

A NEW DIRECTION IN U.S.-RUSSIA RELATIONS?

**America's Challenges & Opportunities
in Dealing with Russia**



Editor, Paul J. Saunders

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OVERVIEW: A NEW DIRECTION?

PAUL J. SAUNDERS

America's relationship with Russia was among the most controversial foreign-policy issues of the 2016 presidential campaign, and has remained so in the Trump administration's initial weeks. Much of the controversy has been strictly political, focused primarily on exploiting anger and suspicion toward Moscow as a weapon during the election campaign and, more recently, in confirmation hearings for President Donald Trump's key foreign-policy and national-security nominees. That said, public discussion before and after the November election has also exposed sharp differences over U.S. policy toward Russia and the assessments of U.S. and Russian interests, objectives and values that shape Washington's choices. This volume seeks to contribute to that debate by exploring U.S. options in pursuing President Trump's stated intent to engage with Moscow.

The first paper, by Thomas Graham, provides an overview of the U.S.-Russia relationship and proposes U.S. strategic goals and objectives. Central to Graham's framework are his assertions that the United States must seek a new equilibrium—balancing cooperation and competition—and that policymakers must place America's strategy and policy toward Russia in a global context. This means understanding the full implications of U.S. choices and recognizing that Russian leaders are less and less inclined to approach individual issues as discrete topics for negotiation. He identifies four U.S. priorities: strategic stability (including arms control and nonproliferation), managing China's rise, European security, and counterterrorism.

Michael Kofman assesses the question of Russia's military capabilities, and particularly the military balance between Russia and the United States and its NATO allies. In his view, while “the armed forces have become one of Russia's most reliable instruments of national power,” Moscow nevertheless faces significant constraints on its capabilities. As a result, he writes, “Russia's military is not an existential threat to Europe, or even Ukraine for that matter”—though Russia can credibly “impose its will by force on neighboring countries.” He cautions against an excessive focus on Baltic security, which he describes as “more rooted in politics than in sound military analysis of Russian force posture and intent.” The key for the United States is therefore to recognize that “America's primary weakness is not in its lack of economic or military power, but in a failure to formulate strategy and policy.”

Matthew Rojansky examines the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and sets out a strategy to resolve it in a manner that advances U.S. interests. He calls for Washington to abandon its “important but secondary role” in favor of a more active and direct U.S. contribution to existing processes, such as meetings in the so-called Normandy format (involving France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine) and implementation of the Minsk II agreement, which set out a broad framework to settle the conflict. Looking to the longer term, Rojansky argues that perhaps most important to a sustainable resolution will be for “Russia and the West to overcome what has become a ‘zero sum’ narrative in and around Ukraine.” Still, Rojansky concludes, Washington should have no illusions that Russia will “abandon” Crimea or that Ukraine will surrender its sovereignty rights.

In the final paper, Nikolas Gvosdev reviews the prospects for U.S.-Russia cooperation in Syria, which President Trump identified as one of his foreign-policy goals during the electoral campaign. Gvosdev begins by urging realism in formulating U.S. objectives, insisting that “there is no low-cost, no-risk approach that will achieve the entire U.S. wish list for Syria.” Succeeding requires understanding both U.S. and Russian interests and objectives clearly; Gvosdev implies that the Obama administration fell short on the former and explicitly writes that the United States “seriously misread Russia’s interests and intentions in Syria.” Moving forward, he states, if the Trump administration seeks a cooperative approach, it is “essential” to do so “from a position of strength and resolve” that shakes Kremlin assessments that Washington is “all talk and no action.”

The papers do not address America’s poisonous political climate surrounding U.S. policy toward Russia in any detail. Taking this into account, it may be difficult for the Trump administration to pursue a new direction in the U.S.-Russia relationship without either articulating its strategy and objectives in a clear and reassuring manner or, alternatively, taking practical steps to define a direction around which the White House can marshal political support. Contrary to what some may think, recent polling suggests that, notwithstanding significant reservations about Russia’s conduct, a majority of Americans continue to view Moscow as a potential partner. This may not be the case within Washington’s immediate environs, but is demonstrably true in the country as a whole.

Of course, for any newly cooperative policy approach to succeed, it will also require changes in Russian conduct. If Russian officials expect that the Trump administration will merely reverse what Moscow views as mistakes in American foreign policy without seeking substantive corrections in Russia’s

course, they are likely to be disappointed. Likewise, America's relationship with Russia is important, but fits within a broader global context that includes relations with other leading powers as well as with U.S. allies in strategic regions. For Washington, finding the right balance among the various components of U.S. foreign policy will be a complex task incorporating many compromises—some of which Russian leaders will almost surely not welcome.

TOWARD A NEW EQUILIBRIUM IN U.S.-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

THOMAS GRAHAM

President Trump will face no more urgent foreign-policy task than developing a Russia policy. His warm words for Russian president Vladimir Putin and his questioning of long-standing bipartisan U.S. policy have alarmed key foreign-policy constituencies at home and allies and partners abroad, while raising hopes in the Kremlin of a new beginning more favorable to Russia. Other statements, however, such as supporting increased funding for the modernization of nuclear-weapons infrastructure and decrying the Iran nuclear deal, suggest a harder approach. The challenge will be turning this vague, often contradictory campaign rhetoric into concrete policy that can win the support of the American people and their representatives on the Hill.

That will not be easy, for the President is correct in his intuition that the United States needs a new approach to Russia, breaking with the bipartisan consensus that has guided policy since the Cold War. Our grand ambition to integrate Russia into the Euro-Atlantic community as a free-market democracy has failed. The eruption of the Ukraine crisis nearly three years ago made that point emphatically. Russian leaders have underscored their determination to rally support against U.S. global leadership and to challenge the United States at a number of geopolitical points along the periphery of their country, especially in Europe and the Middle East. Normalization of relations, in their view, does not mean partnership or even cooperation, but respectful competition between equals with acknowledged spheres of influence.

The Russia We Face

The starting point for a new strategy is a clear understanding of how Russia relates to American goals. Its nuclear arsenal, vast natural resources and proximity to regions of undisputed strategic value to the United States, including Europe, the Middle East, South and East Asia, and the Arctic, make it a power the United States cannot ignore. Moreover, even if it is in secular decline, Russia will remain a power to be reckoned with for years to come. Its world-class diplomatic corps, increasingly capable military that outclasses any in its immediate neighborhood, and creative scientific community that can harness cutting-edge technology to military needs, now most notably in cyberspace, guarantee that.

Relations will focus on security matters, as they have since the United States emerged as a global power at the end of the nineteenth century. Cooperating with Russia is indispensable to maintaining the strategic nuclear balance and

preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction. Taking its interests into account will be critical to creating zones of peace, stability and prosperity along its borders. Engaging it will improve the chances of containing—and ultimately eliminating—the threat of international terrorism. Although major benefits might emerge in time from closer economic ties, the hard truth is that the lack of complementarity between the American and Russian economies prevents trade and investment from becoming anything other than a minor part of the broader relationship in the next decade or more.

Engaging Russia will be neither pleasant nor easy. It exudes a prickly nationalism, born of wounded pride, a deep sense of vulnerability and an unquenched desire for respect. The Kremlin is acutely aware of the challenges it faces in modernizing its economy to generate the resources to sustain its ambition to be treated as one of the world's few great powers. Today, as often before in history, the gap between capabilities and ambitions bedevils Russia's leaders, but it will not prevent them from demanding a role in world affairs they cannot quite fulfill.

The New Equilibrium

How, then, should we proceed? In broad terms, two schools of thought have dominated policymaking for the past twenty-five years. One, which included the Obama administration, argues that we need to contain and isolate Russia, as we did during the Cold War. The other calls for the pursuit of cooperation. But neither is adequate to today's realities. It is impossible to contain one of the world's largest economies and major military powers in an increasingly interconnected world, especially when non-Western powers, notably China and India, are disinclined to follow the American lead. And cooperation for the sake of cooperation makes little sense when Russia is determined to pursue its national interests, which it now often defines in opposition to ours.

Rather, our goal should be to create what we might call a new equilibrium, that is, a balance of cooperation and competition with Russia that reduces the risk of great-power conflict, manages geopolitical rivalry and contains transnational threats.

Achieving this equilibrium will require that we break with some of our traditional diplomatic practices.

First, we need to engage Russia fully, and not limit channels of communication as we tend to do when we find a rival's actions unsavory. In diplomacy, dialogue should not be a reward for good behavior, but a means to understand

the other side's interests and intentions. It is especially needed when events threaten to spin out of control, as they now do in U.S.-Russian relations. Moreover, re-engaging Russia today does not entail a return to business as usual, for the presumption is not that engagement will foster greater cooperation—although it might—but only that it will forestall a more dangerous deterioration.

Second, we have to think globally and holistically, rather than seeking, as we now do, to compartmentalize relations into areas of agreement and disagreement or pursue relations as a disconnected set of discrete deals. Like it or not, Russians operate in a world of soft linkage. Syria and Ukraine policy are inevitably intertwined, because the Kremlin insists they are, and because neither can be separated from the broader question of European security. By the same token, what we do in Europe will necessarily shape Russian policy in Asia, pushing it closer to China or providing reason for it to resist China's pressure or blandishments.

