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# THE FUTURE OF U.S.-RUSSIA RELATIONS

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## About the Authors



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# **THE FUTURE OF U.S.-RUSSIA RELATIONS**

**By Julianne Smith and Adam Twardowski**

## Introduction

The next president will inherit a relationship with Russia fraught with more tension than at any point since the Cold War. Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine sparked fear that its belligerence could threaten the territorial integrity of NATO's eastern members while raising questions about NATO's ability to deter Russian aggression in its immediate neighborhood and beyond. In the Middle East, Russia obstructs U.S. policy in Syria by arming the Assad regime and providing diplomatic cover for its assaults on U.S.-backed Syrian rebels. With a blunt anti-western posture, acts of intimidation toward its neighbors, and a rapidly modernizing military, Russia has plunged its relationship with the United States into a crisis that threatens to destabilize the transatlantic community and undermine future opportunities for cooperation.

Given the current state of affairs, it is easy to forget how different U.S.-Russia relations looked when President Obama first entered office in 2009. After years of simmering tensions tied to NATO's open door policy, Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia, and longstanding disagreements about the West's actions toward Russia in the wake of the Cold War, both countries expressed mutual interest in a fresh start. The Russian "reset" policy, one of President Obama's first foreign policy initiatives, enabled the onetime strategic rivals to cooperate on a wide range of issues, from counterterrorism and arms reduction to trade and development. For a few years, under President Dmitry Medvedev's leadership, Russia appeared to have redirected its focus from power competition to pragmatic cooperation with the United States. Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2012, and its assistance in implementing sanctions against Iran, signaled to many observers that U.S.-Russia relations, while often challenging, offered both sides meaningful opportunities for pragmatic cooperation.

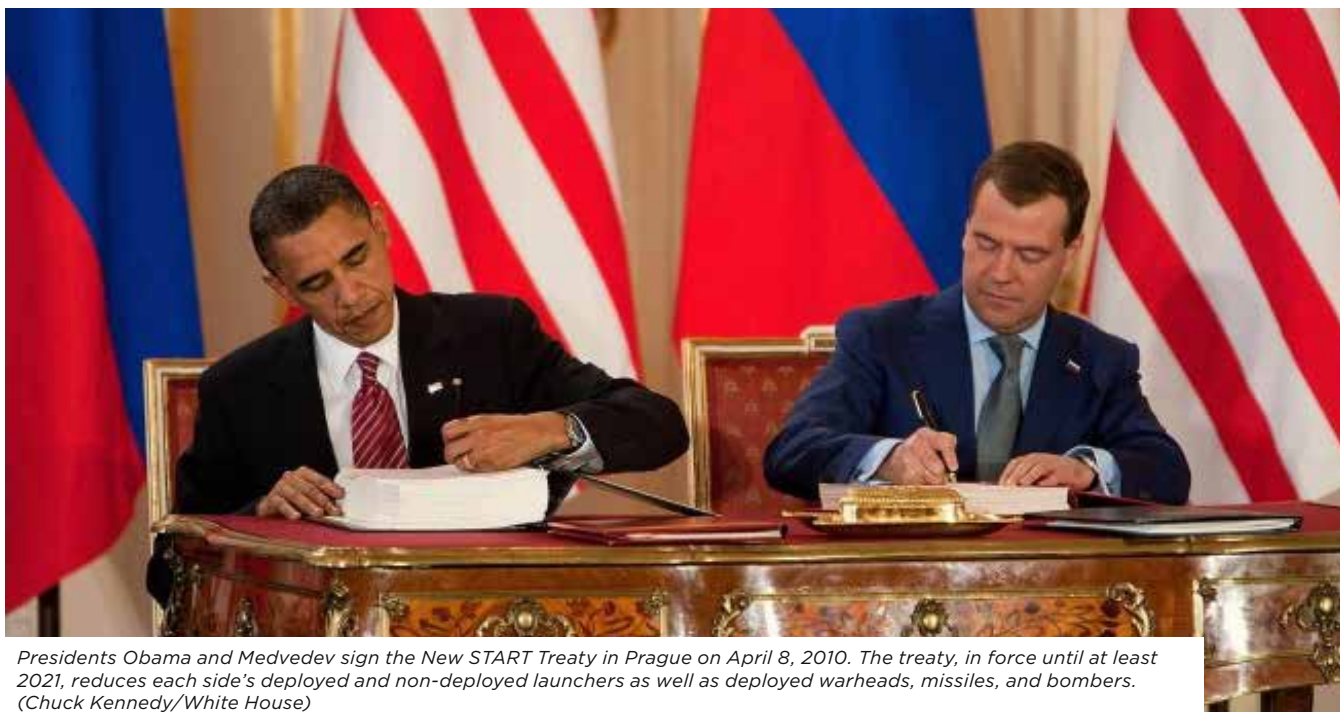
Today, however, these relations can at best be described as bleak, and at worst headed for outright confrontation, given President Vladimir Putin's desire to reestablish a sphere of influence in his neighborhood. But while the next U.S. president must confront the challenge of Russian revanchism, he must also take care not to overstate it. To be sure, Russia has invested

vast resources into growing its military capabilities and appears increasingly willing to deploy those capabilities to further its aims. That said, its power is also constrained by a shrinking population that will not sustain its hollowed-out, oil-dependent economy. Other constraints on Russian power include deepening suspicion toward the country among its traditional partners in Central Asia, a reinvigorated NATO alliance, and long-term uncertainty about the stability of its political and economic system.

