destroying civilization with nuclear weapons, among other anthropologic threats.

TITLE VI FUNDING FOR RUSSIAN AREA STUDIES

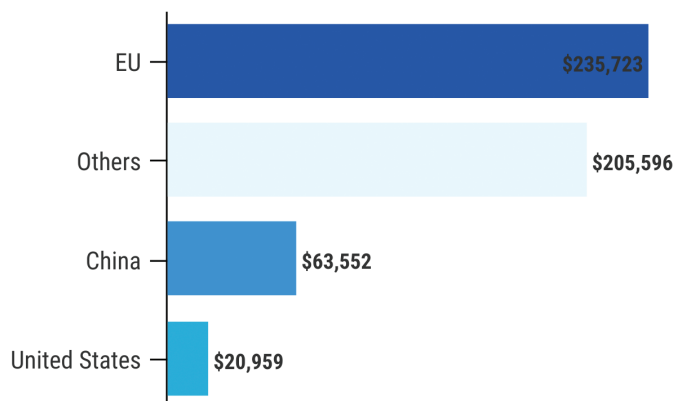
Annual Title VI Funds* for Russia/Eurasia:
2006 - 2017



*Combined National Resource Center (NRC) and Foreign Language Area Scholarship (FLAS) annual allocation estimates. Source: U.S. Department of Education

Russia's Economic Relations

Russia Overall Trade 2015 (millions \$)

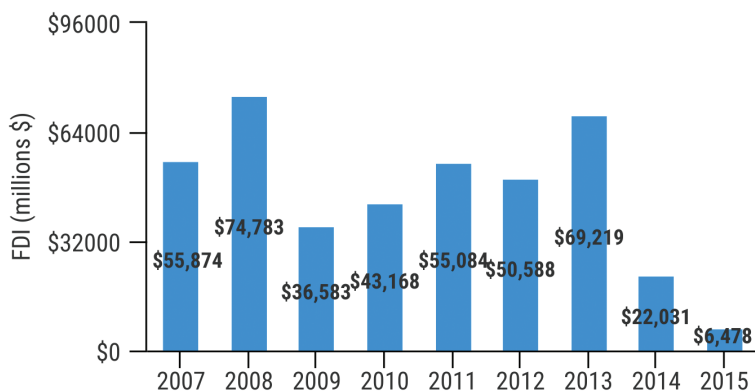


Source: Russian State Statistical Service



Overall U.S.-Russia trade turnover in 2015 was **\$21 billion**, a 28% decline from the previous year.

