



## ANALYSIS

# An accident waiting to happen: Trump, Putin and the US–Russia relationship

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

US–Russia relations are more acrimonious than at any time since the end of the Cold War. Initial hopes in Moscow that Donald Trump’s shock victory in the 2016 US presidential election might lead to a new quality of engagement have evaporated. Today, there is little talk of strategic cooperation, much less a ‘grand bargain’. The question instead is whether Washington and Moscow can manage their many differences, and avoid a dangerous escalation of tensions.

The signs are not good. US sanctions against Russia have been strengthened. Accusations of Russian interference in the US democratic process have become more strident. Vladimir Putin’s conduct of foreign policy is increasingly assertive. And US–Russia strategic arms control agreements are close to unravelling. Meanwhile, the acute dysfunctionality of the Trump White House threatens to create fresh crises and aggravate existing ones.

The best-case scenario for the relationship in the short to medium term may be one of mutual containment, reminiscent of the Cold War. However, even this relative stability appears elusive. Trump’s political weakness and anarchic tendencies point to further destabilisation. Against the backdrop of a volatile international environment, the chances of an accident, even of direct confrontation between the United States and Russia, have increased significantly.

US–Russia relations are now at their lowest ebb since the end of the Cold War. This reality, remarkable in itself, is especially so given the United States has its most pro-Kremlin president in more than a century.<sup>1</sup> When Donald Trump emerged as the shock victor in the 2016 US presidential election, many observers anticipated a relaxation of tensions between Washington and Moscow. During his campaign, Trump had expressed a strong desire to ‘get along’ with the Kremlin. He opposed Western sanctions against Russia; questioned the existence of NATO; and suggested that he would recognise Moscow’s annexation of Crimea.<sup>2</sup> Following the election, he rejected charges that the Kremlin had interfered in the US democratic process, and condemned the decision by the outgoing Barack Obama administration to expel 35 Russian diplomats and close two Russian Embassy facilities.<sup>3</sup>

And yet today US–Russia engagement is more acrimonious than ever. Not only is there no prospect of an end to Western sanctions, but these have since been strengthened. NATO forward deployments in Eastern Europe have continued apace,<sup>4</sup> and the alliance is growing in confidence.<sup>5</sup> Instead of Washington recognising Russia’s incorporation of Crimea, it is now considering the supply of defensive weaponry to the Ukrainian military — a course of action previously resisted by Obama. More broadly, the ongoing scandal of Kremlin involvement in the US election, and the Trump camp’s ties with Russian security agencies, have made Russia among the most toxic of issues in Washington.

The storied personal dynamic between Trump and Vladimir Putin has proved more a hindrance than a help. Their meetings in the margins of the Hamburg G20 summit in July 2017 not only achieved very little, but turned out to be counterproductive. Trump came across as a Russian patsy — craving Putin’s approval,<sup>6</sup> eagerly swallowing assurances that Moscow had not engaged in illicit activity during the US election,<sup>7</sup> and showing an indecent haste to “move forward” and leave the past behind.<sup>8</sup> Strikingly, Trump appeared to get on far better with Putin than with the leaders of key US allies such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel.<sup>9</sup>

Hamburg symbolised the contrast between an America that had lost its way, and a resolute, purposeful Russia. It also stiffened anti-Kremlin sentiment back in Washington. Trump had barely returned from the G20 when he was forced into an embarrassing climbdown over a proposal, announced in Hamburg, to establish a joint US–Russia cybersecurity unit.<sup>10</sup> Two weeks later, both houses of the US Congress passed, by crushing majorities, a bill expanding sanctions against Russia (as well as Iran and North Korea), and preventing the president from exercising his executive powers to lift them.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, the operation of the White House descended to new levels of farce, with the resignation of Press

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Secretary Sean Spicer, the appointment and sacking of Communications Director Anthony Scaramucci, and the incoherent ramblings of the president himself.<sup>12</sup>

These and subsequent dramas have left the future of the relationship hanging. The discussion is no longer about a new era of cooperation, since all but the most incurable of optimists have discounted this. Instead, the focus has shifted to the question of whether the United States and Russia are able, or even willing, to arrest the downward spiral in their relationship.

The omens are not good. The first year of the Trump presidency has seen a return to the vicious cycle that has characterised US–Russia interaction since the fall of the Soviet Union. Typically, this begins with the incoming US president promising to ‘solve’ Russia by building a qualitatively different dynamic with the Kremlin. Expectation and enthusiasm then give way to disappointment and resentment. Each time the relationship sinks to a new low, only for another president to hold out the hope of a fresh start.

What makes the current situation worse still is that Trump and Putin have been unable to score even the most nominal of successes.<sup>13</sup> In contrast to previous eras, there has been no honeymoon period, just a rapid disabusing of illusions. Before the Hamburg meeting mainstream Russian commentators were already acknowledging that anything short of a complete disaster would be a good outcome.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, few in Washington are able to envisage more than narrow cooperation in a few selected areas, such as deconfliction arrangements in Syria.<sup>15</sup>

Even these modest objectives look problematic. Divergent world views, historical mistrust, conflicting priorities, and unstable personalities may end up putting Washington and Moscow on a collision course.<sup>16</sup> Trump prides himself on his ability to ‘make a deal’. But his presidency has instead revealed a reverse Midas touch — the more he says and does, the worse things turn out. And in the case of the US–Russia relationship, this significantly increases the chances of an accident arising from mutual misperceptions and miscalculation.

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## US–RUSSIA RELATIONS BEFORE TRUMP

In February 2007, Putin gave a now notorious speech at the Munich Security Conference, in which he condemned America’s reckless and “illegitimate” use of force, its flouting of international law, and destabilisation of global order.<sup>17</sup> The speech shocked its predominantly Western audience, since it abandoned the pretense that Russia and the United States had common security perceptions. It marked the end of any semblance of post-Cold War consensus, and saw the re-emergence instead of an overtly adversarial view of international politics.

In the decade since Putin's Munich speech, the US–Russia relationship has deteriorated further than even pessimists at the time imagined. A series of events — the 2008 Russia–Georgia war, the fall of authoritarian regimes during the Arab Spring, domestic protests against Putin in 2011–12, the Syrian civil war, the Maidan revolution, Moscow's annexation of Crimea and the subsequent conflict in Ukraine — highlighted the widening gulf between Washington and Moscow. By early 2014, the relationship had sunk to its lowest point since the early 1980s. It was now almost entirely dysfunctional, reflecting opposing visions of regional and global security, and competing priorities and interests. Putin and Obama made little secret of their personal antipathy,<sup>18</sup> while popular and elite attitudes were overwhelmingly negative. For all the talk of a 'new Cold War',<sup>19</sup> in some respects the situation was worse — at once more confrontational, volatile, and unpredictable.

The increasingly dangerous direction of travel would have been reinforced had Hillary Clinton won the 2016 US presidential election. As Obama's Secretary of State, she had already foreshadowed a hardening of US policy on Syria, NATO forward deployments, missile defence, Ukraine, and European security arrangements.<sup>20</sup> Hawkish tendencies in Moscow became more pronounced in anticipation of her victory, with Putin seemingly eager to raise the stakes on Syria and Ukraine, and test the nerve of the transatlantic alliance.

## WHAT DOES VLADIMIR PUTIN WANT?

Trump's victory therefore came as a shock to the Kremlin, despite Putin's attempts to pretend otherwise.<sup>21</sup> Virtually overnight, it called into question core assumptions about American foreign policy, US–Russia relations, and the transatlantic alliance. It also provoked mixed feelings. The predominant reaction in Moscow was one of *schadenfreude* at seeing Hillary Clinton receive her comeuppance, while revelling in the unambiguous consternation of the Washington establishment.<sup>22</sup> Some moderate commentators, too, were pleased with the outcome, because it offered the theoretical possibility that the precipitous decline in relations with the United States might be arrested; a little hope was better than none at all.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, there were few illusions about the depth of the crisis with Washington, or the enormous difficulties Trump would face in translating his good will towards Russia into practical policy.<sup>24</sup>

Over the past nine months, Putin has adopted a wait-and-see approach. He has made few public demands, and largely avoided gloating at the White House's tribulations.<sup>25</sup> He recognises that pressuring Trump to lift sanctions or pull back on missile defence would be counterproductive given the fraught political climate in Washington.<sup>26</sup> It would only strengthen congressional opposition and further limit Trump's room for manoeuvre. Such restraint, however, does not mean that Putin has no clear agenda, or that he is prepared to wait indefinitely. In time, he will

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demand tangible progress, both in America's overall approach towards Russia, and in specific policy areas. Trump will be held accountable on his ability to deliver.