The next president has signaled his intention to pursue closer relations with Russia, which he regards as a partner in counterterrorism and other issues. But Presidents Obama and George W. Bush also entered office believing they could invigorate U.S.-Russia ties until experience showed them that Putin exploits American flexibility while working to undermine American interests at every opportunity. President Trump will find that any honeymoon in U.S.-Russia relations under his watch will force him to confront Russia's revisionist aims for the post-Cold War security architecture, a vision at odds with long-term American interests.

**The broad goal of the next U.S. administration should be to resist and deter Russian efforts to undermine the post-Cold War security order in Europe and elsewhere.**

The broad goal of the next U.S. administration should be to resist and deter Russian efforts to undermine the post-Cold War security order in Europe and elsewhere. To resist Russian expansionism, the next U.S. president must invest in the United States' ability to counter Russia's newly honed abilities in cyber and information warfare, in traditional U.S. strengths such as maritime warfare that have lagged since the end of the Cold War, and in new potentially dangerous domains such as outer space. To do this, the next president should champion a robust transatlantic approach toward Russia that leverages the combined economic, military, and political resources of the United States as well as its European allies and partners. Finally, he should remain open-minded about pursuing pragmatic security and economic cooperation with Russia, should such opportunities arise.



*Presidents Obama and Medvedev sign the New START Treaty in Prague on April 8, 2010. The treaty, in force until at least 2021, reduces each side's deployed and non-deployed launchers as well as deployed warheads, missiles, and bombers. (Chuck Kennedy/White House)*

## U.S.-Russia Relations during the Obama Administration

After his inauguration in 2009, President Obama announced a reset of U.S.-Russia ties to reverse the “dangerous drift” he said had beset the relationship during George W. Bush’s presidency.<sup>1</sup> The reset aimed to deepen bilateral dialogue and engage Russia on pragmatic initiatives of mutual interest, such as establishing stronger security and trade links, while also reducing tensions stemming from Russia’s invasion of Georgia.

The Obama administration’s overtures to Russia produced some important policy victories. Russia granted the United States permission to move troop supplies across its territory to Afghanistan as alternative supply routes across Pakistan became increasingly dangerous.<sup>2</sup> In 2010, Presidents Obama and Medvedev signed the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), which reduced limits on U.S. and Russian deployed strategic warheads by one-third.<sup>3</sup> Russia also participated in President Obama’s first Nuclear Security Summit in 2010 and worked with the United States to dispose of 17,000 nuclear weapons’ worth of excess weapons-grade plutonium.<sup>4</sup> With respect to military cooperation, the two countries pledged to develop “a new strategic relationship based on mutual trust, openness, predictability, and cooperation,” in part by renewing military-to-military

ties through the newly established U.S.-Russia Bilateral Commission’s Defense Cooperation Working Group.<sup>5</sup> Finally, Russia cooperated in imposing international economic sanctions against Iran because of its nuclear weapons program by consenting to the passage of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1929.<sup>6</sup>

However, the bilateral relationship began to unravel shortly after Vladimir Putin’s return to the Russian presidency in 2012. He blamed the United States, and in particular then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, for large-scale protests that erupted in Moscow over reports that the Russian government had tampered with elections. In what was largely seen in U.S. circles as a signal of Putin’s increasing distrust of the United States, he expelled USAID in late 2012.<sup>7</sup>

Shortly thereafter, North American Aerospace Defense Command fighters reportedly intercepted two Russian Tu-95 Bears in the air defense zone off the coast of Alaska, while a Russian Akula-class submarine alarmingly evaded U.S. detection during a patrol in the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>8</sup> In mid-December of 2012, President Obama signed the Magnitsky Act, which imposed travel and financial restrictions on Russian citizens suspected of human rights violations at home. Putin responded by banning the adoption of Russian orphans by U.S. nationals.

Although Russia’s actions and policy changes generated alarm in Washington, the bilateral relationship





*President Barack Obama and then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin meet outside Moscow at the beginning of Obama's first term. Despite disagreements over NATO and other contentious issues following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it appeared that U.S.-Russia relations would be based on mutual efforts to cooperate in fields ranging from trade to security. (Pete Souza/White House)*

did not descend into outright crisis until Russia annexed Crimea in the aftermath of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych's removal from power in March 2014. Ignoring international demands to respect Ukraine's sovereignty, Russia blocked a U.N. Security Council Resolution condemning its annexation of Crimea.<sup>9</sup> It also began funneling arms to pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine.<sup>10</sup> The United States and its European allies proceeded to isolate Russia by expelling it from the G8, imposing a series of economic and political sanctions, and stepping up military measures to reassure nervous eastern allies.<sup>11</sup> Despite ongoing diplomatic pressure from the West and the mounting economic fallout of both sanctions and plummeting oil prices, Russia's support for Ukrainian separatists continues unabated, and diplomatic attempts to successfully resolve the standoff have failed to produce a political settlement.<sup>12</sup>