Third, we need to refine our understanding of shared interests. Both countries might share an interest in fighting ISIS, for example, but closer examination reveals stark differences in the assessment of the threat, the policy for dealing with it and the sense of urgency. The same holds true for other shared interests. As a result, our goal should not be so much to find common ground as to determine the possible trade-offs within and across issues that will lead to the balance of cooperation and competition that best advances American goals.

Last, we need to discipline the bureaucracy to pursue a set of sharply defined national priorities, although it might not always be wise to detail them in public. In this framework, we must relentlessly pursue our core interests—what is indispensable to our security and prosperity—while being prepared to make concessions on other matters that are not vital, even if they might be of value, to advance our priorities.

Strategic Goals and Objectives

The contours of the new equilibrium will shift over time, as we reassess our interests in a turbulent world, and as Russian behavior and capabilities evolve. At the moment, our strategic goals and objectives in broad outline include the following:

First, maintaining strategic stability, preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and constraining arms races.

As the world's two largest nuclear powers by a wide margin, the United States and Russia bear a unique responsibility for maintaining strategic stability. Russia's recent nuclear saber-rattling, apparent violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, suspension of the Plutonium Disposition Agreement and disavowal of interest in further arms reductions have unsettled the strategic environment. Cooperation on nonproliferation remains uneven, as rivalry in cyberspace heats up in the absence of agreed rules of behavior or a common understanding of the dangers.

As one of its first steps, the new Trump administration should propose to Russia a wide-ranging discussion of arms-related issues, to include prolonging the new START, reviewing the implications of advanced conventional weapons for nuclear stability, developing norms for cyberspace and exploring ways to bring other nuclear powers into discussions of strategic stability. Critical to persuading Moscow to engage will be a willingness to discuss limits on our respective missile-defense programs, which Moscow has adamantly opposed, and review the INF Treaty at a time when other countries are acquiring intermediate ballistic-missile capabilities.

In addition, the new administration should strengthen the nonproliferation programs in which both we and Russia participate, including the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism, launched as a joint U.S.-Russian effort in the George W. Bush administration. We should also pledge to continue to work with Russia and others in constraining both Iran's and North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

Second, managing the rise of China.

The rise of China is a defining feature of the current period, affecting the global economy and the geopolitical balance in the Western Pacific and across the Eurasian continent. Russia's pursuit of a strategic partnership with China, accelerated by the deterioration of relations with the West, may eventually run aground amidst deep-seated historical antagonisms, but not without developments detrimental to U.S. interests in the short-to-medium term.

The new administration's goal should be to include Russia as a party in flexible coalitions in East Asia to increase the leverage of all countries, including Russia, the United States and our key East Asian allies, in dealing with China. At the moment, however, the West's Ukraine sanctions weaken Russia and drive it into China's embrace, to our detriment. Our interests would be better served by gradually easing those sanctions, in return for concrete Russian steps vis-à-vis Ukraine, starting with those that prevent robust American and

Japanese participation in the development of Russia's Far East. In addition, the United States needs to overcome its discomfort with Russia's presence in Central Asia, which counterbalances China's; indeed, we should work with Russia there—and encourage Japan, South Korea and India to do so—to moderate China's influence.

Third, enhancing European security.

Russia's annexation of Crimea and meddling in Eastern Ukraine have violated key norms of European security, while its provocative reconnaissance patrols along NATO's borders and loose rhetoric about nuclear weapons have unnerved allies, especially those the Soviet Union once dominated. Russia is also pursuing a multipronged effort to erode European unity by exploiting the fissures that have opened up in recent years as a result of stresses inside Europe.

The challenge is to develop a set of policies that reassure allies and address Russia's security concerns. On reassurance, the new administration should support the NATO policies now in place to underscore our commitment to the Article 5 collective defense guarantees, including maintaining a visible American presence in the Baltic states. But it should avoid over-militarizing the response. The Russian challenge is best met by actions to address internal problems—growing inequality, the democratic deficit, migration, fiscal deficiencies—that have split the European Union and fueled populist anti-EU movements.

To address Russian concerns, the new administration should be prepared to engage the Russians on a new security architecture for Europe, including discussions of the interpretation of the norms underlying European security, as codified in the Helsinki accords of 1975, and ways to enhance transparency in military matters, in the spirit, if not necessarily the details, of the Conventional Force in Europe (CFE) Treaty, which Russia fully exited in 2015.

The Ukraine crisis will demand urgent attention. The outlines of a solution include an agreement among NATO members, Ukraine and Russia on non-bloc status for Ukraine; decentralization of power in Ukraine; protection of minority rights throughout Ukraine; negotiations on a status for Crimea acceptable to Moscow and Kiev; and an aid package to help rebuild Ukraine's economy.

Fourth, containing international terrorism.

The Syria crisis dominates the headlines, but it is only the most prominent illustration of the broader instability throughout the Middle East that is spawning terrorist organizations—some, such as ISIS, with global reach. Russia is now firmly entrenched in the region, supporting the Assad regime in coordination with Iran and Hezbollah as it seeks to enhance relations with other regional powers, including Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

The urgent task is to come to some understanding with Russia on how to deal with the Syria crisis. In exchange for a Russian commitment to begin serious operations against ISIS, the new administration should drop Obama's insistence that Assad must go. It should also initiate a broader dialogue with Russia about the future balance in the Middle East. We cannot decide that between ourselves alone—the major regional powers will have a greater say in the end—but we can reduce the intensity of our competition and help ensure that regional rivalries do not spread beyond the Middle East.

Beyond these four strategic priorities, the new administration should resist the considerable domestic pressure it will face to aggressively counter Putin's authoritarian practices and directly support pro-democracy groups in Russia. Russia is too complex for us to intervene constructively, and Russians will reject what they will rightly see as hectoring. Moreover, since the end of the Cold War, our efforts to promote democracy inside Russia have been counterproductive, leading a wary Kremlin to narrow the space for open, competitive politics. Finally, as a matter of historical record, conditions for democratic advance in Russia are best when U.S.-Russian relations are most constructive, and our success in addressing our own problems feeds a desire among greater numbers of Russians to emulate our system.

It is impossible to forecast with great precision how Russia will react to such an approach. The Kremlin might engage in good faith, but it might also continue to see its deeper interest in eroding American power and influence. The latter possibility should not deter us from seeking a new equilibrium, even if it means that the balance will shift more towards competition. We have little to fear, for the truth remains that we have much the greater capacity to effect our goals in the world, if only we have the will.

THE ABCs OF RUSSIAN MILITARY POWER: A PRIMER FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

MICHAEL KOFMAN

The current confrontation in U.S.-Russia relations, and increasing antagonism in the relationship, makes it difficult to separate structural changes in the European security environment from politically charged sources of conflict. Yet these changes have been profound, dating back to Russian military reforms launched in late 2008. They have serious implications for the new U.S. administration. The principal factors are Russia's revival of the military as an instrument of national power, the unsettled war in Ukraine, and NATO's changing posture to counter a perceived threat from Moscow's machinations.

Seeking an improved, or perhaps simply more stable, relationship with Russia from a "position of strength" requires understanding the new military balance in Europe, the evolution of Russia's military capabilities, and its evolving force posture. Independent of whether the proximate causes of hostility in U.S.-Russian relations are resolved, or there is a change in the broader atmospherics of the relationship, the United States must develop a strategy and policy for dealing with Russia, grounded not in optimism but in hard military realities. The previous administration suffered from a severe rhetoric-to-strategy gap, contesting Russia politically, but losing strategically.

It would be safe to assume that distrust will continue to dominate NATO-Russia relations, and that even if interactions on the whole may improve—arguably, they cannot worsen—they may not produce concrete results in short order. A fact-based approach to the security situation in Europe should inform further changes in U.S. force structure and posture. Unfortunately, for the past two years discourse on this subject has been only marginally informed by reality, with policy advocacy and agendas driving analysis of the Russian military threat. Debate has often taken place either in a fact-free zone, or with new information overconsumed by a policy establishment long unaccustomed to dealing with Russia as a serious adversary. The United States has not been winning the geopolitical confrontation with Russia of late; nor has it come up with a vision for how to change the dynamics in this adversarial relationship.

Like its predecessor, the new administration will have to formulate its Russia policy in the aftermath of a crisis in European security; this is an opportunity either to make fresh mistakes, or to get things right. To succeed, the administration must base its strategy not on individual capabilities that Russia has, the individual concerns of proximate NATO members, or the designs of

different constituencies within the U.S. policy establishment, but on a coherent understanding of the security dynamics in Europe and Russian military power.

Russia Has Been Busy

The Russian military that the United States faces in 2017 is not the poorly equipped and uncoordinated force that invaded Georgia in August of 2008. This is why the magnitude and potential impact of the current crisis is far greater than that inherited by the Obama administration in 2009. Following reforms launched in October 2008, and a modernization program in 2011 valued at \$670 billion, the armed forces have become one of Russia's most reliable instruments of national power. Russia disbanded the useless mass-mobilization army of the Soviet Union, consolidated what was worthwhile, and reconstituted a much smaller, but more capable force. The overall size of Russia's armed forces continues to increase, numbering over nine hundred thousand today, while the state armament program continues to replace aging equipment throughout the force with new or modernized variants.

