



RUSSIA'S BEST ENEMY

RUSSIAN POLICY TOWARDS THE UNITED STATES
IN PUTIN'S ERA

Marek Menkiszak

NUMBER 62
WARSAW
FEBRUARY 2017

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OSW |

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES

OŚRODEK STUDIÓW WSCHODNICH im. **Marka Karpia**

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ISBN 978-83-62936-99-1

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russian-American relations are structurally asymmetrical. Apart from nuclear parity, in all other spheres there are serious disproportions between the two states, in favour of the United States. The two countries' mutual political and economic importance is also asymmetrical. Russian attitudes towards the US are ambivalent and fluctuate in cycles, although anti-US sentiment has been rising consistently. In the sphere of political interests, Russia still has unmet expectations *vis-à-vis* the US. The dynamics of Russia's policy towards the United States over the last sixteen years has been characterised by cyclic oscillations. The recurrent pattern starts with a normalisation and positive dynamics in mutual relations at the start of each new US president's term, and ends with an escalation of tensions and a crisis towards the end of the presidency. There seem to be structural reasons for this: Russia is too weak to be treated by the US as a partner or opponent on an equal footing, but is too strong to be willing or able to accept the status of an inequitable, tactical ally. Besides, Moscow has nothing positive to offer to the US, apart from possibly restraining, to some extent, those of its policies which harm the interests of the US. Making predictions about the Russian-American relations in this situation is very risky. However, in view of the above factors, the most probable scenario is that the same pattern will be repeated and the initial mutual attempts at a 'reset' will be followed in the longer term by a souring of bilateral relations. However, that does not necessarily mean that Russia will suffer an inevitable strategic defeat, as it may try to take advantage of the likely further weakening of the United States and the West.

INTRODUCTION

During Vladimir Putin's third term as the president of Russia and Barack Obama's second term as president of the US, Russia-US relations slipped into the deepest crisis since the end of the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet Union. When Donald Trump took office as president on 20 January 2017, a new chapter in Russian-American relations was opened. This is a moment to ask questions about the future outlook of those relations, which, in turn, leads to even more fundamental questions about the extent to which the causes of the most recent crisis were structural in nature, and whether relations are likely to deteriorate again after a temporary normalisation; or whether, on the contrary, the reasons why relations had been deteriorating will turn out to be transitory, and the two states will find a *modus vivendi* which may not necessarily be friendly, but at least will be stable and pragmatic.

The answers to those questions depend on various factors including the political, economic and security dynamics in the United States and Russia, and in the states and regions important for their respective foreign policies. Those dynamics will, in turn, be determined partly by the recent historical experiences of Russia and the United States and the respective interpretations of those experiences by the current political leaders of both states.

The present paper focuses on one of the parties, Russia. It presents the circumstances which have shaped Russia's policy towards the United States over the last sixteen years, i.e. the period of Vladimir Putin's formal or *de facto* leadership, policy dynamics, and the conclusions that can be drawn from an analysis of those circumstances. The paper is mainly concerned with the position that the United States has occupied in Russia's policy, Russia's objectives and its ways of pursuing them. Because of the specific nature of Russia's authoritarian political system, the paper focuses on presenting and analysing the rhetoric and activities of the ruling group led by Vladimir Putin. On this basis, the paper formulates predictions about the prospects for Russia's policy and Russian-American relations.

I. THE FOUNDATIONS: THE CONDITIONS SHAPING RUSSIA'S POLICY TOWARDS THE UNITED STATES

In order to understand the dynamics of Russia's policy towards the United States, one needs to look at its foundations and the significant factors that determine them. In particular, it is important to compare Russia's and the US's military potentials, examine their bilateral economic relations, analyse public perceptions of the US in Russia, and finally, consider Russia's strategic political interests insofar as they concern the United States.

1. Security: military (dis)parity

Military might is the key component in the self-perception of Russia (its elites and general public) as a world power (it is also seen in Russia as a criterion of world power status in general). This is of crucial importance for the way Russian-American relations are perceived in Russia. During the Cold War, a global bipolar order existed in which the Soviet Union and the United States maintained military parity and competed for global influence. The crisis and subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union was not only a huge trauma for the Russian elite and people, but also entailed the real degradation of Russia's potential and its international influence. The military sphere, and more precisely the sphere of nuclear weapons, is the only one in which Russia has managed to preserve some degree of parity with the United States. Today, it is the only remnant of the Soviet Union's former status as a super-power.¹ That is why Russia has striven so hard to preserve its nuclear potential and parity in the nuclear sphere, for example, by maintaining dialogue on nuclear disarmament with the United States. The ruling elite in Russia perceives the country's nuclear potential as the main reason why the United States does

¹ While Russia's permanent membership in the UN Security Council and its veto rights are an important symbol and hallmark of Russia's status as a global power, Moscow shares that status with four other states, which makes it less unique.

not ignore Russia completely today, and Moscow likes to remind Washington of this, especially in periods of heightened tensions in bilateral relations.²

According to official figures published by Washington and Moscow, as well as expert estimates, Russia's nuclear potential is currently comparable to that of the United States, and in some categories Russia even has a small quantitative and qualitative advantage (better mobility).³

Table 1. Comparison of the nuclear potentials of Russia and the United States

Parameter	Numbers in the US	Numbers in Russia
Strategic delivery vehicles,* total	848	847
Deployed strategic delivery vehicles *	681	508
Deployed strategic nuclear warheads	1367	1796

² This refers, for instance, to the publicity given to (often multiple) tests of Russia's ballistic missiles or overflights by Russian strategic bombers in the vicinity of US overseas military bases.

³ See 'New START Treaty Aggregate Numbers of Strategic Offensive Arms, Fact Sheet, Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance', US Department of State, 1 October 2016, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/262836.pdf>; Hans M. Kristensen, Robert S. Norris, Russian Nuclear Forces, 2016, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 72:3, 15 April 2016, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2016.1170359>; Hans M. Kristensen, Robert S. Norris, Russian Nuclear Forces, 2016, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 73:1, 2 January 2017, <http://thebulletin.org/2017/january/united-states-nuclear-forces-201710380>; Amy F. Woolf, Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons, Congressional Research Service, 23 March 2016, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/RL32572.pdf>; Russian Strategic Nuclear Forces Under New START; <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Russian-Strategic-Nuclear-Forces-Under-New-START>; <http://russianforces.org/>

Parameter	Numbers in the US	Numbers in Russia
Strategic nuclear warheads, total	4480** + 2500 ? *** = <7000 ?	2600 ? + 2800 ? = 5400 ?****
Tactical nuclear payloads	~760 ?*****	~2000 ? ***** (1000 ? – 6000 ?) *****

* Total intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM), heavy strategic bombers according to the calculation principles adopted in the START treaties, as of 1 September 2016; ** according to figures from the US Department of Defence (January 2017) as of 30 September 2016; *** according to figures from the US Department of Defence; **** estimates by H.M. Kristensen and R.S. Norris of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*; ***** estimates by various authors, cited by A.F. Woolf of the Congressional Research Service.

Author's calculations on the basis of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, www.armscontrol.org; Congressional Research Service; Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance, US Department of State

While the nuclear potentials of Russia and the United States are approximately equal, there is a huge general disproportion between the countries when it comes to conventional weapons, with Russia having a much smaller potential. This disproportion is visible in the comparison of the defence spending of the USA (US\$595.5 billion in 2015, according to SIPRI) and of Russia (US\$91 billion, i.e. 5.5 times less).⁴ The US armed forces are also nearly twice as large as the Russian military, and better equipped. For instance, they have twice as many combat aircraft and helicopters. The fact that the US has 10 aircraft carriers, compared to only one held by Russia, is a good illustration of the disproportion in the two countries' ability to project power, even though the total numbers of warships, including submarines, is comparable. Russia has a clear advantage over the US when it comes to the number

⁴ The fact that a portion of Russia's defence spending is hidden under classified or non-military budget lines, and the differences in purchasing power parity and the costs of manufacturing domestically produced weapons make Russia's defence spending relatively more effective, does not significantly alter this picture.

of tanks (twice as many in Russia), artillery (four times as many) and multiple rocket launchers (three times as many).⁵ Due to geographic reasons as well as political decisions, Russia also has a clear regional advantage in terms of the size of conventional forces in the European theatre. In 2016, the United States had only around 65,000 troops in Europe (including only around 1000 on NATO's eastern flank)⁶, whereas Russia at that time had an estimated 400,000 troops on its western flank (in the Western and Southern Military Districts, and in several countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus).

Arms are, generally speaking, the most technologically advanced products that the Russian industry is capable of producing, and one of Russia's few technologically advanced export commodities. Yet despite that fact, and some isolated successful rollouts of Russian technology, it is nonetheless legitimate to say that there is a certain technological gap between Russian and American combat aircraft, warships, precision weapons and stealth technologies.

2. Economy: weak trade ties

The disproportion and asymmetry of the potentials and mutual importance of Russia and the United States is particularly obvious in economic terms. With the world's biggest nominal GDP (US\$18 trillion in 2015), the United States is economically much stronger than Russia, which ranks 13th globally with a GDP of US\$1.3 trillion.⁷ Despite its efforts, Russia has not managed to

⁵ See *Military Balance 2016*, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, London 2016; www.globalfirepower.com

⁶ Data as of 30 September 2016, quoted after: Total Military Personnel and Dependent End Strength By Service, Regional Area, and Country, Defense Manpower Data Center, 7 November 2016; the number of US troops in Central Europe has been gradually increasing since January 2017 in connection with the deployment of a brigade battle group of around 4000 US soldiers in the region.

⁷ Figures from the World Bank, <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf>

establish strong economic foundations for its relations with the US, as the figures on mutual trade illustrate.

According to US figures, in the first year of Vladimir Putin's rule in Russia (2000), Russian-American trade turnover was US\$9.7 billion (of this, Russian exports accounted for US\$7.6 billion) and increased systematically in the following years (except for a slump in the crisis year of 2009), until 2011 when it reached a record level of US\$43 billion (Russian exports to the US accounting for US\$34.6 billion). This growth was related to the peak of Russian oil and petroleum product exports to the United States, which reached a level of around 228 million barrels (31 million tonnes, corresponding to 5.5% of total imports to the US) in 2011.⁸ Since then, trade has been declining, and collapsed in 2015, dropping to US\$23.5 billion (in this, Russian exports accounted for US\$16.4 billion).⁹ Such a dynamic is hardly surprising, given that on average around 70% of Russian exports to the United States consisted of raw materials (mostly oil and petroleum products whose prices suddenly dropped by more than 50% in the autumn of 2014).¹⁰ Moreover, in August 2014 counter-sanctions against Russia were introduced, which blocked the importation of US food products to Russia.