The Kremlin's most important goal is a general one — US acceptance of Russia as an equal in twenty-first century global affairs. 'Equality' here has a particular meaning. Russia self-evidently does not possess the multidimensional capacities of the United States. Nor is Putin interested in taking on a global leadership role similar to that assumed by Washington over the past three decades. Instead, he wants parity on issues where he sees Russia as having vital interests: strategic (nuclear) stability; conflict management in the post-Soviet neighbourhood; the future of Syria and the wider Middle East; and global energy policy.

Although Putin has often criticised American exceptionalism,<sup>27</sup> he seeks an exceptionalism of Russia's own. Just as the United States takes a selective approach to international law, so Putin believes Russia should enjoy similar prerogatives and dispensations. The classical realist notion that great powers decide and smaller countries abide resonates strongly. It is reflected in the historical attachment, pre-dating the Putin era, to spheres of influence (or "privileged interests") in Russia's neighbourhood.<sup>28</sup> More broadly, it is encapsulated in the vision of a multipolar order dominated by three great powers — the United States, China, and Russia. This is a post-hegemonic world, based on great power checks and balances, in which Russia plays a crucial role as the global swing state.<sup>29</sup>

Putin's interpretation of 'equality' is intertwined with the idea of 'respect' (*uvazhenie*).<sup>30</sup> In the first instance, this means others respecting Russian sovereignty by not meddling in its domestic affairs. When Hillary Clinton openly supported popular protests against Putin in 2011–12, the Kremlin viewed her actions as a flagrant breach of this 'rule', and as a personal affront.<sup>31</sup>

Despite Putin's pronouncements about a 'polycentric system of international relations' for the twenty-first century, his conception of world order is distinctly old-fashioned. It recalls the sovereign-based order that emerged after the 1815 Congress of Vienna. The identity of the main players has changed, but for Moscow the principles are timeless: fealty to ideas such as the balance of power and collective mutual restraint; the preservation of spheres of influence; and full sovereignty for the great powers. No one power would be able to impose its will on the others, who would act together to restrain hegemonic ambition from wherever it came.

Other, more specific priorities arise out of this general foundation. The Putin regime seeks the removal of Western sanctions imposed following its annexation of Crimea and the downing of flight MH17. Its primary motivation here is not economic, but political.<sup>32</sup> Sanctions are loathed for their delegitimising effect in identifying Russia as a pariah state.<sup>33</sup> Their removal, as well as repeal of the Magnitsky Act<sup>34</sup> and the return of

confiscated embassy property, would mark Russia's return to the fold, and be interpreted by Moscow as retrospective endorsement of its actions at home and abroad.

The Kremlin desires the reversal of missile defence and NATO forward deployments, but for geopolitical rather than hard security reasons. The point is not that such deployments pose an existential threat to Russia, but that they are seen as part of a larger Western effort to contain and intimidate it. Putin's purpose is therefore to assert strength as a matter of sound principle and necessary practice. A reversal or a 'pause' in deployments would be spun as de facto recognition of Russia's growing influence and status in the Euro-Atlantic space.

Similarly, Putin wants American support or acquiescence in Syria since this would confirm Russia's return as a leading player in the Middle East and a fast-emerging global actor. The Kremlin welcomed the White House decision in July 2017 to end the CIA's covert assistance program to the Syrian opposition above all as a move in that direction. Moscow's cover story, making common cause in the 'struggle against international terrorism', was little more than a slogan to dress up this reality.<sup>35</sup>

#### WHERE TRUMP COMES IN ...

Putin's ultimate goal, then, is not strategic rapprochement with the United States, but a global order dominated by a few great powers, operating according to traditional realpolitik. Trump can, however, aid this purpose by accelerating the demise of the post-Cold War liberal order that has until now constrained Russia's influence and diminished its stature.

In the world imagined by Moscow, the transatlantic security consensus would further fray and eventually break apart. The unitary West would become obsolete. Western-led globalisation would unravel. The EU's rules-based vision of Europe would give way to nation-based politics, in which great power sovereignty was king. Liberal conceptions of democracy would be discredited. Russia would have a freer hand in its neighbourhood. Undercut by American indifference, Berlin and Paris might revert to the type of relations they had with Moscow during the first decade of this century. Then Putin enjoyed cozy relations with German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and French Presidents Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy, unencumbered by normative concerns. In time, the erosion of transatlantic relations could lead to the removal of Western sanctions, and progress towards a settlement in Ukraine that would allow the Kremlin to maintain lasting leverage over Kyiv.

Operationally, Putin seeks a personal interaction with Trump that would cut through the anti-Kremlin consensus in Washington, and improve the chances of a sympathetic hearing on key Russian priorities. But even if this doesn't happen, there are still benefits to be had from a Trump presidency. The contrast between an apparently stable Russia and an increasingly dysfunctional United States plays well at home.

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Internationally, Trump's delinquent behaviour has taken much of the heat off Putin. The US president has become the number one bogeyman for many, while the Russian president has gained growing respectability and admiration in many quarters, not least in the West.

#### TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING?

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There are, however, several caveats to the Kremlin view. Trump's excesses could also lead to outcomes unfavourable to Russia, for it, too, is vulnerable to the caprices of US foreign policy.<sup>36</sup> And whereas previously Putin possessed the advantage of tactical surprise with Washington, he now finds himself, just like America's allies, having to second-guess White House intentions.

Besieged by scandal, and accused of weakness or worse, Trump may embark on foreign adventures to promote his credentials as a 'strong leader'.<sup>37</sup> This, combined with a propensity for shock moves, could threaten Russian interests. The risks were exemplified by the US Tomahawk missile strikes against the Syrian air base at al-Shayrat in April 2017. Although the fallout on US–Russia relations was limited, largely because the action was a one-off and Moscow received prior notification, the consequences may not always be so manageable.<sup>38</sup> If Trump were to channel his aggressive rhetoric on Iran into tougher action on the ground, including military measures, the potential for a major crisis with Moscow would be considerable. Russian–Iranian ties are closer than ever, and their relationship is critical to Moscow's goal of power projection in the greater Middle East.<sup>39</sup>

Likewise, the Kremlin could hardly ignore any American military action against North Korea. Although it has no love for Kim Jong-un, the proximity of the Korean peninsula to the Russian Far East, and the importance of Sino-Russian partnership, would invite a vigorous response from Moscow.<sup>40</sup> Putin's recent high-profile diplomatic activity, calling for a 'freeze-for-freeze' agreement, reflects his heightened concerns.<sup>41</sup> The fear is not just of the devastating consequences of war, but also the reassertion of American power in Northeast Asia and its impact on the regional geopolitical balance.

The underlying paradox is that Putin, having long desired confusion among Russia's enemies, now has a vested interest in seeing the re-emergence of broadly functional governance in Washington. He wants an America that is weakened, but not so weak as to be a danger, unwitting or otherwise, to Russian interests. However, Trump's anarchic tendencies threaten to generate new international crises, and further destabilise US–Russia relations.

Putin must also consider the prospect that the Trump administration becomes so hamstrung by various scandals that its Russia policy falls victim to political expediency. In the worst case for Moscow, a total collapse in Trump's authority could lead to his departure, and a massive

anti-Kremlin backlash in Washington. Even if such an apocalyptic scenario does not materialise, Trump may react to growing domestic pressures by seeking to prove that he is not in hock to Moscow, and adopt tougher positions on a raft of Russia-related issues — Syria, Iran, Ukraine, and sanctions.

