

Marcellus

POLICY ANALYSIS

Fall 2020 - Marcellus Policy Analysis No. 4

A Better Reset: How to Improve U.S.-Russian Relations

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Relations between the United States and Russia are at a post-Cold War low. The enlargement of the NATO alliance to include former Soviet bloc countries has precipitated Russian military interventions in Georgia and Ukraine that have led to tense diplomatic crises. These interventions, motivated by a fear of “neo-isolation”, have not only compromised the territorial integrity of Georgia and Ukraine but entrenched Russian influence in states once considered candidates for integration with the West.

To improve relations with Russia, American policymakers need to take a narrower view of U.S. security interests in Europe which are to maintain a balanced economic relationship and prevent the rise of a regional hegemon. Having the world’s reserve currency, an easily accessible and large consumer market, and a robust financial system make it a global commercial power center. Unlike Russia or China, the United States cannot be alienated from critical trading relationships such as the one it has with Europe.

Europe’s wealth and latent power capabilities are able to prevent the rise of a regional hegemon. The United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Italy all have economies larger than Russia’s. Russia’s economy is heavily reliant on oil and gas and faces serious demographic challenges that will inhibit economic growth. While the Russian military remains a capable fighting force, Europe has the latent power necessary to prevent Russia from becoming a regional hegemon. Given this, the United States should retrench from its forward posture in Europe and allow for the Europeans to provide their own security.

Why U.S.-Russian Relations Need to Improve

Improving relations between the United States and Russia is vital for three reasons. First, Russia will not tolerate a permanent position of geopolitical isolation without perceiving an existential threat remedied by the use of military force. Second, a continued escalation of the security competition increases the risk of escalation, either through conventional or unconventional means, and the breakout of a larger conflict. Third, the collapse of arms control agreements negotiated during the Cold War has allowed the U.S. and Russia to develop new weapons without limits and seemingly made first strikes a more viable option. If the U.S.-Russia relationship is going to improve, efforts must be made to manage the threat environment by reducing the risks associated with escalation. The following sections outline critical sources of tension after the Cold War that have become catalysts for confrontations and crises in recent years.

Russia's Reaction to NATO Enlargement

With the emergence of U.S. military dominance after the Cold War, the enlargement of NATO became the primary mechanism for the projection of American power into the post-Soviet space. Since 1999, NATO has added 14 member states to nearly double the size of the alliance.¹ The strategic rationale behind enlargement had two components. First, American policymakers anticipated that an indepen-

dent European power center would challenge U.S. preeminence in the region as the threat of Soviet hegemony disappeared.² If the United States was to prevent the development of an alternative East-West security paradigm in Europe, incorporating the “orphans” of the Warsaw Pact would be critical.

Secondly, NATO enlargement was seen as an insurance policy against a potentially resurgent Russia. American defense planners hoped that democratization and economic liberalization would transform Russia into a Western partner but, as the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance forewarned, they needed to “hedge against the possibility that democracy will fail, with the potential that an authoritarian regime bent on regenerating aggressive military power could emerge”.³ Accordingly, NATO enlargement was a way to remove “dividing lines” in Europe and prevent the formation of an exclusive, anti-Western sphere of influence.⁴ By extending its nuclear umbrella over the former Warsaw Pact states the United States could contain Russian aspirations to pursue regional hegemony should they arise.

From the beginning, Russian leaders feared that NATO expansion would be a new form of containment, or “neo-isolation”, by the West.⁵ In their view, the integration of former Warsaw Pact states into an alliance underwritten by American military power presented a direct threat to Russian interests. Asymmetries in economic and military power meant that the United States could pursue its security

prerogatives without worrying about the balancing constraints of a peer competitor. Therefore, to check NATO enlargement, Russia maintained a “right to intervene” policy in its “Near Abroad”—neighboring states in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia—to promote its security interests.⁶ While Russia was too weak during the 1990s to militarily challenge NATO expansion, it did not shy away from using hard power once it achieved enough domestic political stability.⁷ The use of military force in Georgia and Ukraine have been effective demonstrations of Moscow’s resolve when its interests are at stake.

