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Guiding Principles for a Sustainable U.S. Policy Toward Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia

KEY JUDGMENTS FROM A JOINT TASK FORCE

SUMMARY

Developing an effective U.S. strategy toward Russia and its neighbors is an increasingly complex and difficult challenge.¹ The breakdown in U.S.-Russian relations is a product of long-standing disagreements about the fundamentals of U.S. and Russian national security interests and policies. It cannot be repaired quickly or easily, or without a major course correction by either or both sides. Closer ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin cannot—or should not—be an end in themselves. Nor should we fool ourselves that they will be sufficient to overcome these disagreements. The U.S.-Russian relationship will remain largely competitive and adversarial. The challenge for Washington will be managing unavoidable tensions with Moscow while advancing American interests and staying true to U.S. principles. The new administration should avoid fueling unrealistic expectations of a breakthrough and instead seek incremental progress on specific topics based on a set of guiding principles. Setting and observing priorities will be key to managing this relationship, as will be separating the critical from the desirable and being realistic about what can be accomplished.

The United States should be guided by the following principles in managing relations with Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia:

- The United States' commitment to defend its NATO allies will remain unconditional and ironclad. America's top near-term goal should be to bolster deterrence with a series of defense improvements and reassurance measures for the alliance's eastern flank.
- The United States and its allies will defend the norms that underpin European security and, more broadly, the international order. These include the Helsinki Final Act and the Charter of Paris, which have been aggressively challenged by Russian actions.
- The United States will continue its strong support for Ukraine. The fate of Ukrainian reform is of critical importance to Europe. Halting the conflict in Donbas, deterring further Russian aggression, and supporting Ukraine's far-ranging domestic reforms will be top priorities for U.S.-EU diplomacy.
- Engagement with Russia will not come at the expense of the rights and interests of Russia's neighbors. At the same time, the United States must recognize that the long-term challenge of promoting democracy in Russia and Eurasia will be a demand-driven rather than supply-driven process.

1. This policy outlook was written by Carnegie scholars Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolsky, and Andrew S. Weiss. It summarizes the findings of the joint Carnegie Endowment for International Peace–Chicago Council on Global Affairs Task Force on U.S. Policy Toward Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia co-chaired by former deputy secretary of state Ambassador Richard Armitage and Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT). In writing this policy outlook, the authors relied on the task force's deliberations and a series of published white papers available on Carnegie's website. However, they alone bear responsibility for the analysis and judgments expressed herein. The work of the task force was made possible in part by the generous support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

A BROKEN RELATIONSHIP

U.S.-Russian relations are at their lowest point since the end of the Cold War. The fault lines between the United States and Russia reflect major differences in interests and values. Russia's annexation of Crimea and aggression in eastern Ukraine have upended the post-Cold War security environment in Europe. By trying to carve out a sphere of influence in its neighborhood using military force and other tools, Moscow seeks nothing less than to rewrite basic principles of the international order, which America has long defended. Unfortunately, it is far from clear whether the new U.S. administration views this situation in comparable terms.

In Europe, Russian propaganda, information operations, and Cold War-style subversion have magnified a dangerous wave of populist nationalism and threats to U.S.-EU unity. In the Middle East, the Kremlin's military intervention in Syria has given Bashar al-Assad's regime a new lease on life and has imposed enormous costs on innocent civilians and lives, while the latest round of Russian-led ceasefire diplomacy excluded the United States. At home, the Kremlin continues to rally support for Putin by relying on anti-Americanism and attacks on civil society and deeply embattled independent groups.

Russia's unprecedented cyber operations during the recent U.S. presidential election and attempts to tilt the outcome have made a dangerous situation worse. The Barack Obama administration's decision to hit back and impose sanctions on Russian

intelligence agencies, senior officials, and entities involved in these cyberattacks is an essential first step to make sure that the Kremlin understands the costs of such brazen interference. While necessary, these steps will not put an end to Russian cyber and information operations in the United States or Europe. More will need to be done to counter these activities ahead of several key European elections throughout 2017–2018. Perceptions that the United States stands to lose more than Russia from confrontation in the cyber domain should not deter it from responding forcefully.

The severity of the break between Washington and Moscow is underscored by the fact that, in the Kremlin's narrative, these Russian actions are meant merely to restore the balance of power. Having rebuilt a measure of Russia's strength, Putin is transparent about his desire to impede U.S. ability to operate at will and to retaliate for the alleged humiliation that Russia suffered in the 1990s. A majority of Russians share Putin's views. U.S. policymakers should recognize that they have a long-term Russia problem on their hands that extends beyond the headaches of dealing with Putin and his inner circle.