We should note, too, that a well-disposed America is not all good news for Putin. For centuries, Russia's rulers have used the presence of an external enemy (or enemies) as a legitimating device — a cause around which to rally popular support, and an excuse to explain away failures of governance. This has been the case in recent years, when the Putin 'social contract' — economic prosperity in exchange for political compliance — has eroded in the aftermath of the global financial crisis.<sup>42</sup> In its place, the Kremlin has played up national-patriotic memes, such as anti-Americanism, to boost regime legitimacy. As journalist Edward Lucas once remarked, "if America did not exist, Russia would have to invent it".<sup>43</sup> So while Putin may want a friendlier United States, he does not necessarily want a friend, especially one whose actions are very hard to judge, and whose international reputation has never been lower.<sup>44</sup>

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## WHAT DOES DONALD TRUMP WANT?

It is more difficult to establish what Donald Trump is hoping to achieve in the US–Russia relationship, beyond the obvious — to reach a practical accommodation with Vladimir Putin. Part of the problem is that during his career he has shown little interest in (and even less knowledge of) foreign policy. His only real exposure to international relations has come when he has negotiated specific business deals. As a result, Trump's world view is largely a set of gut instincts and prejudices, rather than something thought-out.

It is also a world view centred on what he dislikes — his is an essentially destructive agenda. During the election campaign, Trump attacked key elements of the Obama administration's foreign policy, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the NATO alliance, American involvement in Syria and Libya, the Paris climate change agreement, and sanctions against Russia. It was evident that he had little time for liberal internationalism, democracy promotion or multilateral rules-based regimes.<sup>45</sup> If he believed in 'manifest destiny', it was in the narrowest sense — encapsulated by the mantra 'America first', the United States aggressively pursuing its security and economic interests in a dog-eat-dog world.

Trump is animated by a profound sense of national grievance. He and Putin are of like mind in the conviction that their countries have been exploited by others for decades, and that this can no longer be tolerated. Accordingly, both oppose the US-led global order, and have benefited directly from its degradation. Trump won the presidential election on the

back of widespread anti-elite disenchantment, while Putin has exploited the weakness and loss of confidence among Western policymakers to promote the image of a resurgent Russia led by a master strategist.<sup>46</sup>

Discerning what Trump wants from Moscow is complicated by the Russia-related scandals that have engulfed his presidency. Barely a day goes by without a new revelation about the dubious behaviour of senior figures in his administration, including the president himself. Currently, there are three major investigations — Special Counsel, House of Representatives, and Senate — into Moscow's involvement in the 2016 US presidential election campaign, and its ties with the Trump camp. In these turbulent circumstances, Trump has no space in which to develop a coherent foreign policy, let alone chart a course for the US–Russia relationship.

Nevertheless, certain things have become clear since he entered the White House. Trump's main aim in relation to Russia is to neutralise it as a subject of domestic controversy, and thereby reaffirm the legitimacy of his election victory. While he hopes for cooperation with Moscow in selected areas, such as counterterrorism, there is little sign that he wishes to establish a great power condominium with Putin (and/or Xi Jinping) to solve the world's problems. Indeed, such a position would be inconsistent with his long-held opposition to American internationalism.

If it were not for the ongoing scandals in Washington, Russia would be a second order priority in US foreign policy. In this connection, the analogy that is sometimes made between Trump and Ronald Reagan is wholly inappropriate.<sup>47</sup> Reagan sought to engage with the Soviet Union because he saw it as an existential threat that merited the closest attention.<sup>48</sup> For Trump, however, the Russia file is an annoying distraction that threatens to derail his presidency. It is not only inflicting huge reputational damage, but it also prevents him from focusing on the domestic agenda that got him elected in the first place.

So for Trump a quick deal with Russia is a good deal, as long as it can be sold to the public.<sup>49</sup> For this, Putin's assistance is essential both in delivering concrete outcomes and, more vital still, good optics. Trump needs to look like a winner, even if it means selling the store to do so.

## TRUMP'S FIRST YEAR — GOING BACKWARDS FAST

On the surface, Trump and Putin agree on much. They subscribe to a realist view of international relations, and reveal a certain authoritarian like-mindedness.<sup>50</sup> They resent the establishment — domestic in Trump's case, international in Putin's. The 'besieged fortress' mentality (the world against us) that has long been a part of Russian strategic culture is also present in Trump. And both presidents adopt highly individualised approaches to decision-making, and place great importance on personal relations with other world leaders.

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Such affinities should offer a reasonable basis for an improved US–Russia relationship. Yet nine months after Trump assumed office, almost nothing has been achieved. Instead of momentum, there is regression. US sanctions against Russia have been strengthened. Accusations of Russian interference in the US democratic process have become more strident. There has been no movement on counterterrorism cooperation. Even Washington’s decision to end the CIA covert assistance program to the Syrian opposition, portrayed as a concession to Moscow, had been in the pipeline well before Trump was elected.

So why has there been so little progress? There are several reasons. Some are general and long-standing, such as strong anti-Kremlin sentiment in Congress and within the Republican Party. But the biggest obstacles to movement in the US–Russia relationship arise from the dysfunctionality of the Trump administration.

First among these is the all-encompassing distraction of various Russia-related scandals. It has proved impossible for the White House to push a Russia agenda in circumstances where any concession to Moscow, however minor, is viewed as suspicious or worse. The scandals pose a mortal threat to Trump’s presidency, ensuring that he is preoccupied with political survival.

The second impediment to progress is anarchy within the administration, which is riven by divisions and infighting. It cannot govern itself, let alone take on major policy tasks. We have seen this not only in respect of Russia, but also with key elements of the Republican domestic agenda, such as the repeal of the Affordable Care Act (‘Obamacare’), immigration, and tax reform. The appointments of Rex Tillerson as Secretary of State, James Mattis as Secretary of Defense, and HR McMaster as National Security Advisor were supposed to have injected some professionalism — ‘the adults back in charge’ — into the business of government.<sup>51</sup> But these respected individuals have faced huge difficulties in carrying out their jobs.<sup>52</sup>

Most of all, there is the problem of a president whose attention span is short, whose ignorance of foreign affairs is vast, and for whom wild policy swings are a virtue. As a result, there is no policy coherence within the administration, least of all on Russia where there is a major divide between Trump on the one hand, and the US defence and security establishment on the other,<sup>53</sup> with Secretary of State Tillerson occupying an uncomfortable position somewhere in the middle.<sup>54</sup> This problem has been exacerbated by the glacial pace of political appointments to senior positions in the Defense and State Departments.<sup>55</sup> The overall outcome is that the disconnect between policy pronouncements and implementation has never been so wide. Talk of cooperative engagement with Russia remains largely that — talk.

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Third, notwithstanding its public profile Russia is not a high priority for Trump. It is telling that his first official meeting with Putin did not occur until after he had been in the White House for six months, and then only as a bilateral in the margins of a multilateral summit. The delay was partly due to the political sensitivities surrounding the Russia connection. But it also reflected the reality that for Trump foreign affairs is a poor relation to his domestic agenda. His July trip to Warsaw and Hamburg was only his second since becoming president. Even among foreign policy priorities, Russia ranks relatively low — well behind the Middle East, relations with China, and Europe. Its significance is essentially instrumental. It is regarded as a means of meeting other, more important objectives, such as combating international terrorism and checking Iranian influence in the Middle East. This attitude is similar to that of Bush and Obama, both of whom saw Russia as a niche ally (or irritant), rather than fully-fledged partner.

Fourth, American and Russian interests often conflict, including in areas where their priorities are said to converge. In counterterrorism, for example, America's focus is on crushing Islamic State. Russia's priorities, however, are to consolidate its leading role in Syria, boost its strategic presence across the Middle East, and promote itself as a global player. In Ukraine, Washington seeks a more or less neutral resolution of the conflict, while Moscow's goal is to restore its former influence over Kyiv. Washington and Moscow have both been highly critical of NATO, but from very different standpoints. Secretary of Defense Mattis has reiterated the long-held (and long-ignored) American view that European member states need to do more by way of burden-sharing, in order to make NATO more effective. Moscow desires just the opposite — the demise or emasculation of the alliance. All these differences are exacerbated in a climate of growing uncertainty.

Fifth, economic ties are too weak to mitigate the many negatives in the relationship. In 2016 the United States accounted for only 4.5 per cent of Russia's overseas trade (compared to the European Union's 43.3 per cent, and China's 14.1 per cent<sup>56</sup>), while Russia was not even in the top 20 of US trading partners.<sup>57</sup> In 2012, ExxonMobil and the Russian state oil company Rosneft concluded a huge deal to develop oil and gas in the Kara Sea (Arctic), but sanctions brought this venture to a shuddering halt. Since then, global energy prices have fallen by more than half, making such cooperation far less profitable.<sup>58</sup> The expansion of US shale gas has put further downward pressure on prices, in the process undermining one of Moscow's chief instruments for projecting power, and creating yet another source of tension in the relationship.

