



COMMENTARIES

U.S.-Russian Relations in the Trump Era

RICHARD SAKWA

Kirkuk, Iraq's Next War: What Options Does Turkey Have?

OTHMAN ALI

Rohingya: A Preventable Genocide Allowed to Happen

TUN KHIN

How South America Let Venezuela Down

OLIVER STUENKEL

U.S.-Russian Relations in the Trump Era

RICHARD SAKWA*

ABSTRACT Donald J. Trump's rhetorical shift from 'leadership' to 'greatness' made possible some sort of rapprochement between the U.S. and Russia, after a period when relations had seriously deteriorated. Trump did not plan to give up American primacy, but 'greatness' was to be based on transactional relationships, the repudiation of democracy promotion and regime change. However, charges of Russian interference in the U.S. presidential election of 2016 constrained Trump's freedom of maneuver, and in the end relations worsened, although some practical cooperation remains. The situation remains open, with direct conflict not to be excluded, although a continued period of strained relations and the onset of elements of a new Cold War is more likely.

Relations between Russia and the U.S. have been deteriorating for a long time, and quite possibly they will worsen. Although Russia is not a peer competitor in the league of China, it nevertheless poses a challenge to certain definitions of American primacy. As a candidate and then as president from January 2017, Donald J. Trump appeared to offer a way out of the spiral of decline in mutual relations. He repeatedly argued that it would be good to 'get on' with Russia. Instead, not only did he find himself constrained by powerful vested interests opposed to a *rapprochement* with Russia, in the end Russia turned out to be the cudgel with which Trump's opponents sought to constrain him and

even to drive him from office. Charges of collusion with Russia to defeat his Democratic opponent in the November 8, 2016 election were compounded by the alleged Russian hacking of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and the emails of the Democratic election coordinator, John Podesta, with the whole scandal becoming known as 'Russiagate,' by analogy with the Watergate and Iran-Contra scandals. Russiagate signaled the worsening of relations between Washington and Moscow, but this came on top of a long period of deterioration. During the cold peace (1989-2014) after the end of the Cold War, relations veered between cooperation and conflict, but after the Ukraine crisis of

* University of Kent, UK

For many in Russia, one of the few salutary features of the Trump presidency was that it offered the opportunity for a fundamental reset in relations, but Russiagate in the end constrained Trump's room for maneuver, and concessions were interpreted as proof of collusion

2014 they settled in for what some call a new Cold War. For many in Russia, one of the few salutary features of the Trump presidency was that it offered the opportunity for a fundamental reset in relations, but Russiagate in the end constrained Trump's room for maneuver, and concessions were interpreted as proof of collusion. Relations between the two countries are in a deep impasse, fraught with the risk that various proxy conflicts between the two major nuclear powers could trigger a direct confrontation.

The Trump Challenge: From Leadership to Greatness

Trump is an outsider to the political establishment, having never served in an elected office before his unexpected victory in November 2016. His populist insurgency criticized the deleterious effects of globalization on American jobs and the economy, and his slogan 'make America great again'

raised hopes that his planned investment in American infrastructure and support for declining industries (such as coal-mining) would usher in a new era of prosperity. His unorthodox policies raised hopes in Moscow that he would bring new ideas to the table, although Russian elites were well aware that he was unstable in his views, temperamental, and unpredictable in his behavior.

His Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton, by contrast represented policy continuity and intensified hostility towards Russia. As opposed to this, Trump expressed the view that 'NATO is obsolete and it's extremely expensive for the United States, disproportionately so,' and 'it should be readjusted to deal with terrorism.'¹ He later warned that he would only assist European nations during a Russian invasion if they first 'fulfilled their obligations to us.' He also noted that the U.S. had 'to fix our own mess before trying to alter the behavior of other nations': 'I don't think we have the right to lecture.' He argued that his 'America first' slogan was a 'brand-new, modern term,' and did not signal isolationism of the sort advocated by Charles Lindbergh before the U.S. entered the Second World War.² Above all, candidate Trump adopted a radical position:

We desire to live peacefully and in friendship with Russia. ... We have serious differences ... But we are not bound to be adversaries. We should seek common ground based on shared interests. Russia, for instance, has also seen the horror of Islamic

terrorism. I believe an easing of tensions and improved relations with Russia –from a position of strength– are possible. Common sense says this cycle of hostility must end. Some say the Russians won't be reasonable. I intend to find out. If we can't make a good deal for America, then we will quickly walk from the table.³