The reform process and a stable infusion of much-needed capital have restored war-fighting potential to the Russian military, though incomplete, and unevenly applied to the force. Moscow's ability to sustain this spending is very much in question, faced with low oil prices, economic recession and Western sanctions. However, Russia has made the choice to defend defense spending and enact cuts elsewhere. Reductions will be made to the procurement program, but Moscow will maintain spending on nuclear modernization and long-range standoff weapons, trying to sustain the force at current levels. In reality, loss of access to key components from Ukrainian and European defense industries created the most serious setbacks to Russian defense modernization (delays of about five to seven years in 2014).

Russia's defense budget steadily climbed to a peak of 4.2 percent of GDP in 2015. Since then, it has been in relative decline, though likely to remain above 3.7 percent, well beyond the spending levels of America's European allies. This level of expenditure is probably unsustainable for the Russian budget, inevitably forcing its leadership to choose between weapons procurement, operations and the quality of personnel. However, the inertia of the current modernization program will have lasting effects well into the 2020s.

Bottom line, Russia can sustain this military with judicious reductions, and even if the funding base collapses, the dramatic turnaround in its armed forces is not a temporary bounce that the United States must ride out. Russia's General Staff has been focused on drilling the force with snap readiness

checks, joint exercises, large movements and annual operational-strategic exercises. From its air force to the nuclear-powered submarines of its navy, the Russian military has quickly clawed back operational readiness not seen since the 1990s.

Admittedly, the size of this force is a fraction of the Soviet colossus that NATO faced in Europe. However, most of America's allies in Europe have either let their armed forces atrophy or cut conventional capabilities entirely from their roster, in favor of niche roles in the alliance. The United States, too, has cut its navy and army to levels that are hardly consistent with the increased likelihood of interstate conflict, which portends a need to deter great powers and maintain a large network of allies in the face of revisionist ones. That concept in and of itself is likely unsustainable, requiring a rethink of long-standing policies, and the return of strategic discipline to Washington, DC.

What Can the Russian Military Do?

As a Eurasian land power, Russia concentrates most of its firepower in the ground force, intended to counter Western advantages in air power. The Russian army can fight alone. New families of weapon systems that were being developed by the USSR in the 1980s have been completed and are being distributed across the force, enabling long-range precision strikes, air defense and marked improvements down to the individual soldier level.

Today Russia can field perhaps forty or fifty thousand troops on short notice, including airborne and spetsnaz, along with armored and mechanized infantry formations. Simply put, in any contingency on its borders, Russia is likely to be there first with the decisive military power to seize the initiative and establish superiority.

However, Russia's ground force numbers 300,000–350,000 troops at most, and lacks an operational reserve. Since it can only field a fraction of this force, this means Russia's military is not configured to occupy large amounts of land or replace combat losses in offensive operations. This lesson was driven home rather quickly through combat operations in Ukraine, creating strain on the Russian military rotating units through the Donbass. Practical constraints tell us that Russia's military is not an existential threat to Europe, or even Ukraine for that matter, but that it can impose its will by force on neighboring countries and that Moscow is credible when it threatens to do so. Hence, Russia's military is a powerful tool for coercion.

Russian doctrinal thinking, codified in a collection of concepts under the title of New Generation Warfare, shows a clear desire to advance interests through asymmetric means and unconventional approaches. Moscow is aware of its hard-power limitations and prefers to avoid expensive conventional operations, instead making strategic gains through political warfare, special forces and other indirect means. There is a strong shift towards a system of nonnuclear deterrence, based around long-range conventional weapons and domains where it can readily retaliate through cyber or information warfare. These are indicative of an emergent strategy, favoring agility, speed, and reserving options for escalation, in order to shape the battlefield with fairly little hard military power.

Lessons learned from experiences in Ukraine and Syria are being integrated into the Russian military as it develops. Russian armed forces are still in a largely experimental phase, absorbing both chaotic reforms and the high operational tempo of combat in the past two years. Modernization has yet to hit parts of the force, but in some key areas, like nuclear weapons, air defense and long-range guided missiles, Russia has invested heavily and reaped results. Mobility is also a premium. Lessons from fighting in Ukraine and Syria suggest that Russia's "good enough" at current readiness levels is more than sufficient to take on any former Soviet Republic on its borders, and even engage a peer adversary like NATO in a short-term high-intensity fight. Russia would struggle occupying entire states, but it can crush their militaries and readily seize parcels of adjoining land.

European Security: Living in Interesting Times

Looking at military capability is enough to give anyone pause, but this is a story of potential. The new Russian army has not fought en masse against anyone. Russia is one eighth of the world's land area, with perhaps the smallest army it has fielded in centuries. Where it chooses to place its forces matters, because it tells us whom Russia intends to fight and how. From 2009–12, Russia disbanded or moved many of its units on Ukraine's borders, and those in closest proximity to NATO members, towards the Central and Southern Military Districts.

The Russian Navy was making preparations to eventually abandon naval basing in Crimea, while largely ignoring the Baltic region. It may be hard to imagine, but Kaliningrad was once home to hundreds of tanks, rather than the single T-72B tank battalion that currently resides there. Whether out of a desire to avoid provoking NATO, or simply due to priorities elsewhere, there has

been no indication that Russia's military transformation was spurred by being fixated on a fight in the Baltics.

There are four discernible trends in Russia's changing military posture in the European theater: large force rebasing to surround Ukraine, the resurrection of ground and naval forces in Crimea, the revival of military operations in air and sea, and general modernization across the force now making its way towards the Baltic region.

With experience gained in Eastern Ukraine, Russia's General Staff began to rethink its force posture and structure. From late 2014 to early 2016, Russia announced the steady return of brigades to Ukraine's borders. Moscow is creating three new divisions ringing Ukraine, in what Minister of Defense Sergey Shoygu calls the "southwest strategic direction." Although billed as a response to NATO, in reality Russia is rapidly constructing bases around Ukraine, modernizing tactical aviation, upgrading infrastructure, and putting in plans for a large permanent combat grouping, to be based around the country from the north to Crimea.

Russian division-sized formations, which will take time to fully emerge, are a useful indicator of where its military expects to conduct combat operations in the future. The Western Military District is preparing a large contingency force in the event of a significantly expanded conflict with Ukraine. This force is of course mobile, and given time can certainly deploy to the Baltics in strength.

By seizing Crimea, Russia regained the most strategically valuable territory in Ukraine. From the peninsula, it can range most of the Black Sea with antiship and, to a lesser extent, antiair weapons systems. Russia has incorporated Ukraine's former units, the bulk of which defected, and is steadily modernizing their equipment with newer systems, such as the S-400 Triumph and Bastion-P coastal-defense cruise-missile battery. The Black Sea Fleet has been revived, receiving two new multirole frigates, guided-missile corvettes, patrol craft and six diesel-electric submarines. Not only is this fleet the dominant naval force in the Black Sea, but it is also able to project some power into the eastern Mediterranean.

Though easily bottled up by Turkey, Russia's garrison in Syria, with its own set of offensive capabilities, means the eastern Mediterranean is no longer an uncontested body of water for U.S. naval forces. Despite the political focus on the Baltics, the most dramatic change in the military balance is on NATO's southern periphery, with region-wide implications, since Russia's new ship

classes field long-range land-attack missiles capable of ranging most of Europe or the Middle East.

Russia's air force and long-range bomber aviation are also benefiting from the modernization wave, but its combat operations in Syria reveal more weaknesses than strengths. Moscow has leveraged its air power for a deliberate campaign of provocation towards NATO, and even the continental United States. The intent is for Europeans to grow increasingly concerned with Russian behavior and seek engagement, while for the United States, the message is to take Russia seriously and understand the escalatory dynamics that could precipitate from an intervention in Ukraine or Syria against Russian forces there. Moscow's intent was to deter the United States, and also incentivize the West towards negotiations.

The campaign likely achieved its desired effect, but at the same time it has precipitated a serious reorientation of the U.S. national-security establishment to begin planning for a potential war with Russia in Europe. Like a large ship, once turned about to see Russia as a genuine threat, the U.S. national-security establishment will spend the coming years leery of any move by Moscow. NATO partners like Sweden and Finland, wary of Russian behavior, are also reexamining their options to join the alliance. Russia has gotten what it wanted, and then some. Their military activity is also not without practical costs; a high operational tempo cost Russia nine aircraft in 2015 in a spate of accidents.

The most significant threat to the U.S. military (besides nuclear weapons) is Russia's submarine force, which may be a fifth the size of its Soviet predecessor (forty-five to fifty operational), but is active after a prolonged absence from the deep. The United States is technologically dominant in the undersea domain—an important advantage for its global force, but one that is eroding and will continue to do so without investment. Russia remains the most technologically sophisticated adversary beneath the waves, and while it has relatively few operational nuclear submarines, the United States is hardly flush with capacity of its own, stretched thin by the operational requirements of different fleets.

However, NATO enjoys immense geographic advantages; from the GIUK gap to the Bosphorus strait, it has natural choke points to control Russian submarine access to the deep. Reviving antisubmarine warfare capabilities among key allies, for example P-8 purchases by Britain and Norway, or reactivating Keflavik airbase in Iceland, will go a long way to reducing vulnerabilities. This is one area where technical capabilities matter. Allies can make substantial contributions to collective security, and help protect the

American homeland along with their own, but it's a case of either having them or not. For most, the answer is disappointing.

Baltic Fixation: Problem or Policy Addiction?