Georgia 2008

The reasons for Russia’s intervention in Georgia were two-fold. At the Bucharest Summit in April 2008, NATO declared that Georgia and Ukraine would become members of the alliance so long as they continued their democratic reforms.⁸ Russia now faced the serious prospect of having two additional NATO countries on its border. Further compounding Russian anxiety was overt Western support for democracy movements, termed “Color Revolutions”, in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan which Moscow viewed not only as challenges to its regional influence but as threats to the Russian political system itself.^{9,10} In a meeting after the Bucharest Summit, Russian president Dmitri Medvedev warned Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili that joining NATO would not force Russian “peacekeepers” to leave the separatist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.¹¹ When

a conflict broke out between Georgian and South Ossetian forces in August and Georgia launched an offensive to reclaim the region, additional Russian troops and armor rushed in to defeat the offensive. Since then, Russia has entrenched its presence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia while Georgia has yet to attain NATO membership. In addition to alienating any Western influence on its southern periphery, Russia’s presence in Georgia also helps to preserve a buffer zone with NATO member Turkey.

Ukraine 2014

The intervention in Ukraine had similar parallels. Ukraine’s access to the Black Sea allowed Russia to pursue its economic interests, in particular the exporting of oil and gas, and reinforce its posture in the Caucasus.¹² In 2014, when pro-democracy protestors ousted the government in Kyiv for failing to sign an economic aid package with the European Union (EU) and replaced it with an overtly pro-Western cabinet, Russian forces annexed the Crimean peninsula while pro-Russian separatists in the eastern region of Donbas began an insurgency campaign supported by Moscow.¹³ Crimea hosts a base for Russia’s Black Sea Fleet whose upgrades in recent years have tipped the balance of power in Russia’s favor against the NATO navies of Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria.¹⁴ A pro-Western government in Kyiv could have blocked the use of the base in Sevastopol or, worse, hosted NATO naval forces and thereby denied Russia a deterrence posture in a region where it has 400

kilometers of exposed coastline and shipping routes to the Caucasus. Similarly, Russia's continued support for the insurgency in Donbas, a predominantly Russian-speaking region, keeps Ukraine divided and weak. So long as pro-Russian separatists agitate for a closer relationship with Moscow, Ukraine cannot fully open itself up to the West as any political reconciliation will have to consider their interests. By keeping Ukraine in a perpetual state of domestic instability, Russia has blocked it from joining NATO and ensured the existence of a nonthreatening buffer state on its western border.¹⁵

Enlargement Has Costs

Russia's interventions to thwart NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine achieved vital strategic goals through limited but effective action. It prevented further NATO enlargement into its historic sphere of influence by demonstrating a willingness to use military force in defense of critical interests. The lesson the United States should draw is that the period of untempered NATO enlargement was an anomaly and that attempting to contain Russia by absorbing former Soviet-satellites without any regard for its security concerns has costs. While American policymakers have seen NATO as an effective way to increase the security of its European allies and ensure continued military dominance, in the case of Georgia and Ukraine, it has instead compromised their territorial claims by inviting Russian intervention in support of separatist movements. In the post-Cold War peri-

od, NATO enlargement has given Russia legitimate reasons to fear encirclement by the United States. Paradoxically, this effort to alienate Russian influence has severely compromised the security of countries the alliance has sought to integrate and protect.



Joint press point with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the Prime Minister of Montenegro, Zdravko Krivokapić. Photo created by NATO on December 15th 2020. No changes were made to this photo.

Confrontation and the Risks of Escalation

American support for NATO enlargement and Russia's willingness to use military force has helped create a security dilemma whereby neither country wants to risk the loss of deterrence through de-escalation. In recent years there have been several instances where the security dilemma has led to incidents that, though short of being acts of war, have made preemptive strikes a more appealing course of action.

Escalation Through the Gray Zone

Since the early 2000s, the “Gray Zone” has played a significant role in inflating U.S. and Russian threat perceptions. The Gray Zone is a conflict medium characterized by political, economic, informational, and military operations unfit for conventional diplomacy.¹⁶ It is a space for methods of unconven-

tional warfare that can cause considerable harm to an adversary but fall short of breaching thresholds considered acts of war. So far, the use of the Gray Zone to advance foreign policy interests has been largely asymmetric. In 2007, after the Estonian government announced that it planned to relocate a Soviet-era war memorial, diplomatic warnings from Moscow gave way to cyberattacks orchestrated by pro-Russian actors who targeted civil service infrastructure, banks, and media outlets.¹⁷ During the interventions in Georgia and Ukraine, Russian proxy groups conducted cyber attacks against government information systems, civilian infrastructure, and energy grids.¹⁸ In 2016, Montenegrin authorities arrested 20 people plotting a coup against the government. They later assessed that Russian intelligence had planned to support the effort by launching coordinated cyberattacks on government and civilian information systems.¹⁹ Finally, in what was perhaps the most direct provocation against the United States since the end of the Cold War, during the 2016 election cycle, the Russian government directed cyberattacks on local and state-level election infrastructure while pro-Russian actors sowed political discord by disseminating false or divisive content on U.S. social media platforms.²⁰

