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## Rewinding the Clock? US-Russia Relations in the Biden Era

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- “Masters of Our Fate: Global Order in the Post-pandemic Era”, *Horizons*, Winter 2021;
- “Partnership Without Substance—Sino-Russian Relations in Central and Eastern Europe”, CEPA report (with Edward Lucas), April 2021;
- “The Adaptation Game—Russia and Climate Change”, *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 121, Ifri, March 2021.

# Abstract

The escalating crisis in Ukraine in the winter of 2021-2022 has returned US-Russia relations to center stage. Faced with the prospect of a new Russian military intervention, US President Joe Biden has re-engaged with Vladimir Putin in a manner reminiscent of the diplomacy of the superpower era. But this latest American attempt at accommodation raises more questions than answers. In the intervening three decades the world has changed out of all recognition, the international influence of the US-Russia relationship is much diminished, and their cooperation has sunk to historic lows.

Can Washington and Moscow defy gravity and achieve some level of pragmatic engagement? There is good reason for scepticism. Neither side is truly invested in cooperation, but instrumentalizes it to other purposes. The Biden administration hopes to neutralize Russia in order to focus on the all-encompassing challenge of China. The Kremlin looks to undermine American influence as part of its project of promoting Russia as an independent global power. These goals are essentially irreconcilable. Looking ahead, the real question is not whether the United States and Russia can recalibrate their relationship to new “normal”, but whether they can avoid confrontation in an increasingly fluid and disorderly world.

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# Introduction

The escalating crisis in Ukraine in the winter of 2021-2022 has returned US-Russia relations to center stage after several years in the margins. Faced with the prospect of a new Russian military intervention, Joe Biden's liberal internationalism appears to be giving way to old-fashioned realpolitik and deal-making. It is as if the Cold War never went away,<sup>1</sup> with its competing value-systems and worldviews, but also underlying—and cold-blooded—pragmatism. A flurry of diplomatic activity has raised hopes in some quarters that Washington and Moscow may be able to achieve a new “normal”, or rather reach some version of the old “normal”, based on certain understandings.<sup>2</sup>

Such thinking is seductive, all the more so at a time when the threat of conflict seems very close, and uncertainties abound. Yet attempts to rewind the clock to an idealized Cold War vision are misguided. In the first place, the current US-Russia relationship bears almost no resemblance to its Cold War incarnation. Much as the Kremlin would like to imagine an interaction between equals, the gulf in capabilities between the United States and Russia is vast and is set to widen over the course of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is not, and will not become, a relationship between strategic equals.

More critically still, the US-Russia relationship is at its lowest point in more than three decades. It is openly antagonistic, fuelled by deep suspicion, while bilateral cooperation is virtually non-existent. In some respects, the situation is worse than during the Cold War. Then, a rough parity between America and the Soviet Union served as the basis for a degree of mutual respect and accommodation. That is no longer the case. Today, there is little clarity about intentions, the rhetoric is often intemperate, there are few guard-rails in place, and the threat of a dangerous escalation is ever-present. Neither side is seriously invested in cooperation, but views it in almost entirely instrumental terms. The Biden administration hopes to neutralize or

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1. Fiona Hill, Director for European and Russian Affairs on the National Security Council under Trump (2017-19), has observed that “the ongoing confrontation between the two countries (...) seems like an artifact from another era”. See “The Kremlin’s Strange Victory”, *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2021, available at: [www.foreignaffairs.com](http://www.foreignaffairs.com).

2. See F. Lukyanov, “Biden-Putin Meeting Shows Russia-US Relations Are Set for a Return to the Cold War Era. Strangely, That Might Be an Improvement”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, June 21, 2021, available at: <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru>.

“park” Russia in order to concentrate on reasserting US global primacy against the multi-dimensional challenge of China. The Kremlin strives to undermine American influence as part of its larger project of promoting Russia as an independent center of power in a multipolar world. These goals are fundamentally incompatible.

Despite recent intense diplomatic activity, the US-Russia relationship is set on a path of long-term structural decline. Engagement will remain transactional in spirit, but with little to transact in practice. And although it is tempting to blame particular individuals—Vladimir Putin or Donald Trump, for example—or point to supposedly game-changing events, such as Moscow’s annexation of Crimea or the latest Russian threats against Ukraine, the causes of this malaise are deeper. Leaders and events may act as catalysts, but it is the underlying trends that shape decision-making—the asymmetry in American and Russian capabilities; the growing centrality of China in global affairs; and the steady erosion of any sense of shared purpose between Washington and Moscow. Looking ahead, the question is not whether the United States and Russia can recalibrate their relationship, but whether they can avoid the worst—an escalation from crisis into confrontation.

# The Trump Legacy

Before examining the current state of the US-Russia relationship, we need to briefly consider the impact of Donald Trump's legacy.

Despite a widespread belief that Trump was Moscow's stooge or useful idiot,<sup>3</sup> his administration was by no means as compliant as is often supposed. He might have mused that "it would be great to get along with Russia",<sup>4</sup> but his personal cordiality towards Putin did not translate into substantive concessions. During his presidency, US sanctions were strengthened following the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).<sup>5</sup> NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) in the Baltic states expanded.<sup>6</sup> The United States withdrew from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Washington authorized the sale of Javelin anti-tank missiles to Ukraine, which had previously been blocked by Barack Obama. And it adopted a more confrontational stance towards Russia in the Arctic.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, none of Trump's conciliatory moves, such as agreeing to a joint US-Russia cyber-security unit, got off the ground.

But if Trump disappointed some in Moscow by not delivering specific concessions, he was helpful in other respects. As president, he inflicted further damage to the construct of a liberal "rules-based international order". He was publicly contemptuous of America's European allies, describing them as free-loaders. He called into question the value of NATO and validity of Article 5 (on mutual

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3. See comments by former National Intelligence Director James Clapper—in K. Johnson, "James Clapper: Trump is 'Making Russia Great Again'", *USA Today*, July 22, 2017, available at: <https://eu.usatoday.com>.

4. D. Mangan, "President Donald Trump Says Getting Along With Russia Is 'Not Terrible, It's Good'", CNBC, February 16, 2017, available at: [www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com).

5. The CAATSA sanctions bill, which also targeted Iran and North Korea, passed the House of Representatives 419-3 and the Senate 98-2, and was signed into law in July 2017. Its most important provision was to make Congress the ultimate arbiter of any decision to ease (or strengthen) sanctions.

6. At the 2014 NATO summit in Newport, Wales, alliance members agreed to establish a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF). Following the 2016 NATO summit in Warsaw, the alliance instituted the EFP comprising four battle-groups, intended to boost security and confidence in the frontline states of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.

7. See, for example, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's remarks at the 2019 Arctic Council meeting in Rovaniemi, Finland—in S. Johnson, "Pompeo: Russia Is 'Aggressive' in the Arctic, China's Work There Also Needs Watching", *Reuters*, May 6, 2019, available at: [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).



defense),<sup>8</sup> and identified the EU as a “foe” of the United States.<sup>9</sup> And his disastrous response to Covid-19 belied the notion of the United States as a model for others to follow.