The disproportion between Russia's and the United States' economic potentials has nonetheless decreased noticeably since 2000, when the US economy (with nominal GDP at around US\$ 10.3 trillion) was 37 times larger than the Russian economy (around US\$ 280 billion).

⁸ Data from the Energy Information Administration (EIA), https://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/pet_move_impqus_a2_nus_ep00_im0_mbb1_a.htm

⁹ Data from the US Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c4621.html> In the same period, exports of Russian oil and petroleum products to the US dropped to a mere 120 million barrels (accounting for 16.4 million tonnes and 3.6% of total imports to the US) in 2014, and 135 million barrels (18.4 million tonnes or 3.9% of total imports in 2015. See the EIA figures, https://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/pet_move_impqus_a2_nus_ep00_im0_mbb1_a.htm

¹⁰ <http://izvestia.ru/news/588941#ixzz4U3inbUg1>

Table 2. Trade turnover between Russia and the US in the years 2013–2016

Indicators	2013	2014	2015	2016 *
Trade turnover in US\$ billions USA figures / Russia figures	38.2 / 27.5	34.4 / 29.2	23.5 / 21	18.7 / 18.2
Exports from Russia to the US in US\$ billions USA figures / Russia figures	27.1 / 11.1	23.7 / 10.7	16.4 / 9.5	13.3 /
Imports from the US to Russia in US\$ billions - USA figures / Russia figures	11.1 / 16.3	10.7 / 18.5	7.1 / 11.5	5.4 /
Balance for Russia in US\$ billions - USA figures / Russia figures	+16 / - 5.2	+13 / - 7.8	+ 9.3 / - 2	+ 7.8 /

* January–November 2016

Author's calculations on the basis of information from the US Census Bureau; <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c4621.html>; State Statistics Committee of the Russian Federation

The above figures illustrate the weakness of the economic basis of Russian-American relations. That weakness becomes even more prominent if one looks at the significance of mutual trade exchange for the two states' economies. For Russia, the United States is an important partner, although certainly not the most important. According to Russian statistics, the United States ranked 8th among Russia's trading partners in 2015, accounting for a 4% share in total trade turnover. The US ranked 11th among markets for Russian goods (just after Poland), with a share of around 2.8% in Russian exports. At the same time, however, the United States was an important source of imports to Russia, despite the mutual sanctions in place since the summer of 2014 (ranking 3rd, with a 6.25% share in total imports).

The picture looks different for the United States. US statistics show Russia to be an insignificant trading partner. In 2015 it ranked 37th among the markets for American goods (accounting for 0.47% of total exports) and 24th among states of origin for imports to the US (accounting for 0.73% of total imports).¹¹ The Russian economy and its exports are centred on raw materials, which does not bode well for the dynamics of Russian-American trade relations in the long term, given the decreasing demand for energy resource imports in the US as a result of the ‘energy revolution’.

Even though Russia is potentially an attractive destination for US investors, especially from the energy sector, the realisation of that potential has been hindered by the current depressed prices and the unfavourable political and investment climate. This is also borne out by statistics. According to figures from the Central Bank of Russia on net accumulated foreign direct investments (FDI) in Russia in the years 1994–2015, the US ranks only 12th among investors, accounting for slightly less than US\$ 9 billion (around 2.5% of total investments).¹²

This situation could potentially change as a result of the strategic co-operation agreements concluded in the period from 2011 to 2014 (concerning the exploration and extraction of oil and gas in the Russian Arctic shelf and the Black Sea), as well as the exchange of assets between the US oil company ExxonMobil and Russia’s state-controlled oil company Rosneft. Under the agreements, ExxonMobil was expected to invest around US\$3 billion in Russia during the initial phase. However, the implementation of the joint projects stumbled on the US sanctions imposed on Rosneft and some Russian energy projects, as well as on the declining oil prices, which made the exploitation of the Arctic fields

¹¹ Figures from the US Census Bureau; http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/Press-Release/2015pr/final_revisions/exh13py.txt

¹² See: <http://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/nakoplennye-inostrannye-investitsii-v-rossiyskih-regionah-territorialnaya-struktura-i-rol-ofshornogo-kapitala>; <http://www.cbr.ru/statistics/?PrtId=svs>

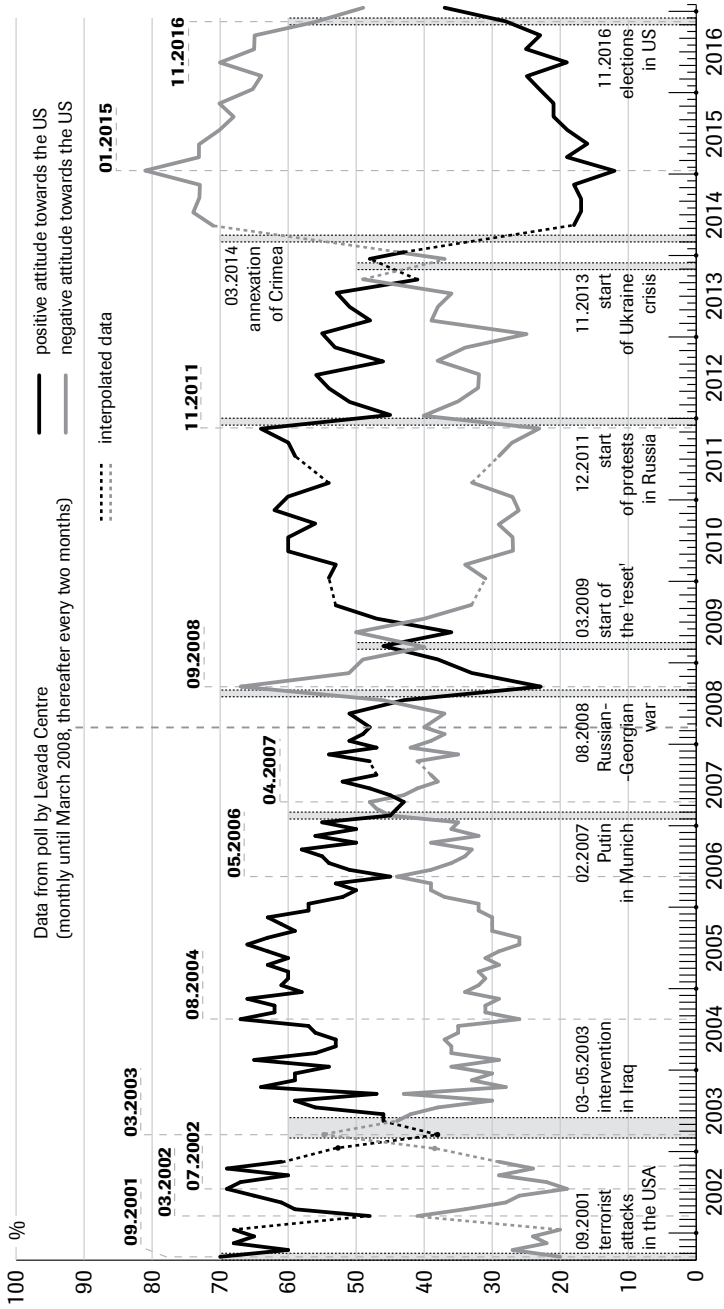
unprofitable. However, ExxonMobil and Rosneft (in partnership with Japanese companies) are continuing their joint gas extraction and LNG production in Sakhalin in Russia's Far East, initiated in 1996 (the Sakhalin 1 project).

3. The people: ambivalent perceptions of the US in Russia

Foreign policy does not exist in a vacuum, but is normally influenced by social conditions and perceptions. However, Russia is an authoritarian state in which so-called public opinion has little influence over politics, especially foreign policy, and sociological studies seem to suggest that public sentiments revealed in opinion polls strongly correlate with changes in the state propaganda's narrative about Russia's external environment (and that narrative, in turn, reflects the leadership's changing tactics). This is because the government-controlled mass media in Russia are able to effectively influence the public's views (90% of Russians rely for their news on the television, which transmits state propaganda; only 30% look for alternative sources of information on the Internet). Moreover, respondents in polls often conceal their real views, refusing to answer questions or lying to align their answers with what they perceive to be the current binding 'political line'. Nonetheless, it is unquestionable that the poll results do reflect the real views of a large portion of the Russian public and correctly identify public opinion trends.

Even with such distorted and uncertain sources of information about the Russian public's views, one cannot but notice some characteristic phenomena. An analysis of the trends in the Russian public opinion's views of the US in the last 15 years (see the chart below) leads to several conclusions.

Russian attitudes towards the US in opinion poll results



Firstly, the views on the US and its policy fluctuate, sometimes considerably. They tend to be generally positive in periods of pragmatic co-operation between Russia and the US, and deteriorate rapidly in periods of crises, usually in connection with US foreign political-military interventions. That was the case in 1999 when the United States and NATO intervened in Kosovo, in 2002–2003 during the Iraq crisis and the subsequent US intervention, and in the summer of 2008 during the Russian-Georgian war (for the outbreak of which the United States was co-responsible, according to Russian propaganda). That has also been the case since 2014 in connection with the crisis and war in Ukraine, with the Kremlin's propaganda representing the Russian aggression as a civil war in Ukraine and an effort to avert the consequences of the Ukrainian 'coup' allegedly staged by the West, especially the US. Historically, the tendency was for positive views of the US to quickly re-emerge in polls following the resolution of the given crisis. The current crisis which started in early 2014 is different, though: this time the perceptions of Americans have deteriorated to unprecedentedly low levels.

Secondly, irrespective of the periodic fluctuations, anti-Americanism has been increasing systematically in Russia. In each successive crisis, the negative trend in perceptions has been deeper, and following normalisation, views have typically stabilised at lower level than before. Thirdly, an analysis of the polls in greater depth reveals that Russians hold persistently ambivalent feelings about the Americans. On the one hand, the US is admired for its power and modernity, and its people for their rationality and entrepreneurial spirit. American mass culture (films, music) is as popular in Russia as in many Western countries. The Russians appreciate US-made computers, office equipment and telephones. Children of rich and influential Russians often study in the US, and some businesspeople and state officials purchase real estate and shop in the US (sometimes secretly; the practice has become more difficult in recent years because of the Kremlin's pressure to step up control of the elite). At the same time, however, the US is

often condemned for its aspirations to global hegemony, aggressiveness and tendency to interfere in other states' internal affairs. Americans are accused of arrogance, hypocrisy, simplicity and spiritual and moral poverty. Against this background, it is not surprising that a majority of the Russian public authentically supports the policy of challenging the United States' foreign and security policy which President Putin has been pursuing in his third term.¹³ However, for the reasons described above, the Russians will not have any problems with quickly and visibly adopting more favourable views of the US the moment the Kremlin's political tactics and propaganda line so require.