While election meddling and cyberattacks may not dramatically alter the strategic calculus, the domestic climate makes it difficult for American political leaders to propose negotiation as a way to manage conflicting interests with Russia. Instead, there is

an incentive to increase troop deployments to Europe or host large military exercises on Russia's border as a way to demonstrate the reach of American power and deter future attacks.²¹ While it may be sensible in the short term to consider enhancing deterrence measures that give Russia pause, it is not a long term strategy that will prevent Moscow from using Gray Zone tactics to advance its foreign policy goals even if they come at a marginally higher cost. Given the nature of Gray Zone warfare, conventional methods of deterrence are largely ineffective. Russia's aggression in the Gray Zone is a source of domestic antagonization with few effective counter-tactics. Deploying more troops, missiles, or bombers does not discourage Russia from launching attacks that do not present existential threats to the survival of the state. Furthermore, it is difficult to hold Russia politically accountable since many of these attacks are conducted by local proxies working in coordination with Russian intelligence services. These attacks, however, do raise policymakers' perception of the threat Russia poses to the United States and frustrate diplomatic alternatives.

Battlefield Security Dilemmas

The breakdown in relations after the Ukraine crisis in 2014 has also seen more aggressive behavior exhibited during encounters between U.S. and Russian military assets. In 2015, Russian fighter jets and bombers penetrated the air defenses of American and Turkish warships conducting naval operations in the Black Sea.²² In 2018, U.S. special forces embedded

in Syria to fight ISIS killed between 200-300 Russian mercenaries operating with Syrian government forces who, using Russian tanks and armored vehicles, launched an assault on their position.²³ More recently, in September, Russian armored personnel carriers rammed U.S. combat vehicles conducting a patrol in northeast Syria, injuring seven American soldiers.²⁴

While these incidents fall short of breaching thresholds that would be considered acts of war, they give both sides reason to expect aggressive behavior in the future. Therefore, it seems that achieving escalation dominance—maintaining enough force superiority to make the costs of further escalation too high for an adversary to rationally pursue—is essential for deterrence. However, this fuels a self-perpetuating cycle where each side is more likely to aggressively misread the other’s intentions and utilize “preventative” strikes or force buildups as a deterrent measure. The resulting security dilemma means that neither side will unilaterally cease to match their adversaries’ reaction as doing so would give their opponent a psychological and material advantage. The result would be a lower threshold for considering preemptive options when, for example, U.S. and Russian war planes intercept each other in NATO airspace. A pilot might think that they could gain an offensive advantage by preemptively shooting down an enemy sortie that intercepted them in international airspace. In an environment marked by rapid force build-up and high tensions, confrontations become increasingly difficult

to avoid. Instead, preemptive action is viewed as the best way to quickly achieve escalation dominance and prevent an adversary from nullifying offensive advantages.

Yet, rather than being a disincentive for confrontation, aggressive short term force build-ups and tactical maneuvers significantly raise the risk of accidental confrontation (especially in local or proxy theaters) either through poor communication or a lack of situational awareness. Furthermore, a security competition dominated by an appetite for escalation risks putting two great powers in a dilemma where neither has the psychological wherewithal to unilaterally break the cycle. Once aggressive force build-ups give way to preemptive strikes, the resulting crises would be difficult for policymakers to manage without inviting further escalation.

A New Arms Race Without Arms Control

Arms control agreements were critical mechanisms for managing the security dilemma during the Cold War. They placed limits on American and Russian ambitions to achieve maximum deterrence—the ability to execute a first strike and defeat a retaliatory attack—by providing incentives for limiting nuclear weapons development. Signed in 1972, the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) was the first agreement put in place that limited the number of strategic defensive weapons systems between the United States

and Russia.²⁵ In 2002, the United States unilaterally withdrew from it citing the need to have more anti-ballistic missile defense systems (BMD) to defend against attacks from rogue states.²⁶ The 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) required the United States and the Soviet Union to verify the elimination of all ground-launched ballistic missiles and cruise missiles with a range of 500-5,500 kilometers. Complete with on-site inspections, by 1991 both countries had destroyed a total of 2,692 missiles. However, in 2019 the Trump administration withdrew from the INF Treaty citing Russia's development of a cruise missile with a range exceeding the treaty's limits.²⁷ Finally, ratified in 2010, New START further reduced the number of strategic warheads and delivery systems, inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and heavy bombers, previously allowed under the 2002 Moscow Treaty.²⁸ Currently, negotiations between the United States and Russia over a five-year extension of New START remain at an impasse although president-elect Joe Biden has pledged that he would extend the agreement once inaugurated.²⁹

