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## **Russia, the US, and the Cold War that Never Ended**

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Contrary to common wisdom, the Russian-American cold war never ended.<sup>1</sup> Russian and American geostrategic interests collide globally, policymakers of both countries rail against each other, and the publics of both countries draw overwhelmingly hostile assessments of the other. Today, high visibility hotspots such as Syria and Ukraine draw in the juxtaposed interests of many countries, both neighboring and distant, but it is the world’s two military superpowers that play major roles – whether openly, or behind the scenes – in further fueling regional disputes. The past years have entailed the worsening of a contentious Russian-American bilateral relationship that was always fundamentally problematic, always grounded in power rivalry and profound misperception. The “peace dividend” that was predicted to come with the rolling back of the Soviet empire, collapse of the USSR, and alleged end of the 45-year-old Cold War never came. History did not “end” as one major American political theory had forecast.<sup>2</sup> Global peace did not emerge with the universal dissemination of American-style democracy, as yet another influential American scholarly formulation, “democratic peace theory,” suggested.<sup>3</sup> It is time for some honest reflection that Americans and other Westerners misjudged the meaning and results of the international power changes of the late 1980s. It is also time to admit that the evolution of Russia, from Soviet to post-Soviet realities, must be reconsidered to more accurately reflect Russian history, values, and preferences. Like it or not, Russia was and is a major Eurasian – and global – power player whose interests must be acknowledged and accommodated.

Any assessment of Russian-American relations, and their impact on global politics, must come up against an “inconvenient truth”: Americans and Russians hold diametrically opposed views of the meaning of (1) the collapse of the Soviet power position in Europe, (2) the ending of the Soviet political and economic system, and (3) the post-Soviet Russian power position in Eurasia. Relatedly, Americans and Russians hold very different views of the post-1991 world power system and the US’s role in it. Where Americans view the US’s unchallenged global power position as an underlying condition for enhanced international stability and even peace, Russians approach the US’s seemingly unchallenged power position with apprehension and wariness of a

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Mikhail Beznosov, Faten Ghosn, and Patrick McGovern for incisive suggestions as this essay was crafted.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, NY: Free Press, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> William J. Dixon, “Democracy and the Management of International Conflict,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 37, 1, March 1993, pp. 42-68.

*Pax Americana*.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, and just as importantly, Russia's Eurasian and global position and rights in expressing its power interests *have never been clear* in the post-Soviet global system.

What has changed since 1992 is Russia's reemerging power and its ability to project its values and geostrategic interests beyond its borders. What has not changed is Russia's view of its interests and its role in the world. An increasingly self-confident and assertive Russia has emerged, with the year 2014 decisive in Russia's quest to find its post-Soviet "national idea." After the decade of the 1990's, an era Russians derisively recall as their "time of troubles" – a term with special meaning to Russians that connotes a period of domestic political and socioeconomic chaos with concomitant foreign intrusion<sup>5</sup> – Russia has returned to its traditional role as a Eurasian power, a promoter of Slavic values, and a defender of Eastern Orthodoxy. In contrast, over this same time period, the US's view and consequent expectations of Russia have not changed. In supposedly "losing" the Cold War, Russia was expected to renounce its sphere of influence expectations, just as both the victorious and defeated European powers (i.e., Britain, France, Germany, and Italy) and Japan accepted their new roles in the post-World War II global system. Meanwhile, if the US remains as the world's preeminent military power and leading economic force, its ability to unilaterally shape international conditions has diminished. Other forces, notably China and the relatively more unified European Union, increasingly influence global realities, while an ever more powerful Russia will no longer accept a second-tier power position. Russia *will not* subordinate its Eurasian interests to the calculations and interests of neighboring countries and, more importantly, the US.

Today's Russian-American cold war is not new. It is serious, its roots are multifaceted, and it is here to stay for the foreseeable future. For those desiring a "glass half-full" view of the tricky Russian-American bilateral relationship, the ability of Russians and Americans to agree over strategic nuclear weapons and Iranian nuclear energy efforts provides hope the two rivals can find agreement on focused policy concerns. But the overall backdrop, (a) grounded in the two countries' fundamental geostrategic positions, and (b) joined with the two countries' judgments and perceptions of both their rival and themselves, points to a great power struggle that is long-term and consequential.

### *Misunderstanding Russia*

A bilateral cold war necessarily signifies that both rivals assume responsibility for the state of relations and for efforts to lessen misperceptions, tensions, and the potential for conflict. In acknowledging this mutual Russian and American responsibility, this essay can hardly do justice to the complicated realities of the 1945-91 Cold War and evolving Soviet-American relations, let alone to the myriad of developments that have overwhelmed the world and the Russian-American relationship since 1992. I advance a few key observations, and they are tied to a fundamental reality that has complicated the US's, and the West's, relationship with post-1991 Russia. These observations spring from my contention that the US and its traditional allies have profoundly misunderstood Russia, its domestic condition, its geostrategic interests and thinking,

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<sup>4</sup> This is at the heart of Putin's contention that the USSR's collapse was the greatest calamity of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For Putin, a hegemonic US emerged that is unconstrained and that has behaved recklessly.

<sup>5</sup> Russians recognize two other "times of troubles," the first (and most profound) surrounding the Polish-Lithuanian invasion in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, and the second tied with the early 20<sup>th</sup> century revolution-civil war.

and the goals that have driven its domestic and foreign policy. We can debate whether this misunderstanding has been accidental or intentional. What cannot be debated is that this misunderstanding has fundamentally structured our interpretation of Russian actions, and our interpretation has fully legitimated a policy line that is not amendable to accommodation of Russian views or interests. Whether or not the US and its allies “won” the Cold War, there is no denying the US emerged in the 1990’s as decisively more powerful, in all domains (military, political, economic, and societal), with its security interests well-defended and its ability to project power unconstrained. Not surprisingly, what many (including Russians) view as a triumphalist American mindset emerged. Russians, whether policymakers, the political establishment, or the public, had different views and expectations. My observations:

1. Russians do not view the winding down of the Cold War as a Russian defeat and they do not view themselves as a defeated power. They have not behaved as a defeated power, though Russia’s severe domestic problems and power constraints in the 1990’s required greater Russian caution and circumspection. It was during the final years of Soviet power that a Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, set out “new thinking” that resulted in the disbanding of the Warsaw Treaty Organization and withdrawal of Soviet troops from Eastern Europe.<sup>6</sup> As Russians see it, it was Russians who ended the “Soviet empire” in Europe.
2. Russians likewise understand that it was they themselves, through their officials and activists, who ended the domestic Soviet system. It was the Russian leadership and Russian people who chose to rapidly move to adopt a market economic system and a democratic political model while rejoining the global system.
3. Russians understand it was developments in their country, and their internal choices, that led – because of the dissolution of the USSR – to the emergence of fifteen sovereign states, with the Russian Federation (formerly Russian Republic) but one of them, albeit the most powerful. Russians do not want a return of Soviet power and they acknowledge the crimes of the Soviet system, committed both domestically and abroad. All post-Soviet Russian presidents, including Vladimir Putin, have explicitly denounced the ugly nature of Stalinism and renounced the oppressive Soviet policies imposed upon FSU nations and former Soviet bloc countries.<sup>7</sup>
4. Russians, in confronting a “failing state” that had been deteriorating for decades, also took on a “quadruple revolution” of root-and-branch political, economic, and societal change, with the search for a “new national idea.”<sup>8</sup> This quadruple revolution arose not from without, but from within, Russians have struggled profoundly with all four, with the search for a post-Soviet national idea arguably the most difficult to tackle. February 2014, nearly 25 years after the dissolution of the USSR, proved seminal, as the successful Sochi Winter Olympics and Ukrainian political collapse confirmed a post-Soviet “national idea” for Russia.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World*, NY: Harper and Row, 1987.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., see Putin’s explicit comments about such ugly behavior in his April 16, 2015 “Direct Line” live broadcast viewed by tens of millions of Russians, transcript at the Russian Presidential Web Portal, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/49261>; accessed 5 February 2016.

<sup>8</sup> John P. Willerton, “The Putin Legacy: Russian-Style Democratization Confronts a ‘Failing State’,” *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, 34, 1, November 2007, pp. 33-54.

<sup>9</sup> Together with Mikhail Beznosov and Patrick McGovern, I am completing a book manuscript on these nuanced issues, the intended volume entitled “Vladimir Putin and Russia’s Search for a National Idea.”

5. Finally, Russians see themselves, as they did in the pre-Soviet and Soviet past, as natural leaders in Eurasia, as having a sphere of influence where fundamental Russian security interests must be respected, as promoters of Slavic cultural values, and as defenders of Eastern Orthodoxy. Russians never denied these views, they have been at the heart of the Russian self-concept, security thinking, and foreign policy actions for centuries; they were not renounced by either the leadership or the public when the USSR collapsed. Indeed, one thoughtful American scholar's overview of Russian foreign policy since 1800 emphasizes a long-term Russian "sense of honor" in its foreign policy that is grounded in a strong commitment to its sphere of influence, promotion of Slavic values, and defense of Eastern Orthodoxy.<sup>10</sup> These leadership and sphere of influence expectations are central to the post-Soviet Russian "sense of honor" and "national idea."

The-above noted five observations are key to the Russian worldview, they have informed Russian thinking and actions since January 1, 1992, and they are true for all post-Soviet presidencies. Thus, even before the 1991 Soviet collapse, President Boris Yeltsin's Russian Republic government expressed concerns about a full divorce of the Baltic states from Russia, just as the post-Soviet Yeltsin Russian Federation government expressed outrage at Western actions against Serbia. American and Western observers have separated out the Putin government for its domestic neo-authoritarianism and for its ever-more assertive foreign policy. Truth be told, the Putin team has operated domestically on the 1993 Yeltsin Russian Constitution. And the growing economic and military might of Russia since Putin's 2000 ascension to the presidency has enabled Russia to more actively react to external developments that previously could only be viewed negatively and without consequential Russian action.