4. Politics: Russia's expectations and grievances

Any analysis of the dynamics of Russia's policy towards the United States requires a look into the Russian leadership's official narratives on the United States and how they have evolved over the last sixteen years. Those narratives include some distinctive recurrent elements, such as criticism of the United States and its policies, and calls for policy change, which effectively reflect the conditions on which Russia would be willing to develop more positive relations with the US and demonstrate Moscow's specific understanding of what 'equal partnership' with the United States means. On the basis of official Russian statements and documents, and the explicit or implicit messages formulated therein, it is possible to compile a list of Russia's expectations and grievances vis-à-vis the United States.

¹³ For more information on the deeper conclusions from an analysis of trends in the Russian public opinion's perceptions of the United States, see Денис Волков, История Российского антиамериканизма: почему в России стали считать США врагом, Moscow Carnegie Centre, 27 May 2015, <http://carnegie.ru/2015/05/27/ru-60220/i9kf>; Денис Волков, Почему мы не любим Америку, *Ведомости*, 24 April 2016, <http://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2016/04/25/638889-pochemu-mi-ne-lyubim-ameriku>

Table 3. Russia's expectations and grievances vis-à-vis the United States (selected issues)

Sphere	What Russia accuses the US of doing	What Russia expects of the US
Russia's internal affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - interference in Russia's internal affairs; - public criticism of Russia's internal policy; - supporting political opposition; - attempts at changing Russia's political regime; - distributing information that compromises the Russian authorities; - espionage; - prosecuting Russian nationals in third countries; - (previously) <i>insufficient co-operation in fighting terrorism / supporting terrorism/separatism in the North Caucasus</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - to refrain from criticising Russia's internal policy and attempting to interfere with that policy; - to refrain from attempts at changing Russia's political regime or undermining its leadership; - to release Viktor Bout from prison and hand him over to Russia. <p>In the optimum variant: to support the Russian authorities and strengthen their legitimacy.</p>
The post-Soviet area (other than the Baltic States)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - supporting the 'export of democratic revolutions' to countries in the region and undermining Russian influence in those countries; - attempting to sabotage Eurasian integration; - (previously) <i>initiating and supporting anti-Russian inter-state structures (GUAM, the Community of Democratic Choice)</i>; - developing political and military co-operation with Ukraine, and supporting Ukraine's and Georgia's potential membership in NATO as well as their and Moldova's integration with the EU; - (previously) <i>attempting to step up its military presence in the South Caucasus and maintain its military presence in Central Asia</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - to refrain from any involvement or presence in the post-Soviet area which have not been agreed with Russia; - to recognise the post-Soviet area as Russia's sphere of influence; - to refrain from developing military co-operation and any closer co-operation with the post-Soviet states; - to establish formal relations and start co-operation with the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation. <p>In the optimum variant: to support Russia's role as the hegemon of the post-Soviet space and the leader of its integration.</p>

Sphere	What Russia accuses the US of doing	What Russia expects of the US
Europe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - stepping up its military presence in Central Europe; - orientating NATO towards 'aggressive activities' against Russia; - pushing for further NATO enlargement (especially to the east); - pressing the EU and its leading member states to push for an 'anti-Russian policy' and preventing their closer co-operation with Russia; - sabotaging important EU-Russian economic co-operation projects; - encouraging the EU to be active in its Eastern membership and crowd out Russian influence; - attempting to use the OSCE institutions and instruments to 'export democratic revolutions' to the Eastern neighbourhood. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - to restrain its presence, and especially military presence, in Europe, including Central Europe in particular; - to refrain from any further NATO enlargement; - to create in Central Europe a partly demilitarised, <i>de facto</i> buffer zone; - to withdraw US tactical nuclear weapons from Europe; - to refrain from obstructing the development of closer Russian-European co-operation; - to refrain from attempts at restraining Russian influence in Europe. <p>In the optimum variant: to support the development of a new security architecture in Europe, in which Russia would be an equal partner; possibly also to develop trilateral political and economic co-operation in Europe/Eurasia (together with the EU and Russia).</p>
Middle East	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - attempting to restrain Russia's presence and influence in the Greater Middle East; - destabilising the region by organising and supporting the Arab Spring as an 'anti-Russian geopolitical project'; involvement in the illegal regime change in Libya and Egypt; - pressing Syria and striving to topple the Assad regime, supporting terror groups in Syria, trying to obstruct Russia's co-operation with the Assad regime and with Iran in Syria; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - to give up the policy of toppling undemocratic regimes in the Greater Middle East (including Syria); - to refrain from attempts at restraining Russia's presence and influence in the region; - to establish a coalition with Russia to fight terrorism and Islamic radicalism.

Sphere	What Russia accuses the US of doing	What Russia expects of the US
Middle East	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - putting political pressure on Iran and trying to thwart its co-operation with Russia; - failing to recognise Russia's role in the regulation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; - ineffective stabilisation efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan and attempts at restraining Russia's co-operation with those states; - insufficient co-operation with Russia in fighting terrorism and Islamic radicalism / supporting Islamic radicalism 	<p>In the optimum variant: to recognise Russia as a key player which jointly decides on the resolution of problems in the Greater Middle East; to actively support Russia politically, financially and intelligence-wise in the 'fight against terrorism'.</p>
Asia / Pacific	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - attempting to separate Russia from China and India and undermine Russia's co-operation with those countries; - stepping up military presence and developing closer military co-operation with Japan, South Korea, South-East Asian states and Australia, and encouraging those states to pursue 'anti-Russian' policies; - attempting to crowd Russia out of the arms markets in the region. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - to restrain US military presence and military co-operation in the region; - to refrain from seeking to thwart Russia's co-operation with countries in the region. <p>In the optimum variant: to recognise Russia's right to jointly decide on security matters in the region; to 'compensate' Russia for not pursuing closer co-operation with China.</p>
Other regions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - attempting to thwart Russia's closer co-operation with certain countries (including Venezuela, Cuba, Brazil, Argentina and South Africa); - attempting to crowd Russia out of the regional arms markets. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - to refrain from attempts at restraining Russia's activities in the regions in question.

Sphere	What Russia accuses the US of doing	What Russia expects of the US
Global economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - imposing financial and economic sanctions on Russia and encouraging other states to join them; - maintaining restrictions on advanced technology exports to Russia; - promoting multilateral trade agreements which undermine Russia's interests (TTIP, TTP); - (previously) <i>hindering Russia's accession to the WTO; failing to abolish the Jackson-Vanik amendment</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - to lift all sanctions and restrictions imposed on Russia; - to refrain from concluding multilateral trade deals in which Russia does not participate.
Global security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - unilaterally using military force (including under the pretext of humanitarian interventions) in violation of international law and against Russia's objections; - withdrawing from the ABM Treaty and disturbing the strategic equilibrium by developing missile defence, including in Europe and Asia; - developing military technologies dangerous to Russia, including precision weapons; - developing plans to militarise space; - carrying out cyber-attacks against Russia; - using the internet for information activities targeting Russia and its interests. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - to refrain from military interventions if Russia objects and if they are not mandated by the UN; - to abandon its missile defence plans, or develop them in cooperation with Russia; - to refrain from developing new military technologies dangerous to Russia; - to impose limits on the freedom of the internet; - to reach agreement on refraining from cyber-attacks; - to support an international ban on unconstitutional government change. <p>In the optimum variant: recognising Russia's right to jointly decide on global security matters; to refrain from any actions in this sphere to which Russia objects; to create an international governance structure for the internet, with Russia's involvement.</p>

Author's own selection and interpretation, based on statements and documents published by the Russian Presidential Administration, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, the Ministry of Defence of Russia and media reports.

It is not too difficult to notice that the above list, inevitably simplified as it is, reveals that Russia has perceived and continues to perceive the United States as a strategic opponent whose policy not only harms many of Russia's vital interests but also poses a direct threat to Russia, and especially the Russian leadership. Even the numerous deals concluded with the United States and examples of pragmatic co-operation (see below) have never fully obliterated this distrust (sometimes quite irrational) and the sense of threat. Paradoxically, the Russian leadership can simultaneously claim (and apparently believe) that the United States is a 'declining power' in the process of losing its global influence, and yet it is a dangerous enemy of Russia; that it has been ignoring Russia and its interests, and yet is focused on countering and harming Russia. Those paradoxical elements in Russia's perceptions have determined Moscow's policy towards the United States over the last sixteen years.

II. DYNAMICS OF RUSSIA'S POLICY TOWARDS THE UNITED STATES

Russian-American relations have a turbulent history in which the defining moments include the Russian Empire's friendly approach to the US at the onset of its independence, the sale of Alaska to the United States, the joint fight against Germany and its allies in the two World Wars, but also fierce global rivalry during the Cold War. The Soviet Union's crisis and collapse destroyed the bipolar global order and seriously weakened Russia, inflicting a trauma which still affects the perceptions of the Russian leadership. Its members still believe the myth that the US deliberately caused the break-up of the USSR in order to change the global and regional balance of power in Russia's disfavour, even though this view has little to do with reality (the US was in fact surprised and concerned by the Soviet Union's break-up, and awkwardly tried to prevent it).¹⁴ Nevertheless, that myth continues to influence the Russian leadership's political decisions. The period that followed the Soviet Union's collapse, i.e. the Yeltsin era in the 1990s, brought many moments of crisis and tension in mutual relations (for example, during the US and NATO airstrikes in Bosnia & Herzegovina in 1995, and during the Chechen war in 1994–6), but also periods of pragmatic co-operation (including in the sphere of nuclear disarmament). Russia owes its gradual inclusion in the G7, the restructuring of its debt and financial assistance from the IMF and the World Bank mainly to the positive attitude of the United States. Today the Kremlin prefers to view those times as a period of Russia's weakness of which the US took advantage, and seeks to revise the post-Cold War order, which it considers to be unjust. This 'Putinist' interpretation of recent history has contributed massively to Russian-American problems in the 21st century.

¹⁴ For more information, see Serhii Plokhyy, *The Last Empire. The Final Days of the Soviet Union*, New York 2014.

1. Russia and the late Clinton era (1999–2000): the Kosovo shock and reactions to trauma

New Year's Eve on 31 December 1999, when Vladimir Putin took over from Boris Yeltsin as President of Russia, marked the beginning of a new chapter not only for Russia, but also for Russian-American relations. Putin took office at a difficult time for Russia. Although the country was already recovering from the deep financial crisis of 1998, it had to face a fresh trauma as a result of the Kosovo crisis in spring 1999. The NATO airstrikes against Yugoslavia, which had not been mandated by the UN Security Council and continued for nearly three months (despite Russia's firm objections), revealed the impotence of the Russian state, which stood in glaring contrast to its actively promoted image of itself as a great power.