The ABM Buildup

The issue of anti-ballistic missile defense has played a significant role in the escalation of the U.S.-Russia security competition since the Bush administration's withdrawal from the ABM Treaty. The administration's ostensible motivations for building up U.S. missile defense capabilities were to insu-

late the United States from threats posed by "rogue states".³⁰ However, even as administration officials insisted that these BMD systems would be purely defensive and that they were not meant to contain Russia, U.S. strategic doctrine defined "defensive" to include the security of allies and forces deployed abroad.³¹ The deployment of BMD systems outside of the United States has been consistent with that broad definition. In 2012, as part of the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA) missile defense program, the United States established a BMD radar facility in Turkey and a command center in Germany along with deploying BMD-equipped ships in the Mediterranean and the Baltics.³² Four years later, an Aegis Ashore site was built in Romania while construction of a site in Poland is scheduled to be completed in 2022.³³

A Shift in the Nuclear Balance

Irrespective of American policymakers' stated intentions, Russia calculated that the unrestricted forward deployment of BMD systems would nullify its nuclear deterrent; the central piece of its deterrent posture. This calculation was not unreasonable. The purpose of deploying BMD systems is to defeat an opponent's offensive nuclear capabilities. States possessing reliable BMD systems could launch a first strike, overwhelm an opponent's nuclear arsenal, and defeat any retaliatory attack. Therefore, to hedge against the deployment of BMD systems in Europe, beginning in 2001, Russia began to modernize its nuclear arsenal.³⁴ The most significant of its new

weapons, the road-mobile Topol-M (SS-27) ICBM, which entered service in 2010, was deliberately outfitted with technology that could evade American BMD systems.³⁵ In a 2018 speech, Russian president Vladimir Putin explicitly cited the United States' withdrawal from the ABM treaty as the strategic motivation behind Russia's nuclear modernization efforts:

*the US, is permitting constant, uncontrolled growth of the number of anti-ballistic missiles, improving their quality, and creating new missile launching areas. If we do not do something, eventually this will result in the complete devaluation of Russia's nuclear potential.*³⁶

However, the United States sees Russia's two-decade modernization program and allowances in its nuclear doctrine for a limited first strike as a threat to its assets and allies in Europe. For American policymakers, this perception is not unreasonable either. As the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) makes clear, U.S. strategic objectives now include impressing upon Russia its determination to retaliate with a strategic strike in response to the use of tactical weapons:

Most concerning are Russia's national security policies, strategy, and doctrine that include an emphasis on the threat of limited nuclear escalation, and its continuing development and fielding of increasingly diverse and expanding nuclear capabilities... Effec-

*tive U.S. deterrence of Russian nuclear attack and non-nuclear strategic attack now requires ensuring that the Russian leadership does not miscalculate regarding the consequences of limited nuclear first use, either regionally or against the United States itself. Russia must instead understand that nuclear first-use, however limited, will fail to achieve its objectives, fundamentally alter the nature of a conflict, and trigger incalculable and intolerable costs for Moscow.*³⁷

As the 2018 NPR makes clear, American policy-makers have calculated that should deterrence fail, their forward-deployed conventional forces or NATO allies might be subject to nuclear blackmail. Thus, per recommendations by the 2018 NPR, the United States is working to upgrade its non-strategic capabilities in Europe to “include the variety of attributes and flexibility needed to tailor deterrence to a range of... potential contingencies”.³⁸ Even as the United States and Russia develop these weapons with the stated goal of preventing escalation, neither side will accept the loss of nuclear deterrence so long as technological asymmetries exist. Without restrictions on the quantity, range, and methods of delivery for tactical and strategic warheads, and BMD systems, interpretations of the American and Russian intentions have become more aggressive with the development and deployment of new weapon systems. As missile defense systems are more readily employed as a hedging strategy,

the fear of losing nuclear deterrence will only become more urgent, thereby perpetuating a cycle that encourages the development of new weapons.

An arms race between the United States and Russia is now taking shape. Given the prevalence of inflated threat perceptions, there is little incentive for leaders in either country to unilaterally change the paradigm. Instead, each has made robust efforts to reinforce their deterrent postures in a bid for escalation dominance. Consequently, the possibility of a strategic miscalculation through the use of nuclear weapons has become more likely. If the United States and Russia are to enhance their security while simultaneously minimizing the risk of conflict, there will have to be mutual adjustments and compromises that lower the geopolitical stakes.