Russia's renewed aggression in Europe coincides with dramatic growth in defense spending following decades of deterioration and underinvestment. In 2011, three years after its invasion of Georgia exposed glaring deficiencies in its military capabilities, Russia launched a \$700 billion modernization initiative that includes advancements in its nuclear triad, the procurement of ballistic missile submarines, the construction of new ICBMs, and the construction of naval bases around the Arctic Circle.<sup>13</sup> Russia has put its revitalized military to use, significantly increasing its military probing in the air and at sea. Although the protracted collapse of oil prices forced Russia to announce in 2016 that it would reduce defense spending by 5 percent,<sup>14</sup> the strong headwinds currently confronting its economy are unlikely to disrupt its newly aggressive posture or significantly slow its

military modernization. Besides allowing the country to respond more effectively to perceived security threats and project its power abroad more confidently, the reinvigorated Russian military helps Putin consolidate state power while elevating his prestige at home and abroad.<sup>15</sup>

To counter Russia's increasingly aggressive posture, NATO pledged to return its focus to its core mission of collective defense and reinvigorate its lagging naval and reconnaissance capabilities.<sup>16</sup> At the 2014 Wales Summit, allies pledged to reverse decades of defense spending cuts and adopted a Readiness Action Plan, which included a new high readiness force that can deploy in days. During the 2016 Summit in Warsaw, allies strengthened NATO deterrence by deploying new multinational battalions in the Baltics and Poland.<sup>17</sup> The Obama administration also pledged to enhance the U.S. military's presence in eastern Europe by increasing exercise, training, and rotational presence.<sup>18</sup>

Russia's increasingly capable conventional forces are not the only source of worry for the United States and its European allies. Subversive forms of aggression such as cyber and information warfare, which are difficult to trace and even harder to retaliate against,<sup>19</sup> have proven to be effective tools for Russia as it works to unleash political instability.<sup>20</sup> During the Cold War, Soviet intelligence services fed western media false information to divert attention from Soviet actions. Today, cyber tools have dramatically expanded the scope of Russia disinformation capabilities. The Kremlin's updated military doctrine states that Russia will use "information warfare . . . to achieve political objectives without the utilization of military force"; accordingly, the state should invest in "the intensification of the role of information warfare."<sup>21</sup> The effects of Russian information policy are no longer



*U.S. Army Europe paratroopers march with Polish counterparts at the beginning of a training rotation with Polish forces in 2014. The United States, through and with NATO, has taken new steps to reaffirm its commitment to the security of vulnerable European allies. (Sgt. A. M. LaVey/U.S. Army)*

confined to its Eurasian neighbors. In October 2016, the U.S. intelligence community expressed confidence the Russian government was responsible for a cyber-attack against the Democratic National Committee, concluding that its interference in the U.S. presidential election could only have been authorized by Russia's senior-most officials.<sup>22</sup>

In the energy domain, Russia's willingness to use its vast energy holdings to blackmail and coerce European customers has provoked fear among U.S. allies and partners that their failure to toe the Russian line in their foreign policy could expose them to retaliation in the form of debilitating delays in gas delivery, as happened in Ukraine during the winter of 2014. A number of NATO allies receive virtually all of their energy supplies from Russia, whereas others receive little to none, which exposes varying ranges of susceptibility to Russian pressure within the alliance. The failure to address Europe's continued reliance on Russian energy imports threatens to undermine the credibility and sustainability of its sanctions in Ukraine and other issues. There are also alarming signs that U.S.-Russian cooperation on nuclear security is under serious strain. In October 2016, President Putin warned that the two powers found themselves in a "radically changed environment" and accused the United States of failing to live up to its treaty obligations. He announced that Russia would suspend a 2000 treaty under which his country cooperates with the United States to dispose of weapons-grade plutonium.<sup>23</sup>

In Syria, Russia's diplomatic and military intervention on behalf of the Assad regime has obstructed U.S. policy aims and hampered efforts to broker a peaceful settlement among the country's warring factions.<sup>24</sup> Putin's bombing campaign, which began in late September 2015, dramatically improved the position of forces loyal to the Assad regime while doing little to weaken the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and other extremist groups. In testimony before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, LtGen Vincent R. Stewart, Director of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, admitted that "Russian reinforcement has changed the calculus completely," and that Assad "is in a much stronger negotiating position than he was [in 2015]."<sup>25</sup> Russia claims it formally ended its military campaign in March 2016, but Russian warplanes continue to bomb U.S.-armed moderate opposition groups. There is also evidence that Russia is returning some military assets to the region to ramp up its airstrikes, casting new doubts about its commitment to seeking a diplomatic resolution to the crisis at the same time as it escalates an already dire humanitarian catastrophe.<sup>26</sup> In October 2016, the United States



*Putin at Russia's new National Defense Management Center. In 2011, the country pledged to spend \$700 billion by 2020 to modernize its military. Although falling oil prices have forced Russia to shrink defense outlays in 2015, it has taken sizable steps to upgrade its capabilities across the spectrum of national power. (The Kremlin)*



*Vladimir Putin receives Syrian President Bashar Assad in Moscow in October 2015. Russia's support for the Assad regime has dramatically escalated the Syrian civil war. U.S. efforts to find a diplomatic resolution to the conflict have been thwarted by inconclusive Russian negotiations. (The Kremlin)*



*Members of the P5+1 and Iran crafted the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action to limit Iran's ability to construct nuclear weapons. Russia's cooperation in this effort was crucial to develop a global sanctions regime against Iran. (U.S. Department of State)*



suspended plans with Russia to coordinate counterterrorism strikes in Syria after repeated Russian bombing of civilian areas in Aleppo.<sup>27</sup> Because of Russia's protracted stonewalling during these negotiations and the immense humanitarian toll of its bombing campaigns within days of the latest ceasefire attempt, the next president should be wary of trusting Russian diplomatic overtures pertaining to Syria.

