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Thirty Years of U.S. Policy Toward Russia: Can the Vicious Circle Be Broken?

Eugene Rumer and Richard Sokolsky

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Executive Summary

For nearly thirty years, successive U.S. administrations have struggled to come up with a sustainable policy toward Russia. Throughout this period, the U.S.-Russian relationship has experienced a familiar pattern of boom-bust cycles: a new administration comes in dissatisfied with the state of the relationship and promises to do better. It launches a policy review that generates a reset aimed at developing a partnership. A period of optimism follows, but obstacles to better relations emerge, and optimism gradually gives way to pessimism. By the end of the administration, the relationship is at the lowest point since the end of the Cold War.

Russia, with its disruptive and often rogue actions, bears a major share of the responsibility for the deterioration in the relationship. But U.S. policy toward Russia has largely ignored such crucial factors as Russia's history, culture, geography, and security requirements—as they are seen from Moscow. For three decades, U.S. administrations have pursued the same unrealistic policies and contributed to the failure of the relationship. Two in particular stand out:

- a refusal to accept Russia for what it is, as evidenced by repeated initiatives to reform and remake its political system, despite the Kremlin's rejection of democracy promotion in and around Russia as a threat to Russian domestic stability; and
- insistence that NATO is the only legitimate security organization for Europe and Eurasia and the extension of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture to the Eurasian space surrounding Russia, which in Moscow's eyes represented a threat to Russian security.

Several other patterns in U.S. policy toward Russia account for the failures over the past three decades. Overreach has been a persistent feature of U.S. Russia policy, reflected in commitments to ambitious goals without the means to accomplish them. U.S. policymakers have repeatedly exaggerated America's ability to affect developments in Russia and their influence over the Kremlin. They have defined American interests in the most expansive terms, failing to distinguish between core and peripheral concerns or to prioritize them. When Moscow pushed back, Washington reasserted its right and responsibility to teach Russia and its neighbors how to manage their affairs rather than take account of Russian objections. It is hard to escape the conclusion that a more restrained U.S. approach to dealing with Russia and the states of the former Soviet Union could have resulted in a more productive U.S.-Russian relationship.

Changing the trajectory of U.S.-Russian relations will be difficult. Russia's image is toxic in the current U.S. political climate, and as a result there will be few opportunities for cooperation even where Washington and Moscow have common interests. Russia is vitally important to the United States, however, and managing this relationship responsibly—even if not necessarily making it better

or solving problems—is a task that U.S. policymakers can ill afford to neglect. Yet the difficulty of managing the relationship is compounded by the fact that both countries are set in their respective approaches to each other and will find it hard to change course.

- Russian leaders see their country as a great power in charge of its own destiny. They do not accept American primacy and want to accelerate the transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world; they reject democracy promotion as a cover for U.S.-sponsored regime change; they believe they are entitled to a sphere of influence and will resist perceived U.S. intrusions; and they rely on anti-Americanism to legitimize their unpopular policies with domestic audiences.
- The post–Cold War consensus in the United States—its primacy in a unipolar world, insistence on no spheres of influence, and commitment to democracy promotion—is baked into its foreign policy DNA. In today’s poisoned climate, where Russia is seen as the cause of many problems in the world, changing that consensus will be an uphill struggle.

To break out of this impasse, the United States will have to—for its part—make several key adjustments to its Russia policy, including:

- prioritize U.S. interests vis-à-vis Russia and focus on the essentials—the nuclear relationship and strategic stability;
- leave Russia’s internal affairs for Russians to untangle;
- halt NATO’s eastward expansion and refocus on the alliance’s core mission of collective defense;
- be clear with Ukraine and Georgia that they should not base their foreign policies on the assumption that they will join NATO, but sustain robust programs of security cooperation with them; and
- rethink the sanctions policy toward Russia and use them with restraint.

These changes will not, by themselves, guarantee a different U.S. relationship with Russia, since the Kremlin would also have to make major changes in Russia’s foreign policy behavior. But pursuing the same policy and expecting different results is not a sound approach for the United States. At the very least, the proposed changes would restore a measure of realism, prudence, and discipline to U.S. policy; more closely align the ends and means of U.S. policy toward Russia; avoid inflicting further harm to the relationship; hold the door open for cooperation on shared interests; and shed the chronic habit of overpromising and underdelivering. These are not grandiose or transformational objectives, but they are realistic and attainable and will help the two countries manage their differences more effectively. To quote the great philosopher and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, sometimes it is best to find “proximate solutions to insoluble problems.”

Introduction

For nearly thirty years, successive U.S. administrations have struggled to come up with a sustainable policy toward Russia. The U.S.-Russian relationship is now at its lowest point since the Cold War. The two countries harbor deep mutual mistrust and are locked into an intensifying geopolitical competition in Europe and beyond. As long as Washington and Moscow remain committed to their current policies and practices—and neither side appears likely to alter them—there are few near-term prospects for alleviating tensions and putting the relationship on a more positive trajectory. Given the scope of U.S. foreign policy ambitions, even under President Donald Trump’s neo-isolationist and unilateralist administration, and Russia’s insistence that it be treated as a major power and its growing international activism, the quality of the two countries’ relationship will have a significant impact on global security and the ability of the United States to advance its interests and protect its values.

At present, the broad bipartisan consensus in Washington is that Russia is entirely responsible for the breakdown in the U.S.-Russia relationship. Among its transgressions, it has invaded Georgia and Ukraine and annexed a portion of Ukrainian territory, interfered in the 2016 U.S. elections and in the elections of the United States’ democratic allies in Europe, violated the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, backed Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria and Nicolás Maduro’s regime in Venezuela, and assassinated or attempted to assassinate former Russian officials on foreign soil. These Russian activities are well documented and widely understood. What is less clear is the extent to which U.S. policy has been a contributing factor in the deterioration of the bilateral relationship. Without a careful and critical analysis of the United States’ own record, there is little chance of doing better in the future and stabilizing one of the United States’ most important foreign relationships.

This paper will outline the causes of America’s inability to build a sustainable policy toward Russia and assess the implications of this failure. It then will examine the lessons that can be learned from the mistakes that have been made in managing the relationship, and present a strategic framework and set of guiding principles to achieve a more stable, sustainable, and productive U.S.-Russian relationship. First, the paper summarizes the many ways in which Russian policies can help to advance or harm U.S. interests. Next, it provides an overview of U.S.-Russian relations since the end of the Cold War and explains what went wrong. It then examines the outlook for U.S. policy toward Russia, in the context of the broader debate in the United States about America’s grand strategy, the changing global balance of power, the main drivers of Russian foreign policy, and U.S. policy priorities toward Russia. The final section offers a framework and guidelines for a more sustainable and productive U.S.-Russian relationship.

Why Russia Matters

Over the past decade, Russia has returned as both a major European and, increasingly, global power.¹ Its relationship with the United States, antagonistic or cooperative, is consequential for U.S. interests. Specifically, Russia:

- remains a nuclear superpower, and is the only country that poses an existential threat to the United States and its major treaty allies;
- is endowed with vast natural resources and has weaponized this asset to achieve its political objectives in Europe;²
- has veto power on the United Nations (UN) Security Council, which it has frequently used to thwart U.S.-supported initiatives toward Syria, Venezuela, and North Korea, to name a few;³
- is capable of projecting military power well beyond its borders in pursuit of a competing vision of global order and its own great power aspirations;⁴ and
- pursues geopolitical ambitions inimical to U.S. interests—notably, the creation of an exclusive sphere of influence in the former Soviet space and opposition to a unified transatlantic community, as well as American efforts to maintain a liberal international order.⁵

A military confrontation between the two countries could have profoundly destabilizing and even catastrophic effects on global order and security. In contrast, a more cooperative U.S.-Russian relationship could yield progress on threats to U.S. national security and prosperity—challenges that the United States cannot tackle effectively alone. Preventing further nuclear proliferation, including the complex problem of securing nuclear materials and other components of weapons of mass destruction, will require not only greater U.S.-Russia collaboration but also preserving at least some elements of the remaining arms control framework and inspection regimes. Efforts to combat transnational threats, from terrorist movements to criminal organizations and illicit trafficking, would also benefit from U.S.-Russian cooperation. Likewise, it will not be possible to resolve long-standing regional conflicts, for example on the Korean Peninsula and in Afghanistan, Syria, and Ukraine, without U.S. and Russian cooperation and willingness to negotiate. Finally, the United States and Russia will need to find practical ways to avoid escalation of tensions in cyberspace and outer space, and restrain the growth of Chinese influence.

Notwithstanding these potentially overlapping interests and opportunities for cooperation, the toxic legacy and current political climate of U.S.-Russia relations make it difficult to address critical questions that should be at the center of the debate about how to manage their strategic competition. What does the United States need from Russia, and what are realistic goals for the relationship?

Given the limits on U.S. capacity and political will, how should the United States prioritize its different goals where U.S. and Russian interests overlap and diverge? What price should the United States be prepared to pay to secure Russian support for American policies and initiatives? Finally, how can the United States build and deploy leverage with Russia to secure its preferred outcomes?

Post-Cold War U.S.-Russian Relations—What Went Wrong?

U.S. policy toward Russia since the end of the Cold War is a story of different administrations pursuing essentially the same set of policies. Two aspects stand out as major irritants in the bilateral relationship: a refusal to accept Russia as it is, as evidenced by repeated initiatives to reform and remake its political system; and the extension of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture into the Eurasian space surrounding Russia. Both of these highly ambitious pursuits have been attempted repeatedly and unsuccessfully, yet both continue to be cornerstones of official U.S. policy toward Russia. In retrospect, it is hard to escape the conclusion that a less ambitious U.S. approach to dealing with Russia and the states of the former Soviet Union could have established a better basis for a less rocky U.S.-Russian relationship.

Boom to Bust

Addressing a joint session of Congress in January 1991, then president George H. W. Bush spoke about his desire “to continue to build a lasting basis” for cooperation with Russia.⁶ His wish, no doubt sincere, was expressed at a time of widely held hopes that the Cold War was ending and the two superpowers would put their differences aside and begin collaborating on the world’s many problems “for a more peaceful future for all mankind.”⁷

It was indeed a promising phase in relations between Washington and Moscow, full of significant accomplishments and optimism about the future. In a short period of time, the two Cold War adversaries negotiated a treaty to reduce strategic nuclear weapons (START II), signed a multilateral treaty on conventional forces in Europe, negotiated the terms for German reunification and a unified Germany’s membership in the North Atlantic



Then U.S. president George H. W. Bush and Russian president Boris Yeltsin sign the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty II (START II) in Moscow on January 3, 1993. (MLADEN ANTONOV/AFP/Getty Images)

Treaty Organization (NATO), and agreed on a charter for European security and stability after the Cold War. Moreover, their cooperation was not confined to Europe; they also jointly sponsored a major conference in Madrid on the Middle East and successfully dealt with Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's aggression against Kuwait. Most important, they entered into all of these endeavors with a new spirit of U.S.-Russian partnership, a far cry from the threatening rhetoric and tensions that had been a hallmark of their relationship for more than a generation.

For the three decades that followed, the U.S.-Russian relationship went through a series of boom-bust cycles, reaching its nadir after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Through the Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama administrations, U.S. policy toward Russia followed a familiar pattern. First, a new presidential administration comes into the White House deeply dissatisfied with the state of the U.S.-Russia relationship. It commits to do better and launches a policy review that generates a new approach—a “reset”—toward Russia aimed at developing a partnership. The road toward partnership looks promising, but obstacles gradually begin to emerge and eventually escalate into a full-blown crisis. By the end of the administration's time in office, the relationship is at the lowest point since the Cold War.