In effect, Trump facilitated what Putin had been trying to achieve for the best part of 15 years: a divided and discredited West. Under Trump, America visibly lost the capacity, will, and legitimacy to lead others. His words and actions made Putin’s case that liberalism was “obsolete”,<sup>10</sup> and diverted attention from Russia’s actions in Ukraine, Syria and Libya.

Trump was not much a game-changer as an accelerant of pre-existing trends. The erosion of the liberal order had been ongoing since George W. Bush’s 2003 decision to invade Iraq.<sup>11</sup> Regardless, Biden faced huge challenges in re-establishing the United States as a reputable global power, restoring confidence among America’s allies, and addressing the seemingly unstoppable rise of China. Developing a functional relationship—or stable interaction—with Russia promised to be no less difficult a task.

It might be thought that the Kremlin would have been delighted with Trump’s part in “confounding the enemy” and undermining the West. Yet there were also downsides for Moscow. One was the whole circus surrounding Trump. This was not only a distraction in itself, but also made it almost impossible to engage seriously with Washington on a raft of policy issues from arms control to Iran to sanctions. The problem was compounded by Trump’s lack of interest in Russia (beyond the Muller enquiry into Moscow’s interference in the 2016 US presidential election).

Then there was the whiff of treason associated with Trump in his dealings with Moscow. This ensured that any US-Russia cooperative venture was doomed from the outset, interpreted in Washington as selling out to the Kremlin or worse. There was a lot to be said, then, for a more reputable and business-like occupant of the White House.

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8. Trump initially refused to reaffirm America’s commitment to Article V during his first visit to NATO headquarters in Brussels in May 2017. A few weeks later, under growing pressure including from within his administration, Trump grudgingly restated the commitment in an off-the-cuff remark to a Romanian reporter. See L. Nelson, “Trump Publicly Commits to NATO Mutual-Defense Provision”, *Politico*, June 9, 2017, available at: [www.politico.com](http://www.politico.com).

9. C. Coniglia, “EU Is One of United States’ Biggest Foes”, *Politico*, July 15, 2018, available at: [www.politico.eu](http://www.politico.eu).

10. L. Barber, H. Foy and A. Barber, “Putin Says Liberalism Has ‘Become Obsolete’”, *Financial Times*, June 28, 2019, available at: [www.ft.com](http://www.ft.com).

11. B. Lo, “Global Order in the Shadow of the Coronavirus: China, Russia and the West”, Lowy Analysis, July 29, 2020, available at: [www.lowyinstitute.org](http://www.lowyinstitute.org).

Russia had already pocketed the gains from nearly two decades of American “suicidal statecraft”.<sup>12</sup> It could now use a little predictability, a prospect that Biden’s somewhat dull public persona appeared to offer.<sup>13</sup>

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12. Z. Brzezinski, “George W. Bush’s Suicidal Statecraft”, *New York Times*, October 13, 2005, available at: [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

13. Fyodor Lukyanov remarked that the Geneva summit had “achieved its goals of cooling tensions after years of circus antics”. See F. Lukyanov, “Biden-Putin Meeting Shows Russia-US Relations Are Set for Return to the Cold War Era”, *op. cit.*

# Russia in Biden's World

Russia occupies a paradoxical place in Biden's view of the world. It is seen as a malign actor, some of whose activities pose a direct threat to American interests. Yet it is also regarded as a declining and insecure power. Biden's contradictory view of Russia was highlighted in the first major policy document of his administration, the *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* of March 2021. The document stated that "Russia remains determined to enhance its global influence and play a disruptive role on the world stage".<sup>14</sup> Later, it juxtaposed "a destabilizing Russia" with "an increasingly assertive China".<sup>15</sup> The clear inference was that Moscow was "disruptive" and "destabilizing" precisely because it was *weak*—in contrast to a formidable China which, unsurprisingly, received far greater attention in the document.

More revealing still were Biden's remarks as he was about to board the plane taking him back to Washington after the Geneva summit with Putin in June 2021: "Russia is in a very, very difficult spot right now. They are being squeezed by China. They want desperately to remain a major power... They desperately want to... be relevant". He rehashed the old description of the Soviet Union as "Upper Volta with nuclear weapons."<sup>16</sup>

At one level, Biden's view of Russia echoes that of his former boss, Barack Obama, who in 2014 famously described it as a mere "regional power" whose actions in annexing Crimea indicated weakness rather than strength.<sup>17</sup> But there are two important differences. Biden today has a more developed appreciation of Russia's disruptive capacities and their impact on US interests. It could hardly be otherwise, given Moscow's interference in the 2016 US presidential election, successful cyber-hacking operations, deployment of 100,000 troops near the Ukrainian frontier during March and April 2021 and, most recently, its even larger and more threatening military build-up against Ukraine in the winter of 2021-2022.

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14. *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, The White House, March 2021, p. 8, available at: [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov).

15. *Ibid.*, p. 14

16. "Remarks by President Biden Before Air Force One Departure", The White House, June 16, 2021, available at: [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov).

17. "Obama, in Dig at Putin, Calls Russia 'Regional Power'", *Reuters*, March 25, 2014, available at: [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

The other key difference is growing nervousness about Sino-Russian comity. The Biden White House views Russia not just as a disruptive actor on its own account, but also as an accomplice in Beijing's globalist agenda. According to what has become known as the Biden doctrine, the world has reached an "inflection point", dominated by the contest between two opposing visions of global order, democratic and authoritarian.<sup>18</sup> China is the great "other" in this existential struggle, but Russia is its principal helper.<sup>19</sup>

These assumptions underpin the Biden administration's approach towards Moscow. It acts on the basis that a declining great power still carries a threat. Russia retains considerable mischief-making capabilities which it is not shy about using. It must therefore be handled carefully—not to the point of appeasement, but by avoiding unnecessary provocations. This is important above all so that the United States can focus on the priorities that really matter—domestic economic recovery, public health, social welfare, China, climate change. But such pragmatism is also sensible because Moscow is liable to cause havoc if it feels it is not getting enough "respect".<sup>20</sup>

Implicit here is the recognition that the United States has limited influence over Russian actions. The most that can be achieved is to prevent tensions from escalating into conflict, and not push it further into the Chinese camp. Despite his liberal internationalist credentials, and "Summit for Democracy",<sup>21</sup> Biden acts on the basis of realist constructs such as the balance of power, spheres of influence, and irreconcilable values that cannot be bridged, only managed.<sup>22</sup>

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18. T. Wright, "Joe Biden Worries That China Might Win", *The Atlantic*, June 9, 2021, available at: [www.theatlantic.com](http://www.theatlantic.com).

19. A. Kendall-Taylor and D. Shullman, *Navigating The Deepening Sino-Russian Partnership*, Center for New American Security (CNAS), January 14, 2021, available at: [www.cnas.org](http://www.cnas.org).

20. "[Putin] knows he's in real trouble, which makes him even more dangerous...". See "Remarks by President Biden at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence", July 27, 2021, available at: [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov).

21. The "Summit for Democracy" took place on December 9-10, 2021. The invitation list included 110 world leaders from "established and emerging democracies". Unsurprisingly, coverage of the gathering focused less on its content than on who was—and was not— included. See P. Wintour, "Can Biden's 'Divisive' Democracy Summit Deliver?", *The Guardian*, December 9, 2021, available at: [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com).

