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# PERMANENT DIVERGENCE

## THE EVOLUTION OF U.S.-RUSSIA RELATIONS IN THE TRUMP ERA

Nikolas Gvosdev

RELATIONS between the United States and the Russian Federation are headed for a state of permanent dysfunction. The inability of Washington and Moscow to find an effective way to manage their differences is making it increasingly unlikely that the two countries will be able to work cooperatively when doing so would benefit both nations' interests.

Vladimir Putin's 2007 address at the Munich Security Conference serves as the effective starting point of this decline: it represented the moment when the United States—and specifically the George W. Bush Administration—was put on notice that Russia no longer would uncritically accept the disposition of the American-led international order as it had emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. This was an order characterized, according to Putin's view, by American interventions—whether in

Yugoslavia in 1999 or Iraq in 2003—or even by the proffering of Washington's advice for Russia's own reform process.

Initially, Moscow had hoped that it could salvage from the wreckage of the Soviet Union a two-part proposition: first, a continuing position as one of the “agenda-setting” countries of the world; and second, that partnership with the United States could work to preserve Russia's great power status. By 2007, this was no longer operative; from that moment on, Russia's willingness to use whatever means at its disposal to seek changes on its terms by pressuring the United States has accelerated.

This was codified, so to speak, in the November 2016 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation. This document makes clear that “Russia believes that dialogue with the United States on bilateral as well as international issues can advance in a steady and predictable

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Photo: Vestnik Kavkaza

*Vladimir Putin delivering his pivotal address to the Munich Security Conference in 2007*

manner only when conducted on equal footing, based on mutual trust, respect of each other's interests, and non-interference in each other's domestic affairs” while decrying “unacceptable attempts [by the United States] to exercise military, political, economic, or any other pressure” on Russia, for which Moscow reserves the right to “firmly respond.”

### DETERIORATION

At the same time, American resistance to accept anything that resembles a Russian sphere of influence in the Eurasian space or a Russian veto on American policy in Europe and the Middle East, has only legitimized. The

same is to be said with regards to legitimizing the Kremlin's concept of “sovereign democracy” when it diverges from the Western liberal-democratic norm. As the December 2017 United States National Security Strategy makes plain, “Russia challenge[s] American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity. [...] Russia want[s] to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests.”

The deterioration of bilateral relations has accelerated despite the brief respite of the “reset” during the presidencies of Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev—based in part on the temporary removal

of Ukraine as a source of geopolitical tension between Moscow and Washington after the election of Viktor Yanukovich in 2010. Temporary gains of the “reset” slipped away as it became clear that the differences between Russia and the United States were not misunderstandings but rooted in divergent and irreconcilable values and interests.

At the same time, Russia’s very real recovery—not only in the economic sphere but, more importantly, because of an ambitious program of military modernization—has given the Kremlin the wherewithal it previously lacked to more forcefully defend its red lines. This was first demonstrated in Ukraine in 2014, especially with the annexation of Crimea. A year later, it was again demonstrated in Syria, when Moscow prevented the overthrow of the regime of Bashar al-Assad—an outcome that would have been welcomed by Washington.

Having failed to compel the United States to undertake serious negotiations about revisions to the post-Cold War international system more to Moscow’s liking, Russia, especially after the return of Putin to the presidency in 2012, has upped the ante to

demonstrate Moscow’s increasing abilities to influence developments in the West—notably in efforts to sway the Brexit vote and, ultimately, to become a factor in America’s 2016 presidential elections.

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The 2014 annexation of Crimea was a dramatic announcement that Russia would unilaterally change international rules without any sanction from the United States, and was part of a larger set of Russian geopolitical and geo-economic steps to strengthen its position in

Eurasia and weaken America’s relationships in Europe and Asia. Moreover, Putin made it clear that he would seek to rally states around the world that dissented from Euro-Atlantic norms on human rights, democracy, and multiculturalism. The Obama Administration moved from its initial policy of seeking a “reset” with Russia in favor of a strategy of isolation and containment that might further deter undesirable Russian actions while attempting to compel Moscow to change course on its foreign and domestic policies.