Trump certainly did not plan to weaken American primacy, but by contrast with his post-Cold War predecessors, he offered an alternative version. The prevailing bipartisan consensus stressed American 'leadership,' working with allies and multilateral institutions, whereas Trump's idea of American 'greatness' prioritized American national interests and was more unilateral. All post-Cold War American leaders from George H. W. Bush through Bill Clinton, George W. Bush to Barack Obama asserted a triumphal reading of American victory in the Cold War, accompanied by the assertion of American leadership in a unipolar world order, although that leadership would be alliance-based, multilateral and intended to defend the 'liberal world order.' Although the liberal world order delivered enormous public goods in the post-war era, it nevertheless represented a power system with the U.S. at its head. This, of course, encountered the resistance of Russia, and increasingly also from Beijing. With the collapse of the Soviet alternative between 1989 and 1991, liberal internationalists and neoconservatives allied to assert America's position as the 'indispensable' nation, accompanied by an enlargement agenda of norm expansion.

The combination of an ideology of exceptionalism and moral supremacy delegitimized not only alternative social and political models, but also the language in which resistance could be couched. The other powers effectively became the subjects of various soft containment strategies to ensure that they did not challenge American supremacy. Against this homogenization of global political space, the other powers began to develop an anti-hegemonic agenda to defend pluralism in the international system. This is in keeping with the classic postulates of 'offensive realism.'⁴

Trump, of course, also defends American primacy, and he is certainly not ready to cede American military predominance to any other power. Nevertheless, the shift from U.S. 'leadership' to American 'greatness' represents a fundamental challenge to the liberal international order, but not to the power system on which it is based. The change entails a new style of engagement in international affairs, some of them with benign implications, and some with rather more negative features. The 'America first' ideology means a retreat from multilateralism and less commitment to the defense of global public goods, such as the December 2015 Paris environmental accords, from which Trump withdrew.⁵ It also means a more mercantilist approach to international political economy, especially since Trump's administration includes a large number of business people close to the libertarian end of the political spectrum, accompanied by a clutch of generals. However, on the plus side, in

Presidents Trump and Putin shake hands during a meeting on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Germany on July 7, 2017.

AFP PHOTO / SAUL LOEB



international affairs ‘greatness’ makes possible a less ideologized style in relations with other states. No longer is democracy promotion an instrument of U.S. foreign policy, and this opened the door to a more pragmatic, rational and transactional mode of engagement with other states. It was through this door that Russia hoped to pass, but found it guarded by the custodians of traditional representations of American power.

Resistance to Trump

The putative shift from globalism to nationalism, from leadership to greatness, provoked an almost unprecedented counter-mobilization to Trump’s policy program and to his entire presidency. Trump became mired in one scandal after another, notably over his travel ban on those without direct family members from certain predominantly Muslim countries. The

focus in particular was on ‘Russiagate,’ in which the alleged Russian interference in the American democratic process was taken to be an assault on America itself. The hacking allegations and the accusation that in one way or another Trump and his associates had in some way colluded with Russia was used to weaken, if not destroy, Trump’s presidency, and to return U.S. foreign policy to the globalist ‘leadership’ path. The neoconservative wing of the Republican Party, keen to ensure American military primacy and the country’s status at the center of the unipolar system, allied with Democratic liberal internationalists, advocating humanitarian intervention, democracy promotion and a values-based foreign policy (which required U.S. leadership) united to oppose Trump. This unholy alliance had been forged in the Bill Clinton years, and then reinforced in the Bush-Obama presidencies. Thus, Trump potentially represented a rupture with

the post-Cold War bipartisan policy to maintain American leadership. Indeed, with his campaign talk of protectionism, condemnation of regional trade pacts (such as the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)), and scorn for traditional alliances, Trump potentially represented a break with the whole post-war order.

The immediate issue of concern was Russia's alleged interference in the American democratic process (of particular concern to the Republicans), and for Vladimir Putin's alleged collusion with the Trump campaign to defeat Clinton (the focus of Democrat concerns). In other words, Russia became an all-purpose scapegoat for disparate groups. Their agendas did not coincide except when it came to excoriating Russia. Running through the whole saga is the story of leaks, alleged hacking, the unwonted interference of security agencies (also accompanied by selective and strategic leaking), and a Washington establishment deeply alarmed by what Trump's insurgency would mean for good governance, the rule of law, bureaucratic rationality, political accountability and moral propriety.