These five observations sum to a Russian frame of reference for understanding the past and for the crafting of post-1991 Russian domestic and foreign policy; *this frame of reference is completely rejected by the US.*<sup>11</sup> In the American frame of reference, the West won the Cold War with the resounding defeat of Soviet Russia, Russia reformed its domestic arrangements in accordance with Western experience and values, and Russia's new Eurasian posturing entailed an acceptance of new geostrategic arrangements (e.g., through NATO and the EU) that signified the end of a Russian sphere of influence and end to any tradition of "special relations" between Russia and its neighbors. The actions (or inaction) of the Yeltsin government seemingly confirmed the Russian acceptance of Russia's new role in the world.

In fact, Americans and their allies fundamentally misunderstood Russia. The West acted accordingly, Western and American interests in Eurasia were significantly bolstered, while Russia was seemingly "contained" and apparently accepted its new role and mode of foreign behavior. Developments of the past decade, and recent global hotspots, reveal the fundamental chasm in Russian and American perspectives. Joined with juxtaposed security calculations and foreign policy interests, a bilateral cold war that had been quietly simmering (certainly in Moscow) reemerged, the evidence of the growing divide tied with the appearance of Vladimir

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<sup>10</sup> Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia and the West: From Alexander to Putin: Honor in International Relations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Russian complaints of the West's condescension and unjust treatment are viewed in the US as little more than whining and maneuvering intended to justify Russian belligerence and aggression.

Putin and a Russia whose power capabilities increasingly permitted it to act more assertively. Now, more than a decade and a half into the Putin period, during which the US moved through the contrasting Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama presidencies, the Russian-American geostrategic divide is highly pronounced, legitimated by contrasting interpretations and historical narratives, and vulnerable to dynamic and unpredictable events that are often not subject to Russian and American actions. In not understanding Russia, and not providing Russia its recognized place in what US President George H. W. Bush termed the “new world order,” we confront an ever stronger Russia that will settle for nothing less than a Eurasian leadership role and major stake in that new order. How will the US and its allies respond, given their worldview, interests, and narrative, all of which seem to be counterpoised to those of Russia? And what are Russia’s options in response?

### *Engaging an Assertive Russia: Dilemmas of Containment*

Recalling the past, the American response to a menacing Soviet Union had been a containment policy that limited any expansion of the USSR’s power bloc. For the period 1945-91, the USSR maintained a large sphere of influence which reflected both past Imperial Russian realities and subsequent Soviet power advances. Soviet probing throughout the period to advance the Soviet power position ultimately proved ineffectual; indeed, the USSR’s hold over its bloc proved difficult, as many bloc members gained increasing maneuverability vis-à-vis the USSR as time wore on. Not surprisingly, with Gorbachev’s actions of the later 1980’s and consequent liberation of the other 14 FSU states and Soviet bloc countries, once-dominated nations sought new arrangements to shield themselves from any future return of Russian control. The behind-the-scenes tacit agreement between Soviet leaders and senior NATO and Western officials that NATO and American influences would not rush into the one-time Soviet (Russian) sphere of influence upon the Russian withdrawal was almost immediately disregarded by the US.<sup>12</sup> The 1993-2001 Clinton Administration proved especially active in promoting both NATO expansion and the extensive in-flow of American resources. EU efforts to bring various one-time members of Russia’s historical sphere of influence into its ranks were just as ambitious. Meanwhile, if Russia was permitted formalized associations with NATO and the EU, these were modest linkages that did not fundamentally address Russian regional concerns. In essence, and without any public pronouncement, the policy of limiting Russian foreign influence, especially with neighbors and countries which had traditionally been of utmost importance to Russia, was preserved. Russia was apparently contained.

In fact, any “containment” of Russia was short-lived. I cannot touch upon all of the events of the past decades that overwhelmed Russia and Russian-American relations. Beyond emphasizing the enlarged ranks of NATO and the EU, we can note that many Eurasian countries, once dominated by Russia, crafted both concrete and more psychological means by which to bolster their sovereign interests vis-à-vis Russia.<sup>13</sup> The circumstances of each neighboring country are

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<sup>12</sup> President Putin commented as recently as January 5, 2016 in an interview with the German newspaper *Bild* that he had seen various documents confirming such a tacit understanding. Consult the Russian Presidential Web Portal, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51154>; accessed 5 February 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Some neighboring states had understandable concerns about a resurgent Russia, with the historical past having included menacing actions by both Imperial Russia and the USSR. There were legitimate reasons for these wary states to establish strong ties with the US and its allies as a counterbalance to the perceived regional hegemon.

unique. Democratic Finland could flourish politically and economically during the years of so-called Finlandization, remain wary of a resurgent post-Soviet Russia, join the EU, and yet not join NATO.<sup>14</sup> The nearby Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, in contrast, rushed to join the American-led military alliance while concomitantly moving into the EU. Belarus, albeit with an authoritarian system, pursued close and non-threatening relations with Russia, while a democratic Ukraine pursued a tortured course of working relations with Moscow under alternating pro-Russian and pro-Western governments. As with most FSU and former Soviet bloc states, the domestic situations in all of these countries were subject to a complex push-pull of pro-Russian and pro-Western forces. From a Russian perspective, considerable Western resources and pressures were moving into a Eurasian space that was traditionally subject to Russia's national and security interests; the inflow of American resources, so far from the US's sphere of influence, was especially problematic. Late 2013-2014 events in Ukraine represented the breaking point for Russia: a breaking point that had been predicted by the dean of America's Russian specialists, George Kennan, more than a decade earlier.<sup>15</sup> The overthrow of democratically elected President Viktor Yanukovich effectively ruptured the 20-year complicated domestic balancing of contending pro-Western and pro-Russian forces in Ukraine, with the prospect of what 19<sup>th</sup> century Russians once called "little Russia" moving into a NATO and EU from which Russia was excluded.<sup>16</sup> The related Russian joining (annexation) of Crimea was a tangible consequence that garnered near-universal support in Russia and near-universal scorn in Western countries. The situation was made more complex by the fact that much of the rest of the world did not join the West in the consequent punishing of Russia, as revealed in a June 2014 UN General Assembly vote to condemn Russia that did not garner the support of the BRICS countries (i.e., Brazil, India, China, and South Africa) or even Israel. Meanwhile, there was a rush of many such countries to negotiate lucrative trade deals with Russia as Western sanctions were placed against Russia.<sup>17</sup>

Many events of the past years, occurring during the tenure of Russia's assertive and self-confident Vladimir Putin, helped move the Russian-American relationship back into a full-blown cold war. Putin's cooperative stance after September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 to help the US in confronting Islamic terrorists evolved into wariness with the August 2008 Georgian War, to strong opposition over 2011 developments in Libya. Russia's mounting involvement in the 2010's Syrian civil war occasioned considerable American upset, but it is the ongoing Ukrainian crisis that is of utmost consequence.

Over the past years, with an ever-more assertive Russia, American Putin-bashing has become universal.<sup>18</sup> And *Putin-bashing is consequential*. With accusations arising constantly – a major

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<sup>14</sup> Special thanks to former Finnish Foreign Minister, Dr. Keijo Korhonen, for his insightful comments on the nuanced history of Russia's relations with Finland.

<sup>15</sup> Cited in John G. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault," *Foreign Affairs*, 93, 5, September/October 2014, pp. 1-12.

<sup>16</sup> US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland famously commented in a leaked February 7, 2014 phone conversation, as events were rushing toward the Yanukovich government's collapse, that at last the US had something to show for investing \$5 billion in its Ukrainian democratization efforts.

<sup>17</sup> While the UN General Assembly vote to condemn Russia over the seizure of Crimea was 100-11 in favor, 82 members chose not to vote or abstained.

<sup>18</sup> This contrasts with Putin's consistently high domestic approval ratings and the widespread Russian understanding that Putin is now in the pantheon of Russia's greatest leaders.

“revelation” about Putin coming every few months – American policymakers are put in a near-impossible position to even engage Putin and Russia. The comparison of Putin to Hitler legitimates a hostile profiling that makes it almost impossible for any American leader to work with Putin for fear of being branded a Neville Chamberlin-like appeaser.<sup>19</sup> Related to this useful demonizing of Putin, Russian domestic advances are widely discounted or ignored in the American public space, while Russian problems are emphasized and even exaggerated.<sup>20</sup> In reality, American policymakers and the public know surprisingly little about Putin’s Russia.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, Russia as a military superpower and a traditional enemy serves as a worthy foe: a much more compelling adversary than Islamic extremists who, with limited means, rely on medieval methods to frighten Westerners. Doubts that once arose around the need for NATO and costliness of the American military-industrial complex are gone. America’s next president will almost certainly raise military spending: spending that by conservative estimates today matches that of the next eight global powers but that, when considered as the US’s overall military-intelligence effort, probably matches the spending of *all other countries*.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the U.S. established the Monroe Doctrine which justified its sphere of influence in the Americas. Other countries have drawn on this American logic to legitimate their spheres.<sup>22</sup> We can debate whether powerful 21<sup>st</sup> century states have the right to safeguard their perceived spheres of influence, but there is no doubt that they do. Two hundred years after the Monroe Doctrine, Canada and Mexico enjoy as much national independence and sovereignty *as the US will permit*. Canada and Mexico will never belong to a military or economic bloc that excludes the US, and no military bases linked to US power-rivals will ever be permitted near America’s borders.