#### CANDIDATE TRUMP

Yet that push was taking place in the context of domestic political upheaval in the United States as the

dominant political narrative about the rationale for and the desirability of American global engagement—particularly to play an active role in Eurasian geopolitical matters by opposing Russia—was challenged in the 2016 election by a populist insurgency that coalesced around the figure of Donald J. Trump and his narrative of “freeloading” allies who sought to harness American blood and treasure to achieve their own ends.

In his campaign statements, candidate Trump appeared to break with a bipartisan consensus that viewed Russian resurgence under Putin’s management as a threat to the United States. He did so by indicating a willingness to entertain the type of pragmatic bargaining that the Kremlin had been seeking, unsuccessfully, from the Bush and Obama administrations.

Trump’s interest in engaging with Russia, however, was misread both by the Kremlin as well as by Trump’s domestic political opponents in the United States as an inclination to accommodate Russia. To the extent Trump had a well-thought out position, it was that Russia was a strategic competitor, but decisions as to whether to engage or confront Moscow should

be based, per his “America First” calculus, on the costs and benefits to the United States.

As we have seen, Trump has been willing to countenance actions—such as selling weapons to Ukraine or promoting the export of American energy to Europe to compete with Russian sales—that reflect a competitive response to Moscow if he believes such steps bolster the American bottom line or strengthen American leverage at the negotiating table.

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Nevertheless, given that other Republican primary candidates, as well as Trump’s general election opponent, former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, were all committed to giving up no ground to Russia, Moscow signaled its preference for a Trump victory in 2016. Given the evidence of Russian involvement in influencing American voters, questionable contacts between the Trump campaign and Russian entities, and Putin’s own well-known antipathy for Clinton, Trump’s surprise election victory was attributed by many in the Democratic party as proof of deliberate Russian meddling in support of and at the request of Donald Trump.



At the same time, Trump was never able to fully overcome a pre-existing Republican suspicion of Russian foreign policy intentions and rejection of liberal norms. Despite his electoral win, Congressional Republicans, under the standard of the late Senator John McCain, joined with their Democratic colleagues to oppose any improvement in relations with Russia in the absence of a clear Russian reversal of course in terms of its policies of the last four years.

One of the few remaining truly bipartisan positions in what is otherwise one of the most polarized partisan environments in Washington in the last three decades, the Congressional view is that Russia must be punished for its many domestic and international transgressions—the shorthand, as one senior Congressional aide put it to me, is that American relations with Russia can never be truly normalized until “Crimea is returned and Putin is gone.” The second part of this equation is that Donald Trump cannot be trusted to manage the bilateral relationship on his own recognizance.

If Moscow had hoped that Trump’s election would create conditions for

improved ties between the two countries, the reality is that Trump’s arrival in the White House has allowed all the suspicion and mistrust of Russia in the American national security establishment to boil up.

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The Congressional approach to handling the Russia relationship—a point of view shared across much of America’s national security community—is rooted in three overarching assumptions. The first is that Russia poses such an existential threat to vital U.S. interests that containing and disrupting Russia is one of

the most critical American national security priorities.

Second, Russia is not seen as particularly important to other things that matter to the United States. To cite America’s former ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul, “the more the United States can do without Russia, the better.” This is a reversal of earlier approaches that postulated that, in terms of the major issues the United States faces around the world, Russian cooperation would prove vital—and even desirable—in helping to find solutions.

The final, and perhaps most critical, assumption is that the effort to contain Russia and disrupt the Putin government is neither expected to generate any significant costs for the United States—especially in economic and financial matters—nor is it expected to strain relationships with key allies or complicate other important American foreign policy priorities. Those would include compelling Iran to return to the nuclear bargaining table or pressuring the Chinese to change their trade and maritime policies.

**TRUMP AND CONGRESS**

In the run-up to his inauguration in January 2017, President-elect Trump suggested he might be willing to roll back certain sanctions imposed on Russia as a prelude to starting the bargaining with Putin. At the same time, Trump has consistently, for the past two years, been reluctant to call out Russia for its alleged interference in the 2016 elections, mainly because he views any focus on this matter as a way to delegitimize what he considers to be his own hard-won victory.

The failure to challenge Putin on this matter—most notably during the

face-to-face encounter between the two presidents at the Helsinki summit in July 2018—combined with suggestions he might overturn the sanctions regime on Russia, eroded the traditional defer-

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ence that the American legislative branch has given to the executive one in managing foreign relations. To wit, Congress moved to institutionalize sanctions on Russia and to prevent Trump from lifting, modifying, or suspending them without its express approval.