22. J. Shifrinson and S. Wertheim, "Biden the Realist", *Foreign Affairs*, September 9, 2021, available at: [www.foreignaffairs.com](http://www.foreignaffairs.com). It is indicative that the White House has given up trying to promote democracy and the rule of law in Russia and post-Soviet Eurasia, while its criticisms of the Kremlin's persecution of Alexei Navalny have become largely pro forma.

The common theme running through Biden's Russia policy is neutralization.<sup>23</sup> He has already attempted three iterations of this approach during his presidency: marginalization; triangularism based on enticing Moscow away from Beijing; and stabilization. Initially, Washington more or less ignored Russia. But this proved impracticable following the latter's military build-up in March/April 2021 and the consequent heightened threat of war. The White House then moved to triangularism, responding to the call from some quarters in Washington to reach out to Moscow, alleviate Russian sensitivities, and forestall the further strengthening of Sino-Russian partnership.<sup>24</sup> But this "reverse-Kissinger" approach<sup>25</sup> has likewise proved inadequate. The Kremlin views the strategic partnership with China as a force multiplier for Russian power around the world, and is unwilling to jeopardize it for the sake of nebulous gains and the vague promise of "normalization".<sup>26</sup>

This has left stabilization – the aim of which is a "stable and predictable" relationship.<sup>27</sup> Importantly, this does not imply a "reset". Even in the best case scenario, Moscow would remain hostile to American interests and Western liberal values, and there would be few possibilities for active cooperation. But the Kremlin would exercise self-restraint and avoid dangerous actions. There would be regular communication through various bilateral channels and mechanisms—presidential summits, a Strategic Stability Dialogue, senior officials talks, and their respective diplomatic missions. A new "normal" might emerge, characterized by order, process and relative clarity.

Stabilization attempts to mitigate several contradictions: between Biden's liberal principles and realist instincts; between a primary focus on China and the need to respond to Russian actions; and between a desire to contain Moscow's aggression, and the dearth of satisfactory means to achieve this.

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23. A. Baunov, "Putin's New (Old) Russia Meets Biden's New America", Carnegie Moscow Center, June 17, 2021, available at: <https://carnegiemoscow.org>.

24. "Anonymous", "The Longer Telegram: Toward A New American China Strategy", Atlantic Council, January 28, 2021, available at: [www.atlanticcouncil.org](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org).

25. E. Luce, "America Is Back—and Wants Everyone to Focus on China", *Financial Times*, June 18, 2021, available at: [www.ft.com](http://www.ft.com).

26. Russian Ambassador to China Andrei Denisov put it succinctly in an interview with *Global Times*: "we're smarter than what the Americans think". See "What Position Would Russia Take in Case of an Armed Conflict Between China and US?", Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), June 16, 2021, available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru>. See also H. Zhao and A. Kortunov, "The Coming Bipolarity and Its Implications: Views From China and Russia", RIAC, November 23, 2020, available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru>.

27 See "Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia", White House press release, April 13, 2021, available at: [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov).

# The United States in Putin's Foreign Policy

The main problem Biden faces in engaging with Russia is that Putin and those around him see the United States as a declining and increasingly discredited power. Although they recognize that America is still the number one power in the world, they believe that the gap between the United States and the leading non-Western powers, particularly China, has narrowed substantially. Not only is liberalism obsolete, but the Western conception of a rules-based international order is defunct. The “forever wars” in Afghanistan and Iraq, the 2008 global financial crisis, the Trump presidency, the failed response of the United States to the pandemic, and the dramatic collapse of the government in Kabul—all point to the historical tide running strongly against America and the West in general.

These sentiments are enshrined in the latest (July 2021) Russian National Security Strategy (NSS). It notes that the “contemporary world is undergoing a period of transformation”, in which multiple political and economic centres have emerged, and where the structures, rules and principles of global order are changing.<sup>28</sup> Mirroring Biden's description of Russia as “desperate”, the NSS depicts a fearful “West”—a transparent allusion to the United States—beset by an array of domestic and international problems.

Moscow's *schadenfreude* is tempered by some anxiety. According to the NSS, America's refusal to recognize changing international realities is generating all kinds of adverse consequences: geopolitical instability and conflict; the shattering of universal norms and principles of international law; the dismantling of bilateral and multilateral agreements; efforts to destroy ties between Russia and the former Soviet republics; and the identification of Russia itself as an enemy.<sup>29</sup> The United States is also attempting to undermine Russian national unity and society, harm its economy, pollute its values, distort history, arouse interethnic and interconfessional conflicts, while also falsely

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28. *Strategiia natsionalnoj bezopasnosti Rossijskoj Federatsii* [National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation], July 2, 2021, pp. 3-6, available at: <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru>.

29. *Ibid.*

accusing Russia of various transgressions from cyber-hacking to interfering in the domestic affairs of other states.

Nevertheless, the overall message of the NSS (and other official statements) is bullish. Russia has returned as a global player. The liberal order is imploding. The Transatlantic consensus is more fragile than ever. China continues to thrive, even in the face of intense American pressure. And the world is no longer willing to accept US global leadership. Subsequent events have only strengthened these views. Most notably, the withdrawal from Afghanistan proved that Washington was unable to deliver to its allies and partners, and that Biden was no different to Trump when it came to prioritizing American interests at the expense of everyone else's.<sup>30</sup>

In these circumstances, the incentives for Moscow to develop a cooperative relationship with Washington are scarcely compelling. Sometimes, the opposite is true. Scandals, such as Russian cyber-operations and interference in the 2016 US presidential election, advertise Moscow's reach and influence, and counter Western narratives about Russian decline. Similarly, keeping the United States and Europe in the dark over its intentions regarding Ukraine enhances Russia's leverage.<sup>31</sup> Yet the Kremlin is keen to avoid direct conflict with the United States. The challenge, then, is to find the right balance between risk and reward, testing Biden's political will and nerve, while minimizing the chances of confrontation.

This balancing act reflects a larger conundrum facing Moscow, which is how far to believe its own declinist narrative about America. Notwithstanding the spectacular rise of China, the United States continues to play an outsize, if reduced, role in Moscow's worldview. It remains the external benchmark—for better and for worse—against which Russia measures itself as a great power.<sup>32</sup> This is not simply a question of status, but has concrete implications: an end to Western “interference” in Russian domestic politics (i.e., no democracy promotion); guarantees of strategic stability; a de facto Russian sphere of influence in the post-Soviet neighbourhood; and the right of involvement in any regional or global issue it chooses. Although Putin

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30. Some American commentators agree. See R. Haass, “The Age of America First”, *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2021, available at: [www.foreignaffairs.com](http://www.foreignaffairs.com).

31. “It is important for them to remain in this state [of tension over Ukraine] for as long as possible, so that it does not occur to them to stage some conflict on our western borders...”, Putin speech to the Foreign Ministry Board, November 18, 2021, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru>.

32. As Dmitri Trenin has noted, “Russia’s foreign policy suffers from its fixation on relations with the United States”—in D. Trenin, “No Emotions or Illusions: The Future of US-Russian Relations”, Carnegie Moscow Center, March 30, 2021, available at: <https://carnegiemoscow.org>.

has frequently criticized American exceptionalism,<sup>33</sup> he insists on an exceptionalism of Russia's own. In this, he seeks Washington's acquiescence.