The question now is what 21<sup>st</sup> century Russia will accept. There are NATO bases in the Baltics less than a 30-minute air flight from St. Petersburg, and Kiev-led Ukraine could one day house NATO forces. Meanwhile, as the Obama Administration winds down, upwards of \$3.4 billion in sophisticated military hardware is planned for Central and East European NATO countries in 2017, and potential successors to Obama promise more. One presidential candidate promises, if elected, to conduct “aggressive NATO war games in the Baltics.” Since returning to the presidency in 2012, Putin has adopted a careful posturing, and – whether in Ukraine or Syria –

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<sup>19</sup> Accusations include Putin being a murderer, a pedophile, having a mental disorder, and being the world’s richest person by virtue of fashioning a kleptocracy. After a British governmental inquiry concluded (January 2016) that Putin “probably approved” the poisoning of the former KGB agent-defector, Aleksandr Litvinenko, in a case based on circumstantial evidence, Russians commonly joked regarding any and all problems in their country that “Putin probably approved.”

<sup>20</sup> As one example, President Obama’s 2015 State of the Union Address to a Joint Session of Congress misleadingly characterized the Russian economy as “in shambles.” On other occasions, Obama has contended the Russian economy has declined since Putin came to power in 2000 when all objective criteria prove the opposite.

<sup>21</sup> Thus, detailed American attention to such high-profile Putin “scandals” as the poisoning of the former KGB agent, Aleksandr Litvinenko, obscures awareness of important developments such as the dramatic growth of Russia’s middle class and Russia’s rising birth rate. Indeed, few Americans know that it was Vladimir Putin who was the first foreign leader to call President George W. Bush after the 9/11 Al Qaeda attacks on the US to express solidarity with the American people.

<sup>22</sup> The USSR drew on the logic of the Monroe Doctrine to legitimate its sphere of influence. See Thomas M. Franck and Edward Weisband, *Word Politics: Verbal Strategy Among the Superpowers*, NY: Oxford University Press, 1972.



demonstrated a willingness to engage the US.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, the US blames Putin for these and other crises, castigating a Machiavellian Putin whose every move must be resolutely halted. Even Putin's success in overseeing the transfer of chemical weapons out of Syria is dismissed by Americans. Hence, between Russia and the US, we find alternative perspectives and alternative narratives, and they are grounded in a continuing history of rivalry and counterpoised geostrategic interests.

The American global position vis-à-vis Russia is strong, it is supported by traditional allies, but it is generally ignored by the BRICS and countries of the southern hemisphere. Russia appears semi-contained, but it is maneuvering around this containment – with mixed results. The situation is dynamic and unpredictable. Who could have predicted that one-time Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, the darling of the American political establishment who launched the 2008 attack on Russian forces in South Ossetia, would ultimately fall from grace, flee Georgia in the wake of arrest warrants, find himself in Ukraine where he would be awarded Ukrainian citizenship, become a governor of the important Odessa region, and now be viewed as a potential future prime minister? All of the events surrounding Saakashvili during the past decade were outside of Washington's and Moscow's control, yet he has remained an influential figure in two important FSU countries.

We may see piecemeal Russian-American agreement in focused policy areas such as arms proliferation or global warming. Yet a cold war continues. For the US, containing a perceived belligerent Russia remains the top priority.<sup>24</sup> For Russia, reclaiming Russia's traditional Eurasian, Slavic, and Eastern Orthodox leadership position is the top priority. These Russian and American priorities collide, but for those outside of the Moscow and Washington establishments, *containing the Russian-American cold war* remains the overriding priority.

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<sup>23</sup> Especially suggestive are Putin's annual appearances before the Valdai International Discussion Club; e.g., see his October 22, 2015 comments, Russian Presidential Web Portal, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50548>; accessed 5 February 2016.

<sup>24</sup> US Secretary of Defense Ash Carter's 2015 characterization of Russia as the US's top national security threat is illustrative.

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## *Washington calls Moscow*

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The 2016 American elections had many surprising developments, with the stunning election of Donald Trump the biggest. Among the most unanticipated developments was the return of Russian-American relations to the center of the American electoral discussion, with a widely-accepted American belief that Putin’s Russia had tried to undermine the American electoral system. Russian-American relations reached new lows as the American elections wound down in fall 2016: these relations are now in a new cold war, the heated – even hysterical – rhetoric transcending the period of Ronald Reagan’s “evil empire” to hearken back to the days of Eisenhower and Kennedy. The underlying structure of contemporary Russian-American relations may be relatively stable. But heated rhetoric in both countries, joined with growing anger and grievances by both publics, contribute to an increasingly worrisome situation that must be carefully managed. Dynamic situations in Syria and Ukraine, not subject to Russian and American unilateral control, make this situation even more dangerous. Seasoned and sober-minded professionals in both Moscow and Washington must assert themselves and move publics back from cartoonish viewpoints and aggressive postures. The challenge is great. If past experience is any guide, Russian and American decision makers are capable of resourcefulness and energy in engaging one another and addressing tests of power and interest. Are they motivated to do so? A new American President is assuming power. Can he engage the Russians and reverse a dangerous situation? Unlike his post-Cold War predecessors, can he acknowledge some sort of acceptable Russian Eurasian power position: a Russian power position that is set against the backdrop of continuing American global leadership?<sup>1</sup>

American anxieties about Russia, if overblown, are understandable. Especially during the second Putin presidency (since May 2012), Russia has – from an American perspective – been troublesome on many fronts. Russia has flexed its muscles, whether in its heightened activity in the conflict-ridden Middle East, or in supporting its interests in Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin has pursued an increasingly self-confident and assertive (Americans would say aggressive) foreign policy that has won favor with most Russians, bolstered Russia’s allies, impressed neutral foreign observers, and worried neighboring Eurasian states and the West. Joined with the considerable improvement in average Russians’ economic lives through

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Mikhail Beznosov, Faten Ghosn, and Patrick McGovern for their helpful suggestions.

the 15-year Putin period, there has been an irrepressible buoyancy in Russians' attitudes and expectations.<sup>2</sup>

As I have argued elsewhere in *Limes*, there was a dilemma in Russia's Eurasian and global geo-strategic thinking that fundamentally challenged American expectations.<sup>3</sup> Where the U.S. had expected a post-Cold War Russia to accept a subordinate position and adhere to American-set international norms (what Americans identify as international systemic, not merely American, norms), the Russian leadership never accepted this subordinate power position.<sup>4</sup> No Russian leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin, or Dmitry Medvedev, accepted such a position, and none pursued a Russian national self-concept that entailed Russia following the American lead. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Russia was not in a power position to assert itself and challenge this American power and leadership position. It was only at the end of the first Putin presidency (2000-08) that Russia's domestic institutional consolidation, economic revival, and increased military capabilities permitted Russia to do so. Putin's 2007 Munich Security Speech signaled a mounting Russian assertiveness, with his strong 2011 criticisms of Western actions in Libya confirming Russia was returning to an assertive position of countering American actions.

Undoubtedly the most important stumbling block for a cooperative Russian-American relationship entailed the considerable American and Western involvement in the former Soviet Union (FSU) area and traditional Russian Central-Eastern European sphere of influence. Whatever the merits of addressing the security concerns of countries once subject to Russian domination, NATO expansion eastward constituted a profound challenge to Russian security and its national self-concept as a Eurasian leader. American and Western activities in the FSU and Central-East Europe were many, their diversity and complexity defying simple summary. Suffice it to note Russia could do little, but Russian unhappiness was considerable and grew over time. It was only with the rise of Vladimir Putin that Russian resistance became pronounced.

This background brings us to Ukraine, which has assumed centrality in the re-emergent expression of Russian anger and assertiveness. While contemporary American and Western attention has fallen on Syria, it is the struggle in Ukraine that is the most provocative – and dangerous – for Russian-American relations. The ongoing Ukrainian civil war did not play a major role in the 2016 American electoral campaign, receiving passing attention as yet another example of Russian aggressiveness. But Ukraine is at the heart of Russian geo-strategic priorities. The domestic Ukrainian situation is dynamic, it is not subject to unilateral *diktat* by either power, and it is profoundly misunderstood by most Americans. Ukraine, while viewed by Russians as the birthplace of their civilization, is central to both the Russian national psyche and its security interests. It is not an exaggeration to say that no country outside of Russia is as important to Russia as Ukraine.

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<sup>2</sup> See Jon Hellevig, *Putin 2000-2014, Midterm Interim Results: Diversification, Modernization and the Role of the State in Russia's Economy* (Awaragroup, 2014), at [www.awaragroup.com](http://www.awaragroup.com); accessed 20 March 2015.

<sup>3</sup> John P. (Pat) Willerton, "Mosca è nostra nemica perché non la capiamo" ("Moscow is our enemy because we don't understand it"), *Limes: Revista Italiana de Geopolitica*, 2/2016, 115-22.

<sup>4</sup> One recalls that after World War II, not only the defeated powers such as Germany and Japan, but the victorious allies such as Britain and France, accepted a new world order that was crafted and guided by the United States. Charles De Gaulle's brief challenging of this hegemonic American position in the 1960s does not alter the fact that all of these countries have deferred to American global political-economic leadership for over 70 years.