Thus, the spirit of partnership that marked the end of the Cold War did not last long. The elder Bush's hope for a new relationship with Russia in a new world order ran into the harsh reality of the rapid disintegration of the Soviet Union and the chaos that engulfed Russia less than a year after his speech. The Bush administration had little chance to prepare for such a dramatic turn of events and develop a policy commensurate with the magnitude of the change in Russia and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union.



Then U.S. president Bill Clinton and Yeltsin take a walk together during their first summit in Vancouver from April 3 to 4, 1993. Yeltsin and Clinton declared a “new democratic partnership” between Russia and the United States. (Diana Walker/The LIFE Images Collection via Getty Images)

Consumed by domestic economic and political crises, Russia largely retreated from the world stage and for the most part was rendered largely incapable of acting as a partner to the United States as envisioned by Bush. Demoralized and embittered Russian elites soon constructed a narrative—greatly amplified by the Kremlin throughout Vladimir Putin's presidency—that the United States had taken advantage of their country at a moment of weakness, which created a sense of victimhood and soured the overall atmosphere in U.S.-Russian relations.

The Clinton administration, frustrated with what it saw as its predecessor's insufficiently

robust engagement to support reforms in Russia, declared its intent in 1993 to build “the foundation for a new democratic partnership between the United States and Russia.”⁸ Speaking in Vancouver, Canada, in April 1993, at the first of his many summits with Russia’s then president Boris Yeltsin, Clinton promised:

Mr. President, our nation will not stand on the sidelines when it comes to democracy and Russia. We know where we stand. We are with Russian democracy, we are with Russian reforms, we are with Russian markets. We support freedom of conscience and speech and religion. We support respect for ethnic minorities. We actively support reform and reformers and you in Russia.⁹

Soon after these hopeful words were spoken, the relationship encountered its first bumps. In late September and early October 1993, tensions between the Russian executive and legislative branches came to a head in a bloody confrontation in Moscow, as the constitutional crisis between Yeltsin and his rebellious parliament led to violence in the streets. When the dust settled, Yeltsin had managed to push through a new constitution that consolidated executive power to such an extent that in effect it placed the presidency above all other branches of government. That same autumn, Russian officials expressed their strong opposition to NATO enlargement, which was emerging as the principal pillar of U.S. policy in Europe.¹⁰

The following year, the Kremlin launched a military campaign against the separatists in Chechnya and tensions escalated between Russia and the United States over the threat of NATO air strikes against Bosnian Serbs in Sarajevo, eventually culminating in the full-blown crisis in the summer of 1999 over the Kosovo campaign. The U.S.-led Kosovo campaign, launched despite the absence of a UN Security Council mandate, which had been blocked by Russia’s veto, was perceived in Moscow as a manifestation of the tendency of the United States to act unilaterally without restraint. To Russian observers, this in turn raised the specter of a similar U.S.-led campaign, justified as a humanitarian intervention, in Chechnya. This concern was amplified when influential U.S. voices referred to the insurgency in Chechnya as not being all that different from Kosovo.¹¹



Clinton and Yeltsin sit in silence after a press conference on September 2, 1998, following a two-day summit in Moscow in the midst of the Russian financial crisis. (Photo by Dirck Halstead/The LIFE Images Collection via Getty Images/Getty Images)



Then U.S. president George W. Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin meet during a four-day summit in Moscow, where they signed the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT or the Moscow Treaty) on May 24, 2002. (Photo by Konstantin Zavrzhin/Getty Images)



Bush and Putin attend the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Beijing on August 8, 2008. That week, war broke out between Russia and Georgia. (ANATOLY MALTSEVI/AFP/Getty Images)

Russia grew disappointed with U.S. assistance and advice on economic reform, especially following the 1998 financial crisis that forced Russia to devalue the ruble and default on its sovereign debt. Perhaps most damaging to the relationship from both sides' perspectives was Russia's backsliding on democracy and the criticism it elicited in the United States, especially after Boris Yeltsin left office at the end of 1999 and Vladimir Putin became president. In 2001, the outgoing Clinton administration's relationship with Russia ended on a pessimistic note amid widespread domestic concerns that, in the words of Clinton, "Putin can get squishy on democracy."¹² The relationship was, in the words of one former Clinton adviser, at its "lowest point since 1991."¹³

When the George W. Bush administration took over in January 2001, it was initially critical of Russia, dismissing it as a failing state in irreversible decline.¹⁴ But that assessment quickly gave way to a more positive view, which in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11 was reinforced by U.S. interest in Russia's offer of cooperation in support of the war in Afghanistan. The November 2001 joint statement by Bush and Putin began by

declaring that the countries were "embarked on a new relationship for the 21st century, founded on a commitment to the values of democracy, the free market, and the rule of law" and concluded with a joint commitment "to advance common values [and] . . . work together to protect and advance human rights, tolerance, religious freedom, free speech and independent media, economic opportunity, and the rule of law."¹⁵ Skepticism toward Russia gave way to a "new strategic relationship" imbued with a "spirit of cooperation."¹⁶

That spirit proved ephemeral. The relationship soon experienced strains over Russia's opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003 and U.S. criticism of Putin's backsliding on democracy and human rights.¹⁷ The list of major disagreements also included U.S. support for the "color revolutions" in Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005, which Russian officials suspected was part of a U.S. plan to encircle Russia and minimize its influence in the neighboring countries, and Russian opposition to NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine, which culminated in Russia's war with Georgia in 2008. By the end of the Bush administration's second term, the relationship was once again at its lowest point since 1991. Russia, in the words of then secretary of state Condoleezza Rice, was "on a path of isolation and irrelevance" thanks to its aggressive international behavior and unreformed domestic economy.¹⁸

The breakdown of the U.S.-Russian relationship at the end of George W. Bush's term set the stage for its rebound during the Obama presidency. The relationship, it seemed, had nowhere to go but up. Indeed, the election of Dmitry Medvedev as president of Russia in 2008 seemed to present U.S. policymakers with the opening for a fresh start with a new, seemingly more progressive and reform-oriented president in the Kremlin. The reset of U.S.-Russian relations launched by Obama and his Russian counterpart set forth an ambitious agenda not only for improved diplomatic relations but also for a partnership for modernization—an effort to support Medvedev's flagship initiative to reform the Russian economy and political system.¹⁹ During the so-called tandem rule, with Medvedev as president and Putin as prime minister, the tone of the relationship between the two countries improved and they were able to conclude the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty.

But once again, the thaw in U.S.-Russian relations did not last long. Frictions arose in 2011 as the Arab Spring rocked the Middle East. The U.S.-led overthrow of the Muammar Qaddafi regime in Libya and Washington's support for the opposition to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad were especially neuralgic for the Russian leadership. When Vladimir Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, his abrupt change of course on domestic policy was another major blow to the reeling relationship. Medvedev's efforts to modernize and reform the Russian economy and politics were largely abandoned, and the relaxation of the domestic political climate was



Then U.S. president Barack Obama and Russian president Dmitry Medvedev look at the menu of a local burger joint on the way to lunch near Washington, DC, on June 24, 2010, just over a year into the U.S.-Russia reset. (Obama White House photo)



Putin and Obama meet on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Hangzhou on September 5, 2016. Obama delivered a warning to Putin against meddling in the upcoming U.S. presidential election. (Photo by Alexei Druzhinin/TASS via Getty Images)



Putin and U.S. President Donald Trump meet for the first time on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Hamburg on July 7, 2017. (Photo by Mikhail Metzler/TASS via Getty Images)

abruptly reversed with the introduction of measures to clamp down on public protests, media freedoms, and activities of foreign and Russian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to promote Russian civil society. In 2014, U.S.-Russia relations plummeted to their lowest since the end of the Cold War when Russia responded to the U.S.-welcomed revolution in Ukraine by annexing Crimea and sponsoring a separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine. Inside Russia, the breakdown was accompanied by further constraints on weakened democratic institutions and civil society. Animosity in the United States toward Russia in the wake of its aggression against Ukraine was further inflamed by the revelation of Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

On the whole, relations between the United States and Russia during the Trump presidency have followed the familiar boom-bust cycle of its predecessors. From the outset of his administration, President Donald Trump expressed an almost preternatural desire to improve relations with Russia. His attempts at a reset with Putin—apparently without preconditions and guided largely by transactional considerations—represented yet another effort by

a new U.S. administration to repair the relationship. It ran into strong resistance from Trump's congressional critics, who codified and added to already existing sanctions on Russia designed to punish it for a range of transgressions, from interference in U.S. elections and aggression against Ukraine to violations of human rights and corruption in Russia. This was done to prevent Trump from lifting the sanctions in order to pursue a rapprochement with Russia without congressional approval.²⁰ Congressional opposition to improving U.S. ties with Russia intensified in the aftermath of the Trump-Putin summit in Helsinki in July 2018, when Trump publicly questioned the findings of

U.S. intelligence concerning Russian interference in the 2016 election.²¹ The relationship once again hit rock bottom, with some commentators describing it as a New Cold War or even Warm War.²²

Russia in the American Imagination

Many factors help explain the turbulent trajectory of U.S.-Russian relations. Overall, Moscow bears the lion's share of responsibility for the problems in its relationship with Washington; its failure to become integrated into transatlantic security and economic structures has been at the root of many of these disputes. It was Russia who interfered in the 2016 U.S. election, upended the post-World War II security order by annexing Crimea, and sponsored a separatist insurgency in Ukraine. It was Russian officials who articulated provocative doctrines to justify interventions in neighboring countries' internal affairs, ostensibly to protect ethnic Russians residing there but in truth to reassert Russia's primacy in its "near-abroad." It is Putin- and Kremlin-linked operatives who have reached out and supported xenophobic and populist/nationalist movements aimed at undermining democratic countries in Europe.²³ But did the United States and its NATO allies and partners make any mistakes in dealing with Russia that contributed to the parlous state of relations?

One striking feature of the past thirty years is the similarity of U.S. approaches to Russia across different administrations and party lines. Despite their differences on many other issues, the Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama administrations did not accept Russia for what it was at the time, or consider it strong and mature enough to consider its views or interests as Moscow, rather than Washington, defined them. Instead, all three administrations saw Russia as an incomplete and at times failing state—a reform project, even a social engineering experiment that the United States had a right and responsibility to carry out. From the U.S. perspective, Russia needed to be successful (on American terms) not only for Russia itself to become a complete state but also for U.S.-Russian relations to thrive. In this view, maintaining America's global leadership and fulfilling its self-proclaimed "exceptionalism" made it imperative to promote Russia's transition to democracy and liberal capitalism and bring Russia into the U.S.-led liberal international order, regardless of the Kremlin's preferences and conception of Russian interests and priorities. (The Trump administration, by contrast, has not attempted this particular approach, but the rhetoric behind it was a critical underlying element of the congressional sanctions that in effect have become U.S. policy toward Russia.)

From the earliest days, U.S. efforts to promote democracy in post-Soviet Russia had a pragmatic aspect—in addition to an idealistic commitment to democracy. The Soviet regime had collapsed, and U.S. policymakers were concerned that any authoritarian regime that might develop to fill the void would be inherently unstable. Transition to democracy was and still is widely assumed to be the only way for Russia to become stable, a reliable steward of its nuclear arsenal, and an ally of the United

States.²⁴ As a result, U.S. policy toward Russia was disposed to hyperactivism and even interventionism in pursuit of ambitious, even transformational objectives in the face of stiff Russian headwinds. That approach failed to take into account various factors that may have seemed insignificant in the United States' celebratory (and at times self-congratulatory) mood at the end of the Cold War. As the Soviet empire crumbled and Russia seemed determined to reject its legacy, the country's geographic expanse, political culture, vision of itself, and its own historical narrative and understanding of its role in the twentieth century mattered little to Russians themselves—which made it all the more acceptable for others to overlook their significance. Those factors appeared even less important in the euphoric atmosphere of the early 1990s and the acceleration of globalization, with its free markets, free movement of people and capital, rapid communications, technological progress, and preoccupation with soft rather than hard power.