The United States also serves as a legitimating rationale for much that is done in Russia's name. As Edward Lucas wrote in 2013, "if America did not exist, Russia would have to invent it".<sup>34</sup> Under Putin, Russia has promoted itself as the "anti-America"—everything that America is not, from individual policies to political philosophy, from national identity to visions of global order.<sup>35</sup> The United States may be the enemy, but it is a "useful enemy".

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33. Putin's most famous (notorious) critique of American exceptionalism was in a 2013 article in *The New York Times*, "A Plea for Caution from Russia", September 12, 2013, available at: [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

34. "The Dread of the Other", *The Economist*, February 16, 2013, available at: [www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com).

35. I. Kurilla, "Mutual Images of Russia and America as Part of Their Domestic Culture Wars", *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 274, November 24, 2021, p. 6, available at: <https://css.ethz.ch>.



# The China Factor

The biggest game-changer in the US-Russia relationship is external: the rise of global China. Most obviously, China has become the number one preoccupation of US foreign policy. For Democrats and Republicans alike, it represents a multi-dimensional challenge, a threat not only to specific national interests from security to trade, but also to the liberal international order on which US power—and much of its identity—is based. All other external priorities, from addressing the global climate crisis to revitalizing the Transatlantic consensus, have been subordinated to the goal of containing, countering and confronting Beijing.

The natural corollary of Washington's China-focus is a diminution of interest in other areas, such as Russia.<sup>36</sup> For much of his first year, Biden did not have a dedicated Russia policy so much as a "China-plus" policy in which engagement with Moscow was just one, albeit important, component. This was exemplified during his first overseas visit in June 2021 for the G-7, NATO, US-EU and Geneva summits. In his efforts to develop a common Transatlantic position on China, Biden gave the green light to the controversial Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. He recognized America's inability to stop the project, but also that continuing to obstruct it would damage relations with Germany and wreck any prospect of joint action against Beijing. In the larger, Sinocentric scheme of things, giving up a long-held position on the undesirability of the pipeline was deemed a small price to pay.

The distraction China presents to American policy-makers is a mixed blessing for Moscow. No Russian leader, least of all Putin, is comfortable with being relegated to a side-show, since this increases the chances of being ignored. That is one reason why Moscow has engaged in a range of destabilizing behaviours over the years, including cyber-hacking, disinformation and political interference. Such actions force Washington and other Western capitals to take notice in spite of themselves. The latest crisis over Ukraine is a stark reminder of this reality.

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36. M. Kofman and A. Kendall-Taylor, "The Myth of Russian Decline", *Foreign Affairs*, November/October 2021, available at: [www.foreignaffairs.com](http://www.foreignaffairs.com).

Yet the benefits for Russia of China's centrality in American (and Western) thinking are undeniable. The Kremlin has been able to leverage the Sino-Russian partnership to advantage. Contrary to conventional wisdom, this is not a de facto alliance, and the coordination of Chinese and Russian foreign policy is less than often supposed.<sup>37</sup> However, what matters in terms of global geopolitics is the *image* of Sino-Russian solidarity. This has had a disproportionate psychological impact on Western leaders. Putin has been able to play on American and European insecurities to maximize his freedom of manoeuvre, extend Russia's strategic reach, and promote its global credentials. The more Washington obsesses about the China threat, the greater the opportunities for Russia—as the green-lighting of Nord Stream 2 showed.

Russia also benefits from America's China-focus from the other end. In the past Beijing could operate secure in the knowledge that Russia would invariably be considered more malign than China. The dependence of leading Western economies on Chinese trade and investment; Russia's wars in Georgia, Syria and Ukraine; and the post-Crimea crisis in Russia-West relations—all these made an asymmetrical Sino-Russian partnership even more so. Following the events of 2014 Moscow had little option but to rely on Beijing, while the latter enjoyed the luxury of strategic flexibility by maintaining functional relations with both the West and Russia.

In recent years, however, the situation has changed somewhat. China has become enemy number one in the United States, and faces increasing resistance in Europe. The Russian economy is increasingly reliant on China,<sup>38</sup> but this is counterbalanced by Xi Jinping's growing need for Kremlin political and moral support. The more intense US-China confrontation becomes, the more scope there is to position Russia as an independent and indispensable center of global power. If China has been the greatest beneficiary of the post-Cold War international order, then Russia is one of the big

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37. See M. Kaczmarek, "The Sino-Russian Relationship and the West", *Survival*, Vol. 62, No. 6, December 2020; also B. Lo, "The Sino-Russian Partnership and Global Order", *China International Strategy Review*, December 2020, available at: <https://link.springer.com>.

38. China's share of Russian foreign trade grew from 10.5 percent to 18.3 percent between 2013 and 2020, while the EU's share over the same period fell from 49.4 percent to 38.5 percent—see A. Gabuev, "As Russia and China Draw Closer, Europe Watches with Foreboding", Carnegie Moscow Center, March 19, 2021, available at: <https://carnegiemoscow.org>. See also R. Connolly, "Russia's Economic Pivot to Asia in a Shifting Regional Environment", *Emerging Insight*, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), September 16, 2021, available at: <https://rusi.org>.

winners from its unravelling and the emergence of what some are calling a “new Cold War”.<sup>39</sup>

This raises the question of what type of global order the Kremlin would like to see. Ostensibly, it seeks a multipolar order or “polycentric system of international relations”. But Moscow’s vision is essentially tripolar. It identifies three great powers that stand above the rest—the United States, China and Russia—because they are sovereign, truly independent actors in a way that other major powers, such as France, Japan and the United Kingdom, are not.

For this vision to become a reality, two things have to happen. First, US power needs to decline to the point that America can no longer dominate the international system—this has already occurred—but not so much that China becomes the new global hegemon in its place.<sup>40</sup> Instead, there would be a dynamic equilibrium between the Big Two, with Russia holding the balance.<sup>41</sup> Its pivotal position would compensate for its limited influence compared to the others. Second, Russia’s relations with the United States and China should be better, or at least no worse, than their relations with each other. For Moscow, that entails not only close partnership with Beijing, but also some level of controlled interaction with Washington. Such a dual outcome would recall the classic triangle of the 1970s and 1980s, but with the critical difference that Russia, not the United States, would be the main beneficiary from great power rivalries, exercising an influence exceeding its actual resources and capabilities.

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39. S. Karaganov, “On a Third Cold War”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, Vol. 19, No. 3, July-September 2021, pp. 102-115.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

41. Dmitri Trenin puts it thus: “Russia, a major independent international actor but not a superpower like the other two, seeks to maintain an equilibrium, though not equidistance, vis-à-vis China, America, and their rivalry”—in D. Trenin, “The Impact of Sino-American Rivalry on Russia’s Relations with China”, *op. cit.*; see also S. Karaganov, “On a Third Cold War”, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

# Ukraine and European Security

Ukraine has become the number one issue in US-Russia relations. The Putin elite views it as an existential priority, critical to Russian national and civilizational identity, strategic depth and geopolitical power projection. For the Biden administration, by contrast, Ukraine is a distraction from more important priorities elsewhere. Such an asymmetry of interests should, in theory, make it easier to reach an accommodation, since what happens in Ukraine matters much more to Moscow than it does to Washington. In practice, however, this asymmetry increases the chances of misunderstandings with unintended, but disastrous consequences.