Finally, the personal dynamic between Trump and Putin has proved largely a negative. Presidential diplomacy can sometimes make progress where this would otherwise be impossible. However, Trump and Putin are such alienating figures in Washington that their direct involvement in policy initiatives has tended to discredit these. The former

Director of National Intelligence James Clapper reflected a widely held view when he remarked that many of Trump's actions seemed designed to "make Russia great", not America.<sup>59</sup> Putin is clearly sensitive to this perception. At a press conference following the 2017 BRICS summit in Xiamen, he responded archly when asked whether he was disappointed in Trump: "he is not my bride, and I am not his bride or fiancé".<sup>60</sup>

## A WINDOW FOR COOPERATION?

Events have exposed the lack of realism behind initial hopes (or fears) of a 'grand bargain' between Trump and Putin.<sup>61</sup> Over the past decade and more, the US–Russia relationship has deteriorated drastically on multiple fronts, well past the point of a 'new Cold War'. It will take many years, considerable good luck, and real political will on both sides just to get back to where things were at the start of the Putin era in January 2000.

Any progress will be limited and incremental. Unlike in 2009, when the Obama administration's 'reset' policy was launched, there are no 'low-hanging fruit'.<sup>62</sup> The huge vote in Congress to increase sanctions against Russia indicates that these will remain in place for some years yet. Trump cannot deliver what Putin wants on missile defence. And there is no chance that Russia will be afforded a privileged status on Ukraine.<sup>63</sup>

In these circumstances, the most promising opening to improve the relationship is to reinforce existing military deconfliction arrangements, particularly in the air space over Syria and the Baltic Sea. The number of near misses highlights the risk of clashes between US/NATO and Russian forces. This not only poses an obvious danger in itself, but could escalate into a larger confrontation fuelled by political animosities, accumulated mistrust, and poor communication. Such fears have been heightened recently by Zapad-2017, one of Russia's largest military exercises since the end of the Cold War.<sup>64</sup> The United States and Russia therefore have a strong interest in improving operational practices in Syria in the first instance, and then extending these more widely to regions where NATO and Russian military units are in close proximity — not just the Baltic Sea, but also the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, and the European Arctic.

Deconfliction is relatively uncontroversial. The same cannot be said, however, about another important step: developing bilateral institutions to improve intergovernmental communication. The establishment of such mechanisms is often hostage to political pressures. Take the case of the Bilateral Presidential Commission, a major initiative of the Obama reset. At its peak, it encompassed some 20 joint committees addressing a wide range of issues, from energy policy to arms control to trade and investment. However, as US–Russia relations deteriorated, the Bilateral Commission became divested of content, before being suspended entirely following the Russian annexation of Crimea. Reinstating some kind of analogous framework would be vigorously opposed in the United

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States.<sup>65</sup> Many in Congress would view such a move as, in effect, forgiving Russia for its actions in relation to Ukraine, Syria, and the US presidential election.

The salience of such considerations reveals the transactional character of the US–Russia relationship. A particular initiative may make good sense, but be derailed by extraneous factors. Thus, Trump’s decision to terminate the CIA covert military assistance program to the Syrian rebels was widely criticised as a sell-out to Moscow. The fact that the program had achieved very little was less important to some than the failure of the White House to obtain a quid pro quo from the Kremlin.<sup>66</sup>

This mindset helps explain, too, why the relatively trivial matter of confiscated Russian Embassy property in the United States has proved so difficult to resolve. The Trump administration could not return the property ‘for free’ since this would have been interpreted as signalling business as usual, in the face of fresh revelations of illicit Russian involvement in the presidential election. Unsurprisingly, the Kremlin eventually concluded that its only option was to retaliate by closing down two American Embassy facilities in Russia, and demanding a massive reduction of American diplomatic personnel to reach parity of numbers.<sup>67</sup> This, in turn, led to a further round of retaliation, with Washington closing down the Russian Consulate-General in San Francisco.<sup>68</sup>

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The difficulties of taking even minor steps to improve the relationship indicate that it will be extremely challenging to make progress on more complex issues, such as arms control. There is much to be said for renewing the 2010 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) agreement to 2026, and preserving the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty. But in the current climate the prospects of either are poor. Many in Moscow regard the INF treaty as an unreasonable and anachronistic constraint on Russia’s capabilities at a time when it faces growing threats, while the US House of Representatives is pushing hard to suspend the treaty in response to alleged Russian violations.<sup>69</sup>

## A GRIM OUTLOOK

In sum, a significant rapprochement between the United States and Russia is improbable. The best-case scenario in the short to medium term might be a relationship not unlike that between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.<sup>70</sup> There would be mutual antipathy, sometimes intemperate rhetoric, and conflicting interests. Any cooperation would be limited and tactical. Each side would seek to undermine the other. But at least there would be no war, and US–Russia interaction might begin to acquire a measure of stability, aided by low expectations.

Such a scenario, however, seems increasingly unlikely. Many of the problems that dogged relations during the George W Bush and Obama

eras have become more serious, and could generate new crises. Most obviously, the political obstacles are becoming more intractable. With the various investigations into the Trump presidential campaign set to run and run, Russia will remain the most toxic of domestic issues. As the passage of the sanctions bill has highlighted, a massive bipartisan majority in Congress opposes any accommodation with the Kremlin, and this will not change soon. The closure of the Russian Consulate-General in San Francisco and the tightening of procedures for non-immigrant visas testify to the harsher mood in Washington.<sup>71</sup>

Equally, there is no sign of an end to the chaos within the Trump administration, or that the president will settle down. The appointment of John Kelly, a former four-star Marine Corps general, as White House Chief of Staff, has introduced a measure of discipline into its operations.<sup>72</sup> But Kelly's capacity to manage the president himself is clearly limited.<sup>73</sup> The irony is that Trump's failings have ensured that executive power has rarely, if ever, been more limited. And nowhere is this truer than on Russia policy. The White House simply has no capacity to deliver the concessions Putin is looking for — such as lifting sanctions, reversing missile defence deployments, recognising Crimea's incorporation into Russia, and so on. Trump's volte-face over the joint cybersecurity unit revealed the extent of his weakness.

For his part, Putin has shown no sign of making the substantial compromises that might soften anti-Kremlin sentiment in Washington and facilitate a thaw in US–Russia relations. The near-unanimous view in Moscow is that his conduct of foreign policy has been brilliantly successful. And therefore it is for others, above all the United States, to recognise changing international realities and modify their policies accordingly.<sup>74</sup>

Until now, official Russian reaction to Trump's under-performance has been relatively restrained. There is understanding of his difficulties, and even some sympathy. There is also a level of realism about the administration's priorities when it is fighting for its very survival.<sup>75</sup> And, of course, the Kremlin is conscious that Trump's travails, and the disorganisation of the US political system, make Russia (and Putin) look good.

But there is no guarantee this restraint will last. As noted earlier, Putin will demand, if not necessarily expect, results. It will not be enough, in this connection, that the United States scales down its support for the anti-Assad rebels. For such a move is perceived to be driven principally by American weakness. Likewise, any cooperation in counterterrorism would be seen as Moscow doing Washington a favour, not the other way around.

There are already indications that Moscow's patience is wearing thin. Although Putin reacted calmly to the passage of the sanctions bill, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's response was notably tougher.

