

U.S.-Russian Relations Will Only Get Worse

Even Good Diplomacy Can't Smooth a Clash of Interests

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Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin with U.S. Vice President Joe Biden in Moscow, Russia, March 2011

Alexander Natruskin / Reuters

It is hard to imagine that U.S.-Russian relations could get much worse, but sadly, they are unlikely to get better anytime soon. Over the past two decades, Russian President Vladimir Putin has defined his country's interests in ways that are incompatible with the interests of the United States and its European allies. The latter believe that democracy, the rule of law, and the provision of security to eastern European countries enhance stability; Putin, meanwhile, considers the spread of democracy to be a threat to his regime and believes that having vulnerable neighbors enhances Russian security.

Any sustained improvement of relations between the United States and Russia beyond progress on arms control (such as the recent extension of the New START treaty) would require one of two concessions: either the United States shelves its foundational support for democracy and formally recognizes a Russian-privileged sphere of influence in the

former Soviet Union or the Russian president decides his interests are not threatened by greater democracy in the region or by having fully sovereign neighbors. Neither is likely to materialize in the near future. The election of U.S. President Joe Biden, who has made support for democracy at home and abroad the centerpiece of his presidency, signals that the United States will not cease to champion traditional democratic values in Europe for at least the next four years. Meanwhile, as long as Putin remains in power, Moscow's policy will continue to be marked by a fear of democracy and of the full sovereignty of Russia's neighbors.

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

U.S. decision-makers approached the post-Cold War world with a clear lesson from the American experience in the twentieth century. Like many others, they drew a link between U.S. disengagement from Europe after World War I and the onset of World War II just two decades later. They also saw the United States' decision to remain in Europe in the face of potential Soviet aggression after the end of World War II as having saved Western Europe from a communist fate. For U.S. officials, then, continued American dominance over European security through NATO was necessary to keep the peace in the uncertain times following the Cold War. The outbreak of war in Yugoslavia exacerbated those fears, feeding the narrative that without the United States, nationalism was waiting to be unleashed and conflict could erupt anywhere in the region.

But the United States also sought to reassure first the Soviets and then the Russians that the West would not take advantage of the end of Moscow's domination of eastern Europe to undermine the former superpower's security. When U.S. President Bill Clinton informed Russian President Boris Yeltsin in September 1994 of plans to move forward with NATO enlargement, he [said](#), "I don't want you to believe that I wake up every morning thinking only about how to make the Warsaw Pact countries a part of NATO—that's not the way I look at it. What I do think about is how to use NATO expansion to advance the broader, higher goal of European security, unity and integration—a goal I know you share."

That quote succinctly summarizes the differences between the United States and Russia during the Yeltsin presidency. For the United States, NATO was the right instrument to achieve European stability and security because it enabled the United States to remain in charge. The U.S. president argued as much and sought to prove that he was not trying to harm Russia by exploiting the Warsaw Pact's collapse. But American leadership was precisely what made NATO the wrong instrument from Russia's perspective. Yeltsin, although he might have agreed with Clinton's objective of fostering European unity, did not share his American counterpart's belief that NATO was the best means to achieve it—nor did any other top Russian official. Under the U.S. leadership of NATO, junior partnership would have been the best available option for Russia. But given Russian opposition to such an arrangement, it was ultimately left out of the Europe that the United States sought to build through the alliance.

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Yeltsin had staked his political fortunes on bringing his country into the West. Since his domestic political battle with Mikhail Gorbachev in the waning months of the Soviet

Union, Yeltsin had sought to win favor by being more pro-Western, pro-democracy, and pro-market than the Soviet leader. He was too weak to oppose American policies, so he took what he could get—not just financial assistance from the United States, its allies, and international financial institutions but also symbols that he was being treated like an equal. These included the NATO-Russia Founding Act—which established a partnership between the West and Russia as invitations to join the alliance were extended to the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland—and Russian participation in the G-7 group of advanced industrialized democracies, creating the G-8.