**Despite the currently deteriorating trajectory of bilateral relations, the United States and Russia have mutual spheres of interest where they will need to find ways to cooperate.**

Despite the currently deteriorating trajectory of bilateral relations, the United States and Russia have mutual spheres of interest where they will need to find ways to cooperate. In recent years, for instance, Russia did not sabotage U.S. efforts to impose sanctions on Iran. The Obama administration has repeatedly extended a hand to Moscow to intensify these and other points of cooperation. However, the next president must not allow the hope of pursuing normalized relations with Russia to diminish U.S. resolve to reassure its allies and deter Russian aggression. The United States must also ensure Russia understands that cooperation in one area (Syria, for example) will not lead to accommodations in another (Ukraine). And Russia's bad faith in implementing the most recent attempt at a ceasefire in Syria will dramatically limit opportunities for constructive diplomatic engagement in that country's ongoing civil war.

## How Did We Get Here?

Many factors contributed to the deterioration of U.S.-Russia relations and Russia's willingness to incur the economic and diplomatic costs of dismembering European neighbors after years of constructive ties with the West. The most significant was likely Moscow's fear that a U.S.-backed "color revolution"<sup>28</sup> threatened the existence of the Russian state. Putin's deep suspicion of U.S. efforts to promote democracy in former Soviet territories underscores a widely held conviction in Moscow that the United States and its NATO allies seek to suppress Russian power and undermine its interests. Furthermore, some U.S., European, and Russian analysts argue that the West's disregard for Russia's security needs forced it to respond militarily, blaming NATO's eastward expansion and Ukraine's flirtation with an EU association agreement for depriving Russia of a security buffer space in eastern Europe.<sup>29</sup>

This argument, however, is unpersuasive because Ukraine was not attempting to join NATO in 2014. The United States and Russia, in fact, pursued warmer ties after NATO's initial round of enlargement in 1997, undermining realist claims that the sudden prospect of Ukraine's "defection" to the West in 2014 posed a unique threat to Russian security. Earlier in 2008, Russia invaded Georgia on the outward pretext that authorities in Tbilisi threatened Russian nationals, thereby forcing Moscow to "liberate" the Russian-dominated autonomous region of South Ossetia.<sup>30</sup> Russian leaders later remarked that Georgia's aspiration to join NATO was a threat to Russia's national security,<sup>31</sup> but Putin's long-term aspiration to reestablish Moscow as a major international center involves exercising a veto on its



*President Obama and other Western leaders consult with Ukrainian President Poroshenko on the sidelines of the 2014 Wales Summit. The United States and European Union imposed a series of sanctions on Russia for its continued violation of Ukrainian sovereignty. (U.S. State Department)*





*U.S. troops participate in Iron Sword 2014, during which more than 2,500 troops from nine NATO member states took part in combined exercises focused on strengthening interoperability and displaying readiness. (SSG Keith Anderson/U.S. Army)*

neighbors' sovereign foreign policy decisions. This includes determining which partnerships and alliances they may pursue.<sup>32</sup> Such a stance is inconsistent with longstanding U.S. support for a Europe where free, sovereign, and democratic states exercise their right to national self-determination.

The difference between Russia's and the United States' perception of NATO is illustrative of Russia's outlook on the current crisis in bilateral relations. In its communiqués and other public messaging, NATO has consistently relayed that the alliance is open to all and is not directed against any single state, including Russia. But in a recent public document, Russia explicitly identified NATO

dismembered Ukraine that NATO collectively resolved to increase lagging defense spending and position new multinational battalions on threatened members' territory.<sup>34</sup>

Russia's assessment of NATO's supposedly hostile intentions has not always been accompanied by fatalistic language, despite its longstanding but inaccurate claim that the United States promised Soviet leaders that NATO would not expand eastward after the Soviet Union's collapse.<sup>35</sup> While Russia protested NATO's expansion eastward as well as its armed intervention in the Balkan Wars, it appeared that that Russia placed a premium on pursuing closer economic and security relations with the West. Therefore, Washington and Moscow

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activities, including the alliance's open door policy and prepositioning of military hardware on eastern members' territory, as a threat to its national security.<sup>33</sup> The paradox of Russia's stance on NATO's supposed threat to its security is that before Russia's annexation of Crimea and its resumption of aggressive exercises in eastern Europe, the United States had removed most of its Cold War divisions from the continent, and most of NATO's members had allowed their defense spending and capabilities to deteriorate significantly. It was only *after* Russia

found ways to cooperate in diverse fields such as arms reduction and trade. Today Russia's stance toward NATO and the West is as animated by an ideological belief among Moscow's elite in Russia's unique civilizational identity as it is by security fears about the encroachment of a foreign alliance on its borders.