French Mirage 2000 aircraft takes off from Ämari Air Base in Estonia. In May 2020, the French Air Force (Armée de l'Air Française) took the lead for NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission in Estonia. Photo created by NATO Multimedia on July 29th 2020. No changes were made to this photo.

How to Improve U.S.-Russian Relations

Improving U.S.-Russian relations will require a new strategic paradigm that takes a narrower view

of American interests in Europe. Only by reconsidering the objectives for American strategy in Europe, and the means needed to meet them, can the United States improve its relationship with Russia. Continuing to pursue policies that have aggravated tensions between both countries will not deescalate the security competition. Instead, the United States should rely on other components of its base of power to effectively manage its interests and improve relations with Russia. This section will examine where the United States and Russia can cooperate on issues of mutual interest and what the limits of cooperation are.

The Balance of Power in Europe

American strategic interests in Europe are two-fold: maintaining a balanced economic relationship and preventing the rise of a regional hegemon. At present, the U.S.-Europe trading relationship and the condition of Russia's latent power capabilities are favorable to these interests. The American economic and financial system makes it an indispensable commercial power center. Furthermore, European affluence and latent power are enough to balance Russian military power. Accordingly, since the United States lacks a significant strategic reason to maintain its current force posture in Europe, it should take steps to revise its regional strategy.

American Economic Hegemony

The U.S.-Europe economic relationship is primarily based on low trade barriers, foreign direct investment opportunities, and the accessibility

of large consumer markets. In 2019, trade between the United States and Europe totaled \$1.3 trillion with a \$123 billion U.S. trade deficit. For the United States, Europe is its largest export market and the second-largest import supplier.³⁹ In 2018, the top five American export markets in Europe were the United Kingdom (\$66.2 billion), Germany (\$57.7 billion), the Netherlands (\$49.4 billion), France (\$36.3 billion), and Belgium (\$31.4 billion). Concerning imports from Europe, Germany (\$125.9 billion), the UK (\$60.8 billion), Italy (\$54.7 billion), France (\$52.5 billion), and the Netherlands (\$24.6 billion) were the top five suppliers.⁴⁰

However, more importantly, the role of the dollar as the world's reserve currency and the universal application of the SWIFT payment system force peer competitors to align with the rules and norms established by the American economic system. Neither Russia nor China can effectively alienate U.S. economic dominance in Europe. Approximately 60% of global sovereign reserves and more than half of global debt issuances are in U.S. dollars. The depth of dollar-denominated markets allows foreign firms to freely issue debt in dollars to raise and spend capital. In turn, foreign central banks need access to dollars to facilitate international transactions. This requires working with American banking institutions who clear the vast majority of the world's dollar exchanges. Finally, the global footprint of American firms, capital, and technology is supported by legal require-

ments and financial regulations that demand transparency and respect for private property. While Europe, Russia, and China still maintain spheres of economic dominance, U.S. economic hegemony is grounded in the foundations of the global economic order itself. So long as foreign investors continue to place their trust in the dollar, accessibility to European markets will remain an American prerogative.⁴¹

Measuring European and Russian Power

Europe's wealth and power relative to Russia are favorable to U.S. strategic objectives. The combined GDP of the European Union and the United Kingdom is over \$18.4 trillion while Russia's is a mere \$1.7 trillion.⁴² Individually, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and Italy all have larger economies than Russia.⁴³ The total population of the European Union is 447.4 million people and, aside from Russia, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and Italy all have the four largest national populations in Europe.⁴⁴,⁴⁵ The United Kingdom and France also have the fourth and fifth largest nuclear weapons arsenals behind Russia, the United States, and China.⁴⁶ However, it should be noted that the quality of some European militaries does not match the strength of their national economies. Germany in particular has significant readiness and preparedness issues. In 2018, only 77 of its 283 combat aircraft, 32 of its 145 transport aircraft, and five of its 13 frigates were ready for action while none of its six submarines were operational. It is not uncommon for German Army units to share equip-

ment in addition to also facing shortages in manpower. The United Kingdom faces similar shortfalls in its naval readiness with a surface fleet whose ships are frequently rendered inoperable due to shortages in sailors or a need for repairs. At one point in 2017, 18 of its 19 frigates and destroyers were sitting idle in port.⁴⁷ Yet, given their economic clout and population size, Europe's largest countries still retain the wherewithal to mobilize militarily if confronted with a serious threat. Especially as the appetite and resources needed to uphold America's global military commitments begin to wane, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, and France, will inevitably be forced to muster up the strength to manage pressing regional security challenges. Given the right incentives, substantial military power can materialize in Europe.