By the end of the 1990s, it seemed that for all the challenges in relations between the United States and Russia (most notably over NATO's 78-day bombing campaign of Serbia on behalf of the Kosovars), the United States and Europe had managed to overcome Cold War divisions and stave off the worst of nationalism in Europe. Serb leader Slobodan Milosevic was no longer able to unleash terror in the western Balkans; the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland joined NATO and others were soon to follow; the European Union was moving forward with its own expansion across Europe; and Russia still seemed oriented toward the West. In November 1999, Clinton visited his alma mater, Georgetown University, to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. It was, in a sense, the valedictory of his effort to build on President George H. W. Bush's vision of a Europe "[whole and free](#)." Clinton [reminded](#) his audience that he had set out to "do for the Eastern half of Europe what we helped to do for the Western half after World War II." As for Russia, he argued, its "transformation has just begun. It is incomplete. It is awkward. Sometimes it is not pretty, but we have a profound stake in its success."

Clinton also declared, "Now we are at the height of our power and prosperity." He meant it as a confirmation that the United States was capable of shaping global affairs to its liking. After all, he had made the notion of the United States as the "[indispensable nation](#)" a hallmark of his presidency. Unfortunately, the belief that the United States was at the height of its power and prosperity turned out to be a prophecy, as others, including Russia, gained more power, and the United States' ability to dominate those countries declined dramatically.

RUSSIA'S RETURN

Reflecting on the 1990s, Putin saw humiliation for Russia. He believed that the West was working to impose its vision of world order. The collapse of the Soviet Union was "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century," Putin [declared](#). "As for the Russian people, it became a genuine tragedy. Tens of millions of our fellow citizens and countrymen found themselves beyond the fringes of Russian territory."

Putin was not suggesting that he wanted to re-create the USSR. But rather than seek to integrate Russia into the West as his anti-Soviet predecessor had done—which inevitably meant relegating Russia to the role of junior partner to the United States—Putin sought to build an independent great power, one that could engage with the West on its own terms and dominate its immediate neighborhood. Early in Putin's presidency, his policies were not necessarily antagonistic but sought to free Russia from Western, and especially American, interference.

From an American perspective, NATO enlargement, the 1999 Kosovo war, the 2002 unilateral American withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty), the 2003 Iraq war, and support for the 2003–5 “color revolutions” in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine were discrete policies. U.S. officials saw themselves not as harming Russian interests but rather as fostering democracy and the rule of law across central and eastern Europe, protecting the Kosovars from Milosevic’s brutal regime, creating the ability to defend the United States and its allies from Iran’s ballistic missile threat, eliminating the possibility that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein could threaten the world with weapons of mass destruction, and supporting reformers trying to build democracy in fragile states.

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The Russian perspective starkly differed. Officials in Moscow watched the United States not only keep its Cold War alliance but expand it, incorporating territory formerly controlled by the Soviet Union, including Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. When NATO went to war against Serbia in 1999, it did so over Russian objections and without going through the UN Security Council—where Russia’s status as a permanent member would have allowed it to veto the action. A mere four years later, NATO went to war against Iraq, again without Security Council authorization and again brushing aside Russian (as well as French and German) opposition. Many in Moscow viewed the United States’ departure from the ABM Treaty as degrading Russia’s nuclear deterrent (particularly after the George W. Bush administration announced its plans to build a missile defense system with interceptors and a radar to be stationed in Poland and the Czech Republic, respectively). And for Putin, the “color revolutions” were not evidence of civil society flourishing but rather confirmation that the United States was pursuing regime change in Europe, including in Russia. For Moscow, then, the same events that, from the American perspective, were discrete policies having little to do with Russia built a narrative of a United States seeking to impose its will and principles on others to the detriment of Russian interests.

In 2007, Putin went to the annual Munich Security Conference and gave a speech venting his opposition to U.S. actions on these grounds. He [complained](#) about American unilateralism: “One single center of power. One single center of force. One single center of decision-making. This is the world of one master, one sovereign.” He argued that “the process of NATO expansion has nothing to do with modernization of the alliance,” declaring, “We have the right to ask, ‘Against whom is this expansion directed?’”