Putin's fear that the United States sponsors efforts to undermine his regime has led to severe restrictions on U.S. government-funded civil society institutions in Russia, along with a steady deterioration of Russia's

human rights outlook. Every year there are worsening reports of harassment of civil society figures, as well as detentions and unexplained murders of journalists and activists. Putin's fear of his domestic political opposition has led him to consolidate power in virtually all sectors of society. For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, no truly independent opposition figures sit in the Russian Duma,<sup>36</sup> almost all media organizations are under Kremlin control,<sup>37</sup> and the government has taken steps to unite its various surveillance and intelli-

**Russia's endemic corruption undergirds the strong links between Putin's inner circle and virtually all pillars of political, military, and economic power.**

gence agencies under a single entity reminiscent of the Soviet-era KGB.<sup>38</sup> Russia's endemic corruption undergirds the strong links between Putin's inner circle and virtually all pillars of political, military, and economic power. Despite initial hopes that Moscow would embark on a path toward democratization and reform after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has instead embraced a form of political organization that funnels wealth and influence to Putin's personal confidants. The highly personalized character of Russia's political system therefore makes it vulnerable to personnel changes, particularly the risk of Putin's sudden and unexpected departure from leadership. It is not clear what kinds of institutional mechanisms are in place to transfer power from Putin, nor is there widespread agreement about whether the current regime is stable or durable.<sup>39</sup>

## The Way Forward: Core Questions and Challenges for the Next Team

The next president will inherit a bilateral relationship rife with tension. Early on, the administration should develop a strategy vis-à-vis Russia on the following issues: Ukraine, NATO enlargement and posturing, interference in foreign governments' domestic politics, and actions in the Middle East. This section poses core questions for the next administration and outlines how the president should approach Russia on specific policy areas. Finally, it offers recommendations regarding how to handle a new, delicate phase of U.S.-Russia relations.

### Ukraine

Although it is not a NATO member, the preservation of Ukraine's territorial integrity and political independence is an American interest. Russia's brazen invasion of a European state in the 21st century not only violates international law, it is also an affront to the spirit of the United States' long commitment to Europe's unity and peace. The next president should preserve all existing economic and political sanctions against Russia and keep the door open to intensifying sanctions should the need arise. The United States should not offer Russia signals, intentional or otherwise, suggesting that it will resume a business-as-usual approach to bilateral relations without a comprehensive resolution to the crisis that is based on international law and respect for Ukraine's sovereignty. Furthermore, the United States must be prepared to encourage Ukraine, Russia, Germany, and France to



*U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry leaves flowers at the Shrine of the Fallen in Kiev in March 2014. The United States strongly condemned Russia's annexation of Crimea and ongoing intervention in eastern Ukraine, and it remains committed to seeking a diplomatic resolution that respects Ukraine's sovereignty. (U.S. State Department)*

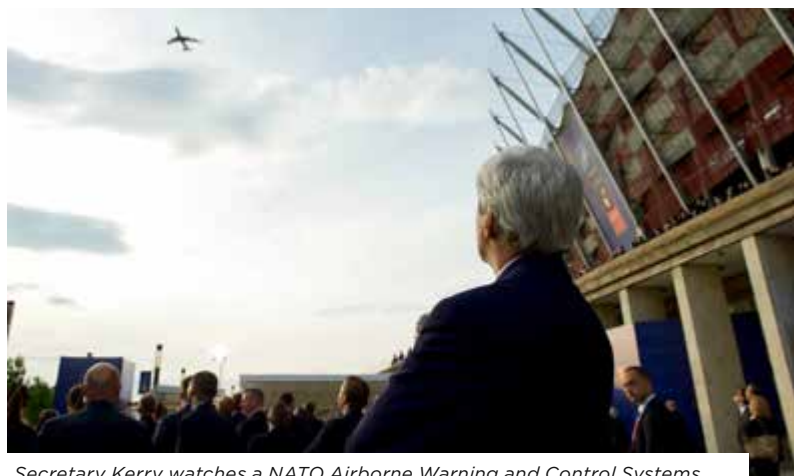
pursue a workable successor to the 2014 Minsk II deal, the many provisions of which Russia continues to violate by supporting separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine.<sup>40</sup> The United States should signal its readiness to impose new sanctions if Russia fails to adhere to the deal's spirit and letter. America's post-Cold War relationship with Russia is replete with instances in which U.S. concessions to Putin failed to produce outcomes favorable to U.S. policy. Rescinding sanctions or recognizing Crimea as part of Russia would damage U.S. credibility, and legitimize a dangerous precedent that could embolden Russia, and be interpreted as a green light to similar actions in other peripheral states.

The next president should consider providing lethal and defensive arms to Ukraine in addition to more training and funds for Ukrainian forces. Besides enhancing the country's ability to defend itself from Russian aggression, the United States should also push Ukraine harder to pursue serious structural reforms, eradicate endemic corruption from its political system, promote transparency, and respect the rule of law. Russia's flagrant occupation of eastern Ukraine and illegal annexation of Crimea have intensified anti-Russia sentiment throughout the country, raising the appeal of closer ties with the West. This gives the United States greater leverage to integrate Ukraine into western institutions. But until Ukraine's institutions operate more efficiently and transparently, Russia will be able to exploit its weak state structures and undermine Ukrainian national aspirations and its ties to both Europe and the United States.