Russia Inward FDI 2007-2015

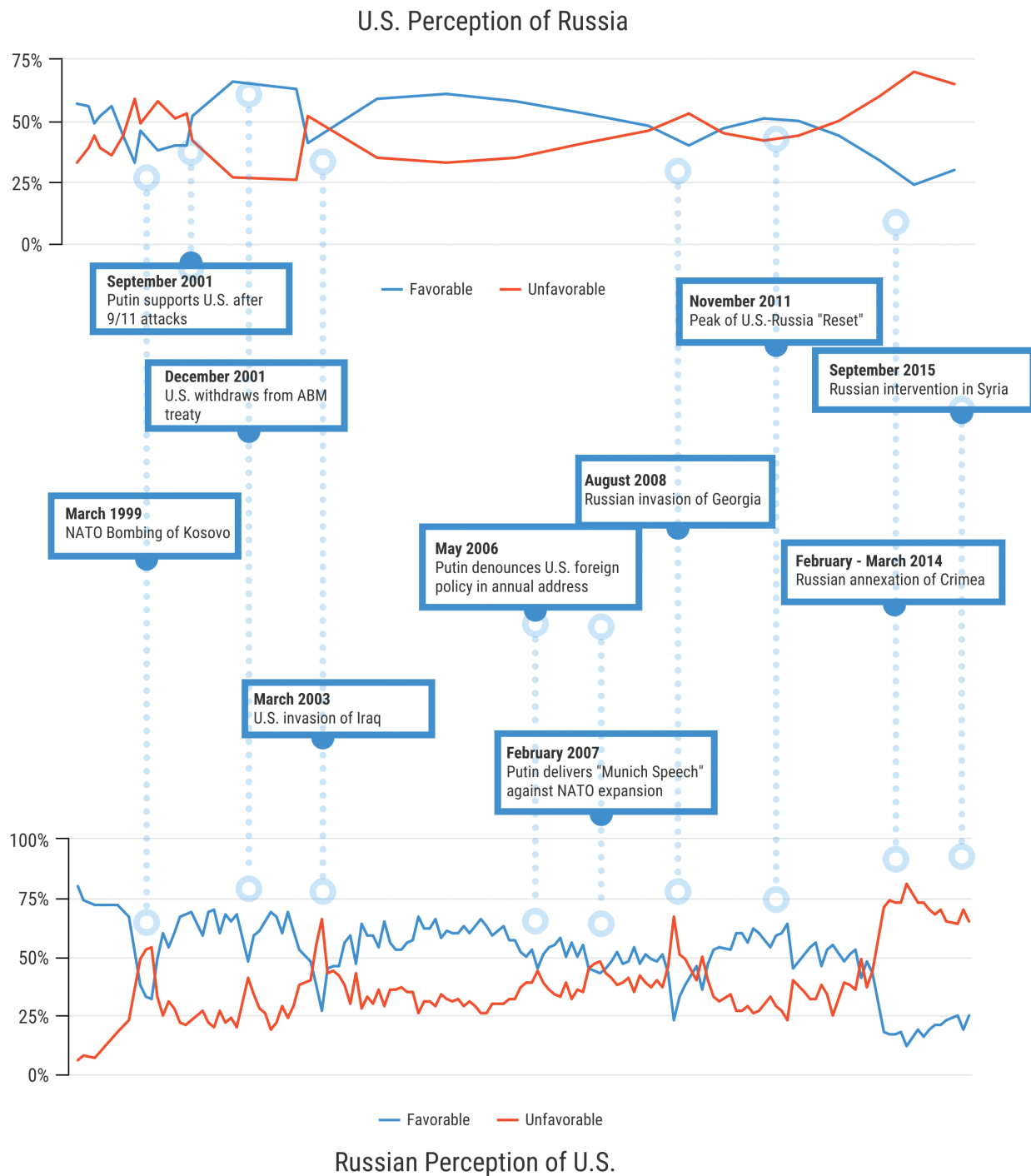


Source: Central Bank of Russia



Total U.S.-Russia trade in 2015 amounted to **less than 1%** of all U.S. trade.

US-RUSSIA PUBLIC PERCEPTION



Sources: Gallup; Levada Center [1991-2016]
 Note: Timeline is approximated to fit data

ACRONYMS

ABM	Anti-ballistic missile
DCFTA	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EU	European Union
G20	Group of 20 major economies
G7	Group of 7 major economies
ICBM	Inter-continental ballistic missile
INF	Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (into force 1988)
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
MAD	Mutually-assured destruction
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
New START	New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (into force 2011)
NSA	National Security Agency
P5+1	Permanent 5 members of UN Security Council and Germany
START	Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (into force 1994)
UN	United Nations
WTO	World Trade Organization

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew C. Kuchins is a senior fellow and research professor at the Center for Eurasian, Russian, and East European Studies (CERES) at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service. He is also a senior associate (non-resident) of the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) Russia and Eurasia Program, which he led from 2007-2015. From 2000 to 2006, Kuchins was a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, where he previously served as director of its Russian and Eurasian Program in Washington, D.C., from 2000 to 2003 and again in 2006. He directed the Carnegie Moscow Center from 2003 to 2005, and has also held senior positions at the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Stanford University, and the University of California at Berkeley. Kuchins currently teaches at Georgetown University and has also taught at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) and Stanford University. He holds a B.A. from Amherst College and an M.A. and Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins SAIS.

RECOMMENDED READING ON U.S.-RUSSIA RELATIONS AND RUSSIAN POLITICS SINCE 1991

Recommended Reading on U.S.-Russia Relations and Russian Politics Since 1991

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