

SCUSA 71 Table Paper: Russia

Whether called “hybrid warfare,” “gray zone conflict,” the “complex approach,” or “new generation war,” the Russian approach to conflict in the 21st century presents multiple challenges for Western policymakers.¹ These tactics have their origins in Soviet doctrine, but make use of information technologies not available during the Cold War.² These challenges manifest themselves in a range of policy issues, from the 2014 seizure of Crimea to ongoing support of the Assad regime in Syria. Beyond military conflicts, Russia is engaged in “political and economic coercion abroad” and “gray zone cyber and space operations.”³ Russian interference in the domestic politics of potential allies and adversaries alike extends far beyond its influence in the 2016 US presidential election.⁴ In the more traditional realm, the demise of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty increases the likelihood of an arms race between Russia and the United States. The challenge in formulating American foreign policy toward Russia is that the areas of conflict are so diverse and seemingly intractable, compounded by the increasingly partisan lens through which both sides view the issues.

Domestically, U.S. national interests vis-à-vis Russia are now often viewed through a partisan lens. The Cold War mantra that “we must stop partisan politics at the water’s edge”⁵ has lost its hold on Republicans and Democrats alike. President Trump attacks Democrats during press conferences abroad, and Democrats respond in kind, criticizing the President’s performance engaging with foreign counterparts, most notably with President Putin during the Helsinki summit.⁶ It is now virtually impossible to disentangle American foreign policy toward Russia from the legacy of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential campaign.

There is modest space for bipartisan cooperation when it comes to sanctions on Russia, though it has led to disagreements between the White House and Capitol Hill. The House, in a strong bipartisan rebuke to the White House, voted overwhelmingly against the Administration’s efforts to lift Russia sanctions in January 2019.⁷ Bowing to pressure from Capitol Hill, in the summer of 2019, President Trump increased sanctions in response to the 2018 poisoning of a former Russian spy in the United Kingdom.⁸ The most recent sanctions build on the earlier 2018 sanctions that targeted seven oligarchs, 12 companies owned by them, and seventeen Russian officials.⁹

In the policy arena, there are tensions between the Trump administration and its own executive branch agencies. The Department of Defense, mirroring the 2017 National Security Strategy,¹⁰ views Russia as a strategic competitor,¹¹ and the intelligence community’s disagreements with the White House over Russian interference in the 2016 election are well documented.¹² On the ground, the military’s Atlantic Resolve operation in Eastern Europe “to reassure NATO allies and partners of America’s dedication to enduring peace and stability in the region in light of the Russian intervention in Ukraine”¹³ contrasts with President Trump’s instincts to readmit Russia to the G7, from which it was expelled because of its intervention in Ukraine.¹⁴

As concerns public opinion domestically in the United States, attitudes toward Russia diverged sharply after the 2016 presidential election. Whereas there had been bipartisan agreement from 2007 to 2015, in 2017 Republican attitudes more than doubled to a 40% favorable view of Russia, while Democrats

had only a 19% favorable view, which reflects what had previously been the bipartisan average since the 2014 seizure of Crimea.¹⁵

Ukraine

Russia undermined the international norm against forcibly redrawing political boundaries when it seized Crimea from Ukraine in 2014. Using hybrid warfare tactics, Russia continues to foment secessionist movements in eastern Ukraine.¹⁶ There is an ongoing debate among Western scholars about whether the West is to blame for Russian aggression, based on antagonistic Western expansion into what was traditionally Russia's sphere of influence.¹⁷ Regardless of where the fault lies, Russian support to secessionist rebels in eastern Ukraine and its seizure of Crimea challenge Western norms and cast doubt on the willingness of the West to support post-Soviet states seeking to reorient away from Russia toward the West. Russia is likely to continue to assert its dominant role in what it believes is its rightful domain, the so-called "Near Abroad."¹⁸

Syria

Russia has continued to support the Assad regime in the long-running civil war, weaponizing refugees to destabilize both countries in the region and further afield in Europe.¹⁹ Russia has demonstrated to the world that it cares more about the outcome in Syria than the West, as measured by material support to the warring factions. The West has backed down from its earlier position that Assad must go, instead recognizing the reality on the ground that Assad, with Russian and Iranian support, is unlikely to be overthrown by the opposition. While Russia and the West had overlapping interests in defeating the Islamic State, conflicting views about the Assad regime reduced the likelihood of cooperation. Russia has successfully maintained its foothold in the Mediterranean with access to the port of Tartus, and it has demonstrated to the wider world that Moscow does not abandon its allies.