Given Trump's checkered business background, they had good cause to be alarmed. However, the struggle against 'Trumpian' arbitrariness and disorder was also often motivated by partisan infighting, ideological prejudices, personal ambition and lack of accountability. In other words, when it comes to Russia, the 'resistance' to Trump mimicked his cavalier disre-

When it comes to Russia, the 'resistance' to Trump mimicked his cavalier disregard for facts and deployed a range of ideologically driven political tricks to discredit him and his administration

gard for facts and deployed a range of ideologically driven political tricks to discredit him and his administration. In this, Russia was employed as a stick to beat Trump as a candidate and to discipline him once in office. During the presidential campaign, the Clinton team 'decided that it would play the Russia card and accuse Donald Trump of being at best a Kremlin stooge, at worst a Russian agent.' It now seems clear that following defeat, her advisors 'decided that the best option was to blame it on Russia.'⁶ This was a form of mendacity indistinguishable from Trump's own disregard for facts. Both sides deployed irresponsible leaks, 'fake news' and neo-McCarthyite denunciations, often involving the security agencies. It was not Russia that degraded the institutions of American democracy but the decline in its own political culture.

Russiagate

Russia took center stage in the 2016 presidential campaign. The alleged break-in by Russian hackers of the emails of Clinton campaign man-

Although Russia's challenge to American global leadership is nothing like as systemic as during the Cold War, anti-Russian rhetoric exceeds earlier levels

ager John Podesta (the founder of the Center for American Progress) revealed the contents of her speeches to Wall Street bankers and the financing of the Clinton Foundation. The second batch, uploaded to *WikiLeaks* from the DNC server, exposed how the Democratic establishment had worked against Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primaries in favor of Clinton. By shifting the focus of the revelations from their substance – the bias of the Democratic leadership against Sanders, and Clinton's cynical subservience to Wall Street while making increasingly populist campaign promises as Sanders captured the political imagination of a surprisingly large part of the Democratic Party.

Convincing evidence of a Russian cyber-attack is missing. Indeed, to this day no substantive evidence has been put into the public domain that Russia had untoward influence on the Trump team, was able to influence the course of the election in any way, or was responsible for the hacks. The Department of Homeland Security and the FBI issued a threadbare report on the matter on January 6,

2017.⁷ A large part of the document was devoted to the programming of *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*) in 2012, and lacked elementary information about the internet service providers (ISPs) or other signatures of the Advanced Persistent Threat (APT) 29 (which began in summer 2015) and APT 28 (from spring 2016) hacks of Democrat emails. The document accused the least likely Russian security bodies (the military's Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) and the Federal Security Service (FSB)) of being responsible, sometimes using the persona Guccifer 2.0, who occasionally used Cyrillic script and even the moniker 'Felix Edmundovich' (referring to Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the Soviet secret police).⁸ Excessive reliance was placed on assessments of the 'cybersecurity complex,' notably the anti-Putin CrowdStrike, which came up with the names of Cozy Bear (the FSB) and Fancy Bear (the GRU), when in fact no groups as such existed – these were fictional personifications of the APTs.⁹ Julian Assange, the editor-in-chief of *WikiLeaks*, vigorously denied that Russia was the source of the two batches of material published on his site. In his view, there was no hack of the DNC servers, only leaks.¹⁰

The leaks exposed misconduct by Clinton and the Democrats, and were thus not 'fake news.' In the end, attention focused less on the substance than on how the material entered the public domain. The 'golden showers' report published on *BuzzFeed* on January 10, 2017 sought to demonstrate that Russia had somehow gained a hold on Trump during his visit to

Moscow in 2013. Prepared by a former British security official, Christopher Steele, the report represented a collection of unsubstantiated allegations.¹¹ Steele had originally been commissioned by Trump's Republican opponents to tar him with the Russian brush, but once Trump won the nomination, Steele was taken on by the Democratic camp. The document was touted around Washington in autumn 2016, notably by John McCain, but since it contained some demonstrable errors and lacked credibility, its publication was delayed.