The first eastward enlargement of NATO¹⁵ which happened at the same time (and included Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary) was seen by Moscow as the West's symbolic consummation of its Cold War victory, even though NATO's political deal with Russia as expressed in the Founding Act in a way 'compensated' for it. On the other hand, the United States and most European countries signed the compromise Adapted Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE) with Russia, closing several years of difficult negotiations, at the Istanbul summit in November 1999, that is, at the height of the Second Chechen War, when Russia was being heavily criticised by the West for its extreme brutality.¹⁶

Yet the then US President Bill Clinton and Secretary of State Madelaine Albright nonetheless became symbols of US liberal

¹⁵ In the years 1993-1996 Russia's diplomacy had actively campaigned against that enlargement, and even afterwards Moscow never fully accepted it.

¹⁶ Russia gained more freedom to deploy forces in its territory covered by the Treaty. Ceilings on a potential deployment of NATO forces in Central Europe were agreed. Russia committed itself to withdrawing its forces from Georgia and Moldova.

interventionism for Moscow. The tactic which Putin adopted in that situation consisted of a combination of pragmatic rhetoric and quite assertive real policies (which was almost the exact opposite of Yeltsin's tactic). On the one hand, he pledged (while still Russia's prime minister in December 1999¹⁷) to rebuild Russia's position as a world power by focusing on economic development, and also (while already acting President in March 2000¹⁸) declared that he would not rule out Russia's membership in NATO. On the other, he started to rebuild or develop closer relations with countries hostile to the United States, such as Iran, Iraq, Syria, North Korea, Libya and Cuba; for instance, in November 2000 Moscow withdrew from the 1995 deal with the US over Iran.¹⁹ At that time, it became a priority for Russian diplomacy to block US plans, initiated by the Clinton administration, to build a strategic missile defence system. To that end, Moscow strove to win the backing of non-Western powers such as China and India, and tried (ineffectively) to persuade Washington's main European allies to back its own alternative proposal (presented in June 2000) to build a US-European-Russian system.

2. Russia and George W. Bush's two terms (2001–2008): from the 'pro-Western turn' to the Georgia crisis

Some Russian experts believe, not without reason, that the Kremlin traditionally prefers to deal with Republican administrations in the US, seeing them as more willing to pragmatically 'talk business' and not interested in promoting democracy, while the Democrats are seen as willing to reach agreement, but also likely to support regime change in undemocratic countries and invoke

¹⁷ Vladimir Putin, *Россия на рубеже тысячелетий*, *Независимая газета*, 30 December 1999, http://www.ng.ru/politics/1999-12-30/4_millennium.html

¹⁸ BBC Breakfast with Frost, Interview: Vladimir Putin, 5 March 2000; http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/static/audio_video/programmes/breakfast_with_frost/transcripts/putin5.mar.txt

¹⁹ Under the deal, Russia agreed not to conclude new contracts for the provision of arms and nuclear technology to Iran.

values in politics. From this point of view, the presidency of George W. Bush must have been quite a disappointment for Moscow.

Right after Bush took office, the new administration took some assertive steps which Russia saw as affronts; for example, it expelled 50 Russian diplomats from the US on charges of espionage in March 2001²⁰, pledged to build a missile defence system, and announced that NATO would be enlarged further. Rhetorically, Moscow's reaction was restrained, and the Russian leadership clearly adopted a new tactic: in summer the same year Russia signalled that it was ready to approve changes to the ABM Treaty (which had been blocking the creation of the missile shield) and to close down its signals intelligence station in Lourdes, Cuba.²¹ The first orientation meeting between Putin and Bush in Ljubljana in June 2001 warmed up the atmosphere²², but fell short of resolving the contentious issues. It was probably already then that the Kremlin made the decision, practically implemented after the 9/11 terror attacks in the US, to make pragmatic gestures towards the US and the West.

The September 11 attacks, which marked a watershed in US politics, also revealed Putin's ability to move quickly and creatively take advantage of a political opportunity as it appears. During a meeting with the leaders of the security institutions on 22 September Putin, reportedly against the opinion of most of the other

²⁰ This was very clearly a reaction to the discovery, two months before, that Robert Hansen, a high-ranking FBI officer, was a Russian spy. In January 2001 the FBI had arrested Pavel Borodin, the state secretary of the Union of Russia and Belarus, on a visit to New York, and in February 2001 the CIA chief George Tenet publicly accused Russia of selling military nuclear and missile technologies to Iran, China, India and North Korea.

²¹ It is worth noting that Russia and Cuba had signed a deal extending the station's operation in December 2000. Russia's decision to close down the Lourdes centre was formally announced in the new political situation after the September 11 attacks.

²² It was after this meeting that the President Bush famously said: "I looked the man in the eye. [...] I was able to get a sense of his soul."

participants, decided that Russia would offer the United States limited support in its retaliatory actions (for instance by opening air corridors, not objecting to the use of airfields in Central Asia, and stepping up assistance to the anti-Taliban opposition in Afghanistan). Moscow did not object to the US attack on Afghanistan, and also announced the closure of its radar station in Lourdes, Cuba, as well as the Cam Ranh naval base in Vietnam (October 2001). Moreover, it authorised new sanctions against Iraq (November 2001). In the atmosphere of the so-called pro-Western turn in Russia's foreign policy, Moscow opened intensive talks, also with Washington, about a new format for political and security relations between Russia and NATO as the Kremlin, guided by cold calculation, noticed an opportunity to achieve at least some of its political goals (see Part I) through bargaining and making deals with the West, especially the United States.

Russia's new tactic was only partly successful. Even though a declaration on the new format of Russia-NATO relations was signed in May 2002, Moscow gained less than it had expected (in particular, it did not gain the right to effectively influence the Alliance's decisions). The declaration was also a case of political 'cross-sale' intended to compensate Russia for the fact that in November 2002, another group of Central European states would be invited to join NATO, including the Baltic States, against whose accession Moscow had battled politically for the previous nine years. Russia failed to prevent the United States' withdrawal from the ABM Treaty (the decision was announced in December 2001 and came into force in June 2002), even though it managed to persuade Washington to sign a new (less ambitious and very perfunctory disarmament treaty that restated the formal nuclear parity between the two sides (the SORT Treaty signed in May 2002). In the meantime, Russia started to publicly express its dissatisfaction with the United States' lingering military presence in Central Asia.

At the same time, Moscow had great expectations concerning the Russian-American energy dialogue initiated in May 2002. The

first test delivery of Russian oil to the US by the private-owned oil company Yukos took place in July 2002, and during the bilateral energy summit in Houston in October 2002 Russian companies declared that they were ready to supply up to 85 million tonnes of oil a year to the United States (a pledge that never materialised). Russia hoped that by laying a foundation for stronger economic relations with the US (based on co-operation among energy companies) it could stabilise mutual relations and foster the development of a lobby, consisting mainly of US energy companies, which would advocate for closer co-operation with Russia. Moscow also obtained tangible financial gains in the form of lower anti-dumping duties as a result of the United States' decision to recognise Russia as a market economy, as well as a boost to its prestige when it was granted full membership of the G8 in June 2002.

Russia made some limited concessions on Iraq to the US (including limited sanctions), but that did not stop the United States from launching an armed operation against the country in March-May 2003. The intervention was a hard blow to the prestige of Moscow, which had, along with Germany and France, been engaged in a diplomatic campaign against military intervention in Iraq (while at the same time secretly selling weapons to Iraq and profiting informally from the trade in Iraqi oil as part of the Oil-for-Food programme). Moscow's harsh criticism of the US over Iraq was nonetheless accompanied by efforts to ensure Russia's participation in the post-war political settlement for the country. Russia also carefully manoeuvred its way with regard to Iran. Facing growing criticism from Washington over its co-operation with Tehran, Moscow decided to conclude a new informal Iran deal with the United States (May/June 2003).²³

²³ For instance, Russia pledged to make the launch of the Bushehr nuclear power plant which it was building conditional on Tehran's consent to provide additional guarantees that the spent nuclear fuel would not be used for military purposes (the guarantees were indeed provided).

Around the same time, the so-called ‘colour revolutions’ in the post-Soviet area became a new source of major tensions between Russia and the US. Moscow saw ‘Washington’s hand’ in the developments and treated them as the execution of an alleged US plan to undermine Russian influence in the remaining post-Soviet countries.²⁴ The event that vexed Moscow most was the ‘Orange Revolution’ in Ukraine in the autumn of 2004. The victory of the pro-Western opposition provoked Moscow to criticise the West, and especially the United States, harshly and publicly for supporting the ‘export of revolutions’ in the post-Soviet area. From Russia’s point of view, the Ukrainian revolution thwarted its plan to take strategic control over Ukraine as part of its Eurasian integration project. On top of that, throughout the year 2004 Russia, and especially the North Caucasus, was shaken by terror attacks organised by Chechen separatists and Islamic radicals. After the most dramatic attack in September 2004, in which a school in Beslan was targeted and around 330 persons, mostly children, lost their lives, President Putin and his chief ideologist Vladislav Surkov formulated an unprecedented accusation against anonymous groups of influence (including ‘in America’), claiming that there was an international conspiracy to destroy Russian statehood.²⁵ The allegations very clearly alluded to the mythical ‘Brzezinski plan’, an alleged US scheme to encircle, weaken and divide Russia. Against this backdrop, the allegations that the US was sponsoring the ‘Tulip Revolution’ in Kyrgyzstan which ousted President Askar Akayev in March 2005 were only a modest addition. In the

²⁴ The then foreign minister of Russia, Igor Ivanov, publicly accused the US of involvement in the ousting of the Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze in the ‘Rose Revolution’ in November 2003, and of thwarting the Russian plan to resolve the problem of Transnistria in December 2003 (the latter had been particularly humiliating for Putin, who at the last moment had to cancel his visit to Moldova, where he had been expecting to sign a deal that would grant Russia a permanent lever to influence Chisinau).