The Ukrainian civil war is complicated and entails nuances that cannot be addressed here. Suffice it to note that Russia and Russians have long been committed to ethnic Russians in Ukraine. In the wake of the 2014 overthrow of the Viktor Yanukovich regime, the Putin regime safeguarded Russia's security interests and bases by easily absorbing Crimea into the Russian Federation. The regime strongly supported the two breakaway regions of Donetsk and Lugansk, while giving refuge to hundreds of thousands of ethnic Russian Ukrainian citizens who fled their homeland after the government overthrow. The Russian people overwhelmingly support these Putin regime efforts, with many nationalists pressing for even more assertive Russian action.<sup>5</sup> Russia is now – as before – intimately involved in all aspects of Ukrainian reality, both in Kiev-led Ukraine and in the breakaway regions. Russia will not be pushed out. The universally acknowledged dean of American specialists on Russia – and the intellectual architect of the American containment policy during the Cold War – George Kennan, had predicted in 1998 that Russia would react harshly should the U.S. and West move into Ukraine. Kennan died in 2005, but his prediction proved true, and it is of central relevance as we approach Russian-American relations today.

The U.S. and West declared economic war on Russia in summer 2014 when they launched economic sanctions that were intended to severely hurt Russia, and, at the most optimistic level, even help topple the Putin regime. Americans view the economic sanctions as morally just, without thinking about the consequences of economically attacking Russia. Indeed, it was Democratic Party presidential nominee Hillary Clinton who first likened Vladimir Putin to Adolf Hitler and Russian actions in Crimea to Nazi moves in the Sudetenland. While the economic sanctions did not cripple the Russian economy to the desired level, these sanctions, when combined with the drop in global oil prices, were painful. The Russian economy has been hurt, and all Russians feel it. Ironically, many of the U.S.'s and West Europeans' friends and allies – including Brazil, India, Japan, and Turkey – have negotiated valuable trade deals with Russia that are helping Russia to withstand these sanctions. Add in countries like China and one finds an impressive list of countries that will help Russia return to economic growth by 2018.

Americans, both policymakers and citizens, are frustrated. So are many Europeans. Russia has withstood U.S.-Western pressures, it continues to be assertive in places such as Syria, and the Ukrainian civil war is in a long-term stalemate. Indeed, Ukraine will neither join NATO nor the EU, and most Ukrainians know their counterparts in Crimea, now a part of Russia, already live on a higher economic level than they. Most Ukrainians, while buoyed by their increased sovereignty vis-à-vis Russia, know their economic lives were better under the discredited Viktor Yanukovich than the ever-less-popular Petro Poroshenko. In Europe, energetic and creative politicians such as Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras already articulate more measured stances on Russia, and one senses these leaders, among others, will press to lessen the sanctions and consequent Russian counter-

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<sup>5</sup> While some Russians have opposed Putin regime actions, these elements amount to less than 10% of the population. Mainstream Russians characterize such domestic critics as “self-hating Russians,” with one-time world chess champion Garry Kasparov the best-known such critic in the West. The great 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote of the tradition of “self-hating Russians”: they “find their pleasure and satisfaction in abusing Russia” as “they hate everything that is native to the [Russian] soil.” While being popular in the West, these critics are not taken seriously by most Russians.

sanctions. The possible retirement of German Chancellor Angela Merkel and potential electoral ouster of French President François Hollande suggest further momentum toward the ending of sanctions. In contrast, Americans, feeling no economic strain from the sanctions and counter-sanctions, show no inclination to lessen pressure on Russia. Indeed, American frustration encourages more pressure. And in the midst of the 2016 election campaign, Americans found a new reason for confronting Putin and Russia that excited many politicians and citizens: alleged Russian cyber attacks on the American electoral system.

Enter Donald Trump, the Republican Party presidential nominee, and the purported beneficiary of Russian actions. Trump always offered muted comments on Putin and Russia, questioning the logic of continual American Russia-bashing. Trump brushed off accusations of Russian cyber meddling advantaging his campaign, and it is unlikely that the incoming Trump Administration will be motivated to aggressively follow up on these hacking allegations. It is true that 17 American U.S. intelligence agencies offered definitive judgments as to Russian culpability in the claimed Russian cyber attacks. But the meager evidence presented was circumstantial at best.<sup>6</sup> Trump's electoral triumph probably halted any American indictment of Russia over the alleged cyber efforts. Indeed, there was little American public reaction to the immediate post-election revelations by Russian Foreign Ministry officials of contacts between the Russian government and the Trump organization during the election campaign.

There are important consequences in the American political arena of many years of Russia and Putin-bashing; this Russophobia continues to structure the thinking of most Americans regarding relations with Russia. During the electoral campaign, and even before, many American Russia specialists and one-time government functionaries desiring a job in an expected Clinton administration had auditioned for senior positions with strong Russia-bashing rhetoric. Former U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul comes to mind. A hired analyst with a major American news network and its cable news division, NBC and MSNBC, McFaul regularly appeared in millions of American homes offering tough talk about Russian intentions and actions. He used his personal dealings with Putin to legitimate his negative characterization, and his efforts would surely have yielded a senior government position had Hillary Clinton won.<sup>7</sup> Republican-oriented Russia specialists and one-time government functionaries offered comparably negative spins on Russia, but their efforts are now complicated by Donald Trump's conciliatory public posturing vis-à-vis Putin and Russia.

Rhetoric matters, and such excessively hostile rhetoric hamstrings the new American President and his team as they approach Russia. Yet with the election over, and with a compelling need to engage Russia on a number of high-priority issues, rhetoric can give way to careful thinking and suggestive action. In Vladimir Putin and his team, the new American administration will find a willing partner. Can the new administration craft a foreign policy line that simultaneously (1) addresses the dangerous Ukrainian crisis, (2) accommodates a mutually

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<sup>6</sup> Many recall these same agencies' definitive judgments in 2003 regarding Saddam Hussein and Iraq possessing weapons of mass destruction. The world community is understandably more skeptical of the American intelligence community's judgment than are Americans.

<sup>7</sup> McFaul was dealt a further setback immediately after Clinton's electoral defeat when it was revealed that the Putin government, angered by McFaul's anti-Russian commentaries, had already placed him on its sanctions list and would deny him a future entry visa.

accepted Russian power position in Eurasia, yet (3) reinforces American global leadership interests?

The Russian media characterization of the U.S. has been hostile since the Ukrainian civil war broke out, but Putin's discussion of the U.S. continues to rely on phrasings such as "our American partners" and "our American friends."<sup>8</sup> The explicit comparison of Putin to Hitler could have limited an American leader's ability to engage the Russian leader lest he be seen as a 21<sup>st</sup> century Neville Chamberlin. Trump has shown no reluctance to speak favorably of Putin, and in the first days after his election Trump voiced a willingness to meet with the Russian President. Ever ready to "make a deal," the businessman-turned-president Trump could sidestep harsh rhetoric, focusing on those realities where Russian-American interests intersect, and tackling areas of disagreement where common purpose can be found. Many areas of the world are not subject to Russian-American disagreement, while in others Russia and the U.S. actually have common ground. The Ukrainian civil war is dangerous, and there are dilemmas of mounting Eastern European fascism that worry many, but interlocked European economic and security concerns can bring Russians and Americans to the table. Likewise in the Middle East, common worries over terrorist extremism and the threat of ISIS can once again occasion Russian-American agreement. Can the American side be flexible on the Syrian Assad regime: a regime never "loved" by the Russians, but a regime always seen as preferable to a stateless Syria that is *de facto* governed by terrorists? The U.S. certainly does not want a failed Syrian state where terrorist groups rule. Trump has articulated harsh rhetoric in promising future aggressive American military action in the Middle East. But he has also voiced a willingness to "think outside of the box." Could Trump creatively engage Putin, not only over the Syrian conflict, but the Ukrainian civil war?

My discussion returns to Ukraine, to Russia's position as a major Eurasian power, and to Russia having legitimate power rights that it asserts. Contrary to the aggressive preferences of many Russian nationalists, the Putin team has taken a cautious stance in Ukraine. True, Russia moved quickly – and without any loss of life – to secure its military bases in Crimea. But its support of the breakaway Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Lugansk has been cautious, and it has left open the possibility of these regions rejoining with Kiev-led Ukraine. U.S. Vice President Joe Biden may have inadvertently disturbed many Ukrainian officials when, in his address to the Ukrainian parliament in December 2015, he championed the merits of a federal system in addressing juxtaposed central government-regional government interests and disputes. In fact, a federal solution to the Ukrainian crisis, now rejected by Kiev, yet supported by Russia and its Eastern Ukrainian allies, could hold the key to an eventual way out of the civil war. Perhaps after years of domestic economic hardship and continuing war, Kiev will be persuaded to reconsider. The U.S. and Europe would surely welcome the federal solution, and peace might return to a troubled Ukraine. Could President Trump, confident in his foreign policy outlook and negotiating skills, and supported by a team of traditional Russophobes who might nevertheless see the payoffs of ending the Ukrainian stalemate and the costly cold war with Russia, come around? Anti-Communist Richard Nixon famously went to Mao's China, and Ronald Reagan compromised with Mikhail Gorbachev. Could America's businessman-president similarly reach out to Putin and Russia? Such a move would be creative and bold. If properly crafted and

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<sup>8</sup> See Putin's comments to the 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, Moscow, 27 October 2016, at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53151>, accessed 11 November 2016.

presented, especially with the national interests of a neutral Ukraine assured, such a Russian-American agreement could serve to defuse a most unpredictable conflict while laying the groundwork for agreement elsewhere.