To advance the agenda of remaking Russia in America's own image, successive U.S. administrations relied on a toolkit designed to promote or enforce a set of domestic Russian government policies that in the view of U.S. policymakers would help Russia become the kind of state with which the United States could have a successful, sustainable long-term relationship. This toolkit included economic and technical assistance to promote market reforms in Russia, delivered through bilateral as well as multilateral (International Monetary Fund and World Bank) channels, and support for political reforms inside Russia provided by programs of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute, and various USAID-supported and privately funded NGOs. Much of this aid was delivered through legislation known as the 1992 Freedom Support Act, and was conditioned on Moscow's commitment to democratic governance, human rights, and open markets.²⁵ The act prohibited—with national interest exceptions—assistance to governments that failed to demonstrate such a commitment, and noted that the success of U.S. assistance depended on “reciprocal commitments by the governments of the independent states to work toward the creation of democratic institutions.”²⁶ The United States adopted a similar perspective on the fate of the former Soviet Union's nuclear inheritance and other weapons of mass destruction, which were scattered across many former Soviet republics at the time of its dissolution. American funding for securing these materials was conditioned on respect for human rights and commitment to democratic change. These conditions typically were accompanied by waivers, but their inclusion in the legislation did little to conceal or make up for social engineering aspects of U.S. assistance programs.

The effectiveness of some of these tools and institutions is open to debate as is the extent to which successive U.S. administrations prioritized promoting democracy in Russia.²⁷ Indeed, at times, U.S. commitment to democracy promotion was more rhetorical than real, as was the case with virtually open U.S. support for Boris Yeltsin's reelection in 1996. But the prominent place, even the priority, of democratic reforms in U.S. official rhetoric directed at Russia, about changes in Russia, and

U.S. policy toward Russia left no doubt about the goals of U.S. policy. Moreover, whereas U.S. official rhetoric about the importance of democratic reforms and commitment to support them often exceeded actual programmatic initiatives, it provided ample ammunition for Russian propaganda on Putin's watch and for constructing the narrative of U.S. malign interference in Russian domestic affairs under the guise of democracy promotion.

The United States pursued reforms inside Russia through various means, from imposing de facto sanctions and withholding assistance for noncompliance with U.S. democracy promotion initiatives, to conditioning removal of sanctions on Russian compliance with human rights norms and democratic practices.²⁸ Thus, the 1974 Jackson-Vanik amendment denied the Soviet Union and subsequently Russia permanent Most-Favored Nation status unless it liberalized its emigration policy. The legislation remained in force long after Russia met that condition. Attempts to repeal it ran into opposition from various critics of unrelated Russian policies and practices, and it was repealed only in 2012.²⁹ As part of the political bargain to repeal it between these critics and the Obama administration, another law—the Magnitsky Act—was enacted in that same year to punish violators of human rights in Russia.³⁰

Could relations with Russia have developed differently had the United States—in its goals toward Russia, the means it chose to pursue them, and its rhetoric—shown greater realism, restraint, and appreciation for Russia's own unique features and the internal drivers of its politics and policies? This is not an abstract question—it stems from the central role democracy promotion played in U.S. policy during both Democratic and Republican administrations and the deep resentment many Russians, across a wide range of political views, harbored toward this policy.

NATO Expansion—Toward or Against Russia?

Another constant feature of U.S. policy toward Russia has been the primacy of NATO as the cornerstone of the post-Cold War European security architecture, including its expansion to some of the former Soviet states. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO enlargement has been the principal instrument of U.S. security policy in Europe and Eurasia. It reflects a U.S. commitment to a whole, free, democratic, and peaceful Europe, as well as a view that the alliance should serve as the vehicle of the continent's post-Cold War transformation. What went largely unnoticed were Moscow's warnings beginning in 1994 that a “whole Europe” was not compatible with an expanding NATO, which would never be open to Russia.

Although NATO's expansion has not necessarily been directed against Russia, it has negatively affected the Kremlin's assessment of U.S. motivations and intentions and has been met with strong objections from Russians across the political spectrum. NATO enlargement also has shaped Russia's

Russia has opposed NATO enlargement almost from the time it was raised as a possibility in the early 1990s.³³ The Kremlin has maintained that NATO's push to the east threatened Russian security and the alliance's central role in Europe's security architecture marginalized Russia as a nonmember. However, Russia's objections proved insufficient to halt the alliance's expansion; most officials and observers in the West treated such opinions as remnants of the old Soviet ideology that Russia would shed as it transitioned to a free market, liberal democracy. For those who did not believe that Russia would make this transition, NATO expansion made all the more sense as a hedge against Russia reemerging as a threat to Europe—a prospect that loomed ever larger as Russia recovered a good measure of its economic health, authoritarian-leaning domestic politics, and geopolitical ambitions.³⁴ In 2007, Putin personally delivered an ominous warning to NATO not to expand further east, though most in the West regarded such rhetoric as an outdated blast from the Cold War era.³⁵ Even though the alliance's dual purpose—as a defense organization and instrument of democracy promotion—had emerged as a major irritant in the United States' relations with Russia, Putin's warning effectively was dismissed.³⁶

In 2008, NATO promised membership to Ukraine and Georgia, crossing the red line that Putin had drawn around the territory of the former Soviet states.³⁷ In the eyes of U.S. policymakers, NATO was in effect the only legitimate and viable security manager for Europe and Eurasia, and its expansion was the only sensible policy for the entire region.³⁸ Putin's response was the 2008 war with Georgia, which reaffirmed the red line around the former Soviet space, stopped NATO's eastward expansion, and marked a major turning point in European security and in the relationship between NATO and Russia.³⁹ In 2014, the annexation of Crimea and Russia's undeclared war against Ukraine symbolized the end of the post-Cold War era and the reemergence of a new East-West divide in Europe.

Could this outcome have been avoided? NATO expansion undoubtedly benefited many countries of Central and Eastern Europe, providing a much-needed security framework for the region when it was left without one in the aftermath of the Cold War. It also played an important role in consolidating these former Soviet bloc countries' transition from communism. But one size does not fit all. Political culture, history, geography, culture, and economic ties are crucially important in shaping individual countries' trajectories. The ties between Georgia, Ukraine, and Russia—and Moscow's strenuous objections to NATO membership for these former Soviet republics—mattered little to the George W. Bush administration or to the president, who reportedly lobbied for both countries to be admitted to NATO over many NATO allies' major reservations.⁴⁰

The promise of membership to Ukraine and Georgia—without a date or plan for their accession—was made as a compromise between Bush and many other NATO leaders, most notably German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who were opposed to the idea. The promise was vague and lacked concrete details. However, it was significant as a symbol of U.S. and NATO commitments to the policy of NATO's eastward expansion regardless of any red lines drawn by Putin.

When Putin spoke about the breakup of the Soviet Union as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century, his message resonated with its intended domestic audience, reflecting widely held opinions among average Russians—a fact overlooked by Western policymakers.⁴¹ In retrospect, these warning signs were harbingers of future strife. But in the prevailing atmosphere of the West's post-Cold War triumphalism, they were repeatedly dismissed as Russia's atavistic attachment to an outdated, obsolete past rather than a vision of its future.⁴²

With the 2008 promise of membership to Georgia and Ukraine, the United States led NATO across an invisible but distinct line. None of the other Soviet bloc countries that joined NATO after the Cold War had ties to Russia comparable to those of Ukraine and Georgia. The countries of Central Europe had been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Poland reemerged as an independent state after World War I and had an adversarial relationship with the Soviet Union until it was crushed by Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler. The Baltic states had long been part of the Russian Empire, but they had closer ties to the German than to the Russian world. Following two decades of independence, they were forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1939, and they viewed Russia as an occupying power—a sentiment that survived Soviet occupation and propelled them to freedom in the late 1980s, helping to unravel the Soviet Union.

Ukraine and Georgia share a different history with Russia. Until 1991, Ukraine had been part of imperial and later Soviet Russia for more than three hundred years. It was the empire's industrial heartland, home to its defense industry and breadbasket, and a bridge to the outside world. Georgia became a Russian protectorate in 1783 and part of the Russian Empire in 1801. Unlike the Baltic countries, both were integral parts of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, and although both countries gave rise to powerful independence movements and played critical roles in the dissolution of the USSR, many of those ties survive to the present day, even after Russia went to war against both countries to keep them in its orbit.⁴³

NATO's 2008 pledge of eventual membership to Georgia and Ukraine was a powerful restatement of its Open Door policy. For both countries—and perhaps for other Soviet states harboring similar hopes—it was taken as a Western promise to help them escape Russia's orbit. But for Russia, it was seen as another perilous sign of NATO's boundless ambitions, and it raised the prospect that it would lose control, or at least immediate influence, over two neighbors that it saw as critical to its security, well-being, and prestige as a major power.⁴⁴ Given the alliance's commitment to spreading democracy, Russia also perceived its neighbors' intended accession as a threat to its domestic stability. Thus, the U.S. rejection of Russia's geopolitical concerns as "atavistic" overlooked Russian sensitivities.⁴⁵ Russia's response to it was an outright repudiation of several key assumptions underpinning the original arguments for expansion—that Russia would gradually change its views, come to share the alliance's founding values, and eventually accept NATO's eastward push as it was intended by

its proponents; in other words, Moscow would see expansion as a move toward Russia, rather than against it.

Russia's opposition to NATO's eastward push lived up to the expectations of those who argued for the expansion as a hedge against a resurgent, irredentist Russia. However, the architects of expansion had not thought through the consequences of that scenario. Having made the promise of membership to Georgia and Ukraine and encouraged their aspirations to join NATO, the alliance had not planned for and did not come to their defense when the two became victims of Russian aggression. The alliance had made a political but not legal commitment to their security. In effect, NATO chose to hide behind this narrow legalistic interpretation of its obligations to member states, rather than act upon the expansive political commitments that permeated the official declarations and speeches of its leaders.⁴⁶

In choosing inaction, NATO reaffirmed what had long been obvious to many observers—that it was not committed to the two countries' security. Russia's wars against Georgia and Ukraine demonstrated the importance of interests as drivers of Russian, U.S., and NATO actions: Russia had more at stake in both Georgia and Ukraine than the United States and NATO and was prepared to go to war to protect those equities. The United States and its NATO allies did not see their stake in Ukraine and Georgia, or their commitment to shared values, as important enough to warrant war with Russia.

Moreover, in promising membership to Georgia and Ukraine to join NATO in the first place, the leaders of the alliance seemed to overlook the importance of geography. Even the most ardent advocates of NATO expansion recognize now that geographic proximity to Russia has been a powerful obstacle to realizing their aspirations of NATO membership and the alliance's eastward push. Russia's proximity to both countries has endowed it with a formidable military advantage, and the alliance would face a daunting challenge in overcoming that advantage if it chose to come to either country's defense in a conflict with Russia. That challenge has been made abundantly clear by the ongoing discussion among defense experts about how the alliance would be able to defend the Baltic states in a hypothetical future conflict with Russia, given the latter's overwhelming geographic advantages in such a conflict.⁴⁷

Finally, the costs and benefits to the alliance of NATO enlargement, as well as the overall geopolitical context, have changed since the early 1990s in two fundamental ways. First, the promise of a Europe whole, free, and at peace with itself and its neighbors, which seemed within reach in the aftermath of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, has been replaced with a new division in Europe between Russia and NATO. Several countries that belong to neither camp are now stuck in a geopolitical no man's land, unwilling to return to Russia's sphere of influence but unable to reach out to an alliance whose promises of protection are vague at best. Second, at the time of NATO's first wave of enlargement in the 1990s, the prospect of a NATO-Russia military confrontation seemed to

have been relegated to Europe's past, and NATO was preparing to go "out of area."⁴⁸ Today, NATO officials and military planners are deeply preoccupied with augmenting capabilities to defend alliance territory against Russian aggression. As a consequence, the costs of opening NATO's door to Europe's east have risen dramatically with respect to new members and aspiring applicants. With the alliance focused on dealing with the new division of Europe and the adversarial relationship with Russia, the prospect of membership for Georgia and Ukraine has been pushed into a distant, indefinite future.