### NATO and Europe

NATO arguably faces more challenges than at any time since the Cold War. Russia's aggressive actions have reinvigorated the alliance's deterrent purpose, particularly on its eastern flank, but they have also exposed gaps in the alliance's capabilities and shortcomings in its collective will to fulfill that purpose. The next president must reaffirm unshakable U.S. commitment to the organization and seek out ways to refashion and repurpose the alliance to better address today's security challenges.

Russia's deployment of sophisticated anti-air and anti-ship defenses in Kaliningrad and other key strategic points such as its ports in Crimea and Tartus stems from its doctrine of anti-access/area denial, which risks constraining NATO's agility and maneuverability during a conflict. NATO must shift resources and develop capabilities to react swiftly if a need ever arises to defend its eastern European members.<sup>41</sup> The next president should enhance the United States' reassurance measures for



*Secretary Kerry watches a NATO Airborne Warning and Control Systems aircraft fly over Warsaw's National Stadium during the 2016 NATO Summit. (U.S. Department of State)*

nervous eastern European allies. He should ask Congress to allot more funds to measures such as the European Reassurance Initiative and work to streamline internal NATO procedures and policies to facilitate faster troop and materiel movements during emergencies.<sup>42</sup> The president should encourage NATO to conduct more exercises in the Baltic, Black, and Arctic seas, while bolstering reconnaissance capabilities to track the probing maneuvers of Russian submarines in the Arctic and Baltic Seas. Finally, although there has been progress on enhancing burden-sharing since the alliance's 2014 Wales Summit,<sup>43</sup> the next president should continue to encourage U.S. allies to deliver on their commitment to spend at least 2 percent of their GDP on national defense. The next president unsettled NATO allies by suggesting that the United States might not come to their defense if they don't adequately spend on their own defense. While demonstrating its commitment to burden sharing must be a priority for NATO during the next four years, the United States must reaffirm its Article 5 security commitments or risk emboldening Russia and damaging the United States' credibility.

Despite the complex array of challenges that the United States faces around the world—ISIL, China's increasingly aggressive actions in the South China Sea, for instance—Russia's rapid and unabated military modernization must not escape the next president's attention. While its growing conventional toolkit is a source of concern to NATO's unsettled eastern members, Russia's increasingly menacing cyber capabilities are a new, urgent, and direct threat that the United States and its NATO allies are still unprepared to deter or effectively retaliate against on a large scale.

In Europe, Russian government-backed hackers have





*NATO warships participate in Trident Juncture to enhance capabilities and interoperability among alliance forces. NATO must continue to reassure allies of its readiness to defend their sovereignty by staging more frequent exercises. (Allied Joint Force Command)*

targeted entities ranging from Ukraine's power grid and the Finnish Ministry of Defense's website to the German Bundestag and a French TV station. Russian hackers routinely target U.S. corporate and government servers. In addition to partnering with private entities to secure vulnerable networks and develop best cyber practices, NATO's most cyber-capable member states ought to assist less capable ones in developing effective systems and enhancing their resilience capabilities.<sup>44</sup>

Although it has been slow to recognize state-sponsored hacking as a threat to the alliance, NATO has helpfully designated the cyber domain as a new frontier in defense.<sup>45</sup> Cyberattacks can now even trigger the alliance's Article 5 obligations.<sup>46</sup> But NATO has no established mechanism to utilize the sophisticated capabilities of the United States Cyber Command or its British

gaps and vulnerabilities, share information, and coordinate responses to Russian attacks.

In the domain of antisubmarine warfare (ASW), the United States and its allies have allowed their capabilities to deteriorate even as Russia has spent vast sums rebuilding its naval force. Although Russia still conducts patrols less frequently than it did during the Cold War, its unexpectedly aggressive incursions into Finnish, Swedish, and even British territorial waters have challenged the ability of the United States and its European allies and partners to respond to provocations. The next president must reinvigorate the credibility and effectiveness of allied ASW capabilities by enhancing cooperation between NATO and non-allied European partners. As part of this effort, he must promote intelligence- and information-sharing and accelerate the positioning of

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equivalent and, due to a notable lack of information- and capabilities-sharing throughout the transatlantic community, Russia does not fear provoking an alliance-wide response to cyberattacks that it inflicts on member states.<sup>47</sup> The next president should elevate this issue to the top of NATO's agenda. Given their scale and the gravity of the challenge, the next president should also press NATO and the EU to cooperate in developing a joint cyber strategy to pool resources, identify capability

technologically advanced sensors, long-range planes, submarines, and surface ships in the region to reverse more than two decades of neglect and deterioration in this domain.<sup>48</sup>

The next president must also address Russia's ongoing ability to blackmail Europe with its monopolistic gas delivery systems and resources. Europe receives approximately one-third of its gas from the Russian energy company Gazprom, which from 2006 to 2009



periodically withheld deliveries to Ukraine during cold months to maximize Russia's political leverage over Kiev.<sup>49</sup> Since the crisis in Crimea erupted in 2014, numerous European states have worked to diversify their national energy sectors to diminish the threat of Russian political interference. New proposals in the European Union aim, among other things, to make pricing more transparent and force member states to give the European Commission advance notice of deals with foreign suppliers. This would provide the commission with the ability to disapprove contracts whose terms could give such suppliers undue influence.