NATO has gotten itself wrapped around the axle of the Baltic threat, but it's a political issue in alliance politics more than a military problem the United States is ever likely to face. There is absolutely no indication that Russia has military designs on the Baltics, and most of its behavior suggests an aversion to gambling with the prospect of large casualties and an expensive conflict. However, the reality is that if it did, NATO is ill positioned to stop it. The bigger problem lies in various types of indirect approaches and unconventional warfare, which the alliance is equally not well situated to manage.

In terms of alliance politics, the United States has thus far ticked all the boxes necessary to reassure allies and strengthen the credibility of its commitments—many of which it did not have to. Unlike in the Asia-Pacific region, American allies in Europe don't exactly have other options besides NATO. However, the United States has yet to seriously tackle the issue of deterrence. The deployment of a brigade combat team split among six Baltic countries (part of the \$3.4 billion ERI package), and four NATO multinational battalions in the Baltics, are in the service of assurance, not intended to change the military balance, which is unequivocally in Russia's favor.

That may all be for the best, given that the specter of Russia attempting a fait accompli seizure of the Baltics is a decidedly contrived scenario. The U.S. policy establishment is a large solution always in search of a problem, and while pragmatism dictates contingency planning, the threat to the Baltics is distorted by alliance politics, poorly grounded in sound military analysis of Russian force posture. Russia's exclave of Kaliningrad is quite vulnerable from Moscow's perspective, while any large-scale U.S. ground presence could prove an intolerable threat, given the proximity of St. Petersburg just outside "NATO's borders." Russia is likely no less worried about Kaliningrad, behind NATO lines, than NATO is about its Baltic members.

Given the proximity to one of Russia's most important cities, there is no prospect of establishing deterrence by denial without deploying a force on Russia's borders so large that it results in a bidding contest and precipitates the very war it was meant to prevent. The good news is that Russia takes NATO guarantees rather seriously—perhaps much more so than its own members, which is why it has invaded both Georgia and Ukraine to keep them from joining the alliance. Contrary to popular belief, for many years not only was

there no Baltic military buildup in progress, but the region had been fielding aging Russian units with poor readiness. The wholesale sacking in June 2016 of the Baltic Fleet command, including ground force officers, is an objective indicator of what the Russian General Staff thinks about the fighting readiness of its forces in Kaliningrad.

It is difficult to assert that a Russian invasion of the Baltics is coming by looking at the meager steps the country's armed forces have taken to enable it. That said, this is a snapshot of what was, not of what will be.

Russia may have saved the Baltic region for last, but an expanded force posture and deployment of new capabilities are in the works. The establishment of the Eleventh Army Corps in Kaliningrad indicates that existing units will be expanded in size, some companies turned into full battalions, and more. As Russia retires the last of its SS-21 Scarab units in Kaliningrad, the dreaded Iskander (SS-26) will take its place in the next year or two, especially given that there are only two units in all of Russia left to rearm with this system. The same can be said for air defenses, with standardization around the S-400 and later models of S-300 systems, combat aviation and fixed-wing aircraft. This is the logical evolution of Russia's modernization program to replace old Soviet workhorses with newer designs.

New units positioned in the Western Military District may not be arrayed against the Baltics, but they are of course mobile, and likely surely intended to intervene in Belarus. This means they are also able to punch through Lithuania to link up with Kaliningrad if needed. Russia's Sixth Army around St. Petersburg, and the nearby airborne division in Pskov, are more than enough to roll through the Baltic states. Although there is little to suggest Russia is building a strike force for the Baltics, even if unchanged, the existing units are sufficient for the task. As the wave of modernization approaches, together with the growing size of Russian armed forces, its combat grouping in the region will only grow stronger relative to NATO's.

The next U.S. administration must think about the right strategy to address deterrence in Europe without being consumed by it, especially given that the Obama administration has already done much to reassure allies. Burden sharing should be at the forefront of that approach, in part because it's a perennial problem, but also because Russia sees U.S. military presence near its borders as provocative, using it in domestic political propaganda to mobilize the population.

Russian Power in Perspective

Despite Russia's restoration of its military, the United States remains a far stronger power. Even if it were interested in fighting NATO over the Baltics, Moscow is not able to sustain a prolonged conventional conflict with the United States, lacking sustainment, reserves and most of all having too small a force to withstand a war on several fronts. Thus, the costs and risks of escalation have grossly outweighed any imagined benefits. The United States is a superpower with a global force; Russia is not, and is not keen on contests where it stands a real chance of losing.

Moscow may match the United States in nuclear weapons, and is a real competitor in the cyber domain, but Russian military strength lies close to its borders. It is also a lonely power, with weak allies like Belarus and Armenia. The United States, on the other hand, benefits from a vast network of allies, contributing military assets or strategically positioned territory, both of which offer advantages over revisionist challengers. Taking this into account, here is how the United States should structure its approach.

Fixing deterrence in the Baltics is an arduous task. It would require not just a tripwire force, but follow-on forces somewhere in theater, to make deterrence by punishment more credible. This means a gradual transfer of combat aviation, air power and naval power to the European theater—close enough to be credible, but based far enough away from Russia's borders as not to be escalatory. There is no credible deterrence in Europe without visible American commitment, which means a force on the continent capable of fighting wars, and not just cheerleading allies. That said, there is little sense in expanding ground forces for a large footprint in Europe. The strategy should be based on punishment, leveraging advantages in the air and sea domain. This also keeps the costs to the United States minimal, and retains flexibility to pursue contingencies elsewhere.

Reviving allied capability and U.S. military presence will take years, and so in the interim it would do Western officials well not to panic publicly over the vulnerability. It's not getting fixed anytime soon, and NATO's track record of follow-through on military spending is terrible. Reviving NATO's war-fighting capability is a generational project. Emphasizing how easily Russia could seize the Baltics is hardly going to help restore deterrence. If the United States wishes to project strength, it must stop incessantly highlighting its weakness in the face of credible adversaries.

To deal with Russia, the United States needs a much better sense of itself. America is not weak. It's just that Washington, DC is not particularly smart in its use of military power, and often unable to corral a disparate policy establishment into a coherent response to long-term threats. Distant from its problems, American leadership is vulnerable to manipulation by adversaries and allies alike. Outpacing the decisionmaking in our policy establishment is no great feat; Russia has done exceptionally well in setting the negative agenda. European allies are also well practiced in the “damsel in distress” act. A few speeches about America’s indispensable leadership is usually all it takes to get DC to open up its pocketbooks and pay to defend the world’s richest economies.

Weakness, Real and Imaginary

America’s primary weakness is not in its lack of economic or military power, but in a failure to formulate strategy and, frankly, poorly informed decisionmaking, even when faced with a peer nuclear power. Military capability in and of itself will not fix these cardinal weaknesses in judgment, nor make up for a lack of vision and political will to see hard choices through.

Russian leadership takes the long view—a luxury of being in charge for sixteen years. The current conflict may seem local to Ukraine, or regional to European security, but the evaluation in Moscow is systemic. The problem this administration must solve is one of strategic insolvency in the eyes of powers like Russia. If the United States continues to cut its force size and defense spending while expanding its alliance network, all while the military utility of its allies continues to decline relative to the power of adversaries, then the proximate cause of a challenge is irrelevant. Eventually, an unsatisfied power will do the math, reaching the verdict that America lacks the ability and resolve to meet its alliance commitments. The odds are higher it will be China, not Russia. The problem is not the military balance in the Baltics, but Russia’s perception that the U.S. position in the international system is declining in large part because of decisions made by its policy establishment.

Prevention means investing in the foundations of military and economic power, not just plugging gaps. The United States cannot just procure its way out of this problem with new batches of missiles and increasingly exorbitant military toys. At the top of the agenda should be capacity in sea power, capability in the land and air force, and a modernized nuclear force structure better able to deal with nonstrategic nuclear weapons. Today the United States is shuffling an increasingly smaller deck of cards. Furthermore, it means stabilizing relations with some adversaries in order to better pursue

confrontation with others. The Obama administration chose to rethink Iran, but the challenge from Russia was arguably no less important. It could not be abandoned to wishful thinking that Russia is a “regional power in decline.”

Negotiating from strength also means figuring out what America wants from Russia and seeking to establish leverage. In the post–Cold War world, the U.S. national-security establishment typically does not negotiate from strength; it builds strength so that it doesn’t have to negotiate, and then just sits there, hoping the other side will expire. The foreign-policy elite is unwilling to set priorities or make trades, and thus falls back on sticks or on “do something” solutions. Exhibit A: the current policy consensus to confront Russian influence everywhere, absent a real strategy. This has resulted in plenty of hand wringing, and bureaucratic activity without any achievement. Russia respects U.S. military strength, but has no regard for American leadership. The approach has also been objectively unsuccessful, with Moscow consistently beating the United States in contests from Ukraine to Syria, or the latest hacking scandal.

If the goal is simply to stabilize relations with Russia, then the new administration can no doubt reach an accord to curb aggressive military activity. That will satisfy European allies, but marginal improvements in atmospherics will not survive inevitable crises in relations. Washington must determine the best way to end Moscow’s rebellion against the international system and align resources to that strategy. A NATO policy is not a Russia policy. A Russia strategy should consider the interests and concerns of allies, and not abandon them, but be based on American interests first. That is a balancing act in which deterrence, coercive credibility and deal making will all play a role.