²⁵ See President Putin’s address to the nation on 4 September 2004 <http://krem-lin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22589>; and the interview with Vladislav Surkov in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 28 September 2004, <http://www.kp.ru/daily/23370/32473/>

aftermath of those developments, the Kremlin *de facto* started to consider US policy as posing a threat to Russia.²⁶

Guided by a sense of threat from the United States, the Kremlin decided at the onset of Bush's second term (2005–2008) to adopt the tactic of persuading Washington to make a deal on the delimitation of interests. Russian representatives repeatedly communicated their postulates to the US side. Most importantly, they expected the US to renounce any attempts at influencing Russia's internal policy (and to refrain from publicly criticising Russia's rising authoritarianism), and to recognise the post-Soviet area as a Russian sphere of influence and not intervene in that area, especially against Russia's interests.²⁷ At that time Moscow did not take any stronger anti-US steps, also for image-related reasons: it wanted leading Western politicians to be present at the celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany in Moscow (May 2005) and the G8 summit in St. Petersburg (July 2006). At the same time, the Russian leadership tried to demonstrate its ability to constructively influence the problem of Iran's military nuclear programme, partly to fend off US pressure for stronger sanctions against Iran. To that end, in autumn 2005 it

²⁶ In this context, it is paradoxical that some of Putin's statements could be seen as expressions of support for George W. Bush (and not the Democratic candidate John Kerry) in the 2004 US presidential election (however, the elections took place before the 'Orange Revolution' broke out). The strongest message of endorsement for Bush came with President Putin's statement in a press conference in Dushanbe, Tajikistan on 18 October 2004. The Russian leader said on that occasion that the aim of international terrorism was to prevent the re-election of George W. Bush as US President, and if that aim were achieved, it would be a success for the terrorists, who would then step up their international activities.

²⁷ Such was the tone of statements by many high-ranking Russian state officials. Cf. the interview with the Russian deputy foreign minister Vitaly Trubnikov, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 12 May 2004, http://www.ng.ru/world/2004-05-12/1_trubnikov.html; Сергей Лавров, *Демократия, международное управление и будущее мироустройство, Россия в глобальной политике*, No.6/2004, December 2004, http://www.globalaffairs.ru/number/n_4201; and the statement by defence minister Sergei Ivanov in the Council on Foreign Relations, New York, 13 January 2005.

made a (failed) attempt at persuading Tehran to accept Russian proposals to resolve the problem (in the hope that the initiative's success would enable Russia to stop the implementation of the US missile shield project, one of the aims of which was to protect Europe from a missile attack from Iran).

The signals coming from Moscow about Russia's willingness to conclude a strategic agreement with the United States had a cold reception in Washington.²⁸ Meanwhile, the good situation in the resource markets, which was generating huge revenues for Russia, strengthened Russia's sense of assertiveness. In that situation, the Russian leadership decided to adopt a tougher line on the United States. This change, also reflected in a new rhetoric, was symbolically marked by President Putin's famous speech at the Munich conference in February 2007, in which he criticised the US in very harsh terms.²⁹ The Munich arguments were not new, but the strong way in which they were formulated signalled the end of Russia's tactic of brushing over problems in relations with the US and making limited concessions to Washington. After a preparatory information and diplomatic campaign, in June 2007 the Kremlin presented the US with (unrealistic) proposals to jointly build a strategic missile defence system.³⁰ Facing a cold

²⁸ The US's attitude found a symbolic expression in the statement by US Vice-President Richard Cheney in Vilnius in May 2006, in which he was very critical of Russia, and accused Moscow of abandoning the principles of democracy and using energy as a weapon against its neighbours (Cheney was referring to the Russian-Ukrainian gas crisis in early 2006).

²⁹ In his speech, Putin fiercely criticised US foreign and security policy, claiming it was unilateral and based on force, destabilised international security and undermined the existing arms control and disarmament regimes. See President Putin's statement at the Munich conference, 10 February 2007, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>

³⁰ During the intensive Russian-American talks in October 2007, Moscow effectively restated the conditions on which it would be willing to accept the shield project. These concerned the joint assessment of missile threats, the development of an integrated anti-missile system with Russia (which would include the radar station in Gabala, Azerbaijan and Russia's new radar station in Armavir, and have one of its two projected command centres based in Moscow), and Moscow's right to jointly decide on the use of the system.

reaction from Washington, in July Putin *de facto* withdrew from (formally suspended) the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE). Before that happened, the US and other NATO countries had rejected Russia's proposals to further revise the treaty in favour of Moscow. In August, Russia resumed regular patrol flights by nuclear-armed bombers for the first time since the end of the Cold War. Another demonstration of Moscow's new aggressive policy came with the massive cyber-attack on Estonia in April and May, and the missile attack on Georgia in August 2007. After this series of events, Moscow put forward a proposal to establish a 'new 21st-century concert of powers' (trilateral co-operation between Russia, the EU and the US in the Euro-Atlantic area), which was presented in September 2007 in a policy speech delivered by Minister Lavrov at the MGIMO.³¹ Washington did not respond.

What followed was an escalation of tensions stemming from what Russia perceived as the West's crossing of the 'red lines' previously drawn by Moscow (recognition of Kosovo's independence, development of the missile shield, the further eastward enlargement of NATO).³² Kosovo proclaimed its independence in February 2008 and was quite quickly recognised by the United States and most other Western states, which triggered a strong reaction in Russia. At the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008 (where the political decision on the future accession of Ukraine and Georgia was taken) President Putin warned about the possible break-up of Ukraine.³³

Moscow also demanded that the project should be frozen for some time. Such conditions were unacceptable to the US side, which was prepared to accept the co-operation of two separate systems (one American and one Russian), Russian inspections of the shield facilities and an exchange of data; it was also prepared to postpone the activation of the shield.

³¹ See Sergei Lavrov's address during the inauguration of the academic year at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), 3 September 2007, http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/70vQR5KJWVmR/content/id/364540

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ President Putin's statement during the NATO summit in Bucharest, 4 April 2008, <http://www.unian.net/politics/110868-vyistuplenie-vladimira-putina-na-sammite-nato-buharest-4-aprelya-2008-goda.html>

At that point, preparations for the war with Georgia were already underway (Putin would later admit that he had approved the war plans in late 2006 or early 2007).³⁴

In those circumstances, the formal change in the president's seat in May 2008 when Putin's loyal aide and designee, the former PM Dmitry Medvedev took office, was not going to change much, especially since Medvedev never gained real political independence. As prime minister, Putin remained the *de facto* main power broker. The five-day, small-scale war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008, which started with a successful Russian provocation, not only changed the local strategic situation in favour of Russia (by consolidating Russia's control of the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, whose independence Russia formally recognised), but was also a proxy war with the United States³⁵, for whom the Russian operation came as a big surprise. Another gain for Russia concerned the fact that it suddenly found itself the centre of attention (albeit as an enemy) of the US leadership and elite, and could no longer be ignored. Most importantly, the war destroyed the chances of Georgia and Ukraine joining NATO in the foreseeable future. The reactions of the US and the West were restrained to say the least. Unlike the EU, Washington did not impose even symbolic sanctions, which strengthened Moscow's conviction that its aggressive policy had proven effective.

3. Russia and Obama's two terms (2009-2016): from 'reset' to the Ukrainian and Syrian crises

As Washington was debating ways to prevent a dangerous escalation of the political conflict with Russia and normalise relations,

³⁴ See President Putin's interview for the Russian media, 12 August 2012, <http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=873569&tid=60513>

³⁵ The war was effectively an extension of the Russian *Kavkaz 2008* military exercise held immediately after the conclusion of the US military exercise in Georgia. During the war, Russian forces seized some US military equipment located in Georgia and forced the evacuation of US military instructors.

Moscow, whose assertiveness was growing rapidly, adopted a wait-and-see attitude, while still demonstrating its potential to harm the US. It delivered a particularly hard blow in February 2009 by successfully pressuring Kyrgyzstan to terminate the agreement on the stationing of US air forces at the Manas airport near Bishkek.³⁶

The first step towards normalisation was taken by the US. At the Munich conference in February 2009, the US Vice-President Joe Biden called for a reset of relations between NATO and Russia. In March 2009, the heads of Russian and American diplomacy (Hillary Clinton and Sergei Lavrov) met to jointly press a symbolic reset button and restart bilateral relations.³⁷ The meeting opened a period of rapprochement between Russia and the US, from which both sides would derive some benefits. However, the reset policy did not resolve the ingrained contradictions of strategic interests, nor did it change the two sides' diverging mutual perceptions or their respective understandings of the situation, which would later lead to a crisis and the ultimate failure of the reset policy. The Kremlin saw the reset as proof that its new aggressive policy was working and as evidence of the United States' weakness. Also, it treated the reset not so much as a mechanism for mutual compromise, but rather as Washington's withdrawal from its previous policy, which in Moscow's view had been wrong and anti-Russian. Russia's contribution to the reset consisted in

³⁶ The base was an important logistics centre as part of the so-called Northern Distribution Network of the NATO and US forces stationed in Afghanistan. Apart from terminating the agreement, in January 2009 Russia provoked a new 'gas war' with Ukraine lasting several days, which was more dangerous than any of the previous ones and affected a large group of EU states, and also announced plans to re-create its navy supply points in Tartus, Syria, Socotra, Yemen and Tripoli, Libya (although only the first one would materialise subsequently). Finally, Russia also started to develop closer political, energy and military co-operation with the regime of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela.

³⁷ In hindsight, it may seem to have been a bad omen that the symbolic button, manufactured by the US side, was wrongly labelled in Russian as *peregruzka* (перезрузка, overload) instead of *perezagruzka* (перезагрузка, reset).

only limited concessions in spheres where it was also likely to gain, or where the calculation of costs and benefits justified them.

One of the reasons for the reset's limited success concerned President Dmitry Medvedev personally. For the West, Medvedev was a symbol of new and better bilateral relations, but contrary to appearances, he in fact shared Vladimir Putin's vision of Russia's strategic interests (with Russia as a great power controlling its own sphere of influence and jointly deciding on the global order). At that time Medvedev may only have differed from Putin in his conviction that tactics based on dialogue and limited co-operation with the West could be successful and help modernise the Russian economy, and thus strengthen Russia's position as a global power – which was largely a repetition of Putin's tactic during his first term. Most elites in the US and elsewhere in the West believed that Medvedev's presidency would in the long term bring about real change in Russia and result in more pragmatic, or even liberal policies. For this reason they tried to support Medvedev, sometimes directly in opposition to Putin, whom they saw as a man thinking in obsolete, Cold War terms. Putin, who was planning his return to power, perceived that as an affront and yet another attempt at a 'Western conspiracy', which only accelerated the reset's end.

Russia's aims at that time included a withdrawal of the US military presence from Central Asia, which Russia regarded as its sphere of influence; at the same time, however, Moscow was interested in a continued US presence in Afghanistan. This was for two reasons: firstly, because the war with the Taliban was concentrating the US and NATO's resources in that country, as a result of which neither Washington nor the Alliance could devote much attention, for instance, to Eastern Europe; and secondly, their presence was reducing the risk of Islamic radicalism expanding towards Central Asia. In an extreme scenario, such an expansion could destabilise the Central Asian states and destroy Russian influence in the region, or require costly military involvement from Russia. This is why, in July 2009, Russia concluded a deal with the

US on military transit to and from Afghanistan via its territory.³⁸ This agreement could have potentially boosted Russia's role in that transit, and offered Russia financial gains and a bargaining card in relations with Washington. In practice, however, its impact was limited because of the difficult financial and technical conditions imposed by the Russian side.