Irrespective of the short-term readiness issues that plague major European militaries, Russia is still unlikely to pursue regional hegemony. While its military remains a capable and effective fighting force with almost one million active-duty personnel and another 900,000 in reserve, short-term increases in defense spending are only expected to match GDP growth and rise between one to two percent in the coming years. Russia's economy is heavily reliant on oil and gas exports for revenue and unable to effectively absorb shocks when global petroleum markets experience volatility. Western sanctions, rampant corruption, and state control of major industries drive away foreign direct investment. A systemic inability

to develop human capital and a shrinking population will place additional long term constraints on future economic growth.⁴⁸ Thus, the factors underlying Russian power do not lend themselves to the aspirations of a rising great power. Although the military power of major Western European countries does not fully complement their economic strength, they nevertheless retain the latent power to preserve the status quo should Russia make a bid for regional dominance.

Embracing Retrenchment

While the argument for maintaining a robust forward presence was sensible during the Cold War, today, the United States does not meaningfully enhance its security by keeping thousands of its troops on dozens of bases spread throughout Europe and preserving an obsolete non-strategic nuclear weapons arsenal. For American policymakers, adopting an alternative strategy requires a different understanding of how to best promote U.S. interests in a stable and secure region like Europe. At present, its forward military presence in Europe contributes to Russian fears of "neo-isolation" as NATO continues to creep into its historic sphere of influence. In 2007, President Vladimir Putin made a speech at the Munich Security Conference in which he questioned the presence of U.S. troops on the Russian border.⁴⁹ In light of Russia's later interventions to postpone NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine, this turned out to be more than just a complaint against the American military presence in Europe. Rather, it reflected the

Russian perception that NATO enlargement allowed the United States to extend its military umbrella without regard for its security concerns.

However, today, the advantages of economic hegemony do more to uphold U.S. preeminence in Europe than troops based in Germany, Belgium, or Italy do. To that end, the United States should consider withdrawing its air and land forces from Europe, as well as its tactical nuclear weapons systems, and discontinue funding the European Deterrence Initiative.⁵⁰ These revisions would have three effects. First, removing the military, financial, and non-strategic nuclear weapons umbrella would incentivize the creation of an alternative European security framework that shifts more of the risks and costs of checking Russian ambitions to NATO countries with large economies, nuclear weapons, and significant latent power capabilities. Should a multi-state coalition fail to organize in time to contain a more aggressive and expansionist Russia, the American, French, and British strategic nuclear weapons deterrents would be enough to deter large-scale incursions into Central Europe. Second, withdrawal would encourage investments in European military readiness to maintain a basic level of operability currently lacking in countries such as Germany. Discontinuing funding for NATO activities would push countries who have under-invested in defense to upgrade and improve their armed forces. Third, Russia would have less reason to fear NATO as an extension of American military

power. American retrenchment from Europe would alter Russia's perception of NATO's potency and elevate Europe's role within the alliance. The prospect of encirclement by a great power would no longer seem imminent and the removal of American financial support would signal that NATO's collective security commitments are primarily a European responsibility.

Opportunities for Cooperation

There are opportunities for cooperation on two issues whose resolution could reduce the tensions between the United States and Russia. The first is arms control, specifically, extending and then updating the New START treaty, and the second is ending their mutual involvement in the conflict in Ukraine. The United States and Russia each have incentives to work together to find mutually beneficial solutions that could help manage the security competition. However, beyond these two major issues, both countries face constraints on how much they can compromise with one another.

Extend and Update New START

Signed in 2010, New START is the only arms control agreement still in force today that limits the strategic arsenals of the United States and Russia. The provisions of the treaty mandate that each country deploy no more than 700 ICBMs, SLBMS, and heavy bombers equipped to carry nuclear armaments. Regarding warheads, only 1,550 can be deployed on ICBMs, SLBMs, and heavy bombers equipped to

carry nuclear armaments. Finally, it allows no more than 800 deployed and nondeployed ICBM launchers, SLBM launchers, and heavy bombers equipped to carry nuclear armaments.⁵¹ Verification measures include on-site inspections and exhibitions as well as data exchanges and notifications. To date, both sides have been in full compliance with their treaty obligations.⁵² As a result, the American and Russian nuclear arsenals are at their lowest levels since the end of the Cold War.