The days of simply dismissing Russia as a nonentity are gone. America’s credibility in retaliation has diminished, as has its demonstrable resolve, enabling Russia to feel it can establish escalation dominance cheaply. Today, Moscow has every reason to judge that the United States fears escalation more than it does American retaliation, which means it may treat any U.S. diplomatic efforts as negotiating from a position of necessity much more so than strength. That should not be a discouragement from pursuing diplomacy, but it is an unfortunate reality any policymaker must deal with. The previous administration found this problem vexing, and consistently punished Russia in the international system in the hope that retaliatory measures would prove coercive. They did not.

The new president has certain advantages. Russia will no longer assume that it can easily threaten escalation until it gets the measure of the new administration. If the president chooses to pursue strength and credibility, he should do it as part of a coherent strategy that brings Moscow back into the fold, rather than a means by which the American policy elite can once again recuse itself from making any choices.

THE UKRAINE-RUSSIA CONFLICT: A WAY FORWARD

MATTHEW ROJANSKY

On November 14, 2016, the International Criminal Court issued a preliminary finding endorsing Ukraine's claims that Russia had committed acts of aggression against its territory, citizens and infrastructure.¹ Ukrainians, who for more than two years have called on the international community to condemn and punish Russian aggression, were heartened by the finding. Russia canceled its membership in the court. Whatever legal, political or diplomatic weight the court's finding may carry, it nonetheless cannot change the reality of Russia's de facto control over Crimea or the seemingly intractable conflict in Ukraine's Donbass region.

There simply is no "higher power" in international law or geopolitics that can rescue Ukraine from its predicament. Thus, the future stability and prosperity of Donbass, Ukraine and Europe still rests with the difficult task of managing and resolving the conflict through negotiations among the key actors involved—which is why Washington must pay attention. The United States has a vital interest in the restoration of Ukraine's sovereignty and the resolution of its conflict with Russia, a key to deescalating growing tension across the wider European and Euro-Atlantic space. What follows is a closer examination of the conditions and steps necessary for Washington to promote more effective management—and potential resolution—of the Ukraine-Russia conflict.

State of the Conflict

More than two years since the Russian takeover of Crimea and the subsequent outbreak of fighting in Donbass, the conflict in Ukraine's east has settled into a largely recognizable pattern: a new and very large "frozen conflict" in the post-Soviet space. The situation on the ground in Donbass is increasingly reminiscent of that in Moldova, Georgia and Armenia/Azerbaijan, where intense fighting at the time of the Soviet Union's collapse was halted by de facto cease-fires, but no effective long-term conflict-settlement mechanism was found. As a result, in all three of these so-called "frozen" conflicts, relatively low-level hostilities persist between two heavily armed camps, even as international monitors and negotiators discuss the intricacies of conflict management in a seemingly endless loop—just as is now increasingly the case in Eastern Ukraine.

¹ "Report on Preliminary Examination Activities," International Criminal Court, November 14, 2016, https://www.icc-cpi.int/iccdocs/otp/161114-otp-rep-PE_ENG.pdf.

In Donbass itself, the local civilian population and economy have been badly depleted. As is often the case in armed conflicts, many of the best educated and most capable citizens have departed the region altogether—some going to Russia, others to Ukraine and Europe—leaving behind an increasingly vulnerable, elderly population, with little means of restoring basic economic life, let alone rebuilding the region’s destroyed infrastructure.² Providing for social welfare and restoring conditions for economic growth should be the responsibility of local authorities, ideally in partnership with international experts and donors. However, the failure so far to broker internationally recognized elections has meant that much of the world perceives the de facto Donbass authorities as little more than warlords and criminals. The region’s current economic limbo, in between Russia and Ukraine, also empowers black marketeers and blockade runners, who can make enormous profits trafficking in everything from cigarettes and medicine to weapons.

Since the fall of 2014, the only formal framework for managing and resolving the Donbass conflict has been the Minsk Agreements, brokered between the Ukrainians and Russian-backed separatists, with Russia, Germany and France as guarantors. The United States has played a de facto guarantor role, but has remained outside the so-called Normandy format. The Agreements were revised and updated through a second round (“Minsk II”) following the outbreak of heavy fighting in February 2015. Since that time, the conflict has settled into a low-intensity war of attrition, with near-constant violations of the cease-fire provisions. The OSCE’s Ukraine Special Monitoring Mission, in place since the summer of 2014, has confirmed many of these violations, and its ongoing presence and real-time response capability is thought to help prevent further escalation of hostilities.³

The heads of state of Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France met in the Normandy format in Berlin in October 2016, instructing their negotiators to work toward a “road map” for implementation of Minsk II.⁴ Since that time, domestic political developments on all sides may have substantially altered the incentives for pursuing concrete progress. Russia is under intense pressure

² Brian Milakovsky, “Kennan Cable No.16: Understanding the ‘Under Control’ Donbas,” Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, April 22, 2016, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no16-understanding-the-under-control-donbas>.

³ “Daily and spot reports from the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine,” <http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/reports>.

⁴ “Lavrov sees no possibility for Normandy Four meeting,” *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, November 22, 2016, <http://tass.com/politics/913866>.

from an economy that contracted almost 4 percent in 2015, plus double-digit inflation, which has left the average Russian household about 15 percent poorer over the past year.⁵ Western financial sanctions, coupled with Russia's own counter-sanctions regime, have severely constrained investment and consumer spending, deepening a recession brought on by structural weaknesses and persistent low global energy and commodity prices.

Yet Moscow has shown no signs of compromising on the West's terms, perhaps in part because it perceives political developments in Europe and the United States to be breaking in its favor. The result of the UK's "Brexit" referendum, elections in Poland and continuing developments in Hungary have all underscored a deepening anti-EU trend in European politics, while elections in Bulgaria, Estonia and Moldova have brought leaders to power who advocate more conciliatory approaches toward Russia. In France, where presidential elections are scheduled for April 2017, both center-right and far-right candidates have spoken favorably about improving ties with Russia.⁶ Although leading voices from both parties in the United States remain hawkish on Russia and supportive of continuing the coordinated Western sanctions regime, President Donald Trump spoke about restoring productive U.S.-Russia relations on the campaign trail, and has already held an initial short discussion with Vladimir Putin to that end.

Ukrainian politics has witnessed dramatic and potentially destabilizing change over the past year. The government formed under Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk following parliamentary elections in October 2014 pursued major reforms, demanded by international donors who have supported Ukraine through tens of billions of dollars of loans and grants. While Prime Minister Volodymyr Groysman, appointed by President Petro Poroshenko to replace Yatsenyuk in April 2016, seems committed to continuing the reforms, the broader political context is not favorable. A sense of deep cynicism and anger pervades, as few ordinary Ukrainians are seeing direct benefits from the painful and slow-moving reform process. With near constant reports of cease-fire violations and Ukrainian casualties streaming back from the war in Donbass,

⁵ "Russian Households 15% Poorer Since 2015," *The Moscow Times*, November 22, 2016, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russian-households-grew-15-percent-poorer-since-mid-2015-56242>.

⁶ Leonid Bershidsky, "Vladimir Putin Is Winning the French Election," *Bloomberg*, November 21, 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2016-11-21/vladimir-putin-is-winning-the-french-election>.

the popular mood favors those who promise decisive action over talk—a rallying cry for Ukraine’s own populist demagogues and far-right nationalists.⁷

In this context, there is an increased risk of conflict escalation from both sides. Both Russia and Ukraine have arrested the other side’s nationals on charges of espionage, sabotage and terrorism.⁸ These actions seem designed to underscore the popular perception of the other side not as legitimate combatants, but as traitors or terrorists—a dehumanizing trope that could be a prelude to further provocations, or even renewed heavy fighting in the winter or spring. Russia has already acknowledged its infiltration of Ukrainian territory with special operatives, so-called “little green men,” while the Ukrainian side can justify almost any operation in Russian-held Crimea, in Donbass, or even over the Russian border as an enforcement action against Russian-backed terrorists.⁹

U.S. Interests in Managing and Resolving the Conflict

By far the most compelling U.S. national interest at stake in the Ukraine conflict is the maintenance of stability and security across the European and Euro-Atlantic space. While Russia has argued that U.S.-led bombing of Serbia in 1999 and subsequent support for Kosovo independence violated international norms, especially the principles of state sovereignty and peaceful resolution of disputes enshrined in the 1990 Charter of Paris, its own actions in Ukraine now risk the total breakdown of that very order.

Europe’s security is an obvious and vital concern for U.S. national security, as world wars that began in Europe have dragged Americans into bloody conflict twice in the past century. Moreover, U.S. NATO allies, especially those bordering Russia and Ukraine, have become understandably nervous, welcoming increased reassurance measures from the United States and western Europe, while undertaking self-help measures of their own. These developments are viewed with deep skepticism by Moscow, which continues

⁷ Oleg Sukhov, “Saakashvili: Ukraine faces chaos if no snap elections held,” *KyivPost*, November 25, 2016, <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/saakashvili-ukraine-faces-chaos-no-snap-elections-held.html>.

⁸ Ivan Nechepurenko, “Putin Accuses Ukraine of Plotting Terrorist Attacks in Crimea,” *The New York Times*, August 10, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/11/world/europe/putin-accuses-ukraine-of-plotting-terrorist-attacks-in-crimea.html>.

⁹ Ivan Nechepurenko, “Ukraine’s Detention of 2 Servicemen Ignites Dispute With Russia,” *The New York Times*, November 21, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/21/world/europe/russia-ukraine-crimea-soldiers-detained.html>.

its own substantial military buildup in the Baltic and Black Sea regions, including forward deployment of sophisticated air defenses and nuclear-capable missiles.