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Notwithstanding Trump's description of the bill as "significantly flawed", Medvedev declared, accurately, that the administration had "demonstrated total impotence by surrendering its executive authority to Congress in the most humiliating way ... The American establishment has won an overwhelming victory over Trump".<sup>76</sup>

For the time being, the Kremlin will keep faith with Trump as the least bad option, consistent with the Russian adage, 'hope dies last' (*nadezhda umiraet poslednei*). That hope, however, would die if Trump were either impeached or forced to resign, and replaced by Vice President Mike Pence. Washington and Moscow would then most likely enter a new phase of confrontation, involving an escalation of Russian military activity in Ukraine, and enhanced troop movements in areas adjoining the frontline NATO member states — the Baltic republics, Poland, and the Nordic countries. The risk of a clash between US and Russian forces would increase exponentially.<sup>77</sup>

Even if Trump manages to stay in power, the chances are that he will be a much diminished figure, with little capacity to influence policy in Russia's favour. Worse still, his continuing if vain attempts to show strength could aggravate international crises where American and Russian interests are at odds. On North Korea, for example, Trump's verbal interventions have inflamed the situation caused by Pyongyang's nuclear weapons tests, and limited the (admittedly narrow) window for effective crisis management.<sup>78</sup>

## THE UNITED STATES, RUSSIA, AND WORLD DISORDER

Donald Trump's actions at home and abroad have had a hugely disruptive effect on the international system. In his first year, he has called into question the integrity of the NATO alliance and Article V commitments;<sup>79</sup> thrown over the Paris climate change agreement; rejected the G20 free trade consensus; launched a military strike against the Assad regime; disavowed the Iranian nuclear deal; and threatened North Korea with unspecified, but very possibly military, consequences. Meanwhile, the system of global arms control is threatening to unravel; the future of a unitary West is more doubtful than at any time in the past seven decades; and the United States is walking away from global leadership to embrace a devil take the hindmost approach to international affairs.

Against this backdrop, the 'special relationship' between the White House and the Kremlin has assumed terrifying proportions to some observers.<sup>80</sup> Its very opaqueness raises all sorts of questions about hidden agendas and corrupt practices. It appears to confirm the demise of a liberal order already labouring under extraordinary stresses, and to threaten the future of international security.

However, we need to put the US–Russia relationship in a twenty-first century global context. The most important if obvious point is that the relationship is not what it was during the Cold War, when it was the defining interaction of international politics. The United States remains the sole genuine superpower, but it is also only one player in an increasingly disaggregated world. Russia talks a big game, but its economy is about the same size as Australia's, while its role in global decision-making is largely limited to arms control, conflict management in Syria, and the Arctic. The US–Russia relationship is important in addressing key challenges to the international system, but it is no longer the game-maker it was before the collapse of Communism. The capacity of Washington and Moscow to bend others to their will, 'in concert', let alone separately, has rarely been more constrained.

Looking ahead, the US–Russia relationship is set to be less actor than acted upon, increasingly buffeted and shaped by forces over which it has little control. Chief among these will be the continuing rise of China and emergence of a global India. How such powers develop in coming decades will have a decisive impact on the foreign policies pursued in Washington and Moscow, and on US–Russia engagement. This is already apparent in relation to Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, which even in its infancy is changing the geopolitical landscape, and calculus, in Eurasia.

We should also distinguish between the effects of Trump's overall conduct of US foreign policy, and his handling of the US–Russia relationship. In terms of challenging world order, the former poses much the greater threat. The latter is merely a subset of foreign policy, and by no means the most important. In less than a year, Trump has done more on his own to undermine the transatlantic security consensus than Putin has attempted, much less achieved, in close on two decades. Similarly, the biggest danger to America's alliances with Japan, South Korea, and other Asian countries is not the rising power of China, the maverick behaviour of North Korea, or Russian meddling, but the possibility that Washington may severely reduce its security commitments in Asia.<sup>81</sup>

*Trump has done more on his own to undermine the transatlantic security consensus than Putin has attempted, much less achieved, in close on two decades.*

Trump's erratic behaviour is the most prolific source of international tensions today. It fuels misunderstandings and animosities, and foreshadows potentially disastrous outcomes — from the Americas, through Europe and the Middle East, to East Asia. Yet perhaps there is a small grain of comfort to be found in this otherwise alarming landscape. Although Trump and Putin share certain authoritarian traits, their attitudes towards global order diverge fundamentally. Trump is an unashamed wrecker,<sup>82</sup> committed to destroying any international system that might limit America's (or rather his) freedom of action. Putin is different. While he has long sought to subvert US leadership, this is not the same as wishing to revert to an uncontrolled 'state of nature'.<sup>83</sup> He desires a different order, not a quasi-permanent state of disorder. This is why he has sided with the G20 consensus on climate change and free

*The importance of global order to Moscow...means there is no chance that it will favour Washington over Beijing while Trump remains president...*

trade, cultivated a closer 'strategic partnership' with Beijing, and reached out to new French President Emmanuel Macron.

The importance of global order to Moscow, albeit on its terms, also means there is no chance that it will favour Washington over Beijing while Trump remains president (and probably long after). Far from weakening Sino-Russian partnership, Trump's actions have served to strengthen it. It comes as no surprise that Putin should identify more with Chinese President Xi Jinping — a leader with real power and authority — than with a blowhard unable to deliver even the most modest of results.

## REVITALISING THE WEST

So how should Western decision-makers react to the twists and turns of American foreign policy? Paradoxically, Trump has done them a favour by highlighting the risks of relying on the United States as a form of universal life insurance. The time is long overdue for America's allies to pursue more independent and flexible policies in response to a formidable array of global challenges.<sup>84</sup> The Hamburg G20 summit offered a possible template, as the rest of the West along with others coalesced around principled positions on combating climate change and resisting protectionism.<sup>85</sup> But this was only a very modest beginning, and it remains to be seen whether the 'Hamburg spirit' leads to a larger transformation in attitudes and policies, or whether it was just another rhetorical flash in the pan.<sup>86</sup>

This raises a broader point about the idea of the West. Much of the concern and even panic about the course of US–Russia relations under Trump is a natural consequence of a cumulative Western failure to uphold liberal norms, values, and institutions over the past 15 years. Lest we forget, Donald Trump was elected because he was able to exploit this weakness by tapping into a deep well of popular discontent. Vladimir Putin is admired, in the West as well as Russia, because he has demonstrated a firm commitment to his beliefs, abhorrent though some of them are. In the end, if a liberal world order is to survive, Western leaders need to defend its principles with no less conviction and energy. It is not enough to complain about others, they need to act. The time for muddling through is over.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Although the Second World War brought Franklin D Roosevelt into a wartime alliance with the Soviet Union under Stalin, this was clearly a partnership born of necessity rather than natural empathy. Perhaps the last US president to be so cooperative towards Russia was Theodore Roosevelt, whose diplomatic involvement in the 1905 Treaty of Portsmouth mitigated the consequences of the Russian Empire's disastrous defeat to Japan in the 1904–05 war.

<sup>2</sup> “Trump Says He Would Consider Recognizing Crimea as Part of Russia”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 1 August 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/trump-ukraine-russia-putin-crimea-annexation/27892208.html>.

<sup>3</sup> The White House alleged that the facilities had been used to assist Russian intelligence activity against the United States: Mark Mazzetti and Michael Schmidt, “Two Russian Compounds, Caught Up in History's Echoes”, *The New York Times*, 29 December 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/29/us/politics/russia-spy-compounds-maryland-long-island.html>.

<sup>4</sup> At the 2014 NATO summit in Newport, Wales, alliance members agreed to establish a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), a brigade of around 5 000 troops whose battalions function on a rotational basis. Following the 2016 NATO summit in Warsaw, the alliance instituted an Enhanced Forward Presence comprising four battle-groups, intended to boost security and confidence in the frontline states of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. The numbers of troops (fewer than a thousand per battle-group) are too small to resist a major Russian incursion. However, their purpose is essentially to act as a tripwire, greatly raising the stakes and costs of any aggressive Russian action.

<sup>5</sup> The Russian scholar Ivan Timofeev notes that “the Russian threat has become a powerful driver of NATO consolidation”: Ivan Timofeev “The Euro-Atlantic Security Formula: The Implications of NATO–Russia Relations to the Baltic Sea Region”, Russian International Affairs Council, 5 October 2017, <http://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/the-euro-atlantic-security-formula-the-implications-of-nato-russia-relations-to-the-baltic-sea-regio/>.

<sup>6</sup> Donald Trump is not the only US president to gush over Putin. George W Bush, after his first meeting with Putin in June 2001, claimed that he had “looked the man in the eye ... [and] found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy ... I was able to get a sense of his soul”: Press Conference by President Bush and Russian Federation President Putin, Slovenia, 16 June 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/06/20010618.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Dan Merica, “Trump Won't Refute Putin, Floats Joint Cybersecurity Team”, CNN, 10 July 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/07/09/politics/trump-russia-putin-cyber-security/index.html>.