U.S. Grand Strategy, Russia, and the Structure of Global Power

The Trump administration's new National Security Strategy identifies Russia as one of the major geopolitical threats to the United States.⁴⁹ The debate over a strategy for dealing with this challenge is taking place, however, in the context of a much broader discussion over U.S. grand strategy and America's role and responsibilities in the world. The two questions are inextricably linked. Indeed, enlarging NATO and spreading democracy to Russia and former states of the Soviet Union is the quintessential manifestation of the broader U.S. global strategy since the end of World War II. As Harvard international relations scholar Stephen Walt has observed, U.S. foreign policy during most of this period has been based on a grand strategy of "liberal hegemony," which he describes as seeking to

expand and deepen a liberal world order under the benevolent leadership of the United States. . . . In practice, the pursuit of liberal hegemony involved (1) preserving US primacy, especially in the military sphere; (2) expanding the US sphere of influence; and (3) promoting liberal norms of democracy and human rights.⁵⁰

To achieve these objectives, successive administrations believed that it was necessary to extend American and Western power—at times referred to as the "zone of stability and prosperity"—to Russia's borders, to deny spheres of influence to Russia, and to maintain and extend unipolarity.⁵¹ The United States, however, was not capable of fulfilling such commitments. Encroaching on what Russia perceived as its sphere of interest risked igniting a conflict in an area that Moscow viewed as critical to Russian security but was not crucial to U.S. security or making commitments the United States could not keep, all in the name of extending America's "unipolar moment."

The architects of U.S. foreign policy for the past seventy-five years tethered this strategy to three foundational assumptions. First, the United States could not maintain its own security, prosperity, and way of life unless America shaped a global environment conducive to its liberal norms, values, and institutions. Second, a world populated by liberal free market democracies would be a more prosperous, secure, and peaceful world. And third, members of this U.S.-led global order would be reliable

and pliant allies and would not go to war with each other or conduct aggressive foreign policies. These convictions, which combined American self-interest and ideals, imbued not only successive administrations' overall approaches to foreign policy but also to U.S. policy toward Russia in particular. They were reinforced by the notion of American exceptionalism, which claimed that only U.S. leadership could maintain, strengthen, expand, and protect the liberal international order it created in the aftermath of World War II. Moreover, following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, America had no rivals in a unipolar world to contest its position of primacy and the pursuit of its ambitions for preserving this order. As George H. W. Bush and former national security adviser Brent Scowcroft wrote, the United States was "at the height of power" with "the rarest opportunity to shape the world . . . for the benefit of not just the United States but all nations."⁵² The United States has been trying to shape the world in accordance with these pretensions, but the balance of global power has shifted with the resurgence of Russia and especially the rise of a much more powerful and assertive China. Bending the world to the arc drawn by the United States is a far more challenging proposition in today's more complicated, competitive, and contested world than it was thirty years ago.

A full examination of options for U.S. grand strategy and American foreign policy and the future of the liberal international order is beyond the scope of this paper. But several points related to these overarching questions, as discussed in greater detail below, are pertinent to the future of U.S. policy toward Russia:

First, Russia under Putin, and perhaps even after he departs from the scene, does not accept American primacy, either in its neighborhood or globally. American policy toward Russia for the past three decades has failed to reconcile Russia to the U.S. vision of its global leadership, which presumes a right and a responsibility to create and maintain everywhere in the world an international order predicated upon U.S. values and advancing U.S. interests.⁵³

Second, Russia's leadership does not subscribe to the view that it should base its own domestic order on the liberal values and norms that have underpinned American policy toward Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union; instead of looking to the West for a model, the Kremlin is charting its own course.

Third, the distribution of global power has shifted from a unipolar world centered around the United States to a more diffuse configuration of power—a more complex and contested geopolitical landscape featuring efforts by China, Russia, and regional powers like Iran or Turkey to push back on American primacy in their surrounding regions. In such a world, continued U.S. unilateralism has become increasingly untenable.

The United States is facing the task of adapting to both changing geopolitical circumstances and U.S. domestic constraints, since segments of the American public appear highly skeptical of U.S. military

interventionism, especially in the Middle East, and tired of bearing much of the burden for solving global problems.⁵⁴ Part of this process of adaptation will inevitably involve changing the paradigm that has guided U.S. policy toward Russia for the past three decades. The strategy of expanding U.S. dominance in regions that Russia defines as vital to its security is increasingly unrealistic, because the United States does not have the compelling interests or the resources necessary to roll back Russian influence in many of the countries in Russia's neighborhood.

Sources of Russian Foreign Policy Behavior

A new strategy for managing the U.S.-Russian relationship will have to be based on a realistic assessment of Russia. What drives Moscow's foreign policy? Is it motivated by fears of foreign encroachment or even invasion? Is it offensive and driven by relentless ambitions to acquire ever more territory, following centuries of expansionism that transformed Russia from a minor principality on the edge of Europe into the largest country in both Europe and Asia? Is there some elusive balance that can be struck between Russia's expansionist ambitions and its neighbors' interests in remaining secure and free to run their domestic affairs and foreign policies? How can that balance be achieved? Policy-makers and Russia experts have wrestled with these questions for years without reaching a consensus. A comprehensive treatment of these issues is well beyond the scope of this study, but it is possible, and even necessary, to highlight several key drivers of Russia's post-Cold War foreign policy.

Since 1991, the weight of history—Russian imperial and Soviet—has been one of the key drivers of Russian foreign policy. The rapid collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union left little time for reflection, reassessment, and reconceptualization of the new Russian state's foreign policy—the search for new foundations turned to past periods of Soviet and Russian greatness, both of which were stories of imperial conquests. For some Russians, their new country's precipitous domestic decline and humiliating global retreat were reason enough to be nostalgic for the Soviet era; they viewed the legacy of the Russian Empire as the foundation from which the country could spring forward. In short, the legacy of Russian greatness realized through imperial conquests became a cornerstone of new Russian foreign policy.⁵⁵

The Kremlin's reliance on the legacy of World War II—or the Great Patriotic War, as it is known in Russia—as a source of its domestic legitimacy has been another major factor shaping Russian foreign policy. According to the Kremlin's narrative, the critical role of the Soviet Union in defeating Nazi Germany and the sacrifices of the Russian people (an estimated 20 to 27 million military and civilian casualties) entitled Russia to a special place in the world and to privileges as a major power. That victory—and those sacrifices—were rewarded with an empire that stretched all way from the Kurile Islands to Berlin. From Moscow's perspective, the catastrophic damage caused by the breakup of

the Soviet Union had to be repaired, and Russian foreign policy since then has been guided in large measure by this goal.⁵⁶

It would be a mistake, however, to focus solely on imperialism and revanchism as the drivers of Russian foreign policy to the exclusion of other factors. The country suffered two devastating western invasions in its modern history—in 1812 by Napoleon, who captured Moscow but was forced to retreat, and by Hitler, whose armies were stopped at the gates of Moscow in 1941. The legacy of these invasions that most Russians learn from literature, art, films, and official propaganda, which includes solemn annual commemorations of the victory in the Great Patriotic War, feeds into the threat perceptions of the country's national security establishment. As seen from the Kremlin, the damage to the Russian state from the demise of its empire is not only a matter of diminished status and prestige, but also the loss of strategic depth and security. The margin of security reached its peak at the end of World War II with Stalin's establishment of the Soviet bloc, and sunk to its lowest point in centuries with the Soviet collapse in 1991, which left Russia's western border just 300 miles away from Moscow. The quest to compensate for this perceived vulnerability and regain a measure of strategic depth has been a major driver of Russian foreign policy, particular in its opposition to European Union (EU) and NATO encroachment on its nearest neighbors. The best-known statement on the Kremlin's desire to control the periphery of the Russian state belongs to Dmitry Medvedev, who as Russian president in 2008, following the war with Georgia, laid claim to the neighboring states of the former Soviet Union as a territory where Russia has "privileged interests."⁵⁷

Another consequential phenomenon in the post-Cold War world was the opening of Russia to the West and Western involvement in Russian domestic politics and economic reform. The 1990s were hailed in the West as a period of peace, prosperity, and regeneration after the Cold War. Russia, however, remembers that decade as a period of political instability, economic woes, and social and cultural dislocations. Peace, prosperity, and regeneration came to Russia in the decade that followed the 1990s, as the Kremlin strengthened its hold on Russian domestic politics, moved to minimize Western involvement and influence in the country's domestic affairs, and amplified these moves through its own propaganda. Consequently, protecting the country not just from foreign invasions but from foreign influence that threatens the Kremlin's internal political order has been another Russian foreign policy goal.⁵⁸

The shock of the Soviet Union's rapid disintegration, coupled with the widespread perception within Russia's national security establishment that the country's rapprochement with the West in the 1990s led to a retreat and diminution of Russian standing in the world, produced another powerful driver of the Kremlin's foreign policy: the quest for recognition as a major power and opposition to the U.S.-led unipolar world. The preferred Russian alternative is a "multipolar world," in which the unilateral power and hegemonic impulses of the United States are constrained by a coalition of

major powers, including Russia, China, and India. The twin goals of building a diplomatic coalition to contain the United States and gaining recognition as a major power have been major drivers of Russian foreign policy since the late 1990s.

Russia's quest for great power status and the Kremlin's siege mentality, reflected in the desire to establish a buffer zone and concerns about its physical security and domestic stability, go hand-in-hand with the Kremlin's economic interests. Thus, from the Kremlin's perspective, Ukraine and Belarus are critical for Russian security not only as bulwarks against potential invaders from the West but also as vital transit routes for Russian hydrocarbon exports to Europe. Oil and gas exports have been critical throughout the Putin presidency to fueling the country's economic revival, constituting on average about 60 percent of Russian exports since 2000 and in some years over 50 percent of Russia's annual federal budget revenues since 2006;⁵⁹ they have also been essential to maintaining domestic political stability after the tumultuous 1990s and regaining leverage in dealing with other countries. Maintaining access to the lucrative European market is a matter of national security for the Kremlin, which helps explain its policy toward Ukraine and its pursuit of two bypass routes across the Baltic and the Black Seas.

In sum, Russian foreign policy is aimed at accomplishing three interconnected goals—physical security, domestic stability, and economic prosperity. Failure to achieve one is fraught with dire consequences for the other two. The experience of the 1990s and concerns about U.S. policies cast long shadows over Russian foreign policy. From the Kremlin's perspective:

- the expansion of NATO as the only legitimate security organization for Europe and Eurasia is a threat to Russian national security;
- democracy promotion in and around Russia is a threat to Russian domestic stability; and
- persistent attempts to curb Russian use of energy as a tool of foreign policy and limit Russia's share of the European energy market are threats to its economic prosperity.

To counteract these threats, Russia has pursued a mix of offensive and defensive policies abroad and at home. These include aggressive military actions against Georgia and Ukraine, economic countermeasures such as trade sanctions, and the establishment of political and trading blocs to counterbalance NATO and the EU. Moreover, Russia is employing soft power, such as propaganda, information warfare, disinformation, and promotion of like-minded cultural and religious communities abroad, while at the same time maintaining a persistent campaign to secure Russian domestic politics from foreign interference, including a robust enforcement apparatus and enabling legislative framework.