But there is division within the European Union over Russian-backed projects such as Nord Stream 2, a pipeline that bypasses Ukraine with the support of Germany and the opposition of countries such as Poland and Italy, which view the project as a Russian attempt to subvert the continent's unity and weaken Ukraine. The

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United States should encourage Germany and others to pursue gas import diversification from multiple suppliers. Because diversification of pipeline routes does not signify diversification of suppliers, the European Union should block Nord Stream 2 and instead pursue pipeline projects from other suppliers. This will not be an easy task, since the EU's other importation options are awkward. Azerbaijan is experiencing difficulty supplying its own needs, Turkmenistan is far away, and China owns most of its own production. Since Egypt, Iran, and Israel, among others, consume most of their own domestic production, this leaves LNG. Poland's experiment with investing in LNG import facilities and re-gasification capacity is an example that the United States should encourage throughout the EU.

Finally, the next president must not allow Russian pressure to prevent qualified states desiring membership from entering the alliance, nor should NATO alter its open door policy as a concession to Russia. Vladimir Putin's overarching strategic goal is to disband NATO, or at the very least render it incapable of reacting to Russian provocations. The surest sign of U.S. resolve to counter-balance Russian aggression is to continue supporting NATO's policy of admitting eligible members.

## Arms Control

Since the end of the Cold War, the operative assumption in western circles has been that Russia seeks to enhance ties with the West and explore new areas of defense and economic cooperation. The events of the past two years have exposed that assumption as dangerously obsolete. One particularly alarming development already noted has been Putin's decision to withdraw from the 2000 Plutonium Management and Disposition Agreement, under which the United States and Russia have worked to eliminate their stockpiles of weapons-grade plutonium.<sup>50</sup> Putin indicated that Russia would resurrect the agreement only if the United States lifted sanctions and paid Russia compensation for economic losses generated by the sanctions.<sup>51</sup>

But this development is not the only example of Russia's willingness to connect arms control to other increasingly contentious facets of its relationship with the United States. The next president must be prepared to address Russia's reinvigorated investment in its strategic nuclear forces and understand that there is a high risk that Russia will further diminish arms control efforts. Since returning to office, Putin has elevated the importance of Russia's strategic forces in its national security doctrine and unleashed costly efforts to modernize its nuclear triad.<sup>52</sup> In March 2015, he revealed in an interview that he was ready to put nuclear forces on alert over the crisis in Crimea.<sup>53</sup> The United States has simultaneously raised concerns that Russia is not in compliance with the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.<sup>54</sup> Putin has resisted U.S. efforts to negotiate new reductions of nuclear arms after his predecessor, Dmitri Medvedev, concluded the New START accord in 2010.<sup>55</sup> That effort will expire in 2021, and there are no replacements on the horizon.<sup>56</sup>

To reinvigorate arms control efforts, each side would have to address the other's claim that it violates elements of earlier agreements. For example, according to news sources, Russia's ground-launched cruise missiles likely violate the INF Treaty.<sup>57</sup> Former Supreme Allied Commander General Breedlove cautioned that any attempt to deploy the system could not go unanswered.<sup>58</sup> For the time being, Russia's concerns about its inferior conventional capabilities will likely lead it to avoid new efforts with the United States to reduce nuclear arms. The next president must pay close attention to developments in this domain and strive to avoid a downward spiral that could lead to a new nuclear arms race. Although the prospect for future arms reduction with Russia seems bleak, given the stakes involved with nuclear weapons, the next President should seek opportunities to engage Russia on this issue if possible.

### Russian Disinformation and Interference in Domestic Politics

Russia has made increasing use of information warfare to influence the internal affairs of its neighbors and adversaries by shaping its opponents' perception of reality.<sup>59</sup> This form of hybrid warfare allows Russia to advance its interests without having to incur the costs of deploying conventional military forces across national borders. Although the Soviet Union famously invested vast resources in this strategy to advance communist ideology abroad, the modern digital era offers to sophisticated state-backed disinformation campaigners the ability to reach much larger audiences with anti-American and anti-democratic messages, while covering their tracks fairly effectively. With no comparably funded agencies devoted to correcting Russian disinformation, the United States and Europe are highly vulnerable to manipulation and fabrication of public opinion—shifting information. The next president must make countering this Russian tactic a priority.

By obfuscating official versions of events, Russia has the ability to undermine public support for measures that are inconsistent with its strategic aims. For instance, in summer 2014, after Russian-armed separatists in eastern Ukraine downed Malaysia Airlines 17, Russia seeded the

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internet with accusations that the CIA or the Ukrainian military was responsible for destroying the commercial airliner. This impeded the West's ability to respond to the brazen act. This year in Sweden, which has been debating the pros and cons of closer ties to NATO (including membership), false information about what this partnership would look like began surfacing on Swedish social media, which led to public outcries that the Swedish government was forced to correct.<sup>60</sup> Russia has constructed a global media empire that influences public perception of its policies by promoting political candidates, policy ideas, and narratives that align with its interests.<sup>61</sup>