Despite the fact that the new president selected most of his national security team, especially

those with oversight over the Russia portfolio, from the ranks of the “Russia skeptics,” Congress did not want to take the chance that Trump would initiate a major reversal in American policy towards Russia. With veto-proof majorities in both chambers, the U.S. Congress has locked American policy on Russia into a confrontational position and deprived the president of much of his leverage in any of his encounters with the Kremlin.

A pair of hearings held in the U.S. Senate in August 2018 could not make clearer the incoherence that

plagues Washington's policy towards Moscow and prevents the development of a stable, sustainable approach to structuring American relations with Russia.

As the testimony and discussion in both the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations and Banking Committees made evident, American policy gyrates between efforts to reduce Russia's position as a great power (with a number of Senators asking what it would take to collapse Russia's economy) but without creating any dislocations for the United States—while at the same time assuming that Russia will continue to work with the United States in maintaining strategic stability, and without introducing damaging second and third order effects, particularly straining relations with allies.

In observing the hearings, one might conclude that Congress is interested in punishment, Trump is interested in dealmaking, and Trump Administration officials are scrambling to preserve American equities; in short, that there is a three-way tug of war as to who ultimately speaks for American policy towards Russia. In acknowledging that

the United States, at present, is sending mixed messages about Russia, at a follow-up hearing before the Senate Banking Committee in early September 2018, McFaul urged the United States “to commit to a single, unified policy.”

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### **RUSSIAN EXPECTATIONS, BILATERAL REALITIES**

For its part, the Russian government initially expected that the furor over Trump's election and the 2016 elections would die down. Moreover, as Trump took control of the executive branch and installed his own appointees in key positions, the Kremlin expected that the new American administration would begin a major overhaul of the U.S. approach to Russia.

Instead, Trump made appointments to key national security positions without using any litmus test as to their support for improving relations with Moscow. In turn, his appointees, notably U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Steven Mnuchin, have presided over the intensification of sanctions on Russia and advised Trump to move ahead with plans to sell weapons to Ukraine—a step that Barack Obama himself had refrained from taking.



Photo: Guiliver Image/Getty Images

*Fierce fighting in East Ukraine, one of Russia's hottest points of contention with the West*

Trump himself ended up choosing not to veto any of the Congressional legislation locking into place a confrontational approach to Russia and even launched two limited military strikes into Syria over Russian objections.

In the aftermath of the Helsinki summit, the Russian government has concluded that Trump, no matter his personal opinions as to the desirability of improving ties with Moscow, is not going to overturn the resistance in both the Congress and the American national security establishment to his efforts. This is also the conclusion of the country's national security bureaucracy,

which can see that Trump does not have sufficient political clout to give top cover to American officials to engage in substantive dialogue and discussion with their Russian counterparts on a variety of issues. Dmitry Peskov, Putin's spokesman, indicated that, despite the good personal relationship between the two presidents, Russia would have to “remain vigilant” and that Moscow had no expectation that the course of American policy towards his country would change.

Thus, Russia is now shifting away from seeking to better the bilateral relationship by capitalizing on Trump's



personal disposition towards having better ties with Russia; in so doing, Moscow is using the disruption Trump causes both in American domestic politics as well as within the international system to push forward on Russian interests and see what can be gained. In particular, Moscow is interested in taking advantage of the problems Trump has generated in American relations with Europe and China to make the case that the world needs a strong Russia as a predictable hedge against a United States under Trump—whose management of the country is deemed unpredictable and unrestrained in the way it throws around power.

Moscow’s continued assertiveness on the world stage, however, triggers a reaction in Washington that not enough pressure has been brought about in order to bring the Kremlin to heel. As additional sanctions are imposed or American military deployments increased to deter Russian activity, Moscow, in turn, is reacting with counter-sanctions, additional moves, and asymmetric responses.

A cycle of tit-for-tat retaliation leads both sides to find new things to sanction or programs and processes to interrupt. With a few exceptions, such as maintaining the International Space

Station or keeping open a limited deconfliction process for military operations in Syria, neither side has been prepared to ring-fence important parts of the relationship from disruption.