<sup>8</sup> See Rex Tillerson's briefing after the Trump–Putin first meeting in Hamburg: Josh Lowe, “Trump and Putin Agree to ‘Move Forward’ from Russian Interference in Election, Tillerson Says”, *Newsweek*, 7 July 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/donald-trump-vladimir-putin-meeting-topics-handshake-633356>.



<sup>9</sup> In addition to the official bilateral, Trump sought a second, more private meeting with Putin. Most unusually, the only other person in the room apart from the two principals was Putin's interpreter. White House efforts to cover up the existence of the second meeting testify to the peculiar dynamic between the two presidents: see David Smith, "Trump Had Undisclosed Second Meeting with Putin, White House Confirms", *The Guardian*, 19 July 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jul/18/trump-and-putin-undisclosed-second-meeting-white-house-confirms>.

<sup>10</sup> David Graham, "What Trump's Cybersecurity Flip-Flop Reveals", *The Atlantic*, 10 July 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/07/trump-cybersecurity-flip-flop/533097/>. Prior to the visit, Steven Pifer among others argued for a "working group to develop rules of the road to govern cyber behavior between the two governments": Steven Pifer, "Tips for President Trump Ahead of His First Meeting with Putin", *Order from Chaos* (blog), Brookings Institution, 4 July 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/07/04/tips-for-president-trump-ahead-of-his-first-meeting-with-putin/>. But many influential political figures were quick to denounce the initiative. Republican Senator Lindsey Graham described it as "not the dumbest idea I've ever heard but it's pretty close": Harriet Sinclair, "Trump's Plan to Form Cyber Security Unit with Russia Pretty Close to the 'Dumbest Idea,' Says Lindsey Graham", *Newsweek*, 9 July 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/trumps-plan-form-cyber-security-unit-russia-pretty-close-dumbest-thing-i-ever-633944>.

<sup>11</sup> The sanctions bill, which also targeted Iran and North Korea, passed the House of Representatives 419–3, and the Senate 98–2. Its most important provision is to make it impossible for the president to ease sanctions without referring any such decision to Congress. See Deidre Walsh and Jeremy Herb, "House Overwhelmingly Passes Russia Sanctions Bill", CNN, 26 July 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/07/25/politics/iran-sanctions-bill/index.html>.

<sup>12</sup> These reached a new nadir during an interview with *The New York Times* and a public address to the Annual Jamboree of the Boy Scouts of America: see "President Trump's Bombshell Interview", *The New York Times*, 20 July 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/20/opinion/president-trumps-bombshell-interview.html>; also Chris Cillizza, "The 29 Most Cringe-worthy Lines from Donald Trump's Hyper-political Speech to the Boy Scouts", CNN, 27 July 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/07/25/politics/donald-trump-boy-scouts-speech/index.html>.

<sup>13</sup> The agreement in Hamburg to broker yet another ceasefire in southern Syria scarcely counts. The experience of the past six years of civil war in that country have demonstrated the unreliability of such arrangements, whose implementation depends on being observed by parties on the ground.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, comments by Andrei Kortunov, Director-General of the Russian International Affairs Council: Jill Dougherty, "Don't Expect Much Out of a Putin–Trump Meeting", CNN, 30 June 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/06/30/politics/trump-putin-g20-dougherty/index.html>.

<sup>15</sup> "Survey: Tips for President Trump Ahead of His First Meeting with Putin", *Russia Matters*, 3 July 2017, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/survey-tips-president-trump-ahead-his-first-meeting-putin>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy”, Munich, 10 February 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

<sup>18</sup> Adam Taylor, “Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin’s Latest in a Long Line of Awkward Photos”, *The Independent*, 1 December 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/barack-obama-and-vladimir-putins-latest-in-a-long-line-of-awkward-photos-a6755551.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War: How the Kremlin Menaces both Russia and the West* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Wright, *The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Crisis of US Foreign Policy*, Lowy Institute Analysis (Sydney: Lowy Institute, October 2016), 12–13, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/2016-presidential-campaign-and-crisis-us-foreign-policy>.

<sup>21</sup> George Bowden, “Vladimir Putin Says Nobody but Russia Predicted Donald Trump’s Victory”, *Huffington Post*, 23 December 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/vladimir-putin-donald-trump\\_uk\\_585d5bffe4b0f24da6e78cf4](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/vladimir-putin-donald-trump_uk_585d5bffe4b0f24da6e78cf4).

<sup>22</sup> Tom Balmforth, “Jubilation, Caution, Concern as Russia Reacts to ‘Great American Revolution’”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 9 November 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/donald-trum-u-s-election-russian-reaction/28106277.html>.

<sup>23</sup> See comments by Dmitri Trenin, Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center: “US Allies and Rivals Digest Trump’s Victory”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 11 November 2016, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/11/11/u.s.-allies-and-rivals-digest-trump-s-victory-pub-65117#russia>.

<sup>24</sup> Dmitri Trenin, “What Would Trump Presidency Mean for Russia: Risks and Opportunities”, Carnegie Moscow Center, 19 January 2017, <http://carnegie.ru/2017/01/19/what-would-trump-presidency-mean-for-russia-risks-and-opportunities-pub-67750>.

<sup>25</sup> A conspicuous exception was Putin’s reaction to Trump’s White House meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Russian Ambassador to the United States Sergei Kislyak. During the meeting, Trump allegedly passed over Israeli intelligence material without permission. Strikingly, the Russian media were allowed to take pictures of the happy trio, while the US press was excluded. See Susan B Glasser, “Russia’s Oval Office Victory Dance”, *Politico Magazine*, 10 May 2017, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/05/10/james-comey-firing-trump-lavrov-putin-215124>. Putin later pretended to chide Lavrov for not having shared this intelligence with his colleagues: Chris Riotta, “Vladimir Putin Openly Mocks Donald Trump for Sharing Secret Intel with Lavrov”, *Newsweek*, 17 May 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/vladimir-putin-mocks-donald-trump-sharing-secrets-russian-officials-white-610963>.

<sup>26</sup> Fyodor Lukyanov, “Trump–Putin Meeting: Much Ado about Nothing”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 7 July 2017, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/redcol/Trump-Putin-meeting-Much-ado-about-nothing-18835>.

<sup>27</sup> Most notably in an op-ed in *The New York Times* in 2013: Vladimir Putin, “A Plea for Caution from Russia”, *The New York Times*, 11 September 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/12/opinion/putin-plea-for-caution-from-russia-on-syria.html>.

<sup>28</sup> The term, “regions of privileged interest”, was used by then President Dmitry Medvedev in the wake of the 2008 Russia–Georgia War: Stefan Wagstyl, Roman Olearchuk and Jan Cienski, “Sphere of Intolerance?”, *Financial Times*, 4 September 2008, <https://www.ft.com/content/1b0944ac-79e2-11dd-bb93-000077b07658>. In fact, the notion of spheres of influence is an ancient one. As Thomas Graham and Rajan Menon have noted, “Russia’s leaders — no matter who they are — will continue to seek predominant influence in former Soviet states and resist any encroachments by the West”: Thomas Graham and Rajan Menon “The Putin Problem”, *Boston Review*, 12 September 2017, <http://bostonreview.net/politics/thomas-graham-rajan-menon-putin-problem>.

<sup>29</sup> Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder* (London and Washington DC: Chatham House and Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 50–51. Typical of this view is the claim that “[i]n East and Southeast Asia, Russia is seen as a necessary balancer and a neutral player with regard to the central regional conflict between the United States and China and equally complicated relations between China and its neighbors (Japan and the Republic of Korea)”: *Toward the Great Ocean — 5: From The Turn to The East to Greater Eurasia*, Valdai Discussion Club Report, August 2017, 29, <http://valdaiclub.com/files/15300/>.

<sup>30</sup> Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 48

<sup>31</sup> Simon Shuster, “Vladimir Putin’s Bad Blood With Hillary Clinton”, *Time*, 26 July 2016, <http://time.com/4422723/putin-russia-hillary-clinton/>.