And always, there was Ukraine, which Putin [told](#) President George W. Bush in 2008 was “not even a country.” Yeltsin a decade earlier had warned Clinton that he could not accept Ukraine’s membership in NATO and sought a private agreement that the United States would not pursue it. By February 2008, U.S. Ambassador to Russia William Burns was [telling](#) his superiors in Washington, “Ukrainian entry into NATO is the brightest of all redlines for the Russian elite (not just Putin).” He warned that Russian officials would view offering a Membership Action Plan (MAP)—a step toward NATO membership—to Ukraine (and Georgia) at the upcoming NATO summit as “throwing down the strategic gauntlet.”

French and German opposition to offering Ukraine and Georgia MAPs took the idea off the table, but the compromise forged within the alliance led to a [NATO summit](#)

[declaration](#) that Ukraine and Georgia “will become members of NATO.” By going to war with Georgia in 2008 and invading Ukraine in 2014, Putin confirmed what Burns had warned against: Putin would not tolerate the crossing of certain redlines perceived as too threatening to Russia’s interests.

Putin sought to build an independent great power, one that could engage with the West on its own terms.

The conflicts over Ukraine and Georgia reflected the United States’ and Russia’s divergent definitions of their interests during the George W. Bush and Putin years. As Clinton argued to Yeltsin in 1994, the United States believed expanding Western institutions would offer much-needed stability and security to eastern European countries. Meanwhile, Russia was protecting what it viewed as its privileged sphere of influence from Western norms, rules, and institutions. The West believed sovereign countries could make their own choices about their future, which, in turn, was viewed in Moscow as undermining Russian interests and, potentially, even its regime.

There appeared to be a brief respite from these conflicts with the “[reset](#),” a policy undertaken by President Barack Obama with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev (who was keeping the presidential seat warm while Vladimir Putin held the post of prime minister). The reset was a transactional approach to policy, with each side recognizing the other’s core interests. Obama made clear he would not promote Ukrainian and Georgian membership in NATO and abandoned the missile defense plan launched by the Bush administration in favor of a different missile defense deployment more clearly designed to combat Iran. Meanwhile, Russia agreed to support stiffer sanctions on Iran to induce Tehran to abandon its pursuit of nuclear weapons. Most important, Moscow allowed the United States to create a new corridor to resupply Afghanistan through Russian-controlled airspace, which meant that the United States was no longer completely reliant on Pakistan. The two countries also agreed that it was in their mutual interest to forge a new arms control agreement, the New START treaty, which would further reduce their number of strategic nuclear weapons and provide verification measures to uphold it.

Alas, the reset ended. Although the Russians abstained during the Security Council’s vote authorizing NATO to launch airstrikes against Libya in 2011 to protect the population of Benghazi, Putin fumed when the operation precipitated the overthrow and death of President Muammar al-Qaddafi. Later that year, protests erupted in Russia around the parliamentary elections, and Putin interpreted then Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton’s statements as egging on his opponents. In 2013, Edward Snowden’s leaks of National Security Agency documents, followed by his receiving asylum in Russia, grabbed headlines. The relationship truly came undone when Putin annexed Crimea and started a civil war in eastern Ukraine the following year. Large countries invading their smaller neighbors, particularly in Europe, had been part of a bygone era and shocked Europeans who had come to believe that the creation and expansion of the European Union had definitively made war on the continent a thing of the past. In response, the United States and its allies slapped sanctions on Russia. It seemed the relationship could not get much worse.