In recent months, Putin has raised the stakes by openly questioning Ukrainian sovereignty,<sup>42</sup> refusing to deal with President Volodymyr Zelensky, deploying 100,000 troops on three fronts next to Ukraine, and raising the spectre of a new Russian invasion. He has demanded security guarantees from Washington: that Ukraine (and Georgia) never be admitted into NATO; an end to US and alliance military support for Kyiv; and the non-deployment of “strike weapons systems” and other weapons that are a “threat to Russia”.<sup>43</sup>

This escalation reflects the Kremlin’s frustration with the ongoing stalemate in the Donbass region and the stillborn Minsk political process, as well as concern at Ukraine’s steady drift away from Russia. But it also highlights Putin’s opportunism and a desire to test the limits of American resolve. In many respects the external context is more favorable to Russia than at any time since its annexation of Crimea in 2014. Biden is under mounting pressure at home, struggling to implement his domestic agenda amidst slumping poll ratings. Internationally, he is absorbed by the challenges of China and climate change. America’s reputation has been tarnished by its

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42. “[T]rue sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia. Our spiritual, human and civilizational ties formed for centuries and have their origins in the same sources... Our kinship has been transmitted from generation to generation... we are one people”—Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”, July 12, 2021, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru>.

43. “Foreign Ministry Statement on Dialogue with the United States and Other Western Countries Regarding Security Guarantees”, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, December 10, 2021, available at: <https://archive.mid.ru>.

chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan. Transatlantic relations, although improved from Trump's time, remain dysfunctional. After 16 years of Angela Merkel as Chancellor, there is a new and untested coalition government in Germany. France is readying itself for presidential elections in 2022. And the Europeans are more dependent than ever on Russian gas.

From the Kremlin's perspective, there is much to be said for seizing the initiative while America and its allies are in disarray and before Ukraine is "lost" forever.<sup>44</sup> It has indicated that, unless Russian demands for guarantees about the future of Ukraine and European security are met, military intervention cannot be excluded. Putin may not wish to wage a major war in Ukraine, given the uncertainties and risks associated with such an enterprise. But by keeping the threat alive, he hopes to pressure Biden into an accommodation on Russian terms.

This calculus is not necessarily unfounded. Ideally, Biden would have liked to "park" Ukraine just as he sought to marginalize Russia at the beginning of his presidency—only even more so.<sup>45</sup> Moscow's actions, however, have forced him to become involved in the Ukrainian question. Biden and Putin held a two-hour virtual meeting on 7 December 2021, at which Biden reaffirmed America's commitment to Ukrainian sovereignty and foreshadowed additional sanctions in the event of a Russian invasion. But more disconcertingly for Kyiv and a number of European capitals, he also speculated about finding a "potential accommodation" with Moscow in Eastern Europe.<sup>46</sup> These comments inevitably raised concerns about a great power stitch-up and a lack of resolve in Washington, especially coming so soon after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Biden's position is difficult, since he must juggle three competing priorities. The first is to forestall the worst-case outcome of a Russian military intervention in Ukraine. The second is to counter the impression—in Moscow, Beijing and some Western capitals—that America does not have the stomach to defend the "rules-based international order" *in practice*, much less when it comes to

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44. E. Rumer and A. Weiss, "Ukraine: Putin's Unfinished Business", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP), November 12, 2021, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

45. True, Biden hosted Zelensky in September 2021, and the United States provides Ukraine with military and humanitarian assistance. But the Zelensky visit was essentially a sop to Kyiv after the White House waved through completion of Nord Stream II over strenuous Ukrainian objections. American military aid, although useful, is far from being a game-changer. Meanwhile, Ukrainian membership of NATO is more improbable than ever, a hypothetical used by Moscow as a pretext to redraw the European security landscape.

46. K. Manson, M. Seddon and H. Foy, "Joe Biden Makes Diplomatic Concession to Russia with NATO Talks Plan", *Financial Times*, December 8, 2021, available at: [www.ft.com](http://www.ft.com).

Ukraine.<sup>47</sup> And third, he wants to limit the US commitment to Ukraine and Eastern Europe so as to concentrate on more important priorities elsewhere, in particular China and the Indo-Pacific.

This balancing act is especially testing since Washington has few levers to influence Moscow's behavior. Its repeated warnings that it would react to a Russian attack on Ukraine by imposing additional sanctions carries little credibility, and is unlikely to deter the Kremlin. The Putin regime has become inured to Western sanctions over the past eight years, and has already initiated moves to decouple the Russian economy from the West.<sup>48</sup> It knows, too, that some EU/NATO member-states are unenthusiastic about the prospect of further sanctions, acutely aware of their dependence on Russian gas. Meanwhile, the optics have become increasingly problematic for the White House. The Biden-Putin meetings in 2021—the Geneva summit and two calls in December—followed major military escalations by Moscow, and pointed to a Russia policy that is reactive rather than strategic.

But if Putin seems to have the upper hand in his dealings with Biden, the truth is less clear. The Kremlin's maximalist stance has created a zero-sum situation, with no evident off-ramp for either side. For example, while Ukrainian membership of NATO is improbable anytime soon, Washington and Brussels cannot be seen to abandon the alliance's "open door" principle, and certainly not in response to Russian threats. Similarly, Biden is in no position to deliver on Moscow's demand that the United States and NATO end all military assistance to Kyiv. The cost to America's international reputation (and his personal standing) would be devastating. The implications would stretch far beyond Ukraine and Europe to the Asia-Pacific and the intensifying US-China strategic rivalry. In short, while Biden is keen to defuse the Ukrainian question, this cannot be at the Kremlin's asking price.

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47. T. Ilves and D. Kramer, "In the Russia-Ukraine Conflict, Standing up to Putin Is Our Only Credible Option", *Politico*, December 2, 2021, available at: [www.politico.com](http://www.politico.com).

48. Central Bank reserves exceed USD 620 billion, while the National Wealth Fund reached USD 190 billion in the third quarter of 2021 – see Max Seddon and Polina Ivanova, "Moscow's Sanction-Proofing Efforts Weaken Western Threats", *Financial Times*, January 18, 2022, available at: [www.ft.com](http://www.ft.com). Russia's US Treasury holdings have plummeted in the last five years from USD 105 billion to USD 3.9 billion, and in July 2021 the Finance Ministry announced plans to remove dollar-denominated assets from the sovereign wealth fund. Moscow is also developing its own alternatives to the SWIFT financial messaging system and exploring the creation of a digital currency. See V. Grishin, "The Economic Factors in US-Russian Relations", PONARS Eurasia, July 11, 2021, available at: [www.ponarseurasia.org](http://www.ponarseurasia.org); R. Nelson and K. Sutter, "De-Dollarization Efforts in China and Russia", *In Focus*, Congressional Research Service, July 23, 2021.