Nevertheless, the burgeoning Russiagate scandal had immediate political consequences. Obama's expulsion of 35 Russian diplomats and the confiscation of two diplomatic compounds on December 29, 2016 were reminiscent of the worst periods of the Cold War. In fact, matters were even worse, since it appears that in its dying days the Obama administration sought to poison the well to impede an improvement in U.S.-Russian relations. Putin's refusal to reciprocate by expelling the equivalent number of U.S. diplomats made Obama look petty and vindictive. Trump tweeted 'Let us move on to bigger and better things.' Instead, politicians across the board lined up to denounce Putin and to present Russia as a hostile state, with constructive engagement denounced as weakness and appeasement. The Clinton campaign used Russia as a scapegoat for its own failings. Clinton's memoir of the campaign is suffused by a profound anti-Russian animus, allowing her to avoid facing the

issues that had deterred voters from supporting her.¹² Certain Republicans used Kremlin-bashing as a way of disciplining Trump and bringing him back into the fold of Atlanticist orthodoxy. Elements in the so-called 'deep state' used allegations of Russian interference in the U.S. election campaign to impede Trump's attempt to normalize relations.¹³ Although Russia's challenge to American global leadership is nothing like as systemic as during the Cold War, anti-Russian rhetoric exceeds earlier levels.¹⁴

Why Russia?

How can we explain Russia's centrality in American domestic politics? The first and immediate explanation, as suggested above, is that the globalists in the Democratic establishment and among Republicans opposed to Trump (notably John McCain, Lindsey Graham, Marco Rubio and a host of others) used Russia to beat Trump and to constrain his policy options. Trump made no secret of his desire for the normalization of relations with Russia. This was part of his broader review of American foreign priorities. Second, and flowing from the first, Trump represented a populist version of the 'America first' tradition, reviving Patrick Buchanan's critique of Bush senior's vision of an American-centered new world order. Buchanan later endorsed Russia's critique of western 'exceptionalism' and the West's claims to have won the Cold War. He warned that 'this will inevitably result in war, as more and more nations resist America's moral

imperialism.¹⁵ This is a tradition that adopts a narrower definition of American interests, and is reluctant to intervene in world affairs except in defense of these narrow interests. Obama remained a firm globalist, 'which puts the emphasis on the world system that runs out of Washington – a modern version of an empire – rather than on the U.S. itself.'¹⁶ By contrast, Trump sought to reshape the U.S. alliance system and America's place in the world. As Robert English notes, Trump sought Russian cooperation on global issues, recognized that Washington bore some responsibility for the deterioration in relations, and acknowledged 'the right of all nations to put their own interests first' and that the U.S. does 'not seek to impose our way of life on anyone.'¹⁷

The third view of why Russia was instrumentalized by Washington flows from the flawed analysis of the dynamics of contemporary international politics. For its critics Russia is a malign force, intent not only on advancing Trump to the presidency but also on subverting American and Western democracy as a whole. Indeed, Russia is accused of a proliferating multitude of sins, including interference in the UK's Brexit vote on June 23, 2016, and in various elections in Europe. The evidence for this is either thin or non-existent, but this has not prevented the emergence of a whole industry to combat the 'Russian disinformation threat.'¹⁸ Increasing sums are pumped into the *Atlantic* 'counter-propaganda' machine, reminiscent of the worst periods of the Cold War, to combat alleged Russian 'fake news'

and disinformation. In Washington, the think tank industry went into overdrive to expose Russia's alleged malfeasance, issuing endless reports on the Kremlin's evil plot to destroy the West.¹⁹ Russia's alleged military threat to Europe was played up for all it was worth.²⁰ There were elements of neo-McCarthyism in this campaign, and those who sought to resist were liable to denunciation as the Kremlin's fellow travelers and 'useful idiots.' Even worse, they were even condemned as unwitting Trumpists.

The Dynamics of Conflict

As far as Russia is concerned, the 25 years of the cold peace between 1989 and 2014 failed to resolve any of the fundamental problems of European and global security.²¹ For Russia, NATO enlargement represented not only a betrayal of the verbal assurances given at the time of German unification that the alliance would not move 'one inch to the East' of the former East German territory, but above all represented a pointless provocation that only intensified the security dilemma that it was intended to avert. At the end of the Cold War, Russia was offered associate membership of an existing enterprise, the Historic West, but Russia's enduring aspiration was to become a founder member of a transformed Greater West. Post-Communist Russia's membership of the transformed community would have provided a benign framework for Russia's domestic transformation, while removing the institutional and ideational structures of

the Cold War. Fearing normative dilution, institutional incoherence and a weakening of American leadership and its commitment to the defense of Europe, such a transformation was rejected. On the Russian side, joining an untransformed historic West would have entailed status demotion, since it would have been a subaltern element in a U.S.-dominated system. Even under Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s this was hard to swallow, and under Putin in the 2000s there were attempts to find a new balance between Russian adaptation and foreign policy and developmental autonomy. By the time Putin returned to the presidency in 2012 for his third term, Russia had shifted to a policy of neo-revisionism: maintaining a commitment to the norms of international society, but resisting the practices of U.S. primacy.