An important caveat is in order. What one American scholar calls the U.S.'s "wealth defense industry" plays an essential role in the never-ending Russia-bashing that has been so critical to American military spending and American politics.<sup>9</sup> President Dwight Eisenhower had warned of the dangers of the American military-industrial complex back in January 1961, and in the intervening years that complex has gained an unassailable economic position that largely structures American foreign policy. Mainstream American political elements – Democratic and Republican – promote policies that advance the wealth defense industry, and a perceived menacing Russia only bolsters resource claims. The foreign policy positions of both the Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton campaigns fully accorded with America's wealth defense industry, even if the particulars of their posturing varied. Trump called for a major increase in American security spending, even though the U.S. currently spends as much on security as the rest of the world. Clinton emphasized the Russia threat, promoting policies regarding the Middle East and Ukraine that would only further bolster that wealth defense industry's resource claims. The never-ending appearance in the U.S. of disturbing revelations about Putin and Russia legitimate the constant claims for resources to counter the Russian threat. The conduct and outcome of the 2016 elections, including congressional elections, reveal that increased military spending, and the interests of the wealth defense industry, will be further advanced. Can a new Trump Administration that conciliates with Putin's Russia challenge the preferences of a wealth defense industry that has been so traditionally motivated to emphasize the eternal Russian menace? Senior members of the Trump Team such as Rudy Giuliani and Newt Gingrich are long-time Russophobes who have advocated harsh aggressive stances toward Russia. Top congressional Republicans such as Senator John McCain have long led the charge in Putin-bashing. Are these politicians capable of permitting Trump to engage in a new *rapprochement* with Putin?

Leadership matters for policy making and policy change, and the election of Donald Trump and formation of a new American administration represent a consequential moment for addressing the dangerously worsened Russian-American relationship. As the domestic political and economic situation in Kiev continues to deteriorate, and questions arise about future Ukrainian intentions, American policy makers and their European allies can reconsider their thinking and policy options. A neutral Ukraine, reunified with the breakaway republics who are provided assurances via genuine federal arrangements, could continue its awkward relationship with Russia without war.<sup>10</sup> With costly sanctions and counter-sanctions lifted, Russia and Europe – including a neutral Ukraine – could engage one another on a widening array of issues. Putin and his team would be highly interested in such stabilizing arrangements. In essence, a stronger Russian Eurasian power position would at last be ensured, yet set against the backdrop of the continuing American-led Western leadership position.

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<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey A. Winters, "Oligarchy in the U.S.A.: The Wealth Defense Industry Protects the Richest of the Rich," *In These Times*, 16, 3, March 2012, available at: [http://inthesetimes.com/article/12698/oligarchy\\_in\\_the\\_u.s.a](http://inthesetimes.com/article/12698/oligarchy_in_the_u.s.a)

<sup>10</sup> While the inclusion of Crimea in the Russian Federation may represent a "deal breaker" for a Russian-American *rapprochement* over Ukraine, one should not discount the ability of motivated actors to creatively craft new legal-institutional arrangements that could bridge the concerns of all interested parties.

Donald Trump's rhetoric on the international system, NATO, and even Russia, has often been confused and even contradictory. We will need time, as the new administration forms and articulates a post-Obama vision of the world, to determine whether there is a meaningful improvement in Russian-American relations. Meanwhile, Trump's suggestion of reaching out to Putin's Russia will surely be opposed by powerful domestic American institutional interests, including some within his administration. There is certain to be a ferocious struggle within the new Trump team over its Russia policy. But the experience of past American leaders who came into office in the midst of profound cold war circumstances is suggestive. As the new Trump Administration launches itself, serious foreign challenges confront American interests and global leadership. For the past years, Putin's Russia has been at the heart of many such challenges. Energetic efforts of renewed engagement by a new American president who is said to be a true Washington outsider could be fruitful. There may be no better place to begin a "real Russian reset" than with Ukraine. Is a Russian-American *rapprochement* possible?



*“USA-Russia, Avanti Piano” (“USA-Russia, Advancing Slowly”), in Limes, No. 11, December 2020.*

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After the four tumultuous years of the Donald Trump Administration, with the election of Joe Biden, American foreign policy will get back on track. Many important power imperatives that characterized American thinking and actions for the past 75 years will return to center stage, with more specific policies that were either ignored or discarded being revived. The U.S.’s friends and allies, not only in Europe, but in Asia and elsewhere, can breathe a collective sigh of relief. Meanwhile, for the U.S.’s traditional rivals, concern and uncertainty will predominate.<sup>1</sup>

For Russia, the replacement of Donald Trump with Joe Biden, and the filling of senior American governmental posts with well-known establishment centrists, will not signify any major change in American thinking and behavior.<sup>2</sup> In truth, for all of the public bombast and even bizarre actions by President Trump, little changed in either the structure or logic of Russian-American relations, 2017-21. The relationship of mistrust and power rivalry that had been evident since the early 2000s – punctuated by the U.S.’s 2003 invasion of Iraq and President Vladimir Putin’s 2007 Munich Security Conference address which challenged a U.S.-led unipolar world system – never went away. During Trump’s tenure, the American foreign policy establishment continued to champion an assertive anti-Russian policy. And Trump himself was accurate during the 2020 presidential campaign in claiming that it was during his administration that among the harshest anti-Russian sanctions were levied by the U.S. For all of his public fawning over Vladimir Putin, President Trump did not alter the decidedly anti-Russian posturing by the U.S. Meanwhile, the new American President is an old hand when it comes to foreign policy and dealing with Russia, and he has a well-articulated skeptical take on Vladimir Putin.<sup>3</sup> As Biden builds his centrist, establishment team and sets a new Russia policy, we should assume the old maximum continues to hold in the forging of American foreign policy and the state of Russian-American relations: *“Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.”* As we anticipate the evolving Russian-American relationship and Biden’s efforts over the next years, we will see considerable continuity with the 2008-17 Obama Administration. Indeed, if Biden’s rhetoric varies from that of Trump, Biden administration actions may surprisingly resemble those of his last two predecessors.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century Russian-American cold war continues, with little prospect of significant change. Yet if it is true that hope rests eternal, then perhaps there are one or two areas where some meaningful policy change can emerge. We should consider these, too, albeit skeptically.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Mikhail Beznosov, Martin Carrier, Faten Ghosn, and Michael Jette for thoughtful comments.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Secretary of State Antony Blinkin, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield, all with long-standing career ties with Biden.

<sup>3</sup> Biden served as a U.S. Senator, 1973-2009, much of that time including membership as Chairman or Ranking Member of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

*It's generally power – not personalities*

Leadership change in Washington or Moscow could portend hopeful developments that might enable these two traditional rivals to address anew – and in creative ways – existent policy differences and problems. A change in personalities at the top of a great power's state apparatus could yield policy innovation. But regarding Russian-American relations, this is unlikely to happen with the 2021 installation of the 46<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, and the fundamental reason is not any lack of leadership prowess on the part of the new president. A likely lack of innovation stems from the structure of post-1991 Russian-American power relations, as the Russian Federation and the United States pursue almost diametrically opposed power interests.

I previously argued in two articles appearing in *Limes* that 21<sup>st</sup> century Russian-American relations must be understood through the lenses of their competing and counterpoised global power positions and interests.<sup>4</sup> This is no less true today, when a new Biden Administration takes charge, than it was in 2017, when the then-new Trump Administration set sail.

Let me bottom-line the power dilemma that profoundly barnacles Russian-American relations. The United States assumed that, with the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia would, first, renounce its Soviet period power position and earlier preeminence in Eurasia, in essence accepting a second-tier global power position vis-à-vis the U.S. Russia would, second, simultaneously accept newly restructured bilateral relations with its Eurasian neighbors that would constrain any future regional Russian power impulses (political, economic, and military). This is what had happened in the global system (excluding the Soviet bloc) after the end of World War II (the last “great war”), when the U.S.’s victorious allies (e.g., Britain and France) and its defeated enemies (e.g, Germany and Japan) had done something akin to this, accepting American global leadership. The new international system that operated in the American-led world, 1945-91, was one essentially built by Americans, and it well served American interests even as the other powers also prospered. But Russia never accepted such an American understanding of post-1991 world politics, power relations in Eurasia, and Russia’s diminished role in both. Russia never renounced its assumed “natural” leadership role in Eurasia, and – indeed – it used bilateral and multilateral means to shore up its position in the 1990s, even in the face of its reduced power capabilities. Then-Russian Republic President Boris Yeltsin had even expressed alarmed in the late Soviet period at the exiting of the three Baltic countries from the Soviet Union. But Yeltsin’s Russia (1992-99) had no choice but to live with the power realities of a unipolar American-led global system.

For the decade of the 1990s, a period Russians refer to as a “time of troubles” (based on interrelated domestic problems and foreign weakness), Russia was relatively impotent in expressing its power interests, even in Eurasia and in neighboring states. In some instances, the

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<sup>4</sup> “Mosca è nostra nemica perché non la capiamo,” 2/16, March 2016, pp. 115-22, and “Washington chiama Mosca” 11/16, November 2016, pp. 143-53, *Limes: Revista Italiana di Geopolitica*.

consequences from Moscow's standpoint were devastating: the three Baltic countries, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, quickly joined NATO and also joined the European Union. In other cases, the consequences were less dramatic, yet also concerning for Russia (e.g., Turkey's enhanced influence in the Caucasus). In still other cases, Russia was more successful in limiting a major diminution in its influence (e.g., Central Asia). Russia did retain considerable political, economic, and even security arrangements with Ukraine and Belarus, albeit each of these Slavic neighbors could occasionally press Moscow's interests. Throughout this period, as Russia dealt with its "quadruple revolution" (political, economic, and societal revolution, with search for a new national idea) and limped through the challenges that came with power weakness and NATO expansion, Russian resentment only grew.<sup>5</sup> None of these developments stemmed from unique personalities or time-specific idiosyncrasies. Rather, Russian and American power interests were at logger-heads, and Russia had little ability to alter its Eurasian (and even global) power disadvantage.