The rivalry between Russia and the United States has consequences beyond their bilateral relations. Russia's neighbors feel it most—the very countries the United States has tried to help leave Russia's shadow. Russia wants to control these countries' security, political, and economic orientation, and, unfortunately, it will have opportunities to meddle in the affairs of the smaller states

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along its periphery. There is a long-standing and strong bipartisan consensus in the United States that Moscow's goals and tactics are unacceptable. Defusing the current tensions can help these countries escape the geopolitical tug of war between Russia and the West, but there can be no return to the days of relegating smaller countries to Moscow's orbit.

MANAGING AN ADVERSARIAL RELATIONSHIP

For the past twenty-five years, U.S.-Russian relations have alternated between high expectations and bitter disappointments. Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama have each in turn attempted a breakthrough with Russia only to see the relationship unravel by the end of their terms. Rather than pursuing a new reset, the incoming U.S. administration should try to break out of this boom-and-bust pattern by focusing on careful management of deep-seated differences with Moscow. There should be no illusions that pursuing a full-scale rapprochement with Putin would not entail a major retreat from core U.S. principles, inflict enduring damage to transatlantic relations, undermine U.S. global influence, and threaten the survival of the international order.

Yet whether the United States likes it or not, Moscow will remain a major factor in regions and issues where key U.S. interests are at stake. Putin is a skilled and agile operator—more daring, less predictable, and less encumbered by bureaucratic inertia than even his Soviet predecessors. With little regard for established norms and a willingness to take risks, he has forced others to

reckon with him—more often than not on his terms. Dealt a poor hand—a stagnant economy, technological backwardness, and a modest defense budget—he has played it well and positioned himself as a major force on the global stage.

Pushing back against Russia will often be necessary. But so will be dealing with it. A sustainable U.S. approach will require a mix of firmness, caution, and deliberation. The risk of escalation and direct conflict is real. Putin is willing to escalate disputes with the West in dangerous and irresponsible ways, knowing full well that the United States is constrained by its commitments as a responsible stakeholder of the international system. Moscow's reliance on asymmetrical tools—so-called hybrid war, cyber operations, disinformation, and old-fashioned subversion—will be an ongoing challenge. But that does not mean that Russian actions should go without a response. The United States has a range of core strengths and tools at its disposal that it can deploy to respond to and deter future Russian adventurism.

TOWARD A NEW POLICY FRAMEWORK

The United States and Russia have been drifting for some time now toward a version of Cold War II. Prospects for halting this dangerous trend will hinge on two factors. First, is Putin prepared to make a strategic decision that he wants better relations with the United States? And second, is the Trump administration for its part willing to make clear to Putin that just as he insists on protecting Russian interests, the United States is committed to securing its core interests

and the alliances and institutions that are at the heart of the existing international order? The success of a U.S. approach to Russia that emphasizes conflict management, rather than conflict resolution, will require hard thinking about American priorities and what are not only desirable but also feasible outcomes, given the many impediments to a true reconciliation of policies and interests.

WHAT IS CRITICAL?

Business as usual between Washington and Moscow has been largely frozen since Russia's annexation of Crimea. The Trump administration's apparent interest in restarting regular, senior-level dialogue between the two governments is not inherently problematic, provided that it is aimed at managing differences, lowering tensions, avoiding misunderstandings, and seizing opportunities for cooperation. The Kremlin may take advantage of this opening only to proclaim that Russia is no longer isolated internationally. However, should a meaningful dialogue resume, the following four areas should be given priority.

The Cyber and Information Domain

If the Trump administration were to rescind the sanctions that were recently imposed on Russia for its interference in the U.S. presidential election, this decision would signal to Moscow that there is little cost or consequence to such actions, thereby rewarding bad behavior. Russian state-sponsored attacks on the institutions and processes that guide modern democratic societies must be exposed and answered. The United States must also significantly strengthen the resilience of its critical infrastructure, support European efforts to

thwart and expose Russian interference in their domestic politics, and develop closer transatlantic coordination of retaliatory measures. At the same time, the new administration should make it a priority to reinvigorate discussions on new rules of the road and norms of behavior to govern U.S.-Russian competition in cyberspace—a goal that would also be undermined if the recent sanctions were lifted.