This view is based on the realist paradigm, which considers Russia as no more and no less than a normal power, pursuing a rational (although that does not mean uncontested) foreign policy to maintain its position in the world and its neighborhood. In that context, Moscow welcomed the conciliatory comments from Trump, although harsh strictures continued to emanate from Congress and the Washington media and political establishment. Despite exaggerated commentary about a ‘bromance’ between Putin and Trump, in fact Moscow throughout was very cautious. It fully understands that the U.S. will continue to defend its primacy, although through a new model of greatness rather than leadership. The post-Cold War attempt to main-

The insurgent Trump soon discovered how hard it would be to overcome the anti-Russian hostility that had become constitutive of the U.S.-led liberal international order. Thus the scene was set for confrontation and conflict

tain the ‘unipolar’ moment and to blunt the emergence of a more pluralistic international system would continue, and thus the dynamic of hostility towards Russia would remain. The insurgent Trump soon discovered how hard it would be to overcome the anti-Russian hostility that had become constitutive of the U.S.-led liberal international order. Thus the scene was set for confrontation and conflict.

The storm of criticism of Trump’s putative links with Russia and that of some of his nominated officials forced the resignation of Michael Flynn on February 13, 2017, after just 24 days in his post as national security adviser. This limited Trump’s scope for action when it came to Russia. Flynn had planned to work with Russia, but his downfall – at the hands, some thought, of the U.S. security establishment – revealed the deep hostility towards Russia. Flynn’s replacement, lieutenant general Herbert McMaster, is strongly supportive of NATO, and he repeatedly talks of the need for the advanced containment of Russia

Trump's initial instinct to improve relations with Russia was never going to be at the price of American military and economic supremacy

in the Baltic region, Ukraine and in cyberspace. These views are shared by the defense secretary, James Mattis and vice president Mike Pence. The American alliance system in Europe and Asia (to contain Russia and China) would be preserved and strengthened. However, the appointment of Rex Tillerson as Secretary of State was a bold move. Tillerson was chief executive of Exxon Mobil from 2006 and forged strong ties with the majority state-owned oil company Rosneft. In 2012, they signed a multi-billion dollar deal to drill Russia's vast Arctic, shale and deep-water fields, and in 2013 Putin awarded Tillerson the 'Order of Friendship.' Tillerson repudiated liberal and neoconservative regime change messianism and clearly represented a return to traditional diplomacy.

Towards a New Relationship

The idea of 'doing a deal' was as insubstantial as Obama's 'reset' earlier. Both failed to address Russia's underlying insecurities and concerns, which can only be allayed by membership of some sort of overarching security and political community. In his press conference with the Italian

Prime Minister, Paolo Gentiloni, on May 17, 2017, Putin noted:

They are shaking up the political situation in the U.S.A. using anti-Russian slogans. Either they do not understand what harm they are doing to their own country, in which case they are simply dim-witted; or they understand fully, in which case they are simply dangerous and unscrupulous.²²

Of course, it could be that they are both. The discursive shift from 'leadership' to 'greatness' potentially allowed the restoration of normal diplomatic intercourse to manage the differences. Trump clearly sought a rapprochement with Russia, but he was trapped by the inertia of Cold War institutions and thinking. Russia, too, has abandoned its early post-Cold War hopes of joining a transformed Greater West, and major steps have been taken towards the creation of Greater Eurasia. Nevertheless, alarmed by the emergence of 'Kissinger's worst nightmare,' a Russo-Chinese alignment, Trump initially planned to drive a wedge between the two by reversing the anti-Putin animus of the previous administration and favoring Russia while making demands on China. Even if this policy had developed, Russia was unlikely to renege on its foundational alignment with China in favor of a tenuous and uncertain relationship with Trump's Washington. Equally, China signaled that it would not be party to attempts by the U.S. to weaken its alignment with Russia. It is hard to see what the U.S. could offer Russia in any putative 'big deal,' while



Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov shakes hands with U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson after a press conference in Moscow on April 12, 2017.

AFP PHOTO / ALEXANDER NEMENOV

at the same time demanding concessions that affected what the Kremlin considered were its core interests. The Russo-U.S. relationship will remain at best transactional (if the Trumpians have their way), and at worst openly confrontational (if his opponents come out on top).