<sup>32</sup> In fact, sanctions have benefited certain sectors, such as agriculture: see Stephen Fortescue, *Can Russia Afford to Be a Great Power?*, Lowy Institute Analysis (Sydney: Lowy Institute, June 2017), 16, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/can-russia-afford-be-great-power>.

<sup>33</sup> Dmitry Suslov, “America Is Becoming Increasingly Dangerous for the World and Trump Has Nothing to Do with It”, *Valdai Club*, 4 August 2017, <http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/america-increasingly-dangerous/>.

<sup>34</sup> The Magnitsky Act, passed by Congress in December 2012, introduced a range of sanctions against Russian officials suspected of the ill treatment and death in custody of the lawyer Sergei Magnitsky. The sanctions included asset freezes and denial of entry into the United States.

<sup>35</sup> Tom O’Connor, “Russian Senator Praises Trump for Backing Kremlin in Syria by Cutting Ties to ‘Moderate’ Rebels”, *Newsweek*, 20 July 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/us-cut-support-moderate-syria-rebels-improve-russia-ties-moscow-639762>.

<sup>36</sup> Lilia Shevtsova, “Bad Romance: Survival in the Trumpian World”, *The American Interest*, 22 February 2017, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/02/22/survival-in-the-trumpian-world/>.

<sup>37</sup> Some prominent Western politicians have played along with the pretence: see UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson’s remarks at the 2017 Lowy Lecture, Sydney, 27 July 2017, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/2017-lowy-lecture-uk-foreign-secretary-boris-johnson>.

<sup>38</sup> The missile strike coincided with Xi Jinping’s visit to the Trump resort at Mar-a-Lago — no doubt as a crude demonstration that Trump, and not the Chinese president, held the upper hand in their relationship.

<sup>39</sup> Russian reaction to Trump's refusal to certify Iranian compliance with the terms of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) has been restrained. Nevertheless, a recent Foreign Ministry statement noted that Russia, along with other parties to the agreement, had no intention of allowing the reimposition of UN sanctions against Iran. See Shelab Khan, "Iran Nuclear Deal: Russia Says Trump's Actions Are 'Doomed to Fail'", *The Independent*, 13 October 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/iran-nuclear-deal-trump-russia-reaction-doomed-fail-aggressive-a7999636.html>.

<sup>40</sup> An additional wrinkle is that Russia–DPRK trade is increasing, albeit from a very low base: Oren Dorell, "Russia's Boost in Trade with North Korea Worries US", *USA Today*, 7 June 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/06/07/russia-north-korea-trade-china/102605222/>.

<sup>41</sup> As outlined by Putin and Xi, this would entail Pyongyang freezing its nuclear missile tests, and the United States and South Korea ceasing joint military drills: "Xi Jinping and Putin Join Forces to Halt North Korean Crisis", *South China Morning Post*, 5 July 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2101359/chinese-and-russian-presidents-urge-peaceful-solution>.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Connelly, *Troubled Times: Stagnation, Sanctions and the Prospects for Economic Reform in Russia* (London: Chatham House, February 2015), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/troubled-times-stagnation-sanctions-and-prospects-economic-reform-russia>.

<sup>43</sup> "The Dread of the Other", *The Economist*, 16 February 2013, [https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21571904-leading-role-played-anti-americanism-todays-russia-dread-other?fsrc=scn/rd\\_ec/the\\_dread\\_of\\_the\\_other](https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21571904-leading-role-played-anti-americanism-todays-russia-dread-other?fsrc=scn/rd_ec/the_dread_of_the_other).

<sup>44</sup> Richard Wike, Bruce Stokes, Jacob Poushter and Janell Fetterolf, "US Image Suffers as Publics Around World Question Trump's Leadership", Pew Research Center, 26 June 2017, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/06/26/u-s-image-suffers-as-publics-around-world-question-trumps-leadership/>.

<sup>45</sup> See Wright, *The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Crisis of US Foreign Policy*, 4–6.

<sup>46</sup> Bobo Lo, "Russian Foreign Policy and the Crisis in Western Policy-making", ANU Centre for European Studies *Policy Notes*, Issue 4, 2017, [http://politicsir.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/politicsir.anu.edu.au/files/documents/ANUCES-policy-notes\\_issue4-2017\\_1.pdf](http://politicsir.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/politicsir.anu.edu.au/files/documents/ANUCES-policy-notes_issue4-2017_1.pdf).

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, comments by Rolf Mowatt-Larssen in "Survey: Tips for President Trump Ahead of His First Meeting with Putin", *Russia Matters*, 3 July 2017, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/survey-tips-president-trump-ahead-his-first-meeting-putin>.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Service, *The End of the Cold War, 1985–1991* (United Kingdom: Pan Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>49</sup> Alexander Baunov, "Making the Best of a No-Win Encounter: Putin and Trump Meet", Carnegie Moscow Center, 13 July 2017, <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/71529>.

<sup>50</sup> Wright, *The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Crisis of US Foreign Policy*, 6–7.

<sup>51</sup> Tom Bowman, “100 Days In, Trump’s Generals Seen as a Moderating Force”, NPR, 28 April 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2017/04/28/525909535/100-days-in-trumps-generals-seen-as-a-moderating-force>.

<sup>52</sup> Ashley Parker and Greg Jaffe, “Inside the ‘Adult Day-Care Center’: How Aides Try to Control and Coerce Trump”, *The Washington Post*, 16 October 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/inside-the-adult-day-care-center-how-aides-try-to-control-and-coerce-trump/2017/10/15/810b4296-b03d-11e7-99c6-46bdf7f6f8ba\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.b6ebf4e35541](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/inside-the-adult-day-care-center-how-aides-try-to-control-and-coerce-trump/2017/10/15/810b4296-b03d-11e7-99c6-46bdf7f6f8ba_story.html?utm_term=.b6ebf4e35541). Stories of tensions between Trump and senior administration officials are legion. See, for example, Dexter Filkins, “Rex Tillerson at Breaking Point: Will Donald Trump Let the Secretary of State Do His Job?”, *The New Yorker*, 16 October 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/10/16/rex-tillerson-at-the-breaking-point>.

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<sup>54</sup> Aaron David Miller and Richard Sokolsky, “The Incredible Shrinking Rex Tillerson: Can the Secretary of State Reclaim His Job?”, *USA Today*, 30 June 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2017/06/30/can-secretary-state-rex-tillerson-reclaim-his-job-miller-sokolsky-column/432721001/>; Filkins, “Rex Tillerson at Breaking Point: Will Donald Trump Let the Secretary of State Do His Job?”.

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<sup>56</sup> European Commission, “European Union Trade in Goods with Russia”, 3 May 2017, [http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc\\_113440.pdf](http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_113440.pdf).

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<sup>58</sup> Thane Gustafson, “The Future of Russia as an Energy Superpower”, IHS Markit, 11 October 2017.

<sup>59</sup> Kevin Johnson, “James Clapper: Trump is ‘Making Russia Great Again’”, *USA Today*, 21 July 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2017/07/22/intel-officials-blast-trump/501199001/>.

<sup>60</sup> Vladimir Putin’s News Conference Following BRICS Summit, 5 September 2017, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/55535>.

<sup>61</sup> Peter Rutland, “The Petty Bargain: Trump, Putin and the Future of US–Russia Relations”, *The Interpreter*, 27 February 2017, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/petty-bargain-trump-putin-and-future-us-russia-relations>.

<sup>62</sup> “Survey: Tips for President Trump Ahead of His First Meeting with Putin”, *Russia Matters*, 3 July 2017, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/survey-tips-president-trump-ahead-his-first-meeting-putin>; Lukyanov, “Trump–Putin Meeting: Much Ado about Nothing”.

<sup>63</sup> This is all the more unlikely since Kurt Volker's appointment as special representative to Ukraine in July 2017. Volker, a long-time critic of the Kremlin, lost little time in blaming it for the ongoing violence in southeast Ukraine: Natalia Zinets and Matthias Williams, "Russia to Blame for 'Hot War' in Ukraine: US Special Envoy", Reuters, 24 July 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-volker-idUSKBN1A80M4?il=0>.