Military Risk Reduction Measures

Russia's provocative military activities pose a real risk of direct conflict either as an accident or as a result of a miscommunication. The United States and Russia already have agreed rules of the road for the responsible conduct of peacetime military operations, but Moscow is ignoring them. The Trump administration should try to re-establish properly functioning military-to-military channels to facilitate full implementation of existing rules and negotiate any new rules that may be necessary. The deliberately vexing nature of Russian behavior may make this impossible to achieve, but an attempt should be made nonetheless. The effort to de-conflict Russian and U.S.-led coalition air operations in and around Syria shows what is possible when there is political will on both sides.

Syria's Future

The fall of Aleppo and the staying power of the Assad regime leave little prospect for a successful U.S. strategy built around the moderate Syrian opposition. In addition, the conflict between the Assad regime and the increasingly radicalized opposition is likely to continue despite the Russian-Turkish-Iranian negotiated ceasefire. With Russia focused

on supporting Assad and securing its own foothold in Syria (rather than defeating the so-called Islamic State), meaningful U.S.-Russian cooperation to counter the group will be a tall order due to the countries' competing priorities and the lack of trust between security establishments. Still, the Trump administration can support efforts to establish a comprehensive ceasefire, to provide humanitarian relief, and to negotiate a peaceful transition toward some form of power sharing in a new Syrian government.

Ukraine in the Balance

Washington, Brussels, and key European allies need to demonstrate in words and deeds their long-term commitment to supporting Ukraine. Moscow is betting that the United States and Europe will eventually lose interest and that the current sanctions regime will crumble amid stalled implementation of the Minsk accords and slow progress by Kyiv on crucial reforms. While Western policymakers should have no illusions that sanctions by themselves will force a change in Russia's Ukraine policy, they are an important source of leverage over Moscow's behavior and should not be lifted for free.

WHAT IS DESIRABLE?

There are several areas that offer somewhat better prospects for cooperation either because of convergent interests or based on prior experience. These include nuclear nonproliferation and nuclear security, the fight against nuclear terrorism, and the future of the Arctic. These are generally technical issues, and progress can be made at technical working levels without involving

senior officials. More challenging arms control measures, such as preserving the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and convening formal negotiations on deeper cuts in U.S. and Russian strategic and tactical nuclear arsenals, will require a political decision and therefore appear unlikely absent a breakthrough in the relationship. That said, both countries are developing military capabilities the other finds threatening, and the Kremlin has a worrying predilection for nuclear muscle flexing. A serious dialogue about strategic stability, military doctrines, and force structures is needed to identify ways of enhancing stability, especially in crises.

WHAT IS FEASIBLE?

The history of U.S.-Russian relations over the past twenty-five years underscores the importance of engagement with the Kremlin at the highest level. President Trump will have multiple opportunities to engage with Putin early in his tenure, but feel-good interactions with Putin should be avoided and should not come at the expense of G7 solidarity.

A stable relationship with Russia is important to achieving many of the highest U.S. priorities. However, the problems that divide the two countries are likely to evade quick or easy solutions. Defusing tensions, re-engaging on issues of mutual interest, preventing or deterring Russian meddling in U.S. and its allies' domestic affairs—in other words managing the relationship with patience and firmness—will constitute success until a measure of trust is restored between Washington and

Moscow. Such a state of affairs would not be transformational, but it is far preferable to the wild ride U.S.-Russian relations have been on for the past twenty-five years. With time, such a methodical approach

may produce more sustainable and productive relations between the two countries that will benefit them and the entire international system. **C**

The joint Carnegie Endowment–Chicago Council on Global Affairs Task Force on U.S. Policy Toward Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia is co-chaired by former deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage and Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut.

Specifically, the task force is focused on

- Identifying U.S. and Western interests in this complex and diverse region;
- Assessing the strengths and weaknesses of U.S. and Western policy toward Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia since the end of the Cold War;
- Preparing an analytically rigorous assessment of U.S. and Western policy challenges in the wake of the Ukraine crisis and the rise of a more assertive, unpredictable Russia under President Vladimir Putin; and
- Offering a set of guiding principles for a durable U.S. policy framework while sustaining and promoting transatlantic unity.

More information on the work of the task force and a series of in-depth white papers are available at carnegieendowment.org/specialprojects/TaskForceonUSPolicyTowardRussiaUkraineandEurasia/.

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