If Biden held firm, Putin would face difficult choices. He could de-escalate tensions over Ukraine without obtaining his desired concessions—a humiliating come-down. He could adhere to the rough status quo of the last few years, a low-level “frozen” conflict combined with political stalemate over the Minsk process. This, too, would be unsatisfactory since it would demonstrate the failure of Moscow’s efforts to create new “facts on the ground”. Or Putin could act on his threats by launching a fresh military intervention in Ukraine, up to and including a fully-fledged invasion. In this scenario, the ensuing crisis in US-Russia relations would be the gravest in decades—several orders of magnitude greater than after the 2014 annexation of Crimea or the 2008 Russia-Georgia war.

The risks are aggravated by misperceptions and hubris on the Russian side, and wishful thinking amounting to naivete in the Biden administration. Putin harks back to the Cold War, when the United States and the USSR supposedly decided the fate of Europe (and the world), kept “small” nations in line, and respected each other’s spheres of influence.<sup>49</sup> But the international system has since changed beyond recognition. For his part, Biden appears to think that he can reason with Putin, and that an understanding approach may reap dividends. Yet there is little basis for such optimism. In the Cold War, the two superpowers operated according to certain, implicitly agreed rules of the game, and knew where the red lines were (particularly following the shock of the Cuban missile crisis). The crisis in Ukraine, however, has shown that Washington and Moscow not only have opposing interests and aims, but also that they play by very different rules.

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49. M. Suchkov, “The Case for a ‘Strategic Pause’: Russia and the United States in a New Era”, *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 274, p. 2, November 24, 2021, available at: <https://css.ethz.ch>. As John Lewis Gaddis and other historians have pointed out, the realities of the Cold War were untidier than the idealized “normality” portrayed in such narratives. See J. L. Gaddis, *The Cold War*, New York/London: Allen Lane-Penguin, 2005.

# Arms Control and Strategic Stability

Historically, arms control and strategic stability have been the mainstays of US-Russia engagement. The two countries have a good track record for reaching agreements, even at the height of the Cold War. Arms control has benefited from being negotiated by professionals on both sides. It has been politicized, sometimes heavily, but less so than many other issues. It is indicative that almost the first act of the Biden administration was to agree a 5-year extension to the START Treaty, which Trump had almost let expire. At their Geneva summit, Biden and Putin agreed to institute a Strategic Stability Dialogue. Two weeks later, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov met at the US mission in Geneva for the first round of discussions. A second round at the end of September 2021 created two working groups: one to discuss “Principles and objectives for future arms control”, the other “Capabilities and actions with strategic effects”.<sup>50</sup>

Despite this encouraging start, the difficulties in the way of progress are formidable. The main structural problem is that the traditional framework for arms control is obsolescent. It does not include China, which has embarked on an unprecedented expansion of its strategic nuclear capabilities.<sup>51</sup> No less significantly, it excludes whole categories of weapons that could play a major role in future wars—from tactical or “battlefield” nuclear weapons to cyber and hypersonic technologies to missile defense and space installations.<sup>52</sup> The United States and Russia are operating a 20<sup>th</sup> century arrangement in an era of 21<sup>st</sup> century armaments. Both governments understand this, yet are a long way from making the compromises necessary to update the existing regime. Moscow has consistently

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50. “Joint Statement on the Outcomes of the US-Russia Strategic Stability Dialogue in Geneva on 30 September”, US Department of State, September 30, 2021, available at: [www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov).

51. T. Zhao, “What’s Driving China’s Nuclear Build-Up?”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP), August 5, 2021, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

52. E. Rumer and R. Sokolsky, “Why the New Start Extension Could Be the End of Arms Control as We Know It”, *Politico*, February 7, 2021, available at: [www.politico.com](http://www.politico.com); see also “US and Russian Experts Share Insights on Strategic Stability Ahead of Bilateral Talks”, *Russia Matters*, July 27, 2021, available at: <https://russiamatters.org>.



rejected any extension of START to cover tactical nuclear weapons, where it holds a large advantage. While Washington will not entertain any modification to its missile defense programs, a stance supported overwhelmingly in Congress.

This stalemate might have lasted more or less indefinitely, were it not for the fact that Putin has used the Ukraine crisis to raise larger questions about strategic stability and global security. The message from the Kremlin is that it has run out of patience, and that Russia is prepared to act on Ukraine and adopt “military-technical reciprocal measures” unless there is a fundamental reshaping of European and international security.<sup>53</sup> If the exact nature of these measures remains unclear, there is little ambiguity over Moscow’s demands—or the scale of its ambition.

On 17 December 2021, the Russian Foreign Ministry published two draft agreements for relations with the United States and NATO, respectively.<sup>54</sup> The Russia-NATO text focuses on European security, while the Russia-US document is global in its scope. In emphasizing the principle of “indivisible, equal and undiminished security”, the latter document not only insists that the United States prevent further eastward expansion of NATO, but also that it may not establish military bases in any part of the post-Soviet space (aside NATO member-states, i.e., the Baltic states), “use their infrastructure for any military activities or develop bilateral military cooperation with them.” In other words, the United States would cease all defense cooperation not only with Ukraine, but also with Central Asian republics such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Article 5 of the Russia-US text goes further: “The Parties shall refrain from deploying their armed forces and armaments, including in the framework of international organizations, military alliances or coalitions, in the areas where such deployment could be perceived by the other Party as a threat to its national security, with the exception of such deployment within the national territories of the Parties.” If this provision were implemented, it would give Moscow the power of veto over the deployment of US troops on the territory of NATO member-states, while allowing Russian forces to deploy in unlimited numbers to the borders of, say, Poland and the Baltic states.

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53. V. Putin, “Expanded Meeting of the Defence Ministry Board”, December 21, 2021, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru>.

54. “Agreement on Measures to Ensure the Security of the Russian Federation and Member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization”, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), December 17, 2021, available at: <https://mid.ru>; “Treaty Between the United States and the Russian Federation on Security Guarantees”, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), December 17, 2021, available at: <https://mid.ru>.

In similar spirit, Article 7 states that “the Parties shall eliminate all existing infrastructure for deployment of nuclear weapons outside their national territories.” This provision would retain Russia’s present advantages in intercontinental ballistic missiles while denying the United States the right to station nuclear weapons on the territory of NATO member-states or even to use its SLBMS (submarine-launched ballistic missiles).

It is implausible that Moscow believes Washington will agree to such an uneven playing field, especially as the publishing of the draft agreements has been accompanied by accusations of bad faith and threats. Which raises the question of what Putin and his circle aim to achieve by such tactics. The most obvious explanation is that this is an opening bid, pitched deliberately high to allow room for a subsequent compromise on Russian terms.<sup>55</sup> Another theory is that Moscow is looking for a quasi-legal excuse to launch a major military intervention in Ukraine.<sup>56</sup> It could claim that it has come up with concrete and constructive proposals that the United States (and NATO) has rejected, leaving Russia with no choice but to take action. A third explanation combines aspects of the other two. Moscow identifies divisions within the Western alliance, and opportunities to exploit these. It matters little whether the draft treaties are accepted, amended or rejected. They will have served their purpose by sowing dissension within NATO ranks. In this connection, Biden’s proposed 5+1 format (the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy opposite Russia) is helpful to Moscow’s cause, since it draws a de facto distinction between “core” members of NATO and “the rest”.<sup>57</sup> Predictably, this has caused discord within the alliance—as Moscow no doubt intended.