<sup>64</sup> Zapad-2017, like its predecessors, was formally designed to test Russian (and Belarusian) troop readiness in the event of a hypothetical NATO military intervention in Belarus. However, it had other purposes as well — to play on NATO nerves by showcasing Russian capabilities, and perhaps gauge the alliance's resolve to defend its most vulnerable members, namely the Baltic states. Although Moscow claimed that the number of personnel involved was 12 700, NATO estimated that a far larger number of troops (at least 40 000) participated in the exercise. The difference in estimates matters because exercises involving more than 13 000 troops must allow full access to outside (i.e. NATO) observers. See Andrey Sushentsov, "Zapad Wargames and Living in Uncertainty", Valdai Club, 29 September 2017, <http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/zapad-wargames-and-living-in-uncertainty/>; "US Army Chief Says Russia War Games Broke Observer Rules", Associated Press, 2 October 2017, <https://www.wthr.com/article/us-army-chief-says-russia-war-games-broke-observer-rules>; Eric Schmitt, "Vast Exercise Demonstrated Russia's Growing Military Prowess", *The New York Times*, 1 October 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/01/us/politics/zapad-russia-military-exercise.html>

<sup>65</sup> Robert Legvold, "Into the Unknown", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 6 June 2017, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Into-the-Unknown--18753>.

<sup>66</sup> Josie Ensor and Luna Safwan, "Donald Trump Ends Covert CIA Aid to Syrian Rebels in 'Win' for Russia", *The Telegraph* (UK), 20 July 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/07/20/donald-trump-ends-us-programme-supporting-syrian-rebels-fighting/>.

<sup>67</sup> Shaun Walker, "Russia Cuts US Diplomatic Presence in Retaliation for Sanctions", *The Guardian*, 29 July 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/28/russia-cuts-us-diplomatic-presence-retaliation-sanctions>.

<sup>68</sup> Julian Borger, "US Orders Russia to Close Consulate and Annexes in Diplomatic Reprisal", *The Guardian*, 1 September 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/aug/31/us-russia-san-francisco-consulate-close>.

<sup>69</sup> Ellen Mitchell, "House Bill Threatens Russia with Nuclear Treaty Suspension", *The Hill*, 26 June 2017, <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/339575-house-bill-threatens-russia-with-nuclear-treaty-suspension>. Another threat to the INF treaty comes from a Senate measure to provide \$65 million for a ground-launched cruise missile (GLCM) that would have a range prohibited under the treaty. See Maggie Tennis, "Senate Approval Threatens INF Treaty", *Arms Control Today*, 1 October 2017, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2017-10/news/senate-approval-threatens-inf-treaty>.

<sup>70</sup> Ivan Timofeev writes of a "stable containment": Ivan Timofeev "Russia and NATO: A Paradoxical Crisis", Valdai Club, 26 June 2017, <http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-and-nato-a-paradoxical-crisis/>.



<sup>71</sup> Ivan Nechepurenko, “US Sharply Curtails Visa Services in Russia”, *The New York Times*, 21 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/21/world/europe/us-russia-visas-sanctions.html>.

<sup>72</sup> It is reported that Kelly had previously considered resigning as head of Homeland Security, so disgusted was he at Trump’s unceremonious sacking of FBI Director James Comey: Shimon Prokupez and Pamela Brown, “Kelly Called Comey to Express Anger over Firing, Sources Say”, CNN, 1 August 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/07/31/politics/kelly-comey-phone-call-angry/index.html>.

<sup>73</sup> Ashley Parker and Philip Rucker, “Enforcer or ‘Choke point’? Kelly Seeks to Bring Order to Chaotic White House”, *Washington Post*, 22 September 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/enforcer-or-choke-point-kelly-seeks-to-bring-order-to-chaotic-white-house/2017/09/22/79783610-9fad-11e7-9083-fbfdd6804c2\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.9afa9b046ca6](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/enforcer-or-choke-point-kelly-seeks-to-bring-order-to-chaotic-white-house/2017/09/22/79783610-9fad-11e7-9083-fbfdd6804c2_story.html?utm_term=.9afa9b046ca6).

<sup>74</sup> Sergei Karaganov, “The Future World Order”, *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 7 September 2017, <http://karaganov.ru/en/publications/457>.

<sup>75</sup> Dmitri Trenin, “If Putin Wanted to Step Up His Fight with America, You’d Know It”, Carnegie Moscow Center, 31 July 2017, <http://carnegie.ru/2017/07/31/if-putin-wanted-to-step-up-his-fight-with-america-you-d-know-it-pub-72693>.

<sup>76</sup> Mike Eckel, “Russia’s Medvedev Says US Sanctions Bill Ends Hope for Better Ties”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 3 August 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/trump-signs-russia-sanctions-bill/28655189.html>.

<sup>77</sup> It is symptomatic of the heightened level of tension that Putin and other senior Russian figures routinely talk about the possible use of nuclear weapons — a notion once utterly unthinkable. See Neil Buckley, Sam Jones and Kathryn Hille, “Russia: Putting the ‘Nuclear Gun’ Back on the Table”, *Financial Times*, 15 November 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/03dfeb98-aa88-11e6-9cb3-bb8207902122?mhq5j=e7>.

<sup>78</sup> The most ill-advised of Trump’s utterances on North Korea was when he told journalists that further threats by Pyongyang would “be met by fire and fury like the world has never seen”: Peter Baker and Choe Sang-Hun, “Trump Threatens ‘Fire and Fury’ against North Korea if it Endangers US”, *The New York Times*, 8 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/08/world/asia/north-korea-un-sanctions-nuclear-missile-united-nations.html>.

<sup>79</sup> Trump refused to reaffirm America’s commitment to Article V during a visit to NATO headquarters in Brussels in May 2017, thereby conspicuously distancing himself from Defense Secretary Mattis. A few weeks later, the President belatedly restated the commitment in an off-the-cuff remark to a Romanian reporter: Louise Nelson, “Trump Publicly Commits to NATO Mutual-Defense Provision”, *Politico*, 9 June 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/06/09/trump-nato-article-five-239362>.

<sup>80</sup> Edward Lucas, “Trump and Putin: Inside the World’s Most Dangerous Special Relationship”, *The Telegraph* (UK), 22 January 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/thinking-man/trump-putin-inside-worlds-dangerous-special-relationship/>.

<sup>81</sup> See Thomas Wright, “Kim Jong-un’s Theory of Nuclear Victory”, *Australian Financial Review*, 29 August 2017, <http://www.afr.com/opinion/columnists/kim-jong-uns-theory-of-nuclear-victory-20170829-gy65f6>.

<sup>82</sup> The conservative American commentator Charlie Sykes has called Trump a pyromaniac: David Smith, “‘The President Is a Pyromaniac’: The Week Trump Set Fire to the White House”, *The Guardian*, 30 July 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jul/29/donald-trump-news-healthcare-transgender-troops-jeff-sessions>.

<sup>83</sup> According to the seventeenth century political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, “during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man”: *The Leviathan*, Part I, Chapter 13.

<sup>84</sup> The September/October 2017 issue of *Foreign Affairs* was devoted to the question of how US allies should manage the challenges posed by Trump’s foreign policy, in particular the possibility of American strategic and normative retrenchment. See, for example, Michael Fullilove, “Down and Out Down Under: Australia’s Uneasy America Alliance”, *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2017-08-15/down-and-out-down-under>.

<sup>85</sup> Michael Birnbaum and Damian Paletta, “At G-20, World Aligns against Trump Policies Ranging from Free Trade to Climate Change”, *The Washington Post*, 7 July 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/at-g-20-eu-warns-of-trade-war-if-trump-imposes-restrictions-on-steel/2017/07/07/0ffae390-62f4-11e7-a6c7-f769fa1d5691\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.9100198c118f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/at-g-20-eu-warns-of-trade-war-if-trump-imposes-restrictions-on-steel/2017/07/07/0ffae390-62f4-11e7-a6c7-f769fa1d5691_story.html?utm_term=.9100198c118f).

<sup>86</sup> Leading Russian commentator Fyodor Lukyanov rightly observes that “Europe is ill-prepared to conduct a policy of ‘strategic autonomy’ that some are calling for”: Fyodor Lukyanov, “Atlantic Drift: Russia and The US–Europe Divide”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 19 September 2017, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/redcol/Atlantic-Drift-Russia-and-the-US-Europe-Divide-18997>.

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