DOOMED TO FAIL

Any attempt by Donald Trump to improve the relationship was doomed from the start. Having been compromised by Russia's interference in the 2016 presidential election, Trump could not afford to be seen as doing Putin's bidding, especially in a number of key areas. Congress, meanwhile, was not only unwilling to lift sanctions on Russia but added to them after the Russian interference was exposed. U.S. officials throughout the government—political appointees and career officials alike—remained committed to continuing the United States' policy of providing reassurance to NATO's eastern neighbors and reinforcing deterrence in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, including stepped-up air and sea patrols in the Baltic Sea and Black Sea regions as well as enhanced military exercises and rotations of military deployments. Beyond exacerbating existing political polarization in the United States, Putin achieved very little by interfering in U.S. domestic politics. Furthermore, the Trump administration's National Defense Strategy and National Security Strategy made clear that Russia was now, along with China, a "[strategic competitor](#)." And with the urging of his then National Security Adviser John Bolton, Trump pulled out of the three-decade-old Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty over the long-standing complaint of Russian violations.

Although his predecessor had refused to commit to extending the New START treaty, Biden agreed with the Russians on a five-year extension shortly after he entered office. Addressing the dangers of nuclear weapons is the one area in which the interests of the two sides allow for greater cooperation. Arms control emerged as a staple of the relationship in the aftermath of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, focusing first on limiting nuclear testing and later on capping the numbers of missiles and warheads. It is the one issue that creates the optic of two superpowers, thereby giving Russia its cherished status as an equal to the United States. And it is in the interests of both sides to limit nuclear weapons and provide verification measures to prevent breaches.

A BLEAK FUTURE

In 1993, Clinton decided to back Yeltsin as the best hope for a U.S.-Russian partnership. Eight years later, George W. Bush looked Putin in the eye and came away believing he had peered into the Russian president's soul. Obama took office in 2009 seeking a reset of U.S.-Russian relations with his first-term counterpart, Medvedev. Eight years later, Trump began his presidency under the cloud of Russian interference in the U.S. election but seeming to believe whatever Putin told him.

In each case, early high hopes for the U.S.-Russian relationship soon gave way to bitter realities. The 1999 NATO bombing campaign against Serbia created the worst conflict between the two powers during the Clinton-Yeltsin years. In 2008, the Russian-Georgian war left in tatters a relationship that had foundered since the 2003 U.S. decision to go to war in Iraq. Early in Obama's second term, Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, leading the West to impose sanctions and bolster its military presence in eastern Europe. And regardless of Trump's strange affinity for Putin, U.S.-Russian relations continued to deteriorate during his term.

As Biden begins his presidency, one aspect of U.S.-Russian relations is over: the high hopes for what an incoming U.S. president can achieve. The SolarWinds hack, Russian election interference, the conflict in Ukraine, and the poisoning and arrest of the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny are just some of the issues that will hinder

any return to a more positive U.S.-Russian relationship. But ever since Putin first became president more than 20 years ago, the bigger issue has been the clashing ambitions that U.S. and Russian leaders have for the world and especially for Europe. Although it is possible that Trump would have bowed to Putin's vision in a second term, Moscow's and Washington's conflicting visions will be on full display in the Biden years.

Better relations with another country are never an end in themselves but rather a means to promote national interests, and for the moment, the United States and Russia define theirs very differently. Beyond exploring new arms control agreements to limit strategic nuclear weapons, the bilateral agenda for U.S.-Russian relations is likely to remain pretty thin for the foreseeable future.

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Russia–China: An Unholy Alliance?

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There is substantial – although not complete – policy convergence on international issues.



Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin at a 2019 gala marking the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Russia and China (Kremlin.ru)

Russia and China’s [verbal sparring](#) with the US over competing visions of multilateralism last week in the UN Security Council exemplified the closer ties forged over recent years between Moscow and Beijing.

The burgeoning relationship undoubtedly offers mutual advantage for both countries – but for Moscow, it also contains inherent risks and weaknesses.

Foreign Minister Lavrov [recently hailed](#) Russia’s relations with China as “unique”, characterised by “comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction”. And there’s no doubt bilateral cooperation has become both broader and, in some areas, deeper. The relationship is guided by the excellent personal relationship between Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping.

Closer alignment with Beijing is, pragmatically, a strategic imperative for Moscow: as a counterweight offsetting Russia's post-2014 estrangement from the US and European Union, and the associated negative political and economic ramifications.