The American 'deep state' reasserted itself, and the fifth post-Cold War reset ended before it had begun.²³ In keeping with his promise to 'make America great again,' Trump proposed a \$54 billion increase in U.S. defense spending, which brought the U.S. defense budget for 2018 to \$696 billion. The increase was 80 percent of Russia's total defense spending for 2016. Trump also signaled his intention of expanding the \$1 trillion program for the modernization of U.S. nuclear weapons launched by Obama. Trump's initial instinct to improve relations with Russia was never going to be at the price of American military

and economic supremacy. The anti-Russian fervor only legitimated 'the kind of nationalist assertiveness that, in normal times, liberals try to tamp down.'²⁴ In his February 16, 2017 news conference Trump defended his policy, arguing 'If we have a good relationship with Russia, believe me, that's a good thing, not a bad thing.'²⁵ However, in conditions of rampant 'Russo-phobia,' and Ukraine's campaign to ensure Moscow's isolation, even small moves by Trump to improve relations were interpreted as appeasement and the sell-out of Ukraine and Eastern Europe, if not some form of collusive relationship with the master-player of the Kremlin.

Trump was forced to prove his toughness on Russia, reducing the scope for deal-making and heightening the risk of a miscalculation leading to war. Indeed, in July 2017 Congress voted to impose a new range of sanctions and to limit the president's ability to

The Trumpian shift from leadership to greatness opened up space for pragmatic agreements, but ultimately the U.S. assertion of primacy remains in place, and will be exercised through military and other means

ease or lift the existing ones. The December 2012 Magnitsky Act, imposing penalties on Russians allegedly involved in the death of the auditor Sergei Magnitsky, was extended to cover more individuals. Faced with enormous majorities in both houses, Trump reluctantly signed the sanctions bill on August 2, but made clear that he objected to this encroachment on the presidential prerogative to conduct foreign policy. The sanctions effectively aimed at changing Russian foreign policy and the basis of its statehood. Russia's immediate response, a long-delayed response to Obama's actions in late 2016, was to expel 755 U.S. diplomats from Russia and to stop access to two U.S. facilities in Moscow. The Russian foreign ministry called the sanctions a sign of the 'extreme aggression' of the U.S. in international affairs.²⁶ In turn, in early September the Russian consulate in San Francisco was seized by the U.S. authorities.

Nevertheless, there was some cooperation on a limited range of issues, notably in negotiating a ceasefire in

Syria. On some big issues, such as strategic arms, there appeared to be a total breakdown, amidst U.S. claims that Russia was in breach of the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) banning missiles with a range of between 500 and 5,000 kilometers in Europe. It was not even clear whether the New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) of 2011 would be extended beyond its ten-year expiry date in 2021. Tillerson stressed the need for close cooperation with Russia and China on the big issues of the day, such as Syria and North Korean nuclear weapons. He noted that the Obama administration had left U.S.-Russia relations in the worst state since the Cold War. Tillerson revealed that when he noted the dangerous situation to Putin, 'He [Putin] shrugged his shoulders and nodded in agreement. And I said it is spiraling down, it's getting worse. And my comment to him was [that] the two greatest nuclear powers in the world cannot have this kind of relationship. We have to change it.'²⁷

There have been significant meetings between Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Tillerson, Tillerson and Putin, and the U.S. Chief of Staff General Joseph Dunford and the head of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces General Valeri Gerasimov. The U.S. was invited to participate in the Syrian peace talks in Astana, and a senior U.S. diplomat, Stuart Jones (Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs) attended the talks on May 3-4, 2017. A meeting on May 10 in the White House between President Trump, Russian

Foreign Minister Lavrov and the U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, typically, provoked an artificial scandal, when Trump quite legitimately passed on information (which by then had long been in the public domain), about the danger of militants using computers to smuggle bombs on board aircraft. Despite the criticisms, the meeting by all accounts was very productive. The long-delayed first face-to-face meeting of Putin and Trump finally took place on July 7, 2017 at the G20 summit in Hamburg. Not since the days of superpower summits during the Cold War had a meeting been more eagerly anticipated, or so assiduously impeded by its opponents. Even as the leaders prepared for the Hamburg encounter, Tillerson revealed that Russia and the U.S. were cooperating on the ground in Syria to create 'de-escalation' ceasefire zones. With ISIS on the verge of defeat, a power vacuum was opening up. The meeting finally tested whether Putin and Trump could work together to resolve common problems.