Russia also sought to conclude new deals with the US on reducing strategic nuclear arsenals.³⁹ This was related to Moscow's desire to cut the costs of maintaining its nuclear potential while at the same time preserving nuclear parity with the US (which was important mainly for political and prestige reasons). Unlike the Bush administration, the Obama administration saw the idea of the gradual elimination of nuclear weapons (Global O) and nuclear non-proliferation as foreign policy priorities, which created a favourable setting for Moscow's efforts. In April 2010, after relatively short negotiations, the two sides signed a new Russian-American disarmament treaty, the so-called New START (which came into force quite quickly this time, in February 2011).⁴⁰

However, Russia did not give up demonstrating its military might, as became clear in August and September 2009 when it organised a series of large military exercises with aggressive scenarios on its

³⁸ Russia ratified the agreement in February 2011 and terminated it in May 2015. While Russia did play an important role in non-military supplies to Afghanistan (mostly of fuel and provisions: in 2012 the so-called Northern Distribution Network would at times account for as much as 85% of all supplies), its role in military transit was marginal.

³⁹ This was all the more important given the fact that the 1991 START 1 Treaty would expire by the end of 2009, the 1993 START 2 had not come into force, and the 2002 SORT Treaty was limited in scope.

⁴⁰ The New START treaty lowered the ceilings laid down in the previous treaties (by 10% to 30% in the case of the warheads ceiling under the SORT Treaty, and by 50% for the delivery vehicles' ceilings under the START 1 Treaty). This was particularly convenient for Russia which could, at a low cost, reduce portions of its arsenal whose lifetime was about to expire.

western flank.⁴¹ One of Russia's priorities was invariably to stop the implementation of the missile shield project (strategic missile defence), especially in Central Europe. In fact, that had been one of the conditions on which Moscow agreed to sign the New START Treaty. Obama's decision to scrap the original missile shield project announced on 17 September 2009 was therefore welcomed in Moscow. However, it was not sufficient for Russia because at the same time President Obama announced a new, more limited, more flexible and cheaper variant of the project.⁴²

One real concession that Russia made to the US concerned its consent to impose a new, third wave of international sanctions on Iran, as it still refused to allow international supervision of its nuclear programme (sanctions were adopted by the UN Security Council in June 2010). Iran had previously rejected Russian proposals to resolve the problem on several occasions. However, Russia's agreement to the sanctions did not mean that Moscow had stopped co-operating with Tehran, even though it also made an important gesture to Washington by suspending (by a decree issued by President Medvedev) a contract for the provision of S-300 missile defence systems to Iran (the contract had been criticised by the US and Israel).

The conclusion, in January and August 2011 and in April 2012, of deals between the US ExxonMobil and Russia's state-controlled Rosneft on co-operation in the sphere of development of and oil extraction in Russia's Arctic shelf and the Black Sea was a success for Russia. The agreements offered Moscow a chance to raise capital and obtain the technologies needed to exploit the rich oil

⁴¹ As part of the *Zapad*, *Onega* and *Ladoga* drills, Russia practiced moving massive forces long distances, as well as sea landings, and was reportedly planning to simulate an invasion of the Baltic States and a tactical nuclear attack on Warsaw.

⁴² The new plans envisaged replacing the projected counter-missile bases in Poland and the Czech Republic with a different type of missile (the SM-3 used in the AEGIS navy system) deployed in bases in Romania (as of 2015) and Poland (as of 2018).

deposits in the Russian shelf.⁴³ They also finally created an opportunity to build a stronger economic basis for the relations with the US, which had long been Moscow's aim.

The ratification of the 123 agreement on civilian nuclear co-operation by the US in September 2010 was another beneficial development for Russia. It paved the way for Russian companies to access the lucrative US nuclear fuel market. Similarly, the agreement on the terms of Russia's accession to the WTO, concluded in December 2011 after several months of final talks, which ended an eighteen-year(!) negotiation process and came into force in August 2012, was also potentially beneficial to Russia, as well as the US and EU states. However, it would soon turn out that Russia would not hesitate to violate its provisions. The WTO deal was likely the last outcome of the reset policy, which at that time was already in crisis.

This crisis became evident in March 2011 when President Medvedev's decision that Russia would not veto the UN Security Council resolution authorising a humanitarian intervention (no-fly zone) in Libya, where rebels were fighting to topple Muammar Gaddafi's regime, triggered an emotional and very critical response from Prime Minister Putin. To Putin, the Western military intervention in Libya, which helped to topple Gaddafi, proved his conspiracy theory (shared by conservative members of the ruling group) that the 'Arab Spring' was part of a secret US operation to change the geopolitical order in the Greater Middle East in favour of Washington and to the detriment of Moscow. It was probably at that time that Putin decided to put an end to the US policy of regime change, and decided that he would do this in Syria (which was also becoming engulfed by an anti-government uprising).

⁴³ Under these agreements, a joint venture was established (Rosneft 66.7%, ExxonMobil 33.3%). According to Russian estimates, the combined reserves in the fields in question are around 5 billion tonnes of oil and 10 billion m³ of gas. ExxonMobil has transferred minority stakes in its fields in the US and Canada to Rosneft, and pledged to invest US\$ 2.2 billion in geological works in the initial phase.

When Putin announced in September 2011 that he would stand in the presidential election scheduled in March 2012, that marked the end of the hopes, shared by Russian liberals and Western elites, that Russia could gradually evolve towards adopting a democratic domestic policy and a pragmatic foreign policy. When mass anti-government demonstrations took place in Moscow in December 2011, the paranoia of Putin and his circle reached a climax. His statements and behaviour at that time showed that he was convinced that the demonstrations were a coup attempt in the form of another ‘colour revolution’, organised and supported mainly by Washington. His subsequent domestic and foreign policy decisions can therefore be seen as a specific form of aggressive ‘self-defence’.

Putin started his new term as president in May 2012 by personally affronting president Obama as he refused to attend the G8 summit in Camp David.⁴⁴ What followed was a whole series of anti-American decisions taken by the Kremlin (and countermeasures by the US). In September, Russia ordered the state USAID agency (which was supporting social projects) to leave the country. In December, responding to the adoption of the so-called Magnitsky Act by the US Congress,⁴⁵ Russia enacted a law imposing retaliatory sanctions against a group of US officials and members of Congress, and banned adoptions of Russian children by US nationals.

⁴⁴ The US side had intentionally moved the summit from Chicago (where a NATO summit, which Putin was not attending, was taking place immediately beforehand) in order to enable the Russian president to take part. In response, the White House announced that President Obama would not be attending the APEC summit in Vladivostok, Russia.

⁴⁵ The main aim of the Magnitsky Act was to penalise the Russian officials and functionaries involved in causing the death of Sergei Magnitsky, the lawyer of the US Hermitage Capital Fund, in jail in Russia in 2009, and profiting from it. The measures included a ban on travel to the US and a freeze of their US banking accounts. Around the same time, the US Congress abolished the Jackson-Vanik amendment which had been blocking the grant of most-favoured nation status to Russia, however, the gesture was not appreciated in Moscow.

In January 2013, at the onset of President Barack Obama's second term, there was already no trace of the reset atmosphere in US/Russian relations. The Kremlin's principally hostile attitude towards the US leadership could not be softened either by the change of the US Secretary of State (when John Kerry, welcomed with joy by his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov, replaced Hillary Clinton who had been publicly accused of Russophobia in Russia), or by the letters Obama sent to Putin. Because Moscow was continuing its campaign against the missile shield, in March 2013 Obama once again restricted its scope by eliminating Moscow's greatest source of vexation, the so-called Phase 4 (which would have made it possible in future to intercept intercontinental ballistic missiles). As could be expected, the decision did not prompt Russia to lift its objections, but only resulted in a change of arguments,⁴⁶ because Russia's opposition was motivated not by military reasons, but mainly by geostrategic considerations (Russia objected to a permanent US military presence in Central Europe). Successive disarmament proposals extended by the US president in spring 2013 were ignored by Moscow. Instead, Russia stepped up its political and military support for the Syrian leader Bashar Assad whose regime was fighting an uprising against his rule. Moreover, in February 2013 Russia started to organise massive snap military exercises.

The crisis in Russian-US relations deepened in June 2013 when Edward Snowden, the runaway former employee of NSA, the US electronic intelligence and counter-intelligence agency, was granted

⁴⁶ Initially, Russia claimed that the counter-missile trajectory was not correct (which was not true) and that the future expansion of the system could pose a threat to Russia's strategic arsenal (which was technically impossible). Then it argued that the system could deepen the strategic imbalance and increase the United States capacity to block a retaliatory nuclear strike (which was absurd given the number of delivery vehicles in Russia's possession). When the US decided not to implement Phase 4, Russia started to demand that the US withdraw from Phase 3 as well, claiming that the construction of the silos in the counter-missile bases would make it possible for the US to deploy offensive nuclear weapons (which is not possible given the legal and political commitments adopted by the US and NATO).

refuge in Russia, and soon afterwards started disclosing secret documents of US espionage programmes. Tensions escalated further when Assad's regime in Syria used chemical weapons against civilians in the suburbs of Damascus in August 2013, and the United States, along with the United Kingdom and France, started preparations for retaliatory strikes in Syria. To prevent them, Moscow agreed to conclude an agreement with the United States on the UN-supervised elimination of Syria's chemical weapons, which, in turn, offered President Obama a pretext to refrain from intervening. That decision seems to have entailed far-reaching consequences, as it apparently led the Kremlin to conclude that Obama's administration was trying to avoid involvement in the Syrian war at all costs, which paved the way for Russia to step up its own involvement in the conflict.

An even deeper political confrontation occurred between the United States and Russia over the events in Ukraine. After the then President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich backtracked (under Russian pressure) on his commitment to conclude an Association Agreement with the EU, mass protests in Kyiv erupted in November 2013. As in 2004, Russia believed them to have been inspired and supported by the West, and the United States in particular. When the revolution toppled President Yanukovich in February 2014, Russia responded aggressively, by militarily occupying and then illegally annexing Crimea in March 2014, and then in April 2014 by stoking and militarily supporting a rebellion in Donbas in eastern Ukraine, which soon transformed into a regular, albeit low-scale war between Ukraine and Russia. This time the US and the EU responded strongly by imposing new political sanctions against Russia, as of March. After the rebels shot down a passenger plane over the Donbas in July 2014, the sanctions were toughened and extended to include financial and energy issues. Russia responded with counter-sanctions in August. On the other hand, especially in the early phase of the conflict, the US tried, without much success, to broker a diplomatic resolution of the conflict, a role it subsequently largely ceded to Germany and France. For

Russia, the Ukrainian conflict was not only a way to subjugate Ukraine using forceful methods, but also a proxy conflict with the US. The statements and moves by Putin and his conservative aides at that time showed clearly that they treated the conflict as a battle against 'Western, and mainly American aggression' aimed at crowding Russian influence out from a key state in the post-Soviet area. On the other hand, Obama's clear declarations to the effect that the US was unwilling to get involved militarily, and his refusal to authorise arms supplies to Ukraine, were seen in Moscow as signs that the US feared a confrontation with Russia, which encouraged Moscow to continue its aggressive policy.