*And the personalities – Trump, Biden, and Putin*

If geostrategic power realities essentially structure Russian-American relations, the preferences of individual leaders and their administrations can make some difference. As Russia's domestic political, economic, and societal situation was stabilized under Vladimir Putin, the country's ability to more forcefully express its policy interests grew. Putin's forceful 2007 presentation to the Munich Security Conference publicly signaled that Russia had the mounting capabilities and national will to openly challenge the power dynamics and international system of the 1990s and 2000s. While the four-year Dmitry Medvedev presidency (2008-12) entailed a relatively benign period in Russian-American relations, Prime Minister Putin's growing assertiveness on foreign policy issues in that presidency's waning days, combined with Putin's 2012 return to the presidency, signified an ever-growing Russian willingness to challenge American interests. Events in Ukraine, culminating in the ouster of the pro-Russia President Viktor Yanukovich and his replacement by a decidedly anti-Russian Petro Poroshenko, gave rise to assertive actions by Putin, whether with Russia moving into Crimea or supporting the breakaway Donbass. Meanwhile, Joe Biden, as Barack Obama's Vice President, assumed an important behind-the-scenes and public position as that administration applied sanctions and assumed an ever more hardline stance against Russia. Putin showed the confidence and applied the growing Russian power capability to more forcefully defend Russia's traditional sphere of influence, while the U.S. and its European allies exhibited the predictable willingness to counter what one analyst described as Putin's "assertive pragmatism."<sup>6</sup>

Enter Donald Trump, with the four years of his odd personal maneuverings with Putin confusing but not altering the profound hostility in Russian-American relations. Biden's rise to the presidency signifies the victory of the American political establishment, most certainly with

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<sup>5</sup> John P. Willerton, Mikhail Beznosov, and Martin Carrier, "Addressing the Challenges of Russia's 'Failing State': The Legacy of Gorbachev and the Promise of Putin," *Demokratizatsiya*, 13/2, Spring 2005, pp. 219-39.

<sup>6</sup> Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*, Fifth Edition, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019, especially Chs. 6-9.

foreign and security policy officials and experts who approach Russia very skeptically. Biden comes to the presidency with major domestic problems, especially the pandemic, a weakened economy, and inflamed race relations, so his focus will be on domestic priorities. His foreign-security policy team will be especially instrumental in restoring the U.S.'s traditional role in actively engaging the world, returning the U.S. to important international organizations (e.g., World Health Organization) and agreements (e.g., the Paris Accord), and championing a global system focused on American global leadership embedded in Western (European and Asian) multilateralism. There are profound implications for Russia and Russian-American relations, though not all of them are negative.

### *The issues*

The most important immediate consequence for Russian-American relations with the replacement of Donald Trump by Joe Biden is the return to a clear and coherent American governmental posturing with the direct and assertive expression of American national interests. A new forceful posturing of American engagement with its allies and the world system will be evident in presidential utterances, in the conduct of international governmental organizations and forums including NATO, and in both multilateral dealings (e.g, with the E.U.) and bilateral relations (e.g., with France and Germany). Most contentious issues that divide the U.S. and Russia will not entail any meaningful policy change. NATO troops moved from Germany to Poland will remain, as will the American sanctions imposed to undercut Nordstream II. Needless to say, the sanctions against Russia over Crimea will remain, as the Biden Administration more energetically engages Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (and to Zelensky's great delight). These efforts will also include the U.S.'s bolstered financial investment in new strategic weapons and related military programs. Of course there are complexities for the U.S. in promoting its national interests vis-à-vis Russia in concert with its allies. Not all Europeans (e.g., Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, and Slovakia) support strong sanctions over Crimea, as some point to the relative cost to Europe of these sanctions. This is even more true regarding U.S. sanctions over Nordstream II, where German politicians and business interests have serious complaints. But U.S.-European differences over aspects of some policies will not fundamentally alter the new momentum toward Atlanticism and American-European buoyancy in jointly addressing both big global issues confronting the international community (e.g., health, security, and environmental), and an assertive Putin-led Russia.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, increased Russian foreign policy activism, evident through the Obama and Trump administrations, shows no signs of abating. From unilateral efforts involving Belarus, Ukraine, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, to multilateral organizations such as the Eurasian Economic Union and Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Russia continues to evince a commitment to maintaining if not expanding its self-defined position as a Eurasian leader, even as it safeguards its former Soviet Union sphere of influence. Posturing with Belarus's Aleksandr Lukashenko,

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<sup>7</sup> It must be recalled that the Biden Administration will have its hands full with China, the world's other economic superpower, and an ascendant political-military rival.

support for the secessionist Donbass, cautious engagement with Ukraine's Zelensky, commitment to Moldovan allies, positioning of Russian troops in the Caucasus (e.g., Nagorno-Karabakh), and enhanced economic and security structures in Central Asia, are all suggestive. The Russian-Syrian alliance continues as Russia's only concrete military presence in the Middle East. Cutting the deal for a Russian naval logistical center in Sudan signifies a first military return to Africa since the Soviet collapse, while the successful hosting of a Russian-African summit attended by more than 40 African leaders showed the Putin government looking past its traditional sphere of influence for new partnerships. The Putin team has even willingly poked the U.S. in the eye by supporting Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro. Often-antagonistic Russian and American maneuvering continues.

But if American and Russian power interests are fundamentally counterpoised, there are a few areas where cooperation could be possible. And here, personalities and leadership can matter. With his electoral victory, Joe Biden declared, "America is back." Yet the U.S.'s return to active leadership of the global community is largely predicated on multilateralism, and in this there is an ironic coincidence with Vladimir Putin's multilateral inclinations. Long a champion of using multilateral vessels to reinforce and even enhance Russian interests, Putin can find commonality with Biden in using multilateral means to tackle pandemic (World Health Organization), environmental (Paris Climate Accord), and security (Iran Nuclear Agreement) challenges. A focused area of mutual Russian and American concern is arms control and avoiding the costs of a spiraling new arms race. Trump unilateralism resulted in the U.S. moving even further away from past bilateral arms agreements and into a new, ever-more-costly arms race. Russia is interested in maintaining, if not building upon, the 2010 Obama-Medvedev new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, among other Russian-American arms agreements that have fallen by the wayside. Meanwhile, with the Biden administration having to tackle very costly domestic challenges, including addressing the costs of Covid-19, further stimulating the economy while tackling the terrible consequences of the U.S.'s steep economic inequality, and reversing Trump policies on the environment, there is good reason for the U.S. to rein in a costly arms race. While the Biden administration may be dominated by officials viscerally hostile to Putin's Russia, they are capable of being pragmatic in engaging the U.S.'s long-term foe.

And what of the highly problematic situation in Ukraine which of late has been so central to Russian-American relations? None of the powers successfully handled the fast-changing developments in 2013-14 Ukraine. The Putin team essentially "lost" Ukraine in the events of Maidan, only partially recovering by "salvaging" Crimea and shoring up breakaway Donbass. The Europeans and Americans supported a wide array of anti-Russian elements in helping a new Kiev regime to emerge. Yet Ukraine was broken, with Crimea never to return to Kiev-led Ukraine, the country in a long-term political-economic morass, and with almost no likelihood Kiev-Ukraine would join NATO or the EU. The West's officially sanctioned, post-Maidan President, Petro Poroshenko, proved ineffectual in bringing order to Kiev-Ukraine, while Poroshenko's successor, Volodymyr Zelensky, a charming entertainer with no political experience beyond playing the part of a president on television, has only shown modest ability to govern his country. No outside power's interests are meaningfully served by the continuing

problems of Ukraine. Donbass will not join Russia, but it will not return to Kiev-Ukraine without real institutional-political safeguards that can only be provided through genuine federal political arrangements.<sup>8</sup> Neither the U.S. nor the E.U. have any interest in deeper entanglements with Kiev-Ukraine, even as both will protect Kiev-Ukraine's sovereignty vis-à-vis Russian pressures. Zelensky maneuvers with various rival elements within Kiev-Ukraine, while uneasily engaging Putin in trying to further manage the simmering war in the Ukrainian east.

Will Zelensky's and Biden's political paths cross as each leader finds the other of value in securing a desired end? Their political fortunes had been unexpectedly connected through Donald Trump's meddling in – and subsequent impeachment over – Ukrainian domestic politics. Could Zelensky finesse American support to bolster his own domestic standing while cutting some deal with Moscow to further regularize the situation in Eastern Ukrainian? Could Biden find Zelensky useful in addressing Central-East-European tensions even as a genuine federal system is consolidated in Ukraine?<sup>9</sup> And could Putin bolster Donbass security concerns – and avoid yet further involvement in the Kiev-Donbass conflict – with normalization advances that draw in all involved parties (including the U.S. and Europe)?

Power realities suggest none of these outcomes are likely. But personalities can matter, and resourceful leadership through Biden-Putin-Zelensky maneuverings might be conducive to at least modest change. Is it possible, in a region beset with Russian-American rivalry, that meaningful Russian-American dialogue could be possible? And is meaningful Russian-American dialogue possible in a post-Trump world yearning for revived multilateralism? If both Putin and Biden have exhibited a past ability to be resourceful and flexible in pursuing their countries' interests, they will be fully pressed to do so now as the new American administration takes power.

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<sup>8</sup> Among regions of Ukraine, Crimea possessed the unique legal ability to secede, which Crimean officials initiated after the February 2014 overthrow of the Ukrainian Yanukovich government. The Donbass provinces did not possess such a constitutional right, and to date remain separated from Kiev-Ukraine while not attempting to join the Russian Federation.