A further concern for Washington is the intersection of mounting humanitarian and economic costs of the Ukraine-Russia conflict. The United States does more bilateral trade with European countries than with any other region, and European economies stand to lose the most from a Ukrainian and Russian economic collapse precipitated by the one-two punch of the global financial crisis and the military conflict in Ukraine. Meanwhile, the migration of more than a million displaced persons from Donbass to other parts of Europe and Russia simply reinforces the crisis triggered by ongoing violence in the Middle East and North Africa, which has unleashed a flood of desperate refugees on Europe's southern borders. The current situation amounts to the largest concentration of displaced persons in Europe since the decade after World War II, and it is doubtful whether even the wealthiest and most stable European societies are prepared to manage its short- and long-term consequences.

The final vital U.S. interest at stake in managing and resolving the Ukraine-Russia conflict is in the continued sovereignty of Ukraine itself. Since the Soviet Union's collapse, the United States has expressed strong support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, not only because of its implications for wider European security, but in the belief that a strong and stable Ukraine can be strategic partner for the United States in a region of enormous strategic importance, at the cross-sections of eastern and central Europe, the Mediterranean, and the greater Middle East.

It is with these concerns in mind that the United States has expended more than \$5 billion over the past quarter century to support Ukraine's democratic development, market reforms and denuclearization.¹⁰ However, as the experience of other post-Soviet states amply demonstrates, no amount of outside support can substitute for a strong and consistent commitment to good governance by a country's own political leaders. In Moldova, for example, decades of de facto acceptance of Transnistria as a semi-lawless gray space has arguably contributed to a reckless view of Moldova's own state sovereignty. Leading Moldovan politicians have viewed state coffers as their own personal piggy bank, even stealing some \$1 billion from the national bank

¹⁰ Victoria Nuland, "Remarks at the U.S.-Ukraine Foundation Conference," December 13, 2013, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2013/dec/218804.htm>.

and unleashing a political crisis that resulted in the election of an oligarch-backed former Communist as president.¹¹

Although often presented in zero-sum terms by the parties themselves, management and resolution of the Ukraine-Russia conflict serves U.S. interests in relations with both Ukraine and Russia. The longer the conflict persists—whether as a low-intensity war or a quieter de facto separation—the more it will empower populist and far-right forces on both sides, and the more it will become a breeding ground for trafficking, offshoring and other illegal activity. Since Washington has adopted a leading role in the coordinated international response to Russia’s military intervention, peaceful conflict resolution is also a sine qua non for restoration of productive U.S.-Russia engagement across a broad range of mutual interests, from counterterrorism to trade.

Framework for Conflict Resolution

The United States can and should play a central role in future management of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, and in negotiations and strategic investments aimed at creating the conditions for sustainable resolution of the conflict. As a first step, Washington should seek agreement from the parties to the Normandy format to become a formal participant in this ongoing process.

The United States held back from direct stewardship of international negotiations during the immediate aftermath of the Russian seizure of Crimea and outbreak of hostilities in Donbass, seeking instead to emphasize the European-led negotiation process. Up to now, that has produced an awkward and occasionally destabilizing dynamic in which Europe ostensibly represents the collective Western position in negotiations with Russia, yet the United States still holds many of the important cards, in terms of incentivizing Russia to cooperate, as well as deterring further Russian aggression in Ukraine and the region.

Washington clearly has an inescapable role to play in this process, and becoming a formal party to the only comprehensive international format for conflict management can help increase the consistency and focus of U.S. policy toward both Russia and Ukraine. Given Ukraine’s longstanding desire for greater U.S. leadership on conflict resolution efforts, Russia’s new hopes for dramatic improvement in ties with the incoming U.S. administration, and the

¹¹ “Pro-Russia candidate Igor Dodon to win Moldova presidential election,” *DW*, November 13, 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/pro-russia-candidate-igor-dodon-to-win-moldova-presidential-election/a-36379350>.

enormous domestic political pressures now facing both France and Germany, it is likely that all sides would consent to such a proposal.

Washington's formal entry into the Normandy process would do little by itself to address the deep deficit of trust between the sides. Indeed, it is lack of trust, combined with uncertain political will, that has delayed any decision on a new "road map" for implementing Minsk II. Here, Washington can make a significant contribution to mitigating distrust and supplementing political will by proposing that each step of a new road map be assigned to capable third parties for verification. The third parties should not include any of the current Normandy format participants, or the United States, but should include European and Eurasian states that enjoy a high degree of trust and productive relations with both Moscow and Kiev—for example, Finland, Austria, Switzerland, Belarus, Kazakhstan and others. Since each is also an OSCE participating state, it would make sense to formalize their verification roles through a single blanket decision of the OSCE Permanent Council endorsing the road map.

Given the viciousness of the conflict and surrounding political rhetoric over the past two years, OSCE verification and the best efforts of third parties to smooth over difficulties will not alone suffice to reassure the conflicting sides. A major concern will be how to structure the disengagement of armed forces to minimize the chance of backsliding. One option would be to allow the parties to designate discrete reservations for their forces in key sectors that will allow them to "hedge" against the possibility of a resumption of hostilities. The idea could be based on past successful phased disengagements in the Middle East and Balkan conflicts.¹² Security reservations—which should be limited to only a handful of positions and should be time-limited—will be extremely difficult for both sides to agree upon and accept. However, they could make the difference between a modest success, and an overambitious blanket withdrawal agreement that fails before the ink is dry.

The United States can help substantially increase Russia's incentives to support a road map for Minsk II implementation by linking each step to specific sanctions relief. For example, following verified withdrawal of heavy weapons by the Russian-backed separatists, Washington should provide appreciable and immediate relief from sanctions barring U.S. financial institutions from medium- or even long-term lending to Russian entities. Following handover

¹² Maj. Theodore W. Kleisner, "Disengagement Operations: Context, Violence, and Spoilers in a New Phase IV Construct," School of Advanced Military Studies, United States Army Command and General Staff College, May 14, 2010, <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a522945.pdf>.

of the Ukrainian side of the border to Ukrainian forces, Washington could suspend prohibitions on U.S. companies cooperating with Russian companies to exploit nonconventional energy resources. With further steps to advance a political settlement, the United States could remove individual Russian companies and officials from its asset-freeze and travel-ban lists.

Of course, a complete cessation of violence in the region is a necessary precondition for a political solution. While sanctions relief and permitted security reservations should be used to incentivize Russian compliance and begin to restore working trust on all sides, the major political steps cannot be implemented until the shooting is stopped, and the total safety of the civilian population is assured. Such an improved security environment is also a necessary precondition for Ukraine to fully implement a new law enshrining the special status of the Donbass region, in advance of free and fair elections.

The special status law is needed not only as a guarantee to Russian-backed forces that they will not be forcibly brought to heel in the future, but also so that the local population understands exactly what powers their representatives will have when an election is held. At the same time, without complete safety for civilians, displaced persons will be unable to return to cast their ballots, and the local population will not view elections as a credible step toward improving their lives. Here as well, third-party stewardship and OSCE verification of both the special status law and local elections can help contain and mitigate attempts to derail the process by self-interested spoilers on either side.

Successful disengagement of military forces, followed by full implementation of the special status law and local elections, will lay the foundation for the most costly and most important phase of conflict resolution: an internationally supported initiative to rebuild infrastructure and economic life in the region, bring displaced persons home and facilitate their resettlement, and reintegrate Donbass into the regional and global economies. Clearly, none of these efforts will be possible without a substantial financial commitment from the international community, in which the United States and Europe must take the lead. Russia should also be expected to make a contribution, in particular by providing free or substantially discounted energy to Ukraine to offset the energy costs of rebuilding Donbass industry.

The economy of the Donbass region has always been uniquely dependent on mining and energy-intensive heavy industry, and this component will remain important in the future. However, the opportunity of postconflict reconstruction can be used to reduce the dependence of the local economy on artificially vast Soviet-era plants, which have traditionally been owned by the

state or by oligarchs, and are nearly impossible to operate according to modern standards of efficiency and environmental cleanliness. New international lending should therefore focus on supporting small and medium-sized enterprises and entrepreneurial activity—creating a magnet for reversing the region’s “brain drain” of talented and highly educated citizens. Meanwhile, internationally financed major infrastructure restoration should be designed and overseen by international experts, with actual construction jobs favoring lower-skilled local laborers.

Unraveling the influence of oligarchs on the local economy will be a difficult long-term challenge. The immediate postconflict goal should be to avoid “blame” narratives and focus on shovel-ready projects to rebuild opportunities with real economic promise, including in partnership with the region’s longstanding industrial kingpins. However, Ukraine’s new transparency requirements for public office holders should be applied to local elected and appointed officials, with enforcement by the new anticorruption task force and the reformed national police.

Perhaps the most important contributions to sustaining conflict resolution over the long term can come from a joint effort by Russia and the West to overcome what has become a “zero sum” narrative in and around Ukraine. The events leading up to the Maidan protests of 2013–14 and the ensuing conflict amply demonstrate that Ukrainians cannot be forced into one or another geopolitical box. Thus, Russia and Europe should finally commit to negotiate an agreement for extending to Ukraine as a whole the benefits of free trade and travel with both East and West. If this ambition proves too difficult, then Brussels and Moscow should at least agree to extend special joint free-trade benefits to enterprises in the Donbass region during a specified reconstruction and transition period.