Arms Control

The American decision to withdraw from the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty is likely to result in increasing Russian arms buildup on the periphery of NATO, potentially destabilizing Europe.²⁰ The United States accused Russia of being in violation of the treaty as justification for its own withdrawal, and now both sides are racing to field previously-banned weapon systems. With the demise of the INF treaty, the only arms control agreement remaining between the United States and Russia is the New START Treaty, which is scheduled to expire in 2021 if the two sides do not reach an agreement to extend it. With a second Trump administration, it is conceivable that within two years the entire arms control regime that existed between the Soviet Union and United States during the Cold War will have ceased to exist. Among the 2020 Democratic Party candidates, there is broad consensus to renew the New START Treaty, with former Vice President Biden²¹ and Senators Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris, Cory Booker, and Amy Klobuchar all supporting it and opposing the Trump administration's policies toward arms control more generally.²² In stark contrast to the bipartisanship of the Cold War, arms control has become as politicized as so many other issues in both domestic and foreign policy.

Interference in American Allies' Domestic Politics

Russia is likely to continue its efforts to weaken Western resolve by covertly supporting political parties amenable to rapprochement with Russia, particularly among far-right parties in Western and Central Europe.²³ Russia believes that the far right in the West is likely to be more in line with Russian interests, and that far-right parties will continue to undermine Western liberal norms and values in their home countries, from xenophobic attitudes against immigrants to skepticism about the role of the judiciary or free press. While the contest between the West and Russia has lost its all-encompassing ideological character from the Cold War, there remains a healthy distrust of universalist Western values in Russia and the Russian government will continue to promote soft authoritarianism in the West.

Interference in Domestic American Politics

Russia is likely to attempt to influence the 2020 presidential election, as it did in 2016.²⁴ Defending the infrastructure of the voting system, alongside the information technology of parties and campaigns, is a daunting challenge, particularly when even acknowledging Russian interference has partisan implications. Russia is likely to covertly promote those candidates it believes would be more amenable to friendlier relations between Russia and the United States, as well take steps to undermine the public's trust in the electoral process generally. While the most obvious candidates Russia would like to see elected are those with an explicit policy of rapprochement toward Russia, they would also like to see candidates with a more generally isolationist policy, those skeptical of alliances, etc. Policymakers are likely to continue to struggle to formulate coherent responses to the threat of Russian interference in domestic American politics.

Conclusion

Managing the challenges Russia presents to the United States and the West as a whole will take concerted, deliberate efforts. Each issue outlined above is in some way interconnected with at least one other issue, making it difficult to negotiate with Russia on any single item discretely. The lack of consensus domestically, as well as across allies in the West, means that responses to Russia are likely to continue to be halting and incoherent, absent a significant single event to serve as a wake-up call. It remains an open question whether a Russian attack on a NATO country, especially one of the three Baltic states, might be the threshold beyond which Western powers would finally be compelled to respond to Russia more forcefully. Absent that, Russia will continue to employ its hybrid war tactics to keep conflicts below the threshold of conventional war, and will seek every opportunity to improve its position in relation to Western powers.

Questions for Consideration

- 1) How should the United States defend itself against Russian interference in the 2020 presidential election?
- 2) What tactics should the United States and its allies use to counter Russian meddling in other states' domestic politics?
- 3) Are there areas for bipartisan cooperation in relation to American foreign policy toward Russia?
- 4) What steps could either or both political parties take to depoliticize foreign policy toward Russia?
- 5) Are there areas for accommodation of Russian interests that do not jeopardize American vital national interests?
- 6) Should the United States renegotiate the New Start treaty with Russia to maintain limits on strategic nuclear weapons?
- 7) Great Power competition will be on the U.S. foreign policy agenda for the coming decade. Should the United States address the strengthening of military, political, ideological, and socio-economic ties between Russia and the People's Republic of China? If yes, what form should such policies take?

Endnotes

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³ Hicks, "Russia in the Gray Zone."

⁴ "Authoritarian Interference Tracker," Alliance for Securing Democracy, accessed 3 October 2019, <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/toolbox/authoritarian-interference-tracker/>.

⁵ "Arthur Vandenberg: A Features Biography," United States Senate, accessed 3 October 2019, https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/Featured_Bio_Vandenberg.htm.

⁶ "Trump sides with Russia against FBI at Helsinki Summit," BBC News, accessed 3 October 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44852812>.

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¹³ “Atlantic Resolve Fact Sheet,” U.S. Army Europe, 6 June 2019, accessed 3 October 2019, <https://www.eur.army.mil/Newsroom/Fact-Sheets-Infographics/Fact-Sheet-Article-View/Article/1451471/atlantic-resolve-fact-sheet/>.

¹⁴ Pamela Brown and Kevin Liptak, “Trump privately clashed with G7 leaders over reinviting Putin,” CNN, 27 August 2019, accessed 3 October 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/27/politics/donald-trump-g7-vladimir-putin-fight/index.html>.

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¹⁶ Shandra and Seely, “The Surkov Leaks.”

¹⁷ John Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2014, accessed 3 October 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault>.

¹⁸ The Near Abroad is usually considered to include all of the former Soviet Socialist Republics, minus the Baltic states.

¹⁹ “Migrant crisis: Russia and Syria ‘weaponising’ migration,” BBC, 2 March 2016, accessed 3 October 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35706238>.

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