In 2010, Medvedev articulated one Russian alternative to the U.S.-led Euro-Atlantic security system based on NATO. It was a vague proposal for a European security treaty whose apparent intent

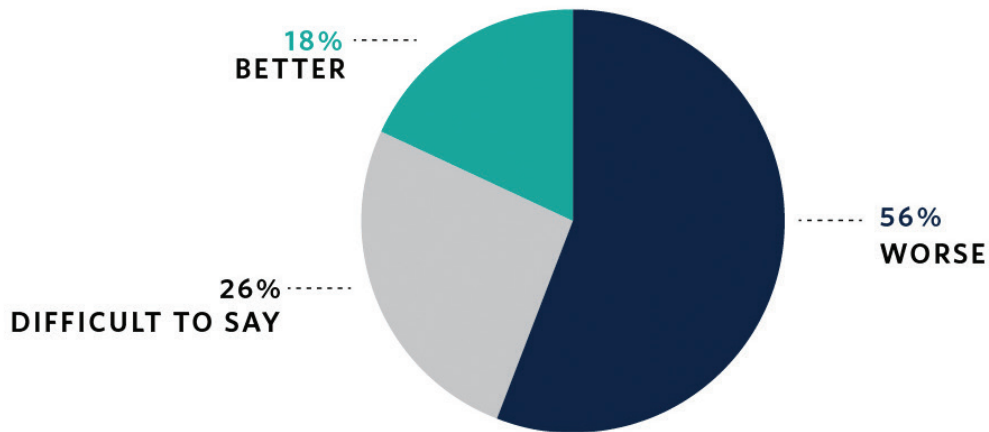
was to effectively give Russia the right to veto NATO decisions and render the alliance incapable of action.⁶⁰ Judging by Russia's wars against Georgia and Ukraine and the Kremlin's insistence that other former Soviet states join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union rather than seek closer ties to the EU, Moscow's preferred security arrangement resembles a nineteenth-century-style division of Europe into spheres of influence.⁶¹ Security and stability would be managed by a concert of major powers with Russia on one side of the divide, surrounded by satellite states in its "privileged" sphere, and the Western powers—France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States—presiding over the continent's western half. In theory, this arrangement would not have to be adversarial as long as the major powers consulted and respected each other's interests and spheres of influence. In practice, formalizing such a sphere is unacceptable for the United States and its allies and runs counter to the core principles of the EU, NATO, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Paris Charter for a New Europe.⁶²

Like many declaratory policies, these Russian conditions represent an extreme position. Kremlin decisionmakers most likely realize they cannot be fully implemented, but some appear nonnegotiable including no additional NATO expansion eastward and noninterference in Russian domestic affairs. The lengths to which the Kremlin has gone to enforce these desiderata suggest that it sees no room for compromise on core Russian national security requirements. Other conditions, such as active ties between former Soviet states, the EU, and NATO—with no pathways to membership or forms of association that would preclude participation in Russian-led organizations—seem much less stringent and more loosely enforced. Thus, in 2013, Russia pressured Armenia into pulling back from signing an Association Agreement with the EU, but Yerevan, presumably with Moscow's approval, has since signed a partnership agreement that enables it to maintain an active relationship with the EU.⁶³ Similarly, Armenia and Kazakhstan are active participants in NATO's Partnership for Peace, a program designed to build trust and working relationships between NATO members and non-NATO countries, in particular those of the former Soviet Union.⁶⁴ In both instances, the format of the relationship enables these countries to maintain a balance between their activities with the alliance and Russian sensitivities. There is no suggestion in either case that NATO membership is even a remote prospect.

It is highly unlikely that this Russian stance toward the United States, NATO, and the West in general will change over time, even after Vladimir Putin departs the Kremlin. The period of Russia's rapprochement with the West under Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin in the 1980s and 1990s appears to have been a temporary aberration from several traditions in Russian political and strategic culture that have endured across centuries and various political regimes. They include a complicated relationship with the West, which Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has described as Russia being a major part of Europe, but with its own civilization and set of values; the quest for strategic depth; and a desire to gain Western acceptance of what the Kremlin defines as legitimate Russian security requirements.⁶⁵ All of these precepts of Russian security policy have caused friction between Russia

FIGURE 1

Was the Yeltsin Era Better or Worse for Russia?



Note: Original question asked was "From a historical perspective, did the Yeltsin era, in your opinion, bring Russia more good or bad?" Survey of 1,600 people was conducted in December 2015.

Source: "Fall of the USSR and Yeltsin Era," press release, Levada Center, April 5, 2016, https://www.levada.ru/en/2016/04/05/fall-of-the-ussr-and-yeltsin-era_/.

and the West. In short, Russia's geography, particularly its lack of natural barriers, has led to it act aggressively against its neighbors and embark on territorial expansion in search of greater security.

The authoritarian nature of Russian domestic politics has long been another source of tension between Russia and the West. This is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Russian authoritarianism is the legacy of different relationships between the individual and the state and different concepts of rights and freedoms.⁶⁶ In the prevailing view of Russian authorities—regardless of what the current Russian constitution says—these rights are not inalienable but rather are granted by the sovereign.⁶⁷ Most Russians do not look back on the experiment with democracy of the 1990s as a success (see figure 1).⁶⁸ Many Russians are dissatisfied with their current conditions, but this discontent should not be conflated with support for regime change and a more open form of government.⁶⁹ In fact, although it may be difficult for Washington to accept, Russians have pinned their hopes for change on the current leadership of the country.

This is not meant to say that Russia will never change; rather, it is a reminder that the United States cannot ignore Russian history, geography, and political and strategic culture—or presume that these factors can be changed quickly, or even at all. Russia's great power legacy weighs heavily on the Kremlin's foreign policy and will continue to do so despite the country's diminished circumstances.

As a consequence, the Kremlin's wish list in its engagement with the United States and its allies is likely to include the following:

Respect. Public opinion data suggest that the quest for recognition as a great power is not only a vanity project of the Kremlin or a tool for diverting attention from its domestic failures; it is also embraced by a majority of Russians who believe that their country should be treated with respect by its partners and see the United States as one of the most unfriendly countries it faces.⁷⁰ They want the United States to treat Russia with respect.

An end to NATO expansion. With foreign policy firmly in the hands of the Kremlin, and a majority of Russians consistently supporting its argument that the United States and NATO pose a threat to Russia, stopping NATO enlargement is likely to be a high priority.⁷¹

A sphere of influence. Russia's opposition to NATO expansion, demonstrated in its wars against Georgia and Ukraine, indicates that the Kremlin has drawn a red line around its former Soviet neighbors, is prepared to enforce this line, and would like the United States to accept it as a *fait accompli*.

A seat at the table of major powers. The Kremlin's ambitions are not limited to the periphery of the Russian Federation. Russian involvement in crises from Syria to Venezuela suggests that the Kremlin intends to insert itself in crises elsewhere in the world to protect its interests, and expects to have a say in their resolution.

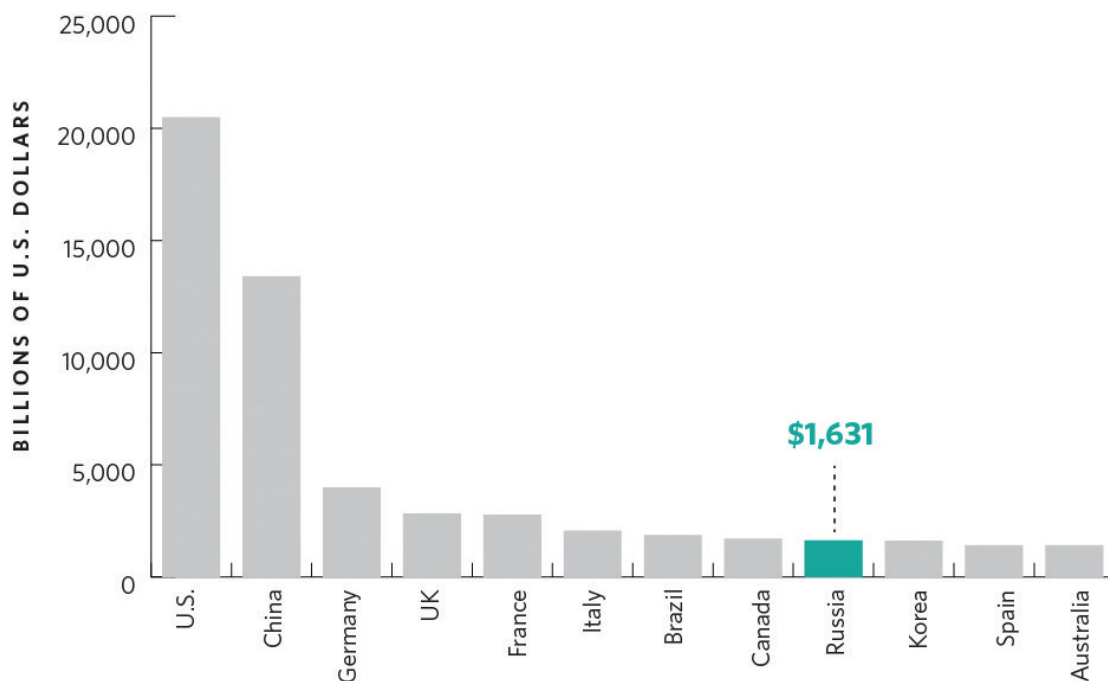
This list belies former president Barack Obama's dismissive description of Russia as a "regional power" and underscores the Kremlin's ambitious international agenda.⁷² However, Russia's status in American discourse as the "number one geopolitical foe" of the United States, as U.S. politicians such as Mitt Romney have described it, is hardly deserved.⁷³ It exaggerates Russian capabilities and the threat they pose to U.S. interests. Only one dimension of Russian power—nuclear weapons—poses a true existential threat to the United States; no other country has a comparable arsenal. But the United States and Russia have lived with the condition of mutually assured destruction for nearly three-quarters of a century and have learned to manage their nuclear relationship. The emergence of new technologies and weapons, cyber in particular, present a range of new and potentially very dangerous Russian threats to the United States, but are not yet comparable to Russia's nuclear arsenal.

Major military reforms and an extensive spending and rearmament program have significantly improved Russian conventional capabilities, but they are only a fraction of the capabilities that the Soviet Union possessed at the height of its military power. Russia's defense spending and gross domestic product are more comparable to those of France and Britain than to the United States, and Russian forces suffer from a number of weaknesses, notably difficulties in maintaining the quality and retention of its

recruits, a deficit of reconnaissance capabilities, and a NATO advantage in combat aircraft in the Baltic zone (see figures 2 through 4). In addition, its military spending and investment are hostage to cost overruns and delays, even in key hardware such as the Armata tank, and to fluctuations in oil prices. Indeed, Russian defense firms are increasingly reliant on Western technology, and its defense innovation sector struggles to attract the talent it needs to keep up with its rivals in the West.⁷⁴

Russia's conventional forces make it the dominant military power over countries around its periphery (not including China); however, its capabilities for long-distance power projection beyond these regions are modest. Russia could perhaps prevail quickly and decisively in a short, limited war with NATO near its border, where it enjoys considerable geographic advantages. But the Kremlin cannot be confident of its ability to limit escalation in such a contingency, and a prolonged war with NATO, notwithstanding the alliance's many shortcomings, would prove devastating for Russia. Though the expansion of NATO has created formidable challenges for the alliance in defending all of its members, the new geography of the NATO-Russia standoff has created multiple new vulnerabilities for Russia.⁷⁵ As a consequence, in Europe, where the risk of a NATO-Russian military confrontation is greater than in any other theater, the Kremlin has adopted a posture intended to exploit NATO vulnerabilities, while avoiding the risk of a military confrontation with a superior adversary.⁷⁶