In December, the CIA concluded Russian intelligence intervened in the election to aid Donald Trump by hacking and facilitating the release of politically embarrassing emails through WikiLeaks. This was an unprecedentedly hostile action whose consequences

extend beyond whatever effect they had on the election.<sup>62</sup> It is almost certain that Russia intended to diminish trust in U.S. democratic institutions and weaken it internally and abroad. Russia has in fact long sought to erode governance standards in peripheral states and the credibility of democracy as a form of governance.<sup>63</sup> Russia's interference in the U.S. presidential election is a glaring indication that its subversive tactics are aimed not only at Europe but also at the United States, where they threaten to destabilize the political order. Russia's willingness to manipulate the U.S. political process for its ends must provoke a firm response from the defense and intelligence establishment at the highest levels. The new frontier of warfare in the 21st century will increasingly be found in this domain. National security leaders must sound alarm bells that the United States is unprepared to confront this new threat, while seeking ways to inflict costs on Russia, costs that at this time do not exist. While the next president has rejected the intelligence community's assessment on Russia's interference in the election, Congress, particularly the Republican leadership, must recognize Russia's assault on the sovereignty of the United States and support a major investigation on the matter. Congress should insist that the president accept the intelligence community's findings, consider measures to repel future assaults on U.S. elections, and call on the president to retaliate appropriately against Russia.

While respecting the First Amendment right of news outlets, even foreign-owned and -managed ones such as RT, to operate freely in the United States, the next president should request funding for initiatives to correct Russian fabrications and expose agents of disinformation where they can be identified. RT, a particularly active source of disinformation, spends \$400 million per year on its Washington bureau alone.<sup>64</sup> The misalignment between Russia's investment in this strategic arena and the U.S. response capabilities is glaring. The next president should support initiatives that correct fabricated information, challenge false narratives, expose hidden connections and interests, and support independent fact-finding efforts. An example of such an initiative is the bipartisan *Countering Information Warfare Act of 2016*, introduced this year by Senators Rob Portman (R-OH) and Chris Murphy (D-Conn.), which would create a Center for Informational Analysis and Response to "expose and counter information operations directed against U.S. national security interests and advance fact-based narratives that support U.S. allies and interests."<sup>65</sup> The center would provide grants to civil society organizations, think tanks, private companies, media, and other nongovernmental groups. The next president should prioritize the passage and implementation of this kind of legislation.

## Middle East

Russian intervention in Syria has greatly strengthened Assad's position, raising the question of how far the United States is willing to go to remove him from power without provoking more intense intervention by Russia. Escalating U.S. involvement runs the risk of direct confrontation with Russia in a complicated theater already occupied by multiple actors with competing interests, some of which view the United States as an enemy. But the deteriorating humanitarian situation on the ground and ISIL's continuing presence in Syria has called into question the United States' relatively hands-off approach to the conflict to date.

Should the next president choose to intensify U.S. intervention in Syria to defeat extremist groups such as ISIL, it will nevertheless be critical to communicate closely with Russia to avoid unintentional confrontations between U.S. and Russian aircraft and personnel. But as risky as such encounters may be, concerns about them should not dissuade the next president from firmly asserting U.S. interests in Syria, combating extremist groups, and/or brokering a workable diplomatic solution that involves intensified support for moderate rebel groups. If the next president chooses to impose a no-fly

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zone over a part of the country's territory to protect civilians and aid the moderate opposition, he will have to lay down clear red lines that Russia cannot violate. The United States must also be prepared to enforce this zone with military consequences for Russia and/or Syria if Putin attempts to cross the lines. An equally important component of a new U.S. policy in Syria will be countering Russian disinformation about its role in the civil war. The next administration must be willing to publicly link Russian policy in Syria to the ongoing humanitarian disaster within the country, and to name Russia as one of the main contributors to the ongoing refugee crisis in Europe.

## Conclusion

The dramatic decline of U.S.-Russia relations is a challenge that will require the next president to expend significant attention and resources. Putin's ongoing intervention in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea have undermined the stability of Europe's postwar order while unsettling the United States' eastern European allies. Russia's aggressive use of cyber, energy, and information warfare threatens the integrity not only of its European neighbors' political systems but also that of the United States. Finally, Russia's support for the Assad regime in Syria has prolonged that country's bloody civil war while making U.S. efforts to broker a sustainable ceasefire nearly impossible.

The next president, who has praised Putin and expressed eagerness to cooperate with Russia on counterterrorism, should avoid unilateral concessions to Russia without first securing an agreement that respects Ukraine's sovereignty. Otherwise, Russia will continue to undermine U.S. interests and seek new ways to pressure the cohesion and stability of NATO and other U.S.-led institutions. The poor state of Russia's economy and its internal demographic crises minimize the full extent of its threat to the United States, but the country's unstable internal political landscape and Putin's unpredictable behavior also have the potential to further upend the stable security order in Europe and beyond. The next U.S. president should maintain current sanctions and be open to intensifying them should the need arise, and must continue investing in capabilities to counter Russia's aggressive cyber and information warfare. Perhaps above all, the next president must reinforce the centrality to U.S. national security interests of the transatlantic relationship, particularly with respect to Russia. He must assure U.S. allies that longstanding security commitments are sacrosanct. Although no one could have predicted it 25 years ago, Russia is once again a strategic problem for the United States. If the next president does not take steps to deliver an unmistakable sign of U.S. resolve to preserve the stable post-Cold War order in Europe, Russia will continue to advance its interests while undermining the sovereignty and stability of the United States' partners and allies.

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