Similarly, the growing gulf between Ukraine’s national cultural and historical narrative and that promoted by Moscow promises to continue diminishing and dividing the region’s social capital. Kiev has been wise to resist pressure from nationalist politicians to denigrate the Russian language, but there has been increasing and troubling evidence of revisionism in state-sanctioned reforms of Ukraine’s national archives and teaching curriculum.¹³ Anti-Ukrainian propaganda has been absolutely rife in state-supported Russian-language

¹³ Josh Cohen, “The Historian Whitewashing Ukraine’s Past,” *Foreign Policy*, May 2, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/02/the-historian-whitewashing-ukraines-past-volodymyr-viatrovych/>.

media, and must be stopped.¹⁴ No matter how the Donbass conflict evolves, Russia and Ukraine will remain neighbors for eternity, and it can be in neither side's long-term interest to erode mutual understanding and foster intolerance.

Looking Ahead

Up to now, the United States has played an important but secondary role in managing the Ukraine-Russia conflict, preferring to negotiate and apply pressure jointly with European countries with far greater economic leverage on both Russia and Ukraine. Yet Washington cannot overlook its own vital interests at stake in this ongoing conflict, nor continue the contradictory and occasionally damaging role of its uncertain engagement in the process so far. The transition to a new U.S. administration provides a useful inflection point for a revised and reinvigorated U.S. approach to conflict management and support for long-term resolution.

Before concluding, it should be noted that this paper has focused primarily on the urgent need for conflict resolution in Donbass, and therefore only briefly mentioned the problem of Crimea, which is yet another central driver of conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Washington should have no illusions that Russia will abandon its newly acquired territory, nor that Ukraine will accept nominal financial payment or other compensation to surrender its legitimate and sovereign rights. However, for a variety of reasons, especially the low likelihood of further military conflict over Crimea, U.S. policy has and should continue to concentrate on settling the Donbass conflict. It is likely that the default path on Crimea will repeat the U.S. position toward Soviet occupation of the Baltic states from 1939 to 1991: long-term nonrecognition.¹⁵

Even under the best of circumstances, the probability that the Russia-Ukraine conflict can be fully resolved remains low. However, in light of the risks to vital U.S. interests in the region, and the implications for U.S. relations with Europe and Russia on a wider global agenda, Washington cannot afford to miss a window of opportunity to push for concerted progress on de-escalation, disengagement and trust building. The relative openness of the parties to direct U.S. involvement, and the potential for Washington to apply its geopolitical clout through coordinated diplomacy, may offer just such a window.

¹⁴ Timothy Snyder, "Fascism, Russia, and Ukraine," *The New York Review of Books*, March 20, 2014, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2014/03/20/fascism-russia-and-ukraine/>.

¹⁵ V. Stanley Vardys, "How the Baltic Republics Fare in the Soviet Union," *Foreign Affairs*, April 1966, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/1966-04-01/how-baltic-republics-fare-soviet-union>.

SYRIA: FIRST TEST OF A U.S.-RUSSIA PARTNERSHIP?

NIKOLAS K. GVOSDEV

On the campaign trail, Donald Trump asked whether a strategic partnership between the United States and Russia could emerge for solving the Syrian Civil War and containing and destroying the threat of the Islamic State. Translating campaign statements into governing policy is not an automatic or easy process, which raises the question: could this proposal actually take shape as a viable strategic concept?

Where U.S. Policy Currently Stands

The Obama administration based its approach to Syria on three core assumptions: that the regime of Bashar al-Assad would fall quickly and be replaced by a broad, pro-democratic coalition; that success in Syria would not require much effort or investment on the part of the United States, because U.S. allies in the region would be prepared to take the lead in doing the “heavy lifting” of assisting Assad’s ouster and in reconstructing a post-Assad Syria; and that Russia would not be prepared to expend resources to prop up Assad in Syria, because the Kremlin did not have any vital interests in his survival. None of these assumptions have stood the test of time. Indeed, the U.S. position in the Middle East has been damaged as radical Islamist groups have used the chaos of the Syrian Civil War to gain bases that allow them to destabilize the entire region, while Russian action—first to forestall U.S. military action over Bashar al-Assad’s use of chemical weapons in 2013, and then to intervene directly in 2015 to turn the tide of the war in Assad’s favor—has created the impression, not only in the Middle East but around the world, that the United States is feckless and in decline while Russia is a resurging global power.

The Trump administration has inherited a U.S. policy on Syria that is characterized by a series of contradictions. While the United States is unwilling to become directly involved in the fight against Assad, it continues to provide aid and assistance to opposition groups seeking his overthrow. It is asking U.S. allies and U.S.-backed groups in Syria to focus more attention on combating more extreme jihadi elements, such as Islamic State and the Nusra Front, rather than joining with them in the fight against Assad. It continues to try to persuade Iran and Russia to abandon Assad and to encourage him to give up power, and to get every outside actor in Syria—from the Gulf emirates, Saudi Arabia and Turkey to Russia and Iran—to focus their efforts on combating the Islamic State as the first priority. None of these efforts is particularly successful, especially since the other players in Syria, as well as the Syrian

government itself, know that the United States is not prepared to undertake any sort of major action in order to push its preferred outcomes.

There is no low-cost, no-risk approach that will achieve the entire U.S. wish list for Syria: no Assad, no Islamic State, no Russian or Iranian presence, no conflict between different Syrian factions and their outside sponsors, no more refugees, no more terrorism, and a pro-American democratic regime taking power. There is no magical force of moderates capable of simultaneously destroying the Islamic State and overthrowing Assad, who can also then reconstruct an effective state that will be secular, democratic and pro-American. There is also no foolproof plan that can insert U.S. military forces into the region and guarantee that there will be no unacceptable losses or risks of major escalation that could lead to unpleasant second- and third-order effects. If the United States is not willing to intervene on a massive scale in order to impose its own will, it must decide whether the fight against Islamic State or Assad's overthrow is more important, and whether it can live with a Syria where U.S. adversaries, starting with Iran, may still be able to exercise influence. It must acknowledge that if the United States is not going to risk large amounts of its own blood and treasure to change the outcome of events in Syria, it becomes necessary to find solutions that can win the support of other stakeholders in the outcome of the Syria conflict. Russia is among the most important of these interlocutors.

Russian Interests and Approaches on Syria

It must be recognized that the United States seriously misread Russian interest and intentions in Syria, and miscalculated the extent to which Vladimir Putin would risk taking losses to ensure that Bashar al-Assad did not fall. This derived, in part, from continuing to ignore signals from Vladimir Putin that he would be prepared to take more assertive action to secure the regime's internal independence to run Russia, defend the Russian position in the Eurasian space and ensure that Moscow's "voice and veto" would be respected by Washington when it came to other global issues. When it became clear to the Kremlin that the Obama administration "reset," like the Bush administration's outreach, was not going to lead to U.S. acquiescence to these demands, Moscow looked for ways to limit U.S. freedom of action around the world.

When it came to Syria, three broad streams of Russian interests have been at play in the decision to support Assad.

Based on what happened in recent instances of regime change, like Ukraine and Iraq, Moscow had little confidence in America's promises that Russian

interests in Syria would be respected if Moscow acquiesced to Assad's overthrow and his replacement by a pro-American coalition. Russia did not expect that its contracts would be honored, its supporters included in a new administration (or safeguarded from retribution), or its military facilities in the country—especially the naval station in Tartus, at present the only Russian base outside the territory of the former Soviet Union—would be left in its possession. Indeed, since the intervention began in 2015, Russia has not only overhauled the Tartus facility, but also concluded an agreement with Assad to turn the Khmeimim air base outside Latakia into a permanent Russian facility. These two assets now allow Russia to deploy a formidable anti-access/area denial umbrella in the eastern Mediterranean and to be able to project power throughout the Middle East in a fashion that has not been seen since Soviet times.

At the same time, the Putin administration did not buy into confident American proclamations about the division of anti-Assad forces into clear “moderate” and “radical” camps, instead operating from the assumption that armed opposition to Assad was a sign of either direct or indirect support for radical jihadi groups—groups that also were targeting the interests of the Russian state within Eurasia and even inside Russia's own territorial borders. To the extent that anti-Assad forces have also drawn on recruits from some of the restive Muslim-majority parts of Russia itself, aiding the Assad regime was a way for Moscow to encourage would-be Russian jihadis to leave Russian territory to fight (and die) in Syria. Russian officials have been quite open that their assistance to Assad has been driven, in part, by the strategic logic that it was easier for Russia to fight such forces in Syria than to face them back home inside Russia's borders.

Finally, Moscow decided that showing its willingness to stand by an ally even in a time of trouble was absolutely necessary in order to reassure other strategic partners, elsewhere in the Middle East and in Central Asia, that the Kremlin was reliable and would defend its friends even against significant Western pressure. Moscow has contrasted this steadfastness with apparent American fecklessness in abandoning long-term allies and partners, such as Hosni Mubarak in Egypt once the optics of the Tahrir Square revolution changed Washington's public-relations calculus, to suggest to other authoritarian leaders that Russia would prove more reliable than U.S. promises. This apparent reliability, even in the face of widespread Western criticism of the Russian role in supporting Assad, has been useful in sustaining Moscow's relations with other strategic countries, like Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and has helped Russian efforts in making diplomatic inroads with traditionally staunch U.S. partners, like Turkey and Egypt.