There is another aspect pertinent to the discussion about strategic stability, and to the overall US-Russia relationship—namely, the personal angle. Putin has reportedly sought a one-to-one face-to-face meeting with Biden, with only interpreters in the room. There is a recent precedent for this—the Helsinki summit between Putin and Trump in July 2018, rightly judged a fiasco from the American

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55. D. Trenin, “What Putin Really Wants in Ukraine”, *Foreign Affairs*, December 28, 2021, available at: [www.foreignaffairs.com](http://www.foreignaffairs.com).

56. S. Pifer, “Russia’s Draft Agreements With NATO and the United States: Intended for Rejection?”, Brookings Institution, December 21, 2021, available at: [www.brookings.edu](http://www.brookings.edu). Michael Kofman describes Moscow’s diplomacy as “more performative than genuine”, and judges that “a dramatic expansion of the war is now the most probable outcome” – in “Putin’s wager in Russia’s standoff with the West”, *War on the Rocks*, 24 January 2022, available at: <https://warontherocks.com>.

57. V. Solovov and E. Chernenko, “Alians na skaku ostanoviat” [The alliance caught on the hop], *Kommersant*, December 10, 2021, available at: [www.kommersant.ru](http://www.kommersant.ru).

perspective. Putin ran rings around Trump, and may believe he can do just as well in a meeting with Biden, extracting assurances that would then be hard for Washington to withdraw. Regardless of whether such hopes are justified, Putin evidently feels comfortable in situations where leaders are unconstrained or assisted by advisors. Biden is an experienced hand in international relations, having been Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Vice-President to Obama. But Putin has been running Russia for more than two decades; is accustomed to dealing with world leaders from a position of strength; and enjoys the luxury of being able to conduct foreign policy unburdened by domestic checks and balances.

None of this augurs well for the future of arms control and strategic stability. For the time being, Washington and Moscow are proceeding on the basis that talking is better than the alternative. But the Kremlin's rhetoric indicates that this state of affairs may be short-lived. Missile defense, understandings on the conduct of military exercises, rules of the road for cyber-operations, de-confliction procedures—are all areas where movement is theoretically possible and certainly desirable.<sup>58</sup> But in a climate where mutual trust and a sense of shared purpose are notably lacking, the prospect of tangible outcomes appears remote.

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58. De-confliction, in particular, is of pressing importance. The growing number of incidents involving ships and aircraft in the Baltic and Black Seas presents a constant threat of an unintended escalation. See R. Clem, "Risky Encounters With Russia: Time to Talk about Real Deconfliction", *War on the Rocks*, February 18, 2021, available at: <https://warontherocks.com>.

# Anaemic Cooperation

Even during its rare and short-lived “good” periods,<sup>59</sup> US-Russia bilateral cooperation was unimpressive. This has been a fundamental weakness of the relationship over the years: the lack of a positive agenda meant there was little to ease the burden of historical mistrust, geopolitical tensions and normative differences.

Today, the cooperative agenda has shriveled to virtually nothing. The US-Russia relationship has become overwhelmingly centered on traditional security issues. And neither side seems invested in improving the quality of engagement beyond its current troubleshooting mode.<sup>60</sup> This is exemplified by the lack of progress on a range of issues, from cyber-security to the staffing of their respective embassies.

## Cyber-Security and Disinformation

Cyber and disinformation issues are an especially contentious area of the relationship thanks to Moscow’s interference in the 2016 US presidential election and subsequent cyber-operations—the Solar Winds data breaches during 2020, and the Colonial Pipeline ransomware attack in early 2021.<sup>61</sup>

There are two major impediments to a bilateral accommodation on cyber-security. The first is that there is little agreement on the rights and wrongs of the case. Washington expects Moscow to put a stop to Russia-based operations against US targets and to rein in its disinformation activities. Moscow, however, has consistently portrayed Russia as the victim rather than the perpetrator.<sup>62</sup> The

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59. In the past three decades, there have been three peaks of US-Russia relations: the first year following the collapse of the Soviet Union; the period between 9/11 and the lead-up to the Iraq war; and the 12-18 months following the Obama “reset”. There were still serious tensions and plenty of disagreements at these times, but also hope that both sides might be able to develop a broadly cooperative relationship.

60. M. Suchkov, “The Case for a ‘Strategic Pause’: Russia and the United States in a New Era” p. 6, *op. cit.*

61. T. Thompson, “The Colonial Pipeline Ransomware Attack and the Solar Winds Attack Were All but Inevitable—Why National Cyber Defense Is a ‘Wicked’ Problem”, *The Conversation*, May 10, 2021, available at: <https://theconversation.com>.

62. The 2021 National Security Strategy alleges the widening use of information-communication technologies to interfere in Russia’s domestic affairs and undermine its national sovereignty and territorial integrity. It accuses “foreign intelligence services” of carrying out espionage

second obstacle to progress is practical. Given the disparity in the relative power of the United States and Russia, cyber operations represent a cheap, effective and deniable way for Moscow to level the playing field.

Lately, there have been some modest steps towards an understanding over the rules of the road (and the limits of rule-breaking). The two governments have participated in a joint UN resolution on cyber-norms, already an improvement given that only a year earlier they were preparing competing resolutions.<sup>63</sup> Yet in-principle agreement is one thing, implementation quite another.<sup>64</sup> Revealingly, the Biden administration has not invited Russia to participate in its “Counter-Ransomware initiative”,<sup>65</sup> while the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) has cracked down on the domestic cyber-security sector and is allowing known hackers to operate with impunity.<sup>66</sup>

## Afghanistan and the Middle East

The prospects are scarcely any better in other areas of the security agenda. Moscow made no secret of its joy over America’s disorderly withdrawal from Afghanistan and the dismay this caused among US allies.<sup>67</sup> Although the Russian government recognizes that the situation in Afghanistan represents a long-term security challenge,<sup>68</sup>

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operations in the Russian information space. And it complains that Russian initiatives to regulate “international informational security” have been rebuffed by foreign governments “striving to dominate the global information space”. See *Strategiia natsionalnoj bezopasnosti Rossijskoj Federatsii, op. cit.*, pp. 19-22, available at: <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru>.

63. E. Chernenko, “Dvoichnyj kodeks” [Binary code], *Kommersant*, October 17, 2021, available at: [www.kommersant.ru](http://www.kommersant.ru); also D. Ignatius, “The Ice Between the US and Russia May Be Thawing—for Now”, *Washington Post*, October 20, 2021, available at: [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com).

64. Alina Polyakova, Director of the Center for European Analysis (CEPA), tweeted on 20 October 2021 that “Moscow will pretend to do something and we will pretend that diplomacy is working”.

65. O. Shakirov, “Why the United States Should Have Invited Russia to Join Counter-Ransomware Initiative”, Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), October 19, 2021, available at: [www.cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org).