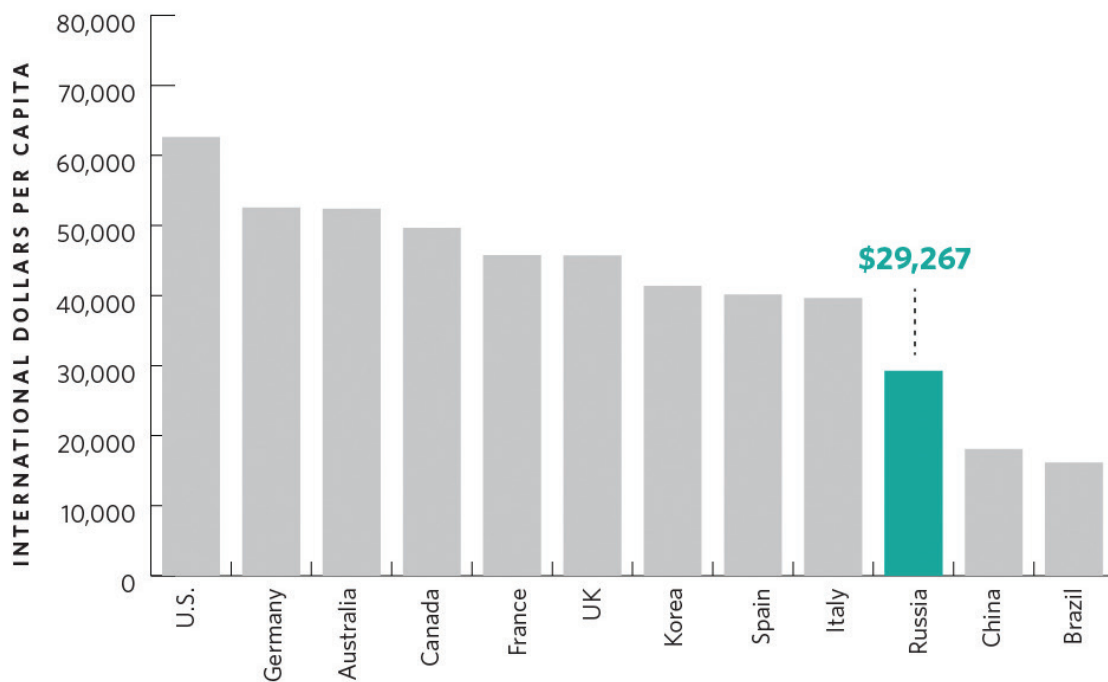
FIGURE 2
GDP of Russia and Select Countries



Source: "GDP, Current Prices," International Monetary Fund, 2019, <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDPD@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD>.

Despite the widespread perception that Russia is pursuing a new, bold, and risky global strategy, its actions beyond the European theater also reflect caution in taking on commitments that would increase the risk of escalation or entanglement in a major conflict. The Syria deployment was launched when it became clear that the risk of a military confrontation with the United States had been eliminated. Russia conducted its air campaign over Syria from high altitudes, beyond the reach of the opposition's modest air defenses, while maintaining only a limited ground presence. The use of contractors in Syria and reportedly in other countries—Libya, the Central African Republic, Venezuela—is clearly intended to limit Russian *military* losses and involvement in regions where it does not have strategic interests.⁷⁷ Russia does not appear to be establishing itself as the dominant power in the Middle East.⁷⁸ Its limited military deployment in Syria, the creation of anti-access/area-denial zones in specific locations, and occasional long-range strikes from small naval vessels in the Caspian Sea suggest that Russia's goal is not to establish itself as the regional hegemon but to deny that role to the United States.

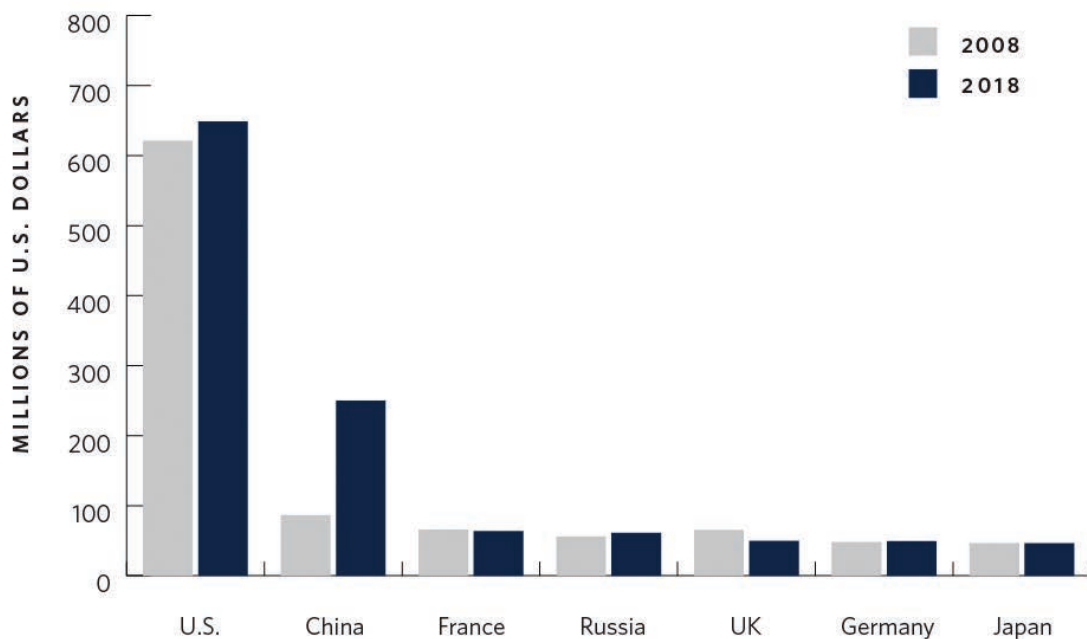
FIGURE 3
GDP Per Capita of Russia and Select Countries



Note: "Per capita GDP represents the total value in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms of final goods and services produced within a country during a specified time period divided by the average population for the same one year," from "World Economic Outlook," International Monetary Fund, April 2019, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2019/03/28/world-economic-outlook-april-2019>.

Source: "GDP Per Capita, Current Prices," International Monetary Fund, 2019, <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/PPPPC@WEO/THA>.

FIGURE 4
Military Expenditures of Russia and Select Countries



Source: "SIPRI Military Expenditure Database," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2019, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>.

In reality, the Russian threat to U.S. security—outside the nuclear domain—is primarily nonmilitary. Moscow relies on asymmetric tools and seeks to exploit fissures between the United States and its allies and the internal weaknesses of other countries. But Moscow will avoid making open-ended, expensive commitments to nation-building and improving governance in countries with weak political orders. It would be a mistake to place the blame on Russia for these problems; the Kremlin gains leverage from but does not create them. Russia's return to international activism after a period of decline is not surprising, and it poses no greater threat to the United States than the Soviet Union's global ambitions.

The competition for global influence between the United States and Russia has been exaggerated and fueled in large measure by a combination of inflated assessments of Russian capabilities and ambitions, the United States' expansive definition of its interests, and a pervasive consensus within the foreign policy establishment that the exercise of U.S. leadership demands a central role for Washington in engineering American solutions to global problems. With growing problems at home, a significant portion of the American public is skeptical of this view.⁷⁹ The only realistic and sustainable solution to these challenges is to focus on their root causes and adopt a more realistic view of Russia and a more disciplined, restrained, and judicious approach to defining U.S. interests around the globe.

U.S. Foreign Policy Priorities Toward Russia

A sustainable U.S. policy toward Russia should provide clarity on where Washington's time, energy, and resources should be concentrated. A strategy that identifies but does not prioritize U.S. goals and Russian threats to them, and then attempts to address all of these threats simultaneously, is no strategy at all. How should these priorities be racked and stacked?

- Managing the U.S.-Russian nuclear relationship and the impact of cyber weapons on deterrence and strategic stability should be the United States' top priority toward Russia, especially in light of the potential of robust nuclear modernization programs and the development of new technologies (for example, hypersonic and cyber weapons) to upset the strategic balance and increase the risk of war.
- Reducing the risk of conventional war in Europe and inadvertent nuclear escalation resulting from the standoff between NATO and Russia should be the second-highest priority. This challenge has become more complicated as a result of NATO enlargement, which has put the Russian heartland within easier reach of U.S. weapons.
- Maintaining an unwavering U.S. commitment to its NATO allies should be the third-highest priority. Under no circumstances should Russian leaders doubt the alliance's strength and the principle of collective security underlying Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.⁸⁰ Preserving the credibility of NATO's conventional and nuclear deterrents is the most effective way for the United States to minimize the risk of war in Europe.
- Russian cooperation can advance U.S. nuclear nonproliferation priorities. American and Russian nonproliferation objectives and interests often differ significantly, but in some cases, such as with the 2015 Iran nuclear deal—JCPOA or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—Russian participation can be helpful.

Advancing these priorities would be an uphill struggle for any future U.S. administration. The task would be complicated by the fact that the constituency for better, more sustainable U.S. relations with Russia is at best small or does not exist at all. Moreover, there are important constituencies in the United States and abroad whose interests and actions would compete with or directly contradict future administrations' pursuit of these priorities. For example, more muted U.S. reactions to Russian domestic repression and human rights abuses would be met with harsh criticism from pro-democracy and human rights organizations in the United States and abroad and strong congressional opposition, engendering pressure for more robust sanctions on Russia. Providing greater transparency to Russia about U.S. military deployments and movements in the European theater in an effort to reduce tensions across the NATO-Russia line of contact would raise concerns among U.S. NATO allies and partners, especially the frontline states on the alliance's eastern flank, about Washington and

Moscow cutting a deal behind their backs.⁸¹ In other words, a more productive and sustainable U.S. policy toward Russia would also require a sophisticated political strategy and expenditure of political capital that future U.S. administrations would not have or want to commit to this task.

Thus, a future administration should be careful not to overpromise what improved bilateral ties can deliver. For example, both countries view nuclear weapons as essential to their security. Because of their adversarial relationship, the state of mutually assured destruction will exist between them for as long as they have nuclear weapons, or until their relationship changes on a fundamental level. Replacing this condition with other, more peaceful-sounding concepts is unrealistic and should not be on the bilateral U.S.-Russian agenda.⁸²

Presently, the U.S.-Russian relationship is firmly on a trajectory that is likely to take a major crisis—on the scale of the Cuban Missile Crisis or 9/11—to change. The task going forward is to manage the relationship and keep it from deteriorating further. To achieve that, future U.S. administrations can rely on the old formula—confront Russia where they must, cooperate where they can.⁸³ But in relying on it, they will have to exercise greater restraint than have their predecessors in deciding on what constitutes U.S. vital interests.

Where Do the United States and Russia Go From Here?

Since the end of the Cold War, the broad U.S. approach toward Russia has enjoyed strong bipartisan support, but those who embraced it paid little attention to Russian history, geography, political and strategic culture, and to how these factors and economic links shape Moscow's relations with its neighbors. These considerations are just as important to Russian foreign policy as they are to American foreign policy. If future administrations want to improve on the unhappy record of the past thirty years, they must stop neglecting the factors that shape Russia's domestic affairs, its role in the world, and its interactions with the United States.

The United States needs to recognize that Russian perceptions of the United States and the West are colored by the geographic and geopolitical realities of the NATO-Russia standoff in Europe—and that U.S. actions shape those perceptions. That said, the United States and its European allies confront a leadership in Russia that defines its identity and interests in opposition to the West, and a Russian policy imbued with an antidemocratic ideology that is integral to the survival strategy of Putin and his regime. Washington can do little to fundamentally change these realities; rather, the imperative is to manage a competitive relationship and avoid conflict, while carving out a handful of areas where shared interests may offer opportunities for cooperation.

The importance and range of conflicting interests of both countries guarantee that their relations will remain complex, controversial, and to a large extent adversarial. Russia's geography, resources, and military capabilities will help ensure that it remains an important global player in its own right, even if at times it may not necessarily be a constructive player and is more likely to be a spoiler. From a long-term perspective, China will pose a much greater global challenge to U.S. interests; in the short term, however, Russia's partnership with China will magnify Moscow's challenge to America's global influence. With these factors in mind, the U.S.-Russia relationship will require continuous active management at the most senior levels of both governments. The following principles should shape how the United States approaches the challenge of a resurgent Russia.