From a geostrategic perspective, Moscow also has concluded that its ability to operate in the Middle East as a player of influence is enhanced by stabilizing and prolonging a de facto division of the region between a Sunni coalition, led by Saudi Arabia, and a Shia coalition, headed by Iran. Assad's outright overthrow would upset that balance, and weaken the Iranian strategic position by cutting off its access to its Hezbollah proxies in Lebanon. While Iran and Russia do not see eye-to-eye on all issues, Moscow is more comfortable than Washington with allowing the Islamic Republic a degree of influence in the region, while Russia's ability to present itself as a necessary interlocutor between Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel guarantees that its presence will be needed in the region. In a more realpolitik assessment, a continued Shia-Sunni "cold war" across the region also guarantees that Sunni extremists are less likely to focus on Russia if they continue to be involved in fighting in the region.

In support of its agenda in Syria, Russia follows an approach based on its own counterinsurgency experiences, as well as those of its partners, like the government in Algeria: Elements of this approach include the use of overwhelming conventional force to crush opposition forces and demonstrate to civilians that support of the rebellion comes at a high material and human cost; efforts to find opposition forces willing to defect and join the side of the government, while pushing other "moderate" forces closer to the jihadi extremists; and a willingness to entertain options that would allow Kurds and Sunnis to enjoy relative independence from the Assad government in Syria, in return for ceasing combat operations against Damascus. This latter strategy is also open to allowing groups sponsored by Turkey or the Gulf Arab emirates to have defined spheres of influence in the country. In pursuing this approach, therefore, operations against the Islamic State have not always had the highest priority.

Russia's willingness to use indiscriminate and brutal force in Syria runs up against an American way of warfare that stresses precision and proportionality, and looks to avoid large numbers of civilian casualties. Russian action also has caused problems in Europe, where even pro-Russian European politicians like British foreign secretary Boris Johnson have loudly condemned Russian military actions in Syria. Indeed, Russia narrowly avoided having new sanctions enacted, in addition to the ones the European Union continues to maintain as a result of the conflict in Ukraine. Russia's efforts to jury-rig a political settlement that keeps the Assad government as the preeminent actor, but creates limited zones for compliant opposition groups, contradict American preferences for a postconflict Syrian settlement grounded in the will of the

people. Such a settlement would also work against U.S. preferences for implementing a more comprehensive containment policy against Iran.

In turn, Russia has concerns of its own. Since the mid-2000s, Russian strategists have noted that conflict and instability in the Middle East invariably draws in the United States, which means that Washington has less time, energy and attention to focus on thwarting Russia, especially in the Eurasian space. The refugee crisis generated by the Syrian Civil War has also created tremendous problems within the European Union, and is weakening EU solidarity in standing up to Russia over issues like Ukraine, while the increased terrorism that has resulted has strengthened more pro-Russian political movements across Europe. Russia is thus in no hurry to “solve” Syria.

Moscow is also well aware that many in the U.S. national-security establishment view any cooperation with the Kremlin as temporary, and that when Russia has helped the United States with tackling other issues like Afghanistan, North Korea and Iran, its “reward” has been increased American scrutiny and pressure. Significant portions of the Russian strategic establishment worry that cooperative action on Syria to rapidly end the crisis then would then free the United States and Europe to resume efforts in Ukraine that Moscow considers hostile to its interests.

U.S.-Russia Cooperation on Syria: Difficult, But Not Impossible

While there are considerable obstacles, there are ways in which the United States and Russia to cooperate on Syria. However, it is essential that if the new administration signals it is interested in pursuing such options, it must do so from a position of American strength and resolve. One of the main problems facing the United States today is that the Kremlin has assessed that America is “all talk and no action” when it comes to Syria. U.S. diplomats, for instance, have delivered long, heartfelt condemnations of Russian actions, while little has been done so far to actually change Russia’s calculations about what it can achieve on the ground, despite a multiplicity of statements about possible U.S. actions. U.S. messaging on Syria over the past several years is a stark lesson in the truth of Theodore Roosevelt’s precept, “Speak softly and carry a big stick.”

Thus, the first challenge the new team will face is ensuring that Putin does not misinterpret Trump’s willingness to consider cooperative measures with Russia as U.S. capitulation to the entire list of Russian preferences for the future of Syria, and the region as a whole. A Trump administration would also need to calibrate its rhetoric with whatever elements of America’s national-security toolbox it would be prepared to use to defend any stated red lines. For

any proposed cooperation to succeed, Moscow would have to understand that Russia would pay a steep price if it failed to accommodate U.S. interests in Syria or uphold its end of any bargain.

Moscow needs to understand that it cannot unilaterally write the end of the story in Syria—even with Iranian help—and present the world with a Russian *fait accompli*. Here, the United States has some important cards to play. Russia has been able to stabilize the Assad regime and help it regain momentum on the battlefield, but even with Iran's help, Russia lacks the ability to restore Assad's control over all of Syria. While Moscow gambled that a limited military intervention would succeed in altering dynamics on the battlefield, it lacks the means to wage a determined military campaign to bring about a decisive Assad victory. Moscow needs a political settlement, which can only come about with the active participation of the United States and its allies. Russia's own security is imperiled if all it can achieve is an uncertain stalemate, which only increases the risk that unsettled conditions in Syria could lead to new terrorist attacks within Russia itself.

Moreover, reconstructing the country, in order to encourage refugees to return and drain the swamps that foster the growth of extremist movements like the Islamic State, will require immense resources. Even the low-end estimates of Syria reconstruction now surpass \$180 billion—and Moscow and Tehran do not have such funds at their disposal. China has not shown much interest in bankrolling Syrian reconstruction. Even the “New Development Bank,” the alternative to the World Bank set up by China, Russia and other non-Western powers, only has \$100 billion in base capital. Stabilization in Syria can only come about with the active participation of America's Gulf and European allies, and with America's willingness to use its influence in bodies like the World Bank to locate the necessary capital.

It is thus possible to negotiate a series of quid-pro-quo arrangements that will secure key American objectives and mitigate some of the Russian actions that most violate American interests and values. Some of these quid pro quos are already in place, due to Russian negotiations with other players in the region, and can serve as the template for U.S.-Russia talks. These include:

1. Creating limited safe havens and “no bomb” areas for those Syrian opposition groups that have clearly separated from jihadi organizations, with an eye to allowing members to decamp from government-controlled areas, and making these territories *de facto* autonomous zones—areas where countries like Qatar and Saudi Arabia may also be able to exercise influence. The Russia-Turkish dialogue on the role and capacities of the Turkish “Euphrates Shield”

zone in Syria, and that no-fly zone, which has been respected by Russian aircraft, provides a model for future policy. The U.S. experience in creating de facto Kurdish zones in northern Iraq after the Gulf War provides a template for how the United States and its partners could set up these areas and facilitate the expulsion or neutralization of extremist elements.

2. Clear red lines on Iranian activity in Syria. Israel has already maintained an extensive dialogue with Moscow about what Iranian actions are intolerable from an Israeli perspective, which has in the past resulted in Israeli strikes in Syria that have nevertheless not provoked conflict with the Russians. The two countries have an ongoing deconfliction process, and Israel has relied on Russia to help moderate Iran's behavior and military capabilities.

3. Agreements on continued strikes against Islamic State, with an eye to its eventual destruction. This requires frank talks about identifying Islamic State fighters and bases to the satisfaction of both Russians and Americans (so that not all non-regime elements are targeted by Russia as ISIS) and, more importantly, about how former ISIS territory is to be administered: what portion under direct Syrian regime control, what part under opposition groups with the help of outside powers like Turkey and Saudi Arabia who will also maintain cease-fires, and balancing Kurdish aspirations for autonomy with Turkish concerns about the rise of a second powerful Kurdish entity on its borders.

4. Enshrining a balance of power via a power-sharing framework—perhaps akin to the Taif accords that ended Lebanon's civil war, or the Dayton Accords that ended Bosnia's, but one that would be enforced by all parties. Here, another sense of “betrayal” from the Russian perspective is important. Moscow reluctantly acceded to the EU-brokered agreement for a staggered transition of power in Ukraine in February 2014, only to have the opposition repudiate it and move to depose Viktor Yanukovich immediately from the presidency, with no repercussions enforced by the agreement's Western guarantors. A price for Russian cooperation on Syria is the retention of Assad for the near future, even if a long-term departure is understood and accepted by Moscow—but any sign of a bait-and-switch approach will torpedo any political arrangement with Russia.

The coordination to make a Syrian compromise work and to pursue greater action against Islamic State has the potential to restore frayed U.S.-Russia contacts in the diplomatic, intelligence and military realms. Because these arrangements would require intensive action, a beneficial side result might be to habituate parts of the Russian and U.S. national-security apparatuses to

greater cooperation and joint work, of the type that was envisioned but never fully realized after the 9/11 attacks. Development of a workable process for regulating the Syria conflict might also serve as a prelude to a similar process on Ukraine—finding a balance of power and interests that all sides can live with. Russia would also expect that constructive behavior on Syria would be reflected by some consideration for sanctions relief.

At his speech at the Center for the National Interest in April 2016, then-candidate Donald Trump said, “Some say the Russians won’t be reasonable. I intend to find out.” A fresh approach to the Syria question may provide the opportunity to test his assumption.

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