But there are also wider benefits: Putin perceives that closer Russo-Chinese relations will be unsettling for America and its Western partners, complicating strategic calculations for the US, and underscoring Russia's relevance in Washington.

Pragmatic political, economic and foreign policy considerations are relevant, too.



Qingdao, China, host of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Council leaders meeting in 2018 (Kremlin.ru)

First, obvious political affinities, reflecting the authoritarian character of both leaders, and their political systems. This has practical implications: Russia has adopted China's face recognition technology to enhance its domestic security capabilities, and has tried, albeit with limited success, to emulate China's constraints on internet freedom.

Economic complementarities provide a powerful impetus: for Russia, resource-hungry China is a huge, growing and proximate market for its energy, commodity and agricultural exporters, while China provides Russia with competitively priced manufactures and investment (although less than the Russians [would like](#)). Bilateral trade totalled over US\$100 billion last year, and China's share of Russia's trade has nearly doubled since 2013.

In foreign policy, Russia and China are broadly like-minded. Their interests and agendas often align: in particular, challenging US primacy and antipathy to what they portray as Western revisionist efforts to impose a "liberal" character on the rules-based international order, characterising this as a vehicle for US hegemony. Instead, Russia asserts the centrality of the UN-based international legal framework, especially the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states – a precept strongly endorsed by Beijing.

There is substantial – [although not complete](#) – policy convergence on international issues. If not offering explicit support, Russia and China will not oppose each other outright, reassuring each that the other "has its back" – witness Russian reticence over Chinese expansionary activities in the South China Sea and China's silence over Russia's aggression in Ukraine. And Moscow's opposition to the Indo-Pacific concept

reflects not only its uncertainty over Russia's place in this construct, but also concern at its perceived China containment rationale.

Striking the right balance in its relations with Beijing will not be easy for Moscow.

Closer military cooperation between the two countries has [grabbed particular attention](#). This ranges from Chinese participation in annual large-scale Russian military exercises, joint bomber patrols over the Sea of Japan, and joint naval exercises (including in the Indian Ocean). Building on its history as China's leading weapons supplier, Russia has helped Beijing modernise its armed forces, including providing SU 35 fighter aircraft and S-400 missile systems – and even assisting with new missile launch detection technology.

And yet ... there are limits.

Russia is very much the junior partner in this relationship – an asymmetry that will only grow over time – and finds this discomfiting. Moscow will strive to retain strategic autonomy, and seek to hedge against the risk of dependence, whether political or economic.

This logic of diversification underpins Russia's efforts to reinvigorate its historically strong but recently stagnant relationship with India – increasingly China's military and economic rival. Likewise, Russia's efforts to improve relations with Japan (impeded, though, by the [intractable](#) Kuril Islands territorial dispute) and broaden links with members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Yet striking the right balance in its relations with Beijing will not be easy for Moscow. Economically, Russia badly needs the Chinese market for its energy and commodity exports, which allows China to dictate the terms of their trade relationship. Maintaining useful alignment with Beijing, while retaining Russia's room for manoeuvre by diversifying relations with third countries, will be challenging. This dilemma could prove [especially acute in respect of India](#), where expanded Russian defence cooperation, especially providing advanced military equipment, may alarm Beijing.

Russia will also scrutinise critically any expansion of China's presence and influence beyond the economic realm in the former Soviet space, which Moscow still considers its privileged sphere of influence. And Moscow remains wary of China's intentions in the Arctic, where Russia regards itself the major player.

And history suggests the relationship is unlikely to be a trusting one. There will be those in Russia, including in the military, quietly mistrustful of China's growing power and capabilities, and uneasy this could rebound, in time, on Russia should the relationship turn sour.

Meanwhile, for all the unwelcome international complications closer Russia-China relations brings, there are limits to what the US and its partners realistically can do to influence this. But it is important at least to engage seriously and directly with Russia, encouraging Moscow to contemplate the risks of excessive dependence on its eastern neighbour.