Inject Greater Realism in U.S. Policy Toward Russia

Domestic politics, the gap in values, and conflicting interests are all partly to blame for the present state of U.S.-Russia relations. But other important factors have contributed to this problem. A U.S. commitment to overly ambitious and unrealistic goals, such as spreading liberal internationalist principles to Russia and surrounding regions, has reflected Washington's overall failure to recognize the limits of America's interests, influence, resources, and political will. Moreover, U.S. engagement in and around Russia has provoked corresponding hostility from Moscow in response to perceived threats, causing deep resentment and suspicion and making it more difficult to secure Russian cooperation on issues where the two countries have shared interests. To overcome this legacy, the United States would do well to revisit the foundational principles of realism for managing the U.S.-Russian relationship, whether with Putin or a post-Putin Russia that continues the policies and behavior of its predecessor. These include:

- differentiating between vital and peripheral interests to avoid taking unnecessary risks with Russia or making unsustainable commitments and obligations—specifically, **preventing an inadvertent NATO-Russian conflict in Europe is a vital interest, whereas expanding NATO to include Ukraine and Georgia is not;**
- understanding the limits of American power and the balance of will and interests in those areas where U.S. and Russian interests conflict;
- maintaining a balance between means and ends to ensure that U.S. ambitions for its relationship with Russia are aligned with its resources and capabilities; and
- recognizing how Russia defines its national interests, and how the Kremlin perceives American efforts to project its influence and values both within Russia and around its periphery.

The current political climate of U.S.-Russia relations may be too toxic to begin this reclamation process while Putin is in power, and perhaps even after he disappears from the scene. Russia's political system and the parameters of its foreign policy doctrine are well entrenched, and in some form or another they will likely outlive Putin's rule, even if there are changes on the margins. Consequently, the United States should base its approach toward Russia not on assumptions about what might happen after 2024, but on an understanding of Russia's place in the world.

Publicly Name and Shame Russia for Rogue Behavior

Along with this more realistic approach to the U.S.-Russia relationship, Washington needs to be more judicious in designating Russian actions as "rogue" behavior to avoid conflating Russian moves that are inimical to U.S. interests with rogue or otherwise malign behavior. The more Washington blurs the distinction between these categories, the harder it will be for Moscow to understand overall U.S. policy. Russia's intervention in Syria, its support for the Maduro regime, and its growing presence and activities in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, are all points of concern, but they are not rogue behavior. After all, Moscow believes it has legitimate interests it is seeking to protect in Syria and Venezuela, including coming to the defense of long-standing clients.

At the same time, continued Russian assassinations at home and abroad of former spies and Russian dissidents and interference in U.S. elections cannot be treated with impunity and should elicit U.S. responses commensurate with the crimes. In addition to targeted sanctions, vigorous "name and shame" campaigns and legal actions against suspected culprits and their superiors in the chain of command should be the primary response to Russia's rogue behavior. Thorough investigations would be conducted, the results would be made public, and there would be legal prosecutions even if the accused parties will never stand trial before a jury or judge in the United States. Some Russian transgressions may be so serious, however, that naming and shaming would be an inadequate response—both politically and with respect to restoring deterrence against Russian behavior that threatens U.S. security and institutions.

In fact, naming and shaming has its own limitations, in part because the Russians seem to be shameless. For example, the practice of assassinating those deemed to be traitors is deeply ingrained in Russian political culture, and even political and economic sanctions and diplomatic expulsions are unlikely to stop it. Defining the threshold between naming and shaming and going after the assets and interests of Russian individuals and organizations will almost always be a tough call—and the United States will have to determine the extent of such punishment on a case-by-case basis. Nonetheless, the Kremlin needs to be held accountable for these horrific acts.

Use Sanctions More Judiciously

Sanctions can be an effective tool of statecraft, but they cannot substitute for the practice of statecraft itself or for a coherent and more comprehensive strategy that goes beyond brandishing bigger sticks. Congressionally imposed sanctions have become nearly synonymous with U.S. policy toward Russia, but it would be hard to find an instance when they alone have produced the change in Russian behavior they are intended to achieve. Paradoxically, the avalanche of sanctions has unintended effects: a conviction among Russian officials that the sanctions bar is so high that Russia can never clear it even if it tried and greater Russian resilience and dependence on China.

Much of U.S. sanctions policy toward Russia appears to be a catch-all attempt to punish Russia for everything it is doing, without fully considering whether the sanctions will have their desired effect. It is time to recognize that sanctions are not necessarily an effective or appropriate response in certain situations. They may be necessary to deter future Russian interference in U.S. elections, but they are not going to force Russia to leave Crimea or to stop interfering in Ukraine and Syria. These two expansive goals for sanctions exceed America's means to accomplish. Sanctions can provide leverage, but only if they are aligned with realistic objectives and strong unity of purpose with Russia's leading economic partners in Europe and Asia.⁸⁴

In that vein, Congress should pay more attention to the perspective of the United States' European allies when considering the utility of sanctions and when they should be employed. For the United States, a cycle of Russian aggression followed by the imposition of sanctions, and a cold war relationship more broadly between the two countries, is sustainable because of its relatively limited economic and security exposure. European countries do not have similar luxuries in their dealings with Russia. An increasingly unilateral approach to sanctions that has characterized U.S. policy during the Trump administration will only add more strains to an already fraught relationship between America and its closest allies—especially with Germany, the most important state in Europe.

Restraint in U.S. Engagement With Russia's Neighbors

The United States should refrain from making commitments it cannot fulfill to Russia's neighbors in the former Soviet lands, in particular Ukraine and Georgia. The United States does not have vital interests there and only limited resources to commit to those relationships. Overpromising can lead to miscalculation; arguably, this was the case with NATO membership promises to Georgia and Ukraine, which had dire consequences for both countries. This does not mean that the United States should relegate these countries to the status of Russian satellite states, but it should base its policies and statements on a careful consideration of its interests and the constraints on its capacity to advance them. The U.S. approach to Russia's neighbors should be more nimble, nuanced, and flexible than simply countering any and all manifestations of Russian neo-imperialist impulses.

The United States' preferred end-state for this region is clear: it would like to see Russia's neighborhood populated by liberal democratic governments with free markets that are integrated as much as possible into Western security and economic institutions and have the autonomy to choose their external relationships. Russia, by contrast, has claimed a sphere of privileged interests in its neighborhood; it wants the economies, trade, and energy policies of the former Soviet republics to be integrated as much as possible with the Russian economy and their security to be provided for by Russia. It is essential for U.S. policymakers to recognize that in many post-Soviet states, domestic obstacles (and not Russian influence) have stalled or slowed their progress toward democratic governance and free markets; rolling back Russian influence would not necessarily result in progress toward U.S. goals for the region. It is equally important—even if not likely to happen—for Russian policymakers to recognize that popular unrest in neighboring states has domestic roots and is not a U.S. export. Clear communication and sustained dialogue about these issues are essential for both sides to reach these understandings.

The potential for popular unrest in some countries around the periphery of Russia, combined with Russia's neuralgic view of such developments and the limited U.S. reach in those areas, mean that the United States needs to tread carefully in managing its engagements with Russia's neighbors. In practical terms, the United States should refrain from actively agitating and supporting color revolutions. This restraint would be based on the following realities:

- Moscow's proximity and long-standing ties to many of the former Soviet republics put Washington at a serious geopolitical disadvantage in any competition with Russia for influence in the region. American policy has to take this into account in defining its goals for this area and in aligning these ends to its limited means.
- Central Asia and the Caucasus are conceptually and geographically remote from U.S. core interests. Contrary to what the United States has led many of these countries to believe over the past two decades, there are limits on America's ability to protect them from Russian bullying and intimidation with more robust diplomatic and economic support and security assistance.
- Many of these countries have had considerable experience dealing with Russia and have a much better sense of what Moscow will and will not tolerate. Washington would do well to remember that some are prone to play the "Russia card" for their own political advantage and to try to manipulate the United States in their own intraregional endeavors. Washington is also constrained by the absence of good relationships with many leaders of these countries and a poor understanding of domestic political dynamics.

The United States should still pursue trade, commercial, and investment opportunities; provide development assistance and support local efforts to improve governance where U.S. assistance is welcome and can make a meaningful difference; maintain cultural and educational exchange programs; and engage in regular bilateral and multilateral consultations on issues of concern.

The United States has neither the interests nor the resources to counterbalance Russia's dominant position. Previous American initiatives to compete with Russia, especially by promoting democracy and human rights have proven to be overly ambitious. U.S.-supported energy corridors that bypass Russia have been successful commercially, but have done little to reduce Russian leverage over its neighbors. More effective approaches to advancing U.S. interests in the area would keep expectations modest, maintain a better balance between U.S. commitments and resources, demonstrate a clearer appreciation of the limits on U.S. capacity to promote transformational change, and take a more cautious tack in promoting U.S. values. Demand- rather than supply-driven American engagement would produce better results.

Halt NATO's Eastward Expansion

On countless occasions since 2008, NATO has reiterated promises of membership to Georgia and Ukraine.⁸⁵ However, the repetition of that pledge has become a litmus test of NATO's commitment to its Open Door policy. For countries that want to see Georgia and Ukraine admitted into NATO, a failure to repeat this catechism—let alone an explicit acknowledgment of the true state of affairs—is certain to be interpreted as abandonment. But, as previously discussed, these two countries are not vital to U.S. security and NATO cannot defend them, at least not at a cost its publics are willing to pay. The United States and its NATO allies should sustain their security cooperation with Georgia and Ukraine through their individual cooperation programs and help them improve their defenses. However, Ukraine's and Georgia's interests would be better served by an honest statement that NATO membership is not in their future, and therefore they should base their security policies not on the prospect of joining the alliance, but on the requirements of having to live alongside a big, powerful, and difficult neighbor.

Abandoning NATO's Open Door policy, however, is not an option. It is integral to the founding principles of the North Atlantic Treaty. Article 10 of the treaty states that,

The Parties may, by unanimous agreement, invite any other European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area to accede to this Treaty.⁸⁶

That said, this language is clear with respect to the conditions for extending invitations to new members: it has to be done unanimously, new members have to be in a position to advance the principles of the treaty, and they have to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area. None of these three conditions was present in 2008 when the alliance first promised membership to Georgia and Ukraine, and they are not present today.⁸⁷ Instead of repeating promises that cannot be fulfilled, the alliance should acknowledge this reality and focus on its core mission of collective defense.

Leave Russia's Internal Affairs to Russians

Russia's democracy deficit is bound to be an obstacle to improved U.S.-Russian relations. The commitment to spreading U.S. democratic ideals and respect for human rights in Russia can never be eliminated from U.S. foreign policy. But U.S. involvement in Russian domestic affairs cannot make up for shortcomings in Russian governance, and it is a major irritant in the relationship and has left a sour legacy in both countries. The defense of the U.S. homeland and U.S. allies against Russian attacks—nuclear, conventional, and cyber—is a vital U.S. interest; the evolution of Russia's domestic affairs is not. This posture does not require a major moral compromise or deviation from the U.S. position in the world at large. The United States has maintained stable relations with other countries even when it does not approve of those countries' domestic politics and human rights practices, and Russia should be no exception.

U.S. policymakers should be clear that American and Russian differences over values will have a significant effect on the quality of the relationship—just as it should and sometimes does with other nations—but U.S. policy will not seek to change Russian domestic politics. The United States should not remain silent on the odious character of the Russian government and its internal political and human rights practices; however, Washington needs to discard the assumption that Russia will have to change if the two countries hope to have a more productive relationship.