On the eve of the meeting, in a speech in Warsaw on July 6, Trump announced that Western civilization was at the risk of decline, warning against 'radical Islamic terrorism' and 'the creep of government bureaucracy.' He argued that 'The fundamental question of our time is whether the West has the will to survive.' Given the location, he issued one of the harshest condemnations of Moscow since taking office, calling on Russia to 'cease its destabilizing activities in Ukraine and elsewhere and its support for hos-

tile regime, including Syria and Iran,' and asserting that it must 'instead join the community of responsible nations in our fight against common enemies and in defense of civilization itself.'²⁸ At the meeting on July 7, Trump demonstratively raised the question of Russia's alleged interference in the U.S. election, although Trump's heart clearly was not in it. The actual meeting lasted far longer than the anticipated half hour, at two hours and fifteen minutes. The two leaders clearly established a good personal rapport, and discussed substantive issues including the global economy, trade, climate change, Ukraine, Syria, North Korea, and agreed to establish a working group on cyber-security. Ultimately, the meeting was important for the fact that it took place, rather than any substantive agreements.

Conclusion

The Trumpian shift from leadership to greatness opened up space for pragmatic agreements, but ultimately the U.S. assertion of primacy remains in place, and will be exercised through military and other means. The U.S. remains intent on maintaining its hegemony, but its retreat from multilateralism will make common work on nuclear proliferation and climate change more difficult. Russia nevertheless welcomed the shift to realism and Trump's repudiation of liberal idealism. Although numerous contentious issues divide the two countries, the relationship is less personalized than it had become in the Obama years. Personal relations are

Russo-American relations remain hostage to competing understandings of international relations, and while the normalization of relations is attainable, a sharp deterioration into overt confrontation is no less a possibility

important, but the structural factors are determinative. Trump defended traditional American positions, and thus the new era of ‘good relations’ with Russia will not emerge any time soon. In the context of the discursive shift from expansive U.S. ‘leadership’ towards a more pragmatic policy of ‘greatness,’ there is potential for a more pragmatic and transactional relationship. However, this will only be realized if the defense of U.S. primacy takes into account Russian interests and concerns. Russo-American relations remain hostage to competing understandings of international relations, and while the normalization of relations is attainable, a sharp deterioration into overt confrontation is no less a possibility. ■

Endnotes

1. Tim Hains, “Trump: NATO Is Obsolete and Expensive, Doesn’t Have The Right Countries in It for Terrorism,” *RealClear Politics*, (March 27, 2016), retrieved from http://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2016/03/27/trump_europe_is_not_safe_lots_of_the_free_world_has_become_weak.html.
2. David E. Sanger and Maggie Haberman, “Donald Trump Sets Conditions for Defending NATO Allies against Attack,” *The New York Times*, (July 20, 2016), retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/21/us/politics/donald-trump-issues.html?_r=0.
3. “Transcript: Donald Trump’s Foreign Policy Speech,” *The New York Times*, (April 27, 2016), retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/28/us/politics/transcript-trump-foreign-policy.html?_r=0.
4. Outlined, for example, most eloquently by John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014, originally published 2001).
5. In economics, see for example Shawn Donnan and Demetri Sevastopolu, “US Looks to Bypass WTO Disputes System,” *Financial Times*, (February 27, 2017), p. 6.
6. Paul Robinson, “Dimwitted and Dangerous,” *Irrussianality*, (May 17, 2017), retrieved from <https://irrussianality.wordpress.com/author/paulfrobinson/>.
7. The published paper of course was only the public version of a classified report, but to this day there is little to suggest that the full report contained substantive evidence.
8. “Background to ‘Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections:’ The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution,” *Office of the Director of National Intelligence*, (January 6, 2017), retrieved from https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf. For a critique, see Ronald Deibert, “The DHS/FBI Report on Russian Hacking was a Predictable Failure,” *Just Security*, (January 4, 2017), retrieved from <https://www.justsecurity.org/35989/dhsfbi-report-russian-hacking-predictable-failure/>.
9. There is a vast literature on this, but for a good analysis of the ‘cybersecurity complex,’ see Yasha Levine, “From Russia, with Panic,” *The Baffler*, No. 34, 2017, <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/from-russia-with-panic-levine>.
10. “Assange: Russian Government not the Source of WikiLeaks Emails,” *FOX News Politics*, (January 3, 2017), retrieved from <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2017/01/03/assange-russian-government-not-source-wikileaks-emails.html>.
11. Unable to travel to Moscow, Steele paid Russian informants for the material. “US Presidential Election: Republican Candidate Donald Trump’s Activities in Russia and Compromising Relationship with the Kremlin,” *BuzzFeed*, (January 10,

2017), retrieved from <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/3259984-Trump-Intelligence-Allegations.html>.