**ALLIES ADJUSTING**

Two years into the Trump Administration, key allies and partners of the United States in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East are coming to terms with the realization that U.S.-

Russia relations show no sign of improvement and that the contradictions in the American approach are no closer to being resolved.

Indeed, the conclusion that many allies are drawing is that any normalization of U.S.-Russia relations cannot occur as long as Putin and Trump

are the respective presidents of Russia and the United States. Any attempt at normalization of the relationship could only take place in a post-Putin/post-Trump environment—which means, assuming that neither leader dies or retires ahead of schedule, that the relationship in this frozen condition will be kept until 2024.

Countries like Germany, Italy, France, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Japan, and South Korea, however, cannot wait

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Photo: Guiliver Image/Getty Images

*Russian soldiers at the 2018 VOSTOK exercise*

for another six years for the U.S.-Russia relationship to be sorted out. Instead, they are being forced to assess the extent to which they can pursue geo-economic and geopolitical projects with Moscow vital to their own national interests without damaging their longstanding ties with the United States—while at the same time insulating themselves from the consequences of American efforts to contain the Kremlin.

These countries would align with the position articulated by French president Emmanuel Macron, who, as if responding to American critics who argue that Russia does not matter, has

asserted: “I also recognize the very role that Russia has now built for itself both in its immediate environment and in some other regions of the world, for example, in the Middle East. This newly acquired role of a strong leader imposes a new responsibility. And I am well aware of Russia’s irreplaceable role in some international issues.”

American allies are not unconcerned by what they see as Russia’s troubling behavior. Most want to follow the approach laid down by Germany’s chancellor Angela Merkel: a two-track response that links deterrent/punishment responses to specific Russian

actions while continuing to incentivize positive behavior in other areas.

What they are finding to be a problem is that this approach—which also characterized U.S. policy prior to 2016 under the moniker of “selective engagement”—is being rejected, particularly by the U.S. Congress, on the grounds that concessions or incentives provided to Russia in one area legitimize and encourage negative, unwelcome action in others. From Congress’s view, this makes sense: the America-Russia relationship is characterized by a narrow set of strategic issues with the United States largely insulated from the negative consequences that can accrue from increasing pressure on Russia, while any major economic downturn in Russia would deprive the Kremlin of the wherewithal to project and sustain power around the world as well as to challenge American policy.

In contrast, other countries may have a much wider range of issues to consider in their bilateral relationships with Russia and do not have the luxury of foregoing all cooperative ties with Moscow given their greater proximity to Russia itself.

Germany joined with the United States in imposing sanctions on Russia after the annexation of Crimea and has played an important role in the initiative to reassure NATO allies in Poland and the Baltic States that the Atlantic Alliance can protect them from any possible Russian incursion. At the same time, no German government can echo the demand made by U.S. Senator John Kennedy (R-LA) for sanctions that would bring Russia’s economy “to its knees.”

The reason is simple: such a result would collapse a German economy for which Russia is one of its major trading partners as well as a leading destination for its foreign investment, and from which some 35 percent of German energy consumption is obtained. Nor would Germany want to deal with the human costs and instability that a collapse of Russia would entail.

Furthermore, while Germany may decry the humanitarian costs of the Russian intervention on behalf of Assad in Syria, Russia also plays a role in regulating the conditions that determine whether or not Germany—and all of Europe—will face another migration crisis. Thus, while Berlin has sanctioned

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Moscow, it continues with the construction of the Nordstream-2 gas pipeline directly connecting Russian gas fields in which German firms hold minority interests to the German homeland, without relying on intermediate transit states. And Berlin has done this for reasons having to do with its own energy, economic, and financial security.

Merkel has used the Nordstream line project as a way to extract commitments from Russia that, in return, it must continue with some energy transit through Ukraine, so that Kyiv can continue to receive some revenue from the export of Russian energy to Europe. This compromising approach has not sat well with the U.S. Congress, which, in the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (2017), provides for penalties to be exacted against Germany for construction of the Nordstream line. Similarly, the same act targets other projects like the Turkish Stream line, which creates problems with Turkey since it negatively impacts President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s efforts to develop his country as a major energy transit state.