Set Realistic Expectations for Ukraine

The 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea was a pivotal moment in U.S. policy toward Russia as well as toward Ukraine. The blatant occupation and annexation of Ukrainian territory, the undeclared war in eastern Ukraine, the massive anti-Ukrainian propaganda campaign, and the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 by a surface-to-air missile fired from an area occupied by pro-Russian forces were only a few of the most egregious aspects of Russian policy that sent shockwaves throughout Europe and the United States. They triggered an outpouring of support for Ukraine and its new government, as well as the grassroots movement that had ousted the previous government. Ukraine's "Revolution of Dignity" also renewed hopes inside and outside of Ukraine that it would finally break away from the path of crony capitalism and embrace genuine free market and democratic gover-

nance. Five years after the revolution, those hopes are still alive, but the road toward their becoming reality is much longer than it seemed in the days following the fall of president Viktor Yanukovich.

Ukraine, its post-2014 government, its people, and its civil society activists have accomplished a great deal. Competitive elections have become the norm. The government has implemented a number of critical economic, administrative, political, and military reforms, and more are on the way. These accomplishments are all the more significant in light of its ongoing war against Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine. However, the country's old crony capitalist system has proved equally resilient. Its politics and economy suffer from pervasive corruption that no amount of civil society pressure, media coverage, or outside threats to cut off foreign assistance have been able to overcome. In 2018, Ukraine was Europe's poorest country, according to the International Monetary Fund. The country is second only to Russia in the European rankings of Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index.⁸⁸ The oligarchic system is still in place.⁸⁹ Its endurance was in full view during Ukraine's April 2019 presidential election. The list of leading candidates was full of familiar faces, including the first postrevolutionary president, billionaire businessman Petro Poroshenko; former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko, the one-time "gas princess" who had run afoul of the Yanukovich regime and spent time in prison on politically motivated charges; and former Yanukovich government energy minister Yuriy Boyko.⁹⁰ It is hardly surprising that the voters chose Volodymyr Zelenskiy, a newcomer to politics with no prior record in government—in effect a vote against the old guard.

The record of the past five years, during which top U.S. officials, including then vice president Joe Biden, regularly engaged with the leadership of Ukraine and urged action on key reforms, suggests that the task of reforming Ukraine and changing the nature of its politics is beyond the United States' ability and available resources. It is a task for the people of Ukraine to accomplish on their own schedule and according to their own vision. This is not to say that the United States should abandon Ukraine. Instead, U.S. policy toward Ukraine should be predicated on a different set of expectations, including a much slower, evolutionary pace of change than was expected in the aftermath of the 2014 revolution, occasional rollbacks of key reforms, and persistent dysfunction resulting from the natural diversity of interests and competitive nature of Ukrainian politics. U.S. policy toward Ukraine should also sustain targeted assistance to civil society organizations and technical support for government agencies in support of domestic reforms.

The United States has a strong interest in supporting an independent and sovereign Ukraine. It can serve as an important partner in deterring Russia and a barrier against the threat from Russia to U.S. allies in Europe. Backing away from the promise of NATO membership should not mean that the United States should also cut back on security cooperation with Ukraine. To the contrary, such cooperation should be sustained bilaterally and, wherever possible, under the NATO Partnership for

Peace, focusing on defense and military reform and improving Ukraine's capabilities to defend itself against Russia aggression—but without renewing the promise of NATO membership.

Don't Overreact to Russia Muscle-Flexing Outside the Former Soviet Union

Formulating an effective and sustainable response to Russia's increasingly assertive foreign policy behavior will be challenging. Both the U.S. National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy define great power competition with Russia (and China) as America's highest strategic priority.⁹¹ Given the emergence of Russia as a serious adversary, its toxic image in U.S. domestic politics, and the severe strains in the bilateral relationship, the impulse of virtually every member of Congress, a large fraction of the American public, almost the entire U.S. foreign policy establishment, and most senior administration officials is to respond aggressively to Russian moves, from Syria and the greater Middle East to sub-Saharan Africa and Venezuela.

This impulse, however, needs to be controlled to avoid overreaching and to minimize the risk of escalating local conflicts and provoking unnecessary U.S.-Russian confrontations over matters that do not engage vital U.S. interests. Russia may play a significant role in exploiting certain foreign policy problems for its own gains, but it would be a mistake to portray the Kremlin as the main driver behind most of the major international challenges facing the United States. Indeed, despite Russia's newfound prominence and ambitions on the world stage, its capabilities and impact are modest; having Russia inside the proverbial tent may be necessary to deal with some of these challenges, but its presence is by no means sufficient to resolve them. To strike the most effective balance between restraint and activism, the U.S. response to Russian meddling and muscle-flexing should be informed by the following policy guidelines:

Ask First-Order Questions. The exact nature of the U.S. response to Russian activities will vary based on the circumstances, particularly with respect to the tools—diplomatic, economic, informational, and military—Washington and its partners employ. U.S. policymakers will need to answer the following questions:

- What goals is Moscow seeking to achieve, and what core U.S. interests and objectives are being threatened? How much relative weight does each country give to their respective interests?
- What tools is Russia employing to achieve its ends, and how effective and costly is Moscow's use of these means?
- What tools should the United States and its partners use, unilaterally or multilaterally, to counter Russian influence? How effective and costly are these countermeasures?

- How is Moscow likely to respond to U.S. countermeasures? What are the prospects for managing the risks of escalation and other unforeseen consequences? What are the potential costs, risks, and benefits of specific Russian responses?

Avoid Overreaching. U.S. officials are right to be critical and concerned about some Russian overseas activities, such as Moscow's support for right-wing and populist nationalist groups as well as authoritarian regimes. Many of those situations capitalize on largely homegrown phenomena such as the post-2008 wave of anti-elite sentiment across the eurozone. In some parts of the world, these activities are taking place in countries where U.S. interests are peripheral, ill-informed, or not defined at all, and where U.S. engagement has been minimal at best.

Russian foreign activities should not be conflated with Russian success. In fact, Russia's global activism has had mixed results; it would be a mistake to view every instance of Russian machinations, such as its involvement in Syria, as a threat to American security or the U.S.-led liberal international order. Russia's deployment there took place as the United States made clear that it intended to "pivot" away from the Middle East. Russian intervention has brought benefits to Moscow and undercut some U.S. objectives, but the goals of U.S. policy have alternated between unrealistic, contradictory, and muddled, and in any case cannot be achieved with the forces the United States has deployed in Syria and Washington's paltry commitment of resources to stabilizing and reconstructing the country. Moreover, Russian actions in Syria were not an example of overreach. Moscow has had a close relationship with Baathist Syria since the mid-1950s, as reflected in its military facilities, arms sales, and training of military personnel. In the Kremlin's assessment, the alternative to Assad was a government aligned with the United States or, more likely, an Islamist regime and unending chaos.⁹²

Putin's support for the Maduro regime has complicated the Trump administration's plans to install a new government led by opposition leader Juan Guaidó. But it has not been a decisive factor in U.S. policy, and fears that Russia's actions in Venezuela are part of a broader campaign to expand its influence throughout the Western Hemisphere are based on a misunderstanding of Moscow's more limited interests in the country and modest capabilities.⁹³ Likewise, in sub-Saharan Africa, threatening interpretations of Russian involvement are frequently overblown. The deployment of Russian trainers to the Central African Republic or Sudan and modest arms sales are inconsequential compared to the substantially larger U.S. and French military presence in the region.⁹⁴ It is very much an open question whether Russia will be any more effective in training and equipping local security forces than the United States and France have been. In any event, Russia's checkbook and commercial withdrawal across Africa simply pale in comparison to China's.

Leverage Partnerships. Wherever possible, the United States should seek to share the burden of countering Russian actions—as it has done, for example, with its European allies in the Balkans,

sub-Saharan Africa, and Syria, and what it should be doing in Libya.⁹⁵ The Trump administration's distaste for pursuing multilateral cooperation notwithstanding, Washington should develop tailored strategies to work with and through allies, partners, nearby states, and regional organizations to craft appropriate responses to Russian attempts to undermine key U.S. and Western interests. Judgments about how and when to organize multilateral responses to Russia's foreign activities should be made on a case-by-case basis.

Avoid a Cookie-Cutter Approach. There is no one-size-fits-all response to Russia's growing regional activities. Moscow may not be instigating turmoil and conflict, but it is opportunistically and skillfully exploiting situations to advance its interests. Ignoring or downplaying Russian activities when a firm response is warranted will only encourage and embolden Moscow to act more aggressively. Overreacting to Russian actions, however, could exacerbate regional tensions and make conflicts more difficult to resolve or to deescalate. Moreover, the creation of a new tit-for-tat Cold War dynamic would boost the Kremlin's legitimacy at home and the standing of domestic Russian constituencies that benefit from conflict with the West. Nuanced judgments, prudence, and restraint will be required.

It would do well to remember that, beyond Russian threats to U.S. and European security, especially where their militaries are deployed in close proximity, the vital interests of the United States and Russia intersect in very few regions. This creates opportunities for mutual restraint and perhaps the rebuilding of trust, both of which are essential for managing the relationship, whether it is adversarial or cooperative. Pushing back indiscriminately on all Russian activities will lead to overextension and a waste of resources. Tougher and more aggressive U.S. responses to Russia's global activities should be implemented only when the Kremlin's actions threaten important U.S. and allied interests and Washington has realistic, practical, and sustainable means to thwart Russian ambitions without making the situation worse.

Restore Regular, High-Level U.S.-Russian Dialogue

Since Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the quality, frequency, and productivity of U.S.-Russian high-level dialogue have all suffered. These consultations need to be resuscitated and regularized. The issues that require immediate attention include maintaining and strengthening the U.S.-Russian arms control framework, deterrence, and strategic stability; developing rules for managing U.S.-Russian competition in cyberspace, space, and regional conflicts; and reducing the risks of unintended military escalation between NATO and Russian forces.

Conclusion

Russia is an important actor on the world stage with far-reaching ambitions and significant capabilities; its withdrawal in the 1990s was an aberration rather than the norm. It will insist on occupying a seat at the table in dealing with most global crises and regional conflicts. The United States therefore has a vital interest in establishing a stable, sustainable relationship with Russia. Washington can neither afford to ignore Russia nor embrace a confrontational posture that would increase tensions and risk conflict. It is a relationship that has to be managed at the highest levels of U.S. policymaking, with personal involvement by the president. Developing a more cooperative and less antagonistic U.S.-Russian relationship will require a gradual, step-by-step process of rebuilding a measure of trust and practicing mutual restraint in dealing not only with bilateral problems, but also a broader range of issues where U.S. and Russian interests intersect. It would be unrealistic to expect the U.S.-Russian relationship to be free of competition and tensions, but even if major differences cannot be resolved, they can be more effectively managed. Advancing U.S. interests will require realism, restraint, and active engagement with Russia, and give-and-take and compromises rather than ultimatums.

That said, the United States should be under no illusions about turning around the perilous U.S.-Russian relationship. As long as Russia continues to identify itself in opposition to what it perceives as American attempts to maintain global hegemony, especially through expanding the Euro-Atlantic system to include Russia's closest neighbors, a more restrained and less interventionist U.S. approach to Russia may not gain traction with the Kremlin. Indeed, for the remainder of the Trump administration, no improvement in the bilateral relationship appears feasible—not least because Trump's heavy personal baggage on Russia curtails the political space to change the fundamental direction of U.S. policy. Regrettably, the issue of U.S.-Russian relations has become so poisonous in U.S. domestic politics that reasoned conversations between the two governments are not possible about many of the options presented in this paper. Should there be a change of administrations in 2021, the atmosphere for considering alternative courses of action may become more hospitable. If this were to happen, the principles set out here could establish the basis for a long-term road map to protect U.S. core interests when they are challenged by Moscow, halt the downward slide in the U.S.-Russian relationship, and provide a foundation upon which to build a more sustainable and productive bilateral relationship.

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Notes

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