<sup>9</sup> Recall Biden's December 2015 address to the Ukrainian Rada, when he shocked members in promoting a viable federal system as a preferable step toward the rejoining of Donbass to Kiev-Ukraine.

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## Can the U.S. shed its traditional hostility toward Russia?

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Americans have long held complicated feelings about Russia and Russians. This is as true today, well into the twenty-first century, as it was in the twentieth century and earlier. But all Western nations have had complicated feelings about this continent-country, Westerners always feeling a developmental-societal distance from their Eurasian neighbor. Western views of Russia have often entailed condescension and mistrust, and Russia has long served as a powerful "other" as Westerners pursued their interests. Meanwhile, Americans now operate in a global reality where they are no longer the sole world power. Americans are uncomfortable engaging in a multi-polar system where powers such as China and Russia can openly disregard American preferences.<sup>1</sup>

Today, Americans don't know what to make of post-Soviet Russia. It was easy to define the Marxist-Leninist Soviet Union as an "other" and enemy. The USSR especially after Joseph Stalin was seen as a one-dimensional military power. It was led by a nondescript leader (the bombastic Nikita Khrushchev an exception), its society little known, and its authoritarian political system and command economy the seemingly inevitable consequence of Asiatic despotism. For Americans, the USSR constituted a genuine political-military threat, but in all other respects it merited little serious consideration. Yet today's Russia is more difficult to characterize. Russia has embraced capitalism, it has renounced the Communist ideology, it is freely open to Western ideas and culture, it has exhibited a profound desire for many things Western, and it has bottom-up pressures at work that suggest a complicated political system. With a powerful Vladimir Putin looming over Russia, domestic Russian nationalism strong and openly expressed, and Russia pursuing an ever-more-assertive foreign policy line, it is easy for Americans to see the traditional threatening adversary.

It has been observed that "hostility to Russia is the oldest continuous foreign-policy tradition in the United States,"<sup>2</sup> and this hostility has now returned in full force. Russia's reemergence as a power of consequence, with President Vladimir Putin confidently posturing with strong domestic Russian support, has led to the return of powerful domestic American hostility toward Russia that, very importantly, is equally shared by American decision makers and the American public. Unfortunately, the animosity between the two governments and peoples – at least in

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Mikhail Beznosov, Dan Detzi, Faten Ghosn, and Adam Irish for their thoughtful reactions to this article.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Berman, "Anti-Russia: Liberty and servitude in the new philo-czarist age," *Tablet Magazine*, 10 January 2017, at <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/why-we-fight-russia>; accessed 24 November 2021.

public rhetoric and posturing – matches the extremes witnessed during the Cold War. What makes today’s animosity especially concerning is that this animosity toward the rival is now shared by both the American and Russian publics.<sup>3</sup> Where once, both publics distinguished between the adversary’s government and its people, with hostility oriented to that adversary government while the people were positively judged, today’s highly negative evaluations are now directed against the adversary people themselves. While praising high-visibility critics of the Russian regime such as Aleksei Navalny and one-time chess champion Garry Kasparov, there is widespread American animosity even toward Russian cultural figures such as operatic soprano Anna Netrebko and conductor Valery Gergiev when they predictably support Russian causes (e.g., the plight of children orphaned in the eastern Ukrainian breakaway republics). One knows the rhetorical hostility has reached a dangerous extreme when Michael McFaul, the one-time U.S. Ambassador to Russia, who has consistently been among the U.S.’s most severe critics of Russia (Soviet and post-Soviet), warns that the extremely hot rhetoric needs to be cooled.

It is important to recall that American hostility toward Russia, long grounded in socio-cultural differences and a psychological distance from Russia, extends back to the nineteenth century. If Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in the early nineteenth century of America and Russia as the two great ascendant powers who were different from Continental Europe and who would represent rivals to Europe, he also noted profound differences between the two emergent powers themselves. Indeed, his writing suggested America and Russia would be rivals, even granting there were not (and never have been) any profound territorial, ethnic, or religious differences that separated the two countries. The U.S. and Russia could partner in twentieth century wars against Germany, but American judgments about Russian authoritarianism, communal values, and Russia’s engagement of Marxism – among other things – kept Americans highly suspicious of both Soviet Russia and its people. The phenomenon of “Uncle Joe” Stalin being an ally of the American people during World War II was short-lived.

Meanwhile, Americans have always been highly negative about the political left, especially the left inspired by Marxism. The Russian Revolution and all it brought were inimical to Americans, and it is not surprising that the U.S. was the last major Western country to recognize the USSR (in 1933 under President Franklin D. Roosevelt). Well into the twenty first century, the Soviet Russian experience still stands for most Americans as an iconic example of human wickedness, with President Ronald Reagan’s description of the Soviet Union as “the evil empire” still resonating with Americans (and with the famous Reagan line sometimes still voiced when speaking of Putin’s Russia). In contrast, the U.S. has been easily able to accommodate the far right and fascism. Beyond the existential challenge of Adolf Hitler and Nazism, the U.S. has always made peace with far-right regimes. Thus, after the 2014 overthrow of the pro-Russian Ukrainian government, the reemergence of fascist and neo-Nazi elements within the new

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<sup>3</sup> The Pew Research Center regularly surveys both Americans and Russians on their views of the other country. For illustrative results, see Jacob Poushter, “6 Charts on how Russians and Americans see each other,” 4 October 2018, at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/04/6-charts-on-how-russians-and-americans-see-each-other/>; accessed November 28, 2021.



regime has not been problematic for Americans. Indeed, the reemerged anti-Semitism in post-Maidan Ukraine is ignored or actively denied.

I have contended elsewhere in *Limes* that, after the end of the Cold War, the U.S. struggled to acknowledge Russia's Eurasian (and global) geostrategic interests in what has been called a "new world order," and this has contributed mightily to contemporary hostility in the bilateral relationship.<sup>4</sup> Today, with much of the Russian-American rivalry playing out within the territory of Russia's historical sphere of influence (and especially the former Soviet Union [FSU] space), Russia has reacted assertively and even aggressively. NATO expansion eastward could not be stopped in the 1990s, but the fall of a pro-Russian government in Ukraine and the prospect of NATO bases on Ukrainian soil were just too much for Russians. Space precludes an analysis of how the Putin government "lost" Ukraine in 2014, only partially recovering by pulling Crimea into the Russian Federation and supporting the two eastern breakaway provinces of Donetsk and Lugansk. But Russian actions involving Ukraine, joined with reactive military actions taken when Georgian forces attacked South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008, are only among the most important security steps taken by Moscow which have reinforced the long-held American view of a menacing and dangerous Russia.

Thus, as we move through the 2020s, negative American views of Russia are widespread, strongly held, and even deepening. American hostility exceeds the uncertainty and skepticism of both the 1980s Soviet period of Mikhail Gorbachev and the 1990s "time of troubles" decade of Boris Yeltsin. But in the 1980s and 1990s, Russia was in evident decline, there was powerful domestic decay in the wake of a failing state and failed command economy, Russian rhetoric was defensive, and the Russian government struggled to cope with restive domestic regions (e.g., Chechnya).

Without revisiting the complicated history of Russian-American relations of the Vladimir Putin period, suffice it to note that it is important that a strong leader consolidated power and fashioned a governing team that has helped to (1) oversee the restoration of the Russian (federal) state, (2) guide the recovery of a domestic economy that once again approaches the size of Germany's,<sup>5</sup> (3) refashion a functional social welfare state with Russians experiencing a demonstrable improvement in their standard of living,<sup>6</sup> and (4) bolster Russian public self-confidence both collectively and individually.<sup>7</sup> Yet these realities of Putin's Russia of the 2020s are unknown to Americans. Americans speak of a Russian economy in shambles, and of a population that is terrorized by the increasingly authoritarian state while that population awaits

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<sup>4</sup> John P. (Pat) Willerton, "Russia, the US, and the Cold War that Never Ended" ("Mosca è nostra nemica perché non la capiamo"), *Limes: Italian Review of Geopolitics (Limes: Revista Italiana di Geopolitica)*, Issue 2/16, March 2016, pp. 115-22.

<sup>5</sup> See International Monetary Fund and World Bank GDP Purchasing Parity Power figures, 2021, at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_by\\_GDP\\_\(PPP\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_(PPP)); accessed 24 November 2021.

<sup>6</sup> See John P. Willerton, "Russian Public Assessments of the Putin Policy Program: Achievements and Challenges," *Russian Politics*, 1, 2016, pp. 131-58.

<sup>7</sup> See John P. Willerton, Mikhail Beznosov, and Martin Carrier, "A Russian National Idea and the International System," *Journal of Political Research*, 5, 2021, forthcoming.

a putative democrat like Aleksei Navalny to wrest power from Putin. Perceptions of Navalny are a good indicator of the profound divide between Americans and Russians regarding the contemporary state of the Russian polity. Where Americans see in Navalny a freedom fighter and human rights activist who devotes his life to rescuing Russia from Putin's authoritarianism, Russians, who have nicknamed Navalny "Alexei two-percent" because he has low single-digit approval ratings in public opinion surveys, see an entrepreneurial self-promoter who is increasingly removed from mainstream Russian reality.<sup>8</sup> When Navalny ran for mayor of Moscow in 2013, he scored an impressive 27% of the popular vote. This was probably the high point of Navalny's real influence in Russia, and it has been in decline since. In contrast, American commentators speak of Navalny as constituting the greatest political threat to Putin's reign, with some even offering the possibility of Navalny as a future president. In truth, there are profound domestic political threats to the Putin team and its governance, but those threats come from extreme nationalists, many on the political right, others on the political left. Russia's reemergence as an ever-more-consequential power, with heightened domestic Russian patriotism, has lent itself to nationalist and even jingoist attitudes that are a much more consequential challenge to Putin and his team.