However, in mid-2015 Russia very clearly started to de-escalate its direct involvement in the war in Ukraine as it was already preparing to open up a 'new front' in its political struggle with the US. When in September 2015 the Obama administration ignored Putin's call (formulated in the UN General Assembly) to create an anti-terror alliance against Islamic radicals with Russia, Moscow responded, on 30 September, by launching a limited military operation in Syria, which had been in preparation for months, and was aimed at salvaging the Assad regime and demonstrating the inefficacy of the US policy of regime change. Russia's brutal airstrikes, which claimed large numbers of civilian lives, were not directed against the radicals of the so-called Islamic State, but mainly against the moderate Syrian opposition supported by the US and the Sunni monarchies of the Arab peninsula. By supporting Assad (and his backers from Iran and the terror organisation Hezbollah) and undermining the moderate Syrian opposition, Russia effectively demonstrated (at a relatively low cost to itself) that it was the main power broker in the conflict, while at the same time delivering a blow to the image of the United States, further undermined by the failures of the successive ceasefires which Secretary of State John Kerry had tirelessly negotiated with Moscow.

However, the prestige-boosting success in Syria was not enough for Russia, and Moscow decided to strike at the US directly.

As early as the summer of 2015, hackers associated with the Russian secret services launched a cyber operation targeting the Democratic Party, which was stepped up in the spring and summer of 2016.⁴⁷ The materials intercepted at that time (some of which were compromising to the leadership of the Democrats' campaign and the candidate Hillary Clinton herself) were gradually published on Russia-friendly portals in autumn 2016. One of the operation's aims was to increase the chances of Donald Trump winning the election (the Republican candidate had made frequent statements implying the possibility of improved relations with Russia and deepening divides with the US's Western allies). But in the event of Clinton's victory, they were also intended to weaken her position as president and contribute to internal political destabilisation in the United States (the attempted cyber-attacks on regional polling stations in nearly half of the states served the same purpose).

The deliberate exacerbation of the crisis in US-Russian relations, mainly over Syria, was apparently also an element in the campaign against Clinton's candidacy. When Russian aircraft bombed a humanitarian convoy near Aleppo in September 2016, another fragile ceasefire negotiated between Russia and the US broke down. Russia then stepped up its airstrikes on eastern Aleppo, killing large numbers of civilians as Western and Arab public opinion watched on in helpless outrage. Moreover, in early October 2016 President Putin signed a decree suspending the implementation of the Russian-American agreement on the disposal of plutonium, in which he also laid down a list of far-reaching political conditions upon which the deal's implementation could be resumed.⁴⁸ This was a propaganda exercise designed to highlight the

⁴⁷ FBI and NCCIC report, Grizzly Steppe. Russian Malicious Cyber Activity, 29 December 2016, https://www.us-cert.gov/sites/default/files/publications/JAR_16-20296A_GRIZZLY%20STEPPE-2016-1229.pdf

⁴⁸ The conditions included the withdrawal of US armed forces from Central Europe (back to 2000 levels); lifting of all sanctions against Russia and compensating it for all the economic losses caused by the sanctions, and the US

dramatic new low in Russian-American relations (and to ‘blame’ it on the Democratic Obama administration, of which Hillary Clinton was a former member and potential continuator), while at the same time presenting Russia’s wish-list before the potential start of new talks on normalising relations. However, one should not overestimate the role that the Russian propaganda campaign and the cyber-attacks played in the outcome of the US presidential elections in November 2016, which Donald Trump won. Paradoxically, Russia’s greatest success was to make itself one of the main topics of the election campaign and be recognised by large parts of the US political elite as a dangerous enemy capable of influencing the internal politics of the American superpower, to President Putin’s unabashed satisfaction.⁴⁹

4. Russia on the Trump presidency (2017-): Moscow’s great hopes

The Kremlin and pro-Kremlin circles in Moscow greeted Donald Trump’s election victory on 8 November 2016 with barely concealed enthusiasm,⁵⁰ although they were also quite surprised by it, as Clinton had been the frontrunner. The belief that unlike Hillary Clinton’s potential win, Donald Trump’s victory would offer a chance to improve Russian-American relations and bring benefits to Russia was common not only among the ruling elite, but also among the general public, as opinion polls conducted just before the elections clearly demonstrated.⁵¹

withdrawing its programme of support for Ukraine. See [http://asozd2.duma.gov.ru/addwork/scans.nsf/ID/C4294ACB989FB546432580410044CB71/\\$File/1186208-6_03102016_1186208-6.PDF?OpenElement](http://asozd2.duma.gov.ru/addwork/scans.nsf/ID/C4294ACB989FB546432580410044CB71/$File/1186208-6_03102016_1186208-6.PDF?OpenElement)

⁴⁹ Cf. President Putin’s statements at the Valdai forum, 27 October 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53151>

⁵⁰ For instance, State Duma deputies responded to the news of Trump’s victory with an ovation; Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Orthodox Church, personally publicly blessed Trump; and many pro-Kremlin politicians and commentators posted enthusiastic comments.

⁵¹ In a VCIOM poll conducted in October 2016, 57% of respondents said the US elections would be important for Russia; 29% expected that US-Russia rela-

It seems that the Kremlin had three main reasons to be so positive about Donald Trump:

Firstly, Russian experts and politicians interpreted Trump's success as a symptom of a political crisis in the United States. They saw it as a manifestation of a rebellion by a large part of the US population against the political establishment and the political correctness of the liberal-dominated mainstream media. Trump's win was also seen as a sign of rising isolationist sentiments, xenophobia (the fear of 'strangers', especially Muslims) and the unwillingness to pursue an active foreign policy (especially in the spirit of the liberal/conservative interventionism of the Clinton and Bush eras). **The deep polarisation of public opinion in the US and the rise of internal tensions** (which have not disappeared in the aftermath of the election, and may still be exacerbated) **are evidently treated in Russia as factors which may weaken the US internally and likely erode its ability and willingness to get involved abroad, which opens a space for Russia to step up its own activity. Irrespective of what views and plans Trump himself has, he will not be able to completely ignore these sentiments in his political base.**⁵²

Secondly, the rhetoric of Trump and some of his aides during the election campaign (e.g. the playing down of NATO's role, pledges to make allied support conditional on the allies stepping up their financial contributions, plans to renegotiate or terminate important trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Area

tions would improve in the event of Trump's victory, compared to 4% in the case of Clinton, while 8% expected a deterioration of relations in the event of Trump's win, compared to 45% who believed relations would deteriorate if Clinton won. A poll by the Levada Centre showed that 41% of respondents who were interested in the election supported Trump, while 10% supported Clinton.

⁵² The fact that Trump was referring to those emotions is clear if one looks at his inaugural address on 20 January 2017, in which he said that 'America first', a slogan referring back to the US isolationists of the 1930s, would be the guiding principle of his foreign policy. Cf. the Inaugural Address, 20 January 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/inaugural-address>

(NAFTA) and critical attitudes towards the currently negotiated trans-Atlantic deal (TTIP) and the trans-Pacific agreement (TTP)) were a source of concern and (not always publicly displayed) irritation in many allied states, both in Europe and in Asia. The election's outcome came as a real shock to the liberal elites in Europe (for example in Germany), leaving them deeply worried about the future. For the very same reasons, it was a source of hope and joy in Moscow, because it **increased the likelihood that tensions between the US and its allies (including across the Atlantic) would exacerbate**. Even though just after the election Trump and his circle toned down their most controversial campaign arguments, the risk that the stance of the new administration could **adversely affect NATO's cohesion, activity and capacity to act** did not disappear (NATO being seen in Russia as a strategic opponent, an instrument of US policy, and a tool of America's hegemony over Europe's security sphere).

Thirdly, Trump's previous business involvement, and the rhetoric used in the past by himself and some of his aides (including positive opinions on Vladimir Putin as a leader, declarations of readiness to 'reach a deal' with Russia, frequent statements about the need to cooperate with Moscow against the so-called Islamic State, statements which brushed over Russia's aggressive policy towards Ukraine and the Baltic states, etc.), **suggested that his approach to Russia would be 'pragmatic' and transactional**. In the eyes of the Kremlin, that offered a chance for dialogue with President Trump which could enable at least some degree of strategic bargaining and further some of Russia's vital interests (for example, in the post-Soviet area).

For this reason, Moscow actively sought to establish contacts with Trump's circle and the candidate himself as early as possible, in which it partly succeeded.⁵³ After the elections Vladimir Putin

⁵³ Statements by the Russian deputy foreign minister Ryabkov, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Maria Zakharova, and to some extent also President Putin's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov, suggested that Russian diplomats (including Sergei Kislyak, the Russian ambassador in the US) had met

sent a friendly letter of congratulations to the president-elect, and several days later, the two leaders held a telephone conversation in which both sides declared that they were willing to normalise and positively develop bilateral relations.⁵⁴ Also, some of Trump's nominations for key administration positions, including in particular Gen. Michael Flynn⁵⁵ for national security advisor and Rex Tillerson⁵⁶ as secretary of state, could have been seen as signalling a readiness on the part of the US leadership for some new form of 'reset' in relations with Russia.

Moscow very clearly started 'investing' into Trump even before his inauguration on 20 January 2017. For instance, while the Russian leadership condemned the decisions taken by the outgoing Obama administration in December 2016 to express its criticism of Russia, by extending the list of persons and bodies under US sanctions against Russia (including the FSB counterintelligence agency, the GRU intelligence agency and its leadership)⁵⁷ and the

with (unidentified) members of the 'Trump team' while the election campaign was still underway.

⁵⁴ Cf. the communications on the outcome of the phone conversation between Putin and Trump on 14 November 2016: the Russian version <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53255>, and the American version <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=119645>

⁵⁵ General Michael Flynn, the former chief of Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), was controversial for liberal commentators in the US because of Flynn's appearances on Russia's English-language television RT, a tool of Putin's propaganda, and even attended its anniversary celebrations in Moscow where he sat at one table with President Putin. Some of Flynn's statements were interpreted as endorsements of co-operation with Russia, especially in the field of fighting terrorism.