The limitation of strategic nuclear weapons has two key benefits. First, limiting the size of deployable weapons systems commits each country to a more restrained nuclear force posture and discourages the pursuit of first-strike capabilities. It stabilizes the nuclear threat environment by reducing the incentive to bid for escalation dominance; an unstable and tenuous posture to maintain in the event of a limited conflict. Second, strategic arms limitations and on-site inspections and verification measures deflate threat perceptions and establish a baseline for mutual trust on arms control issues. If neither state is increasing its ICBM or SLBM deployments then there is less of a reason to fear losing deterrence. Rather, the United States and Russia would both calculate that a surprise first strike, limited or strategic, would likely invite an overwhelming strategic response. In effect, nuclear deterrence would be mutually assured.

For these reasons, it is in the interest of the United States and Russia to, as allowed by the treaty's

provisions, extend New START for another five years before February 5th, 2021. After an extension, negotiators should immediately set out to further stabilize the strategic balance by amending the agreement to include new kinds of strategic arms that have been developed since 2010. Specifically, a new treaty would include limitations on the deployment of missiles, launchers, and warheads for multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs), inter-continental ground-launched boost-glide missiles (IGLBGMs), nuclear-powered torpedos (NTs), nuclear-powered cruise missiles, air-launched ballistic and boost-glide missiles (ALBMs and ALBGMs), and sea-launched boost-glide missiles (SLBGMs).⁵³ Limiting the deployment of these new strategic weapons would avoid undermining New START which, since it has entered into force, has been an effective mechanism for stabilizing the nuclear threat environment.

Reduce Competition Over Ukraine

The conflict in eastern Ukraine is another issue where the United States and Russia have a shared interest. Neither the United States nor Russia want to see Ukraine fall within an opposing sphere of influence. The United States and its European allies have long viewed Ukraine as a buffer against Russian influence and, as a result, strongly encouraged its democratic reforms and integration into Western security and economic institutions. Russia's 2014 intervention was a reaction to the West's dual proposition of NATO membership and developing a closer economic

and political relationship with the European Union. Since then, these competing interests remain at an impasse as Ukraine's domestic instability has evolved into a low-intensity proxy conflict between the United States and Russia. More specifically, Russia's material support for separatists in the eastern region of Donbas has been counteracted by American arms sales to the Ukrainian government and the imposition of sanctions on individuals and companies linked to fueling the conflict.⁵⁴ However, while both sides perceive the status quo to be effective at checking the influence of the other, the longer the conflict continues the greater the risk of American or Russian escalation



Czech, Estonian and US Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTACs) communicate with Allied pilots overhead during Exercise Ample Strike 20. Photo created by NATO Multimedia on September 15th 2020. No changes were made to this photo.

to bring about a decisive result. If, for example, the pro-Western government in Kyiv collapsed or was democratically replaced by an administration that was warm to Moscow, the United States could view the loss of influence as a reason to apply pressure on the domestic political environment in Ukraine. Unwilling to risk Ukraine falling into alignment with the West again, Russia might then be prompted to respond with

another limited intervention to solidify its presence.

Given the precedent of a diplomatic crisis stemming from the unilateral use of military force, it is in the interest of the United States and Russia to leave Ukraine as a neutral buffer state akin to what Austria was during the Cold War.⁵⁵ To end American and Russian involvement in the conflict, the United States could propose a moratorium on admitting new countries into NATO for the next decade, halt arms sales to Ukraine, and lift sanctions related to the 2014 crisis. In exchange, Russia would need to end its material support for the insurgency in Donbas and encourage the separatists to seek a political reconciliation with Kyiv. Considering the failure of past ceasefires, it would be important for American and Russian monitors to verify the cessation in hostilities throughout the reconciliation period. This would better allow the national government in Kyiv to consolidate its domestic position and address the grievances of Russian speakers in the east without having to make direct concessions to Moscow. Given how the United States and Russia view the importance of Ukraine's strategic alignment, neither is willing to see it fall under the influence of the other without first taking action. Hence, Ukraine would instead be better off as a neutral country with balanced relations between the United States and Russia. It would be in the best interest of the United States and Russia to minimize the risk of escalation by allowing Ukraine to repair its internal political cohesion and exist as a neutral state

between their competing spheres of influence.

