Policy Priorities in U.S.-Russia Relations

A Meeting Report

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The U.S.-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) convened the latest in a series of expert meetings on U.S.-Russia relations in October 2017 in Moscow. The mood was grim: participants were unanimous that the current state of bilateral relations is dire and in danger of spiraling down further. In Russia, that country’s representatives reported, the conventional wisdom holds that disagreements between the two countries are intractable. Where the United States sees the Ukraine crisis as having caused the downturn in relations, Russians see it as a result of the failure to better ensure Russia’s security in the years since the end of the Cold War. The Trump administration’s foreign policy, moreover, increasingly feels to Moscow very similar to that of the Obama administration, particularly when it comes to Ukraine and Syria, even though many American specialists see it as unpredictable and still evolving.

Meanwhile, distrust of Russia in the United States continues to grow as evidence mounts of a large-scale Russian campaign to influence American domestic politics by a wide range of means. While some Russians discount American anger as a factor of political opposition to President Donald Trump, the expert group agreed that the American perception of violation is far-reaching and spans political constituencies. Indeed, one Russian comparison likened the U.S. response to that to Pearl Harbor or the September 11, 2001, attacks, a comparison many Americans thought exaggerated, but which the group returned to several times.

This negative dynamic is also affected by a broader context of shifting global power dynamics, which are, in turn, affected by the interaction between these two great powers and their actions around the world. At this time of great change, the United States and Russia would be well-served to collaborate in thinking through responses to new transnational challenges, from the evolution of economies away from industrial employment and toward automation, to the impact of migration and the implications of cultural change. Instead, group members posited that the United States and Russia are stretching and testing the limits of what is possible in the world, and the effects may prove detrimental to those norms that still exist.

What, then, can be done, both by governments and by members of the expert community, to help ensure the security of our own states and avoid spiraling? Over the course of our discussions, three central challenges emerged:
1. The Russian perception that the current security order in Europe leaves it at a disadvantage

2. The crisis in Ukraine

3. The crisis over political/election interference

This is not to say that other questions—including resolution of the continuing conflict in Syria, the threats posed by violent extremism, arms control, and the two countries’ abilities to respond to their own health care needs and coordinate for international global health—are not crucial to both states’ wellbeing and security. To the contrary, they very much are. However, in the context of bilateral relations, it is possible to identify cooperative ways forward in those areas. Indeed, some are underway. But, absent resolution of the three factors named above, any coordination and cooperation, even on the most important of these topics, will be issue-specific and at risk of falling hostage to underlying tension in the relationship.

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The team was not optimistic that factors as challenging as these could be resolved quickly. However, an approach that recognized the need to move forward on several fronts found favor with the group. Specifically, participants emphasized two general approaches:

- In areas in which policy goals and parameters are clear, but substantial disagreements remain—most notably in the context of overall European security (including, but not limited to, Ukraine), arms control, and policies in Syria—the group recommends a combination of working-level coordination by the two governments (which exists) and continuing Track Two engagement. The latter would take the form of expert working groups, comprising specialists and including former senior officials able to develop options for ways forward. Such groups can offer expertise and knowledge and serve as a capability multiplier for governments. These efforts can be bilateral for some issues (e.g., arms control) but must be multilateral for others (European security). The Track Two process can support government working-level engagement, both in areas in which decisions can be made at that level and by helping to develop clear recommendations for senior decisionmakers.

- In areas where much remains to be done to define the art of the possible, such as developing mechanisms to preclude illegal interference (and the perception of interference) in one another’s domestic political processes, designing rules of the road to foster both states’ cybersecurity, or coordinating lessons to be learned from health care policy and approaches to international health, a combination of Track Two working groups and collaborative research and analysis papers by experts can help lay the groundwork for further engagement.
Participants were also able to identify some areas of agreement (as well as disagreement) in each of the issue areas discussed. Despite continuing differences regarding the Intermediate Nuclear Force (INF) treaty, participants generally agreed that the treaty should be preserved, as failure to do so could undermine arms control more broadly. While some raised questions about the U.S. commitment to future arms control, those at the table felt that the New START Treaty should be extended and future agreements to further limit capabilities pursued. Here, group members emphasized the importance of working-level engagement between the two governments. Elevating this topic to senior levels too early, several suggested, could undermine negotiations and plans. Good ideas adequately developed and agreed at lower levels, in contrast, can be presented to senior leaders for decision.

Moreover, the group felt that Track Two efforts by a working group of experts that included former senior officials and negotiators could be particularly useful. Such a group could develop and evaluate proposals from a variety of perspectives, ensuring that the options presented to officials are adequately vetted and assessed. Moreover, while there was debate on this point, a number of Russian participants agreed that at present, Russia might have to take a more forward-leaning posture on the arms control agenda, as the United States likely would not. American participants, for their part, allowed that Washington might be amenable to defining mechanisms that could assure the Russian Federation that the Aegis Mark-41 Vertical Launch System cannot be used to launch missiles (which would violate the INF), in exchange for resolution of the question of the Russian Ground-Launched Cruise Missile system that Washington alleges Russia has deployed in violation of the treaty.