⁵⁶ Rex Tillerson has been the CEO of the oil company ExxonMobil since 2006, and for this reason he has been a frequent visitor in Moscow, where he would have signed agreements with the Rosneft CEO Igor Sechin and met Russian officials including President Putin, who in September 2012 awarded Tillerson the Order of Friendship for his contribution to the development of Russian-American relations. For this reason, Tillerson was controversial not only for the Democrats, but also for a large group of influential Republicans.

⁵⁷ This decision, announced on 29 December 2016, was related to official allegations that the Russian secret services had carried out a series of cyber-attacks in 2015 and 2016, targeting the US and especially the Democratic Party (while not mentioned by name). See the FBI and NCCIC report.

expulsion from the US of 35 Russian diplomats accused of espionage, by President Putin's decision the Kremlin refrained from the retaliatory tit-for-tat measures that would have been the standard response.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ In his statement on 30 December, Putin very clearly implied that the decision had had been a provocation (effectively by the Obama administration) designed to further damage Russian-American relations. He said that Russia's reaction would depend on the policy towards Russia adopted by the Trump administration. On the same occasion, he extended New Year's wishes to Obama, Trump and the American nation, and invited the children of US diplomats to a New Year's party in the Kremlin. The Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev responded less diplomatically as he Tweeted: "It is sad that the Obama administration, which began its life with renewed cooperation [with Russia], finishes it in anti-Russian agony. RIP".

III. LESSONS FOR RUSSIAN-AMERICAN RELATIONS: CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

An analysis of the foundations of Russia's policy towards the United States under Vladimir Putin and of its dynamics leads to several general conclusions:

1. Structural asymmetry of relations

The structural asymmetry between the two countries, with all the problems it generates, is probably the most visible feature of Russian-American relations. This concerns not only the disproportion of potentials (especially in the economic dimension) between the US, which remains the dominant global power, and Russia, which is a declining multi-regional power despite its growing military might, but also the asymmetry of significance. While the United States is the main point of reference for Russia, for the US Russia has never been anything like that since the break-up of the USSR. Even though in view of Moscow's aggressive policies Washington can no longer ignore Russia, no form of bipolar order can be restored (and not just because of the rising power of China).

Russia may gain some local advantages, but it is incapable of acquiring the hallmark of all great powers, i.e. the ability to convince others to follow it, or to impose its vision of order, even on the regional scale (as evidenced by the inefficacy of the so-called Eurasian integration, the failure of the 'Great Europe' idea, and the fact that Russia's relations with China are increasingly asymmetric). Russia has been unable to initiate an effective effort to resolve any regional or local conflicts (despite its efforts, it could not even resolve the Karabakh conflict, in which it has a dominant advantage and should be able to leverage its position).

In this situation, Russia's efforts to be noticed and taken seriously by Washington have been focused on demonstrating Russia's potential to cause harm. That potential is too large to be ignored by

the US, but also too small (at this stage) to cause the US to revise any of its policy priorities. Russia is too weak to be recognised by the US as an equal partner or enemy, but too strong to be willing or able to accept the status of America's unequal, tactical ally.

2. Cyclic patterns in relations

Some regular patterns could be observed in the Russian-American relations over the last sixteen years. The inauguration of every new US administration has brought new hopes and been followed by efforts to improve relations, as well as proposals for a strategic deal on the part of Russia. Over time, however, the parties have exhausted the potential for successes and positive gestures, and the significant differences in mutual interests and perceptions resurface. By the end of the tenure of each US president, the Russian-American relations were usually in crisis, and then the cycle would repeat.

What is characteristic of these cycles is that with every iteration, the final crises get deeper and more difficult to recover from. This is undoubtedly related to the systematic growth of Russia's international assertiveness, even though the country, struggling with economic difficulties and entering a phase of economic stagnation, is long past the times when it optimistically believed that its power (especially economic power) would keep growing. The increasing depth of the crises is also related to the Kremlin's increasingly strong belief that assertive or even aggressive policies are effective. 'The weak get beaten' seems to be Vladimir Putin's political creed.⁵⁹ The Kremlin's growing sense of threat from the US, which is felt particularly strongly in the aftermath of every new 'colour revolution', 'Arab Spring' or wave of protests within Russia itself, guides Russia to demonstrate its determination to

⁵⁹ Putin used the phrase in his statement after the terror attack in Beslan in September 2004; <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22589>. Later he frequently referred to similar ideas.

fight for its interests, in line with the above maxim. On top of that, in today's 'post-truth' world it is easier for Russia to use skilful propaganda to present itself as stronger than it really is, and even to present its failures as successes.

Paradoxically, it could be partly because of the unprecedented depth of the current crisis in Russian-American relations at the end of Obama's administration that the hopes for a positive change under Donald Trump are higher than ever before in Russia. Another reason for that may concern the uniqueness of the Trump phenomenon – that is, the President's views, political style and personality – in US political culture and life. In a situation where improving Russian-American relations might require non-standard moves, Trump seems to be capable of acting in a non-standard way.

3. Outlook for the future: from reset to crisis?

It is a paradox that the Russian ruling elite views the United States as a very influential actor, allegedly pulling the strings in many regional and global developments, while at the same time portraying it as a 'declining power' struggling with an internal crisis. The Russian conviction that the US is in a deep crisis (which forms part of the wider crisis of the entire West) was considerably strengthened by Donald Trump's election victory (which was perceived as a rebellion by parts of American society against the establishment).

This is probably related to the fact that members of the Russian leadership are aware that Russia's economic problems are systemic and long-term while its original development model has exhausted its potential, while at the same time lacking any new ideas for an alternative model that could ensure stable long-term development and allow the current elite to stay in power. Because of this perceived weakness, Russia is inclined to seek a *modus vivendi* with the West, including the United States, independently of its efforts

to build a closer tactical alliance with China (perceived as the future superpower). Russia's position towards the United States in the longer term will depend – apart from US policy and developments in key regions – on which weakness, Russia's or America's, the Kremlin considers to be deeper and exacerbating faster.

It is difficult to predict at this stage how Russian-American relations will develop. Their prospects depend on too many factors in the United States, in Russia and globally, and also on Donald Trump himself, who is still quite a mystery as a politician. However, it is nonetheless possible to outline some elements, both positive and negative, that will influence the two states' relations in the future.

Out of Russia's list of 'wishes and grievances' in relations with the United States, the problems concerning Russia's internal policy will in theory be relatively the easiest to solve. The earlier hopes that Russia could join the group of democratic states pursuing pro-Western policies in the near future (or ever) have been abandoned not only by Trump, but apparently by a majority of the American establishment. The only question that remains is whether the pathologically distrustful President Putin and his conservative aides will believe that the United States has once and for all given up the idea of effectuating regime change in Russia.

A gradual thaw in Russian-American economic relations is also imaginable, especially in the energy sector, even if a swift and complete abolition of US sanctions against Russia would be difficult because of the prevailing sentiments in Congress and among the US public. The appointment of Rex Tillerson as US Secretary of State would undoubtedly bring that prospect closer. However, even leaving aside the bad investment climate, the implementation of ExxonMobile's ambitious plans in Russia may stumble on the fact that most of these projects are not economically viable given the current global market trends, and in particular the prospect of oil prices remaining relatively low (despite short-term fluctuations).

The fight against international terrorism, and especially Islamic terrorism, is another sphere in which reaching agreement and starting co-operation, at least at the level of declarations, would be relatively easy. Deeper political and intelligence co-operation is possible, although the two sides' past record of instrumentally using Islamic radicalism for political ends may prove to be an obstacle and engender distrust. Moreover, in the opinion of many members of the American political establishment and the intelligence community, by carrying out its cyber-attacks on the US Russia has crossed certain 'red lines', for which the US side may be inclined to retaliate.

The prospects of possible co-operation between the US and Russia in Syria are also linked to the above problem. Assuming that the Trump administration could accept Russia's fundamental demand, which concerns providing *de facto* (if not formal) support to the Assad regime, the two sides might be able to reach an agreement, and Russia might temporarily step up its military involvement in Syria in coordination with the US. However, the prospects of a lasting peace settlement in Syria will nonetheless remain highly uncertain, because of the multiplicity of actors involved in the conflict and their often-contradictory interests.

There is a big question mark over another issue of key importance for Russia, i.e. the United States' willingness to recognise, at least informally, the post-Soviet area as a Russian sphere of influence. While there are no reasons to believe that the area (or even just Ukraine) will remain a policy priority for the US, any moves to give up US involvement in the region completely (not to mention moves to directly support Russia) would certainly be opposed in the US not only by the Democratic opposition, but also the Republican elite.

The same applies to Russia's postulates concerning Central European countries and the rest of Europe. The likely objections by these states, which would be the US's policy objects and partners

in this regard, may make it hard to meet Russia's demands, even if one assumes some goodwill on the part of the US (which does not seem realistic). Russia should not expect a dismantling of NATO or an end to the US military presence in Europe. Even scrapping the missile shield plans seems to be hard to reconcile with the new administration's views of the Iran problem.

Likewise, there are no reasons to believe that Russia's demands concerning global political and security issues will be met. It is unclear whether the US will be willing to 'pay' Russia for refraining from deeper co-operation with China, which Washington sees as a strategic rival. Even if an illusion that such a policy could be effective were to take root in the White House, it will soon be verified by political realities. Concerning global economic issues, the failure of TTIP and TPP will not mean better chances of success for any alternative projects involving Russia.

Russia has very little, if anything at all, to offer the United States in a positive sense. What it can do is limit the harmful impacts of its negative actions. That, however, may turn out to be insufficient from Washington's point of view.

With all the hopes surrounding Donald Trump's presidency, Russia cannot be sure what the specific direction of US policy will be. Moscow runs the risk that its potential aggressive actions in future (which it may, for instance, take to force Washington to take a decision in line with Russia's expectations) will be met with a firm reaction on the part of Trump (partly because of the latter's need to protect his image); such a turn of events may undermine the image of Russia as a world power as nurtured by Russian propaganda, and could sour mutual relations.

For the above reasons it seems most likely that Russian-American relations will go through another iteration of the typical cycle: Trump's presidency will start with a new attempt at resetting relations with Russia, and end with a new crisis in mutual relations.

However, that does not mean that Russia will inevitably suffer a strategic defeat. The prospect of growing tensions between the United States and its allies, as well as rivals such as China, a deepening crisis of trans-Atlantic relations and of Western institutions will put Russia in a position to gain some comparative advantages, even as it grows weaker, and will create a strong temptation for Moscow to use them. A Russia whose strength derives from the West's weakness may become even more assertive and aggressive, contributing to growing regional and global instability.

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The text was closed on 22 January 2017