66. M. Seddon, “Russia Sends Warning to Cyber Security Sector with Arrest of Ilya Sachkov”, *Financial Times*, October 13, 2021, available at: [www.ft.com](http://www.ft.com). The highly publicized arrest of the REvil ransomware gang may signal an improvement in law enforcement, but many uncertainties remain. See J. Leyden, “Celebrations over REvil Ransomware Arrests in Russia May Prove Premature”, *The Daily Swig*, January 17, 2022, available at: <https://portswigger.net>.

67. Margarita Simonyan, RT editor-in-chief, put it pithily if crudely: the US withdrawal was a case of “hump you, then dump you”—tweet of August 20, 2021.

68. See M. Chesnut and J. Waller, “Russia’s Response to US Withdrawal from Afghanistan: Criticism of US, Concerns about Security Environment”, *Russia Matters*, September 14, 2021, available at: [www.russiamatters.org](http://www.russiamatters.org).

it does not see the United States as a viable partner there. It would rather work with the Taliban regime, China, Pakistan, and the Central Asian republics.<sup>69</sup> Accordingly, it was quick to reject suggestions that the United States might establish over-the-horizon counter-terrorism facilities in former Soviet Central Asia.<sup>70</sup> Since then, the draft Russia-US agreement produced by the Russian MFA has underscored Moscow's strong opposition to the idea. None of this is surprising; the marginalization of US—and Western—influence in Eurasia is a long-standing goal of Russian foreign policy, and Moscow sees no advantage in making an exception over Afghanistan.

It is a similar story in the Middle East, where Washington and Moscow have few common interests. There is, however, one partial exception: Iran, or rather the Iranian nuclear file. Biden has attempted to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), for which he needs the cooperation of various parties to the original agreement, including Russia. In theory, this could be the subject of constructive engagement between Washington and Moscow. But in reality the prospects for reviving the JCPOA are meagre. Hardliners are in the ascendancy in Tehran. The Iranian government has accelerated the production of enriched uranium. And any relaxation of US sanctions would require Senate approval, which looks highly problematic. It is questionable whether Moscow is in any position to assist Washington, or even why it would do so in the current climate. Russian influence over the Iranian regime is minimal. And a nuclear Iran, although undesirable, is much more of a security and political headache for America than for Russia.

## Climate Policy and the Arctic

It is sometimes speculated that climate policy could be a promising area for US-Russia cooperation.<sup>71</sup> Biden has made climate a major priority of his administration, while prior to COP 26 Russia announced a commitment to reach net-zero carbon emissions

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69. E. Graham-Harrison, "Russia Holds High-Profile Afghanistan Talks With Taliban", *The Guardian*, October 20, 2021, available at: [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com).

70. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov claimed that the presence of US troops in the Central Asian republics would only make the latter targets for terrorist action. See "Lavrov Doesn't Want to See US Troops in Central Asia", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (RFERL), August 24, 2021, available at: [www.rferl.org](http://www.rferl.org).

71. See, for example, M. Kaczmarek and K. Kaczmarek, "US-Russia Summit: Ignoring Climate Change Was a Missed Opportunity for Real Cooperation", *The Conversation*, July 15, 2021, available at: <https://theconversation.com>.

by 2060.<sup>72</sup> However, hopes of cooperation are misplaced. Formally, Putin and the ruling elite recognize the impact of global warming on Russia, yet they have long opposed decarbonization and the shift to renewable sources of energy,<sup>73</sup> regarding this as a Western conspiracy to undermine Russia's comparative advantages in fossil fuels.<sup>74</sup> The latter form the principal basis of Russia's economy and national wealth and are critical to its regional and global influence. It is improbable that Moscow would voluntarily surrender these advantages.<sup>75</sup>

Even in areas where the United States and Russia have worked productively in the past, such as on Arctic issues, there are signs of a sea-change for the worse. The drastic acceleration of the polar ice-melt has raised the economic and geopolitical stakes, and the Arctic region as a whole is becoming "securitized".<sup>76</sup> Russia, in particular, has intensified its military build-up there.

## A Diplomatic Spat

One of the more "technical" difficulties in the relationship is that of diplomatic representation. Following the expulsion in April 2021 of ten Russian diplomats for alleged interference in the 2020 US presidential election and involvement in cyber-operations, Moscow retaliated by banning the American Embassy from hiring locally-engaged staff. This, in turn, has led to calls in the US Senate for parity in their respective missions. Given that there are 400 Russian diplomats accredited to the United States, and around 100 American

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72. Putin remarks at the Russian Energy Week International Forum, "Russian Energy Week International Forum Plenary Session", October 13, 2021, Kremlin.ru, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru>.

73. See B. Lo, "The Adaptation Game—Russia and Climate Change", *Russie.NEI.Visions*, No. 121, March 2021, available at: [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org).

74. The Russian government's 2019 Climate Action Plan refers to the threat of "carbon protectionism"—*Natsionalnyj plan meropriiatij pervogo etapa adaptatsii k izmeneniiam klimata na period do 2022 goda* [National plan of measures in the first stage of adaptation to the changes in climate in the period up to 2022], Russian government directive No. 3183-r, December 25, 2019, p. 3.

75. Russia's Low Greenhouse Gas Emissions Development Strategy to 2050 (published in October 2021) assumes that hydrocarbons will continue to dominate energy production—see *Strategiia sotsial'no-ekonomicheskogo razvitiia Rossijskoi Federatsii s nizkim urovniem vybrosov parnikovykh gazov do 2050* [Strategy of socio-economic development of Russia with a low level of greenhouse gas emissions until 2050], October 31, 2021, available at: <http://static.government.ru>. The government's Energy Strategy-2035 foreshadows a massive expansion of the energy sector, in particular natural gas (a 50 percent increase over the period 2019-2035).

76. S. Rainsford, "Russia Flexes Muscles in Challenge for Arctic Control", *BBC News*, May 20, 2021, available at: [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk).

diplomats in Russia, this could potentially involve the expulsion of up to 300 Russian diplomats.<sup>77</sup>

Although the matter was discussed at the Geneva summit, and again during the visit to Moscow of Victoria Nuland (Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs) in October 2021, a resolution appears no closer.<sup>78</sup> Moscow's latest move is to order all US diplomats who have served more than three years to leave Russia by 31 January 2022.<sup>79</sup> This quarrel, petty as it is, is an apt metaphor for a thoroughly dysfunctional relationship.

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77. "US Senators Call for Expulsion of up to 300 Russian Diplomats over Visas", *The Moscow Times*, October 6, 2021, available at: [www.themoscowtimes.com](http://www.themoscowtimes.com).

78. "No Breakthrough Reported at US-Russia Talks over Embassies Dispute", *RFERL*, October 12, 2021, available at: [www.rferl.org](http://www.rferl.org).

79. "Russia Orders Some US Diplomatic Staff to Leave as Embassy Spat Expands", *Reuters*, December 1, 2021, available at: [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).



# Outlook

The future of US-Russia engagement is grim. Biden is a calmer, more rational and predictable personality than the mercurial Trump, but the gulf in perceptions and interests between Washington and Moscow is as wide as ever. Biden continues to believe that Russia can somehow be managed while he concentrates on the challenge of China. The Kremlin overestimates US decline and doubts Biden's capacity or will to defend the liberal principles he publicly espouses.<sup>80</sup>

One might think that the US-Russia relationship is so bad that the only way