On health policy, it was clear that the United States and Russia had much in common, as both countries are ill-served by many aspects of their existing health care systems. While some of the specifics of the challenges are different, many overlap, as do the gaps in resolving the problems: officials in both countries place little priority on and have a limited scope for truly improving systems, for instance through study of experiences around the world. This is because in the United States, health care is highly politicized, while in Russia officials simply pay it insufficient attention. Participants agreed that a continuing dialogue on health would be advantageous and could lead to policy recommendations in both countries.

In Syria, where Russia’s intervention has brought it substantial success, an endgame approaches.
must reach accommodation on a number of key questions, not least the roles different parties (Iran, the Syrian Kurds, Islamist groups) will play in the future of Syria and Iran.

Participants agreed that as with arms control, a Track Two working group of experts familiar with Syria and the evolving situation, including former officials, could play an important role in defining and delimiting first basic concepts of borders and zones and later what can be done in Syria more broadly, what the implications might be, and what roles the United States and Russia can play. The group’s analysis and recommendations could help facilitate additional steps on official levels. For example, current bilateral deconfliction mechanisms might be expanded to include borders of de-escalation zones, and better definition of the roles of parties. Development of norms of behavior to enable enduring ceasefires until longer-term political issues can be addressed would also be helpful. Similarly, official exchanges of information regarding foreign fighters (including, importantly to Russia, those from Central Asia and the Caucasus) may be possible and serve mutual interests.

Meanwhile, participants generally agreed that the challenge, and thus the resolution, of Ukraine is inextricably tied to European security more broadly. Meanwhile, participants generally agreed that the challenge, and thus the resolution, of Ukraine is inextricably tied to European security more broadly. Today, the Russian government appears convinced that the sanctions law passed by Congress means that resolution of the Ukraine crisis will not result in the lifting of any U.S. sanctions. Russians also expressed doubts that European Union states would lift sanctions if the United States did not. As a result, Russian participants emphasized, the sanctions regime, rather than incentivizing Russia to change its policies, does the opposite. At the same time, Moscow does want to see Ukraine resolved, for the sake of whatever normalization that might bring. Moreover, it wants the United States involved in any resolution (some suggested that this was necessary to keep the United States from “spoiling” any settlement).

While the United States has sought to limit its role, those at the table agreed that processes that it undertakes in support of the Normandy process (involving Russia, Ukraine, Germany, and France) can be helpful. The group was also cautiously supportive of the broad concept of a peacekeeping, although many questions remain regarding how this could truly move forward. Several Russian participants, however, emphasized the need to more directly link the settlement of Ukraine to a way forward on European security more broadly, whether through the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) format or something else. Agreement that the NATO-Russia founding act remains in place and should continue to do so (although NATO members might argue that Russia’s actions in Ukraine violate it) is one possible starting point. So is having both officials and experts discuss how escalation dynamics can be reversed and eliminated. This does not mean that progress on Ukraine can be made conditional on revision of European security arrangements. However, several Russian participants indicated that NATO recognition that rethinking those arrangements, in parallel with Ukraine processes, could make the latter more likely to succeed. The
process can begin with deconfliction and move on from there. Here, too, an expert working group that can assess possibilities for European security arrangements may be helpful.

Moving forward in all of these areas is made all the more challenging by the broad bipartisan consensus in the United States that Moscow undertook a comprehensive, orchestrated campaign to interfere in and affect the results of America’s 2016 presidential election. While some Americans sought Russian acknowledgement of their country’s actions, many participants from both countries agreed that this was unlikely. One Russian proposed that a Russian signal that actions of this sort are unacceptable and will not take place in the future would be helpful. One American participant proposed something of a mutual noninterference pact. The group discussed mechanisms to define “rules of the road” for cybersecurity, and perhaps involvement (of various sorts) in one another’s polities. Russia, too, is vulnerable to election hacking. This, however, is uncharted territory, and fraught with dangers. Aside from the anger and grievance on both sides, it is not clear how arrangements or agreements could be designed, verified, or enforced. Indeed, even definitions are unclear, as Russians and Americans have very different views of what constitutes “interference.” Participants suggested that collaborative research and analysis, perhaps in the form of short papers on parameters, prospects, and possibilities, might help lay the groundwork for developing concrete ways forward.

Participants agreed that Russia and the United States are not likely to emerge as close partners: the two countries are looking to deter and contain one another, and perceive threats in one another’s policies and actions. This makes engagement and deconfliction, as well as coordination in areas where it is needed, that much more critical. Engagement requires contact. The group agreed on the need to develop a framework of relationships, including between diplomats at all levels, and between Russian officials and experts and the U.S. Congress, where Russia remains something of an unknown quantity. Some lessons can be learned from the development of the Sino-U.S. relationship, which includes substantial and substantive engagement of American legislators, and especially senior congressional staff. While parliamentary exchanges have their role, American participants cautioned, U.S. senators and representatives seek genuine contact and conversations with fellow policymakers from all branches of government in other countries. Cultural diplomacy should also not be overlooked. Group members suggested that nongovernmental organizations could play a role in developing an annual security forum, on the model of that the United States has with China, with government officials as participants.
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