The Limits of Compromise

However, there are limits to negotiation and compromise. The difference in political systems places considerable strain on U.S.-Russian relations. American foreign policy is the product of a unique democratic process where legislative priorities, interest groups, bureaucratic inertia, and public opinion all play a role in shaping policy outcomes. American policymakers are bound to particular conventions and norms that produce decisions not formed exclusively through geopolitical calculations alone. When it comes to relations with Russia, congressional pressure has prevented the executive branch from lifting sanctions and discouraged the withdrawal of troops from Germany for fear of weakening the American force posture in Europe.^{56, 57} Similarly, foreign policy elites—think tank analysts, academics, journalists, interest group advocates, and consultants—play a significant role in determining what are legitimate points of view for policymakers to hold.⁵⁸ For example, the consensus on Russia became overtly hawkish after the Ukraine crisis and grew more so after revelations about Moscow’s interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.⁵⁹ Additionally, there is a strong tendency in American domestic politics to oppose cooperating with authoritarian regimes due to their records on human rights or a history of systemic civil abuse.⁶⁰ By framing the issue in explicit moral terms, foreign policy elites can frustrate policymakers by

making diplomacy appear an unsavory, if not an outright immoral, option. Whether they are right in doing so is less important than that elites can be particularly effective at shaping the conditions under which foreign policy is made.

In contrast, Russia’s foreign policy is largely the product of decisions made at the highest levels of the Russian government. Depending on the political arrangement, neither legislative resistance nor bureaucratic inertia affects the decisions made by the president or the prime minister.⁶¹ Elite and public opinion have almost no role in determining the direction of Russia’s foreign policy. On the contrary, the government works to shape elite and public opinion by carefully framing decisions in a way that conforms with the conservative attitudes of Russian society and the nationalist tradition of its foreign policy.⁶² To that end, the public square is heavily regulated to manage the flow of information and stifle opportunities for criticism. Consequently, there are no rival political parties or reform movements strong enough to bring about change through democratic means.⁶³

For American policymakers and foreign policy elites, this difference in political systems poses a psychological challenge. There is an innate suspiciousness of Russian power projection that goes beyond strategic calculations to conclude that something more sinister is at play. Given Russia’s failure to sustain democratic reforms, American foreign policy practitioners can be apt to prescribe a hostile ideological

motivation to Russian behavior that is irreconcilable with U.S. interests. Thus, negotiation and compromise with a figure such as Vladimir Putin is seen as a betrayal of democratic values and a victory for authoritarianism.⁶⁴ So long as an anti-Western, anti-democratic regime exists in Moscow, the elite consensus in the United States will be that Russia poses an ideological challenge that needs to be minimized.

Recommendations

Implementing the following policy recommendations will require a paradigm shift that takes a narrower view of U.S. security interests in Europe and the means necessary to pursue them. The United States should be primarily concerned with maintaining a balanced economic relationship with Europe and preventing the rise of a regional hegemon. Having the world's reserve currency, an easily accessible large consumer market, and robust financial system makes the United States a global commercial power center. By this measure, the United States maintains a decisive advantage over Russia because it underwrites the foundations of the global economic order. Europe's population size, economic vitality, and nuclear capabilities are more than enough to prevent the rise of a regional hegemon. Russia's declining population growth, lackluster economy, and social malaise will hinder any pursuit for regional hegemony. However, as this paper has illustrated, post-Cold War American security policy in Europe has been too ambitious and overly reliant on a forward military presence. Rapid

NATO expansion and the unrestricted forward deployment of ballistic missile defense systems have inflated threat perceptions in Moscow and helped fuel a nuclear arms race. As a result, the United States and Russia are locked in a destabilizing security competition. If American policymakers want to improve the U.S.-Russia relationship, they should focus on stabilizing the threat environment and revising the United States' security policy in Europe.

- The United States should agree to extend New START before February 2021 and begin negotiations to include limitations on missiles, launchers, and warheads for MIRVs, IGLB-GMs, NT's, nuclear-powered cruise missiles, ALBMs, ALBGMs, SLBGMs. It should also negotiate for limitations on Russia's non-strategic arsenal in exchange for gradually withdrawing its tactical nuclear weapons from Europe.
- The United States should place a moratorium on the forward deployment of BMD systems in NATO territory and negotiate a new agreement with Russia that limits the number that can be deployed. To that end, it should also pare back patrols of ships with Aegis missile defense systems in the Mediterranean and the Baltics.
- The United States could propose that NATO will place a moratorium on enlargement for ten years, cease arms sales to Ukraine, and lift

sanctions related to the 2014 Ukraine crisis conditional on an end to Russian support for the insurgency in Donbas and a halt to Gray Zone attacks against NATO members.

- All U.S. air and land forces stationed in Europe should be gradually withdrawn over a three year period and the European Deterrence Initiative defunded. Army and air force bases in Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, the UK, and Spain would either be closed or handed over to host governments for their use.

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