How have contemporary American attitudes about Putin's Russia become so hostile, and hostile to the point that even traditional American establishment critics of Russia urge caution and a lowering of the rhetoric? In a nutshell, the extreme hostility stems from the wide gap that has arisen between Russian domestic realities and the hyped misleading characterizations and interpretations of Russian reality. Russia of the 2020s has many problems, its political system – led by a "paramount leader" (or what some might call a "strongman") – is hardly democratic, the economy has many structural problems, the society is wracked with corruption, and Russians are frustrated that their own economic conditions have not improved even more. Meanwhile, any expression of Russia's power interests, especially by force, in the FSU space and in Russia's traditional sphere of influence, naturally lend themselves to outsiders' skepticism and concern, if not their outrage and inclination to take action. But hyping real problems of the Russian polity, economy, and society only exaggerates traditionally negative American judgments. As the hyping continues, expands, and deepens, American hostility grows. The hyped Russia presented by the American establishment (governmental and media) and seen by the American public, obscures a developing Russia that has come far since 1991, that has accomplishments with continuing problems, and that offers both promise and challenge.

The following table sets out eleven important facets of Russian reality, most domestic, some involving foreign-security policy. The left column briefly presents my evaluation of Russian reality, based in mainstream Russian views, juxtaposed with the right column that briefly captures the hyping of that Russian reality that currently pervades American attitudes. Without

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<sup>8</sup> Navalny's 2021 YouTube, "Putin's Palace. History of the World's Largest Bribe," viewed by over 20 million Russians, is suggestive. Average viewership only lasted 20 minutes as most Russians found the nearly two-hour exposé wanting in hard evidence. See [https://www.youtube.com/embed/ipAnwilMncl?hl=en&cc\\_lang\\_pref=en&cc\\_load\\_policy=1](https://www.youtube.com/embed/ipAnwilMncl?hl=en&cc_lang_pref=en&cc_load_policy=1); accessed 4 March 2021.

restating in detail each of these facets of reality, and how they are hyped, I summarize this juxtaposed hype vis-à-vis reality as follows.

### Putin's Russia: Reality or Hype

Reality	Hype
Top-down decision-making system, with hegemonic presidency & powerful Putin	Putin a dictator involved in all domestic actions & policy decisions
Regularized multi-candidate elections, with considerable Kremlin influence over campaigns & elections	All campaigns and elections rigged and stolen from <i>pro forma</i> & token opposition
Kremlin pressures political opposition	Putin kills political opponents
State pressuring of media; cautious media criticism of Putin & régime; journalists die in terrorist zones & local corruption scandals	Putin kills journalists; no media criticism of Putin & regime; Russian media today are Soviet style
High state profile in Russian society; citizen activism in selected areas (e.g., family & children, environment)	No bottom-up societal pressures; severe repression; no civil society & no citizen activism
Putin enjoys high public approval with widespread elite-mass support	Russian opinion surveys rigged & public approval ratings fabricated
Guiding role of state in economy; regulated, increasingly diversified, market economy	Putin recreates Soviet-style economy solely based on energy-minerals-arms
Putin & team operate in society with considerable corruption	Putin & team steal and hoard vast sums; stashed abroad (e.g., Cyprus)
Putin & team work with powerful oligarchs (rich businesspeople)	All oligarchs are personal friends of Putin & dominate all aspects of Russia
Russia involved in Georgian & Ukrainian affairs; safeguards sphere of influence	Putin's Russia invades countries (e.g., Georgia and Ukraine)
Crimea viewed by Russians as ethnically-historically part of Russia; 2014 overthrow of Kiev regime ended bilateral & multilateral treaties between Russia & Ukraine; half of Ukrainian population opposed overthrow	Crimea is Ukrainian, illegally seized by Russia, legitimately part of Ukraine; all Ukrainian people supported the 2014 overthrow of Kiev regime; Crimeans as unwilling hostages of Russia

Turning to the “hype” column, we see a set of conditions and behaviors with which we Americans are well aware. The overall picture drawn is dire. A dictatorial Vladimir Putin, involved in all domestic actions and policy decisions, easily ignores public preferences, rigged elections, and token opposition. Putin kills his political opponents and kills journalists in opposition to the regime. Russian media are completely controlled and operate Soviet style. Meanwhile, there are no bottom-up societal pressures, there is no citizen activism, and any opinion surveys that suggest support for the regime are fabricated. The contemporary economy is Soviet-like, and based solely on the energy-minerals-arms sectors. At the same time, what profits are yielded are mostly stolen and stashed abroad by Putin and oligarchs; those oligarchs are Putin friends and they dominate all aspects of society. Finally, regarding foreign policy behavior, critically important are Russian invasions of countries such as Georgia and Ukraine, with Ukrainians having joined together in 2014 to overthrow a tyrannical pro-Russian regime.

I contend that the Russian reality diverges greatly from this cartoon-character and ideologically driven simplification. In fact, Russia has a top-down decision-making system, grounded in the 1994 Yeltsin Constitution, that legitimates a very powerful (“hegemonic”) presidency. The office of the presidency is held by a popular incumbent who, contrary to his predecessor, is overwhelmingly supported by the general public. The Putin team does have considerable influence over campaigns and elections, but regularized multi-candidate elections with respectable levels of public participation yield a variety of politicians, even granting the Putin platform party, United Russia, is highly advantaged. The Kremlin does pressure the political opposition, and there are severe constraints on the media – especially the federal-level media. Russian journalists have died in terrorist zones and in reporting local corruption scandals, but – in fact – the number of journalists who have died carrying out their work has declined steeply since the Yeltsin 1990s. Indeed, more journalists die per year in democratic India and Mexico than in Russia, while since 2017, more American journalists (6) than Russian journalists (5) have died in undertaking their reporting activities.<sup>9</sup> Under the Putin team, the state has a high profile in the society and the economy. But there is citizen activism in important (to Russians) policy areas, while the economy can be described as relying on a regulated, increasingly diversified, market. The Russian domestic socioeconomic scene is dominated by oligarchs; “oligarchs” who if they were in the U.S. would be described as “rich businesspeople,” and predictably these rich businesspeople have access to the Russian President. But evidence that these rich businesspeople dictate policies is as sketchy as evidence that George Soros or the Koch Brothers dictate American policies, though all of these rich Russian and American businessmen certainly have their president’s ear.

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<sup>9</sup> See the Committee to Protect Journalists, statistics for journalists killed by country, 1992-2021, at [https://cpj.org/data/killed/?status=Killed&motiveConfirmed%5B%5D=Confirmed&type%5B%5D=Journalist&start\\_year=1992&end\\_year=2021&group\\_by=year](https://cpj.org/data/killed/?status=Killed&motiveConfirmed%5B%5D=Confirmed&type%5B%5D=Journalist&start_year=1992&end_year=2021&group_by=year); accessed 25 November 2021.

Meanwhile, Russia has returned to defending its interests in its traditional sphere of influence, and there is little doubt of Russian involvement in Ukraine. Events tied with the 2014 *coup d'état* that ousted the constitutionally mandated Ukrainian president and Constitutional Court, with related ouster of pro-Russian parliament members (the so-called “garbage can lustration,” as parliament members were literally carried out of the building and thrown into dumpsters), are complicated and would require, at a minimum, an article-length essay to begin to explain. Suffice it to note, Ukraine was divided roughly 50% pro-Western to 50% pro-Russian, central and western Ukraine generally supporting the *coup d'état*, while eastern and southern Ukraine generally opposed it. For its part, Crimea was the lone region within Ukraine that enjoyed the constitutional right to secede, and with the events of the *coup* and the emergence of a perceived anti-Russian regime, Crimean authorities moved to secede and invited Russians in. Russian obfuscation around their “little green men” moving into Crimea reflected Russian anxieties in safeguarding their traditional power interests, but no Russian government would agree to NATO bases in Crimea. My intention here is not to defend Russian actions involving Ukraine and Crimea, but rather to explain that the 2014 events involving Ukraine, Crimea, and Russia, were multifaceted and complicated. Simplistic explanations do nothing in understanding dynamic developments, but they are valuable for further hyping negative assessments of Russia and its actions.

In summing up, there are many factors, both long-term historical and more recent polemical-rhetorical, that explain the extreme contemporary American hostility toward Putin’s Russia. This is a hostility that matches, and perhaps exceeds, the hostility expressed toward, for instance, Brezhnev’s USSR, especially as the hostility now includes hostility toward Russians and their society, and not just their government. After the chaotic and even incoherent policy efforts of the Donald Trump Administration, the return of a more stable and predictable policy line by the Joe Biden Administration may be conducive to modestly reduced tensions between the two polities. The Biden team did permit Russia’s important Nordstream 2 Pipeline initiative to be completed, while they have not matched tough rhetoric with meaningful increased military support to Kiev-Ukraine. Such support would be highly confrontational to Russia, and it could yield highly dangerous consequences. In addition, important policy areas, including climate change and Iranian nuclear energy development, could bring Russia and the U.S. back to the negotiating table. The Biden Administration will have to deal with the increased domestic hostility that has been illuminated here, and that widespread hostility may well constrain the Biden team in important ways.

Both Russophobia and Putin-bashing have mattered greatly in the crafting of American policies toward Russia, and this harsh rhetoric will continue. Only time will tell if conditions can arise that might alter the currently highly charged anti-Russian atmosphere in the U.S. But viewed today, such conditions are difficult to find.