Other American partners have looked, unsuccessfully, for the United States to signal where and under

what conditions tradeoffs with Russia might be possible. In 2017, a steady stream of Arab and Israeli emissaries to Washington sought to explore whether the United States would be flexible in lifting or suspending sanctions against Russia if this would lead to Moscow

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compromising on a final settlement for Syria or working more vigorously to contain and limit Iran’s influence in the region. These emissaries found little support for such an approach.

Japan has also been interested in balancing its support for sanctions on

Russia over its action in Ukraine by moving forward with the strategic imperative of ensuring that Russia does not fall completely into the Chinese orbit—as well as guaranteeing important resource endowments are available for Japanese use—by contributing to the development and modernization of the Russian Far East.

A too-weakened Russia pushed into the Chinese embrace is a major threat to Japan’s own national security. While the move for any sort of Japan-Russia rapprochement is complicated by the World War II-era territorial dispute between the two countries, Washington has been highly ambivalent—despite the reality of a deteriorating U.S.-China relationship—for fear that Japan could

help Russia mitigate the impact of American pressure.

**HARD REALITIES**

The reality is that Russia remains an important economic and military player in the world that cannot be seamlessly and effortlessly cut out from the international system. Most countries will continue to hedge their relationships—and Moscow is one of the options they want to hold in reserve.

Over time, American allies may look to segregate their economic and political dealings with Russia from “touching” the United States and the jurisdiction of its institutions—a concern former U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Jack Lew raised in his last days in office in January 2017 whereby Washington’s “overreach” could incentivize a “migration” away from using the U.S. dollar and American institutions. In so doing, Lew argued at the time, the position of the American currency in the international economic order could erode and, with it, all the benefits that accrue from the U.S. dollar serving as a de facto international currency.

Increasingly, the United States will have to decide to what extent it is willing to extend punishments for

those continued interactions with Russia on the part of third countries, close allies included. In this context one should consider the plea expressed by Wess Mitchell, Assistant U.S. Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia, to the U.S. Congress, in responding to a question posed by U.S. Senator Bob

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Menendez (D-NJ), “we need discretion with those sanctions. Sanctions without discretion, in my mind, is the antithesis of diplomacy.”

Yet there is little evidence that the United States, for the time being, would ever be prepared to accept a series of deals whereby,

in return for throttling back on its pressure on Russia, especially sanctions, Washington would be assured of concrete Russian support for American initiatives in the Middle East and East Asia; or, for that matter, would exempt its allies from dealings with Russia that are vital to their own national interests. So far, the United States has shown extreme reluctance to offer any such waivers, even to its closest partners, to shield some of their important transactions with Russia from American pressure.

What also remains unclear is the American response to conflict resolution efforts in Europe and the

Middle East in which Russia is playing an active role. Will the United States allow Moscow to receive the credit—and perhaps bank the rewards—for its actions, or will Washington be inclined to challenge or even spoil possible settlements to deny Russia any benefits?

Here, the trend lines are worrying. Some of the new legislation being considered by the U.S. Congress to intensify pressure on Russia takes as its starting point that any Russian leaven spoils the whole loaf. Some of the economic provisions would ban American involvement in business entities where there is any Russian ownership or interest, regardless of whether the project serves larger American strategic goals or interests. Applied in the national security sphere, this type of thinking would prejudice American support for matters such as a peace settlement for Syria or what is being called the “normalization” of the Belgrade-Pristina relationship if Moscow plays any sort of role—not to mention if Russia is the main source of the arrangement.

A related worry is the tendency for American policymakers to take as their default starting point that the United

States must oppose any position or preference expressed by Russia—and to identify with those who oppose a Russian proposal. This almost reflexive response could torpedo efforts to pursue an end to the Syrian conflict or resolve lingering tensions in the former Yugoslav space—matters that, in the

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long term, serve American interests—because of Russian authorship or advocacy of specific proposals. The self-inflicted damage to American interests in the long run would outweigh the shorter-term harm inflicted on Russian pride and interests.

The bottom line is that friction in the American relationship with Russia is inevitable, but dysfunction is not. It should be possible to find a way to contain and mitigate the contradictions between the two countries’ approach to international affairs, but, at present, the United States is not interested and Russia is giving up. Whether this trend is reversed or not may depend on whether a coalition of other states that risk seeing their own national interests damaged by this dysfunction attempt to compel Washington and Moscow to figure out the terms of a cold peace. ●