12. Hillary Rodham Clinton, *What Happened*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017).

13. Katrina vanden Heuvel, "Neo-McCarthyite Furore around Russia Is Counterproductive," *Washington Post*, (February 21, 2017), retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/neo-mccarthyite-furor-around-russia-is-counterproductive/2017/02/21/2e9857c2-f7a8-11e6-be05-1a3817ac21a5_story.html?utm_term=.b9b0ffb59ba4.

14. Dmitry Suslov, "The U.S. Elections and the Cold War 2.0: Implications and Prospects for Russia," *Valdai Discussion Club*, (September 9, 2016), retrieved from <http://valdaiclub.com/news/the-us-elections-and-the-cold-war-2-0-implications-and-prospects-for-russia/>.

15. Patrick J. Buchanan, "The Mind of Mr. Putin," (October 2, 2015), retrieved from <http://buchanan.org/blog/the-mind-of-mr-putin-124130>.

16. Dmitri Trenin, "National Interest, the Same Language of Beijing, Washington and Moscow," *Moscow Carnegie Centre*, (December 29, 2016), retrieved from <http://carnegie.ru/2016/12/29/national-interest-same-language-of-beijing-washington-and-moscow-pub-67631>.

17. Robert David English, "Russia, Trump, and a New Detente," *Foreign Affairs*, (March 10, 2017), retrieved from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2017-03-10/russia-trump-and-new-d-tente>.

18. For example, the Stratcom 2017 Summit in Prague on May 15-19, 2017. For a typically shrill account, see Nicholas Watson, "Europe Slowly Wakes up to Russian Disinformation Threat," *bne IntelliNews*, (May 19, 2017), retrieved from <http://www.intellinews.com/conference-call-europe-slowly-wakes-up-to-russian-disinformation-threat-121789/?source=blogs>.

19. For example, Radosław Sikorski, "Foreword to Atlantic Council," in Alina Polyakova et al., *The Kremlin's Trojan Horses*, (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, November 2016).

20. For example, Steven Pifer, "The Growing Russia Military Threat in Europe," *Brookings Institution*, (May 17, 2017), retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-growing-russian-military-threat-in-europe/>.

21. This is analyzed in Richard Sakwa, *Russia against the Rest: The Crisis of Post-Cold War Order*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), from which this paper in part draws.

22. Vladimir Putin, "Zayavleniya dlya pressy i otvety na voprosy zhurnalistov po itogam rossiisko-ital'yanskikh peregovorov," *Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia*, (May 17, 2017), retrieved from <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54511>.

23. For the recurring pattern of hope followed by disappointment in U.S.-Russian relations, see Angela E. Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

24. Walter Russell Mead, "Manchurian Candidate? Trump Isn't Sounding Like a Russian Mole," *The American Interest*, (February 24, 2017), retrieved from <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/02/24/trump-isnt-sounding-like-a-russian-mole/>.

25. "Full Transcript and Video: Trump News Conference," *New York Times*, (February 16, 2017), retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/16/us/politics/donald-trump-press-conference-transcript.html?_r=0.

26. "Russia Orders U.S. to Cut Diplomatic Staff in Response to Sanctions Bill," *Radio Forda*, (July 28, 2017), retrieved from <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/russia-orders-united-states-cut-diplomatic-staff-sanctions-bill/28644840.html>.

27. Rex W. Tillerson, "Remarks to U.S. Department of State Employees," *U.S. Department of State*, (May 3, 2017), retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/05/270620.htm>.

28. "Remarks by President Trump to the People of Poland," *The White House*, (July 6, 2017), retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/07/06/remarks-president-trump-people-poland-july-6-2017>.

THIS IS OUR WORLD



Turkuvaz Media Group is the leading group of companies which deals with broadcasting, publishing and distribution activities in Turkey. Most reputable national and international magazines, best selling local and national newspapers and prestigious tv channels create the most powerful synergy in Turkish media.

The opportunity to utilize this power for your advertisements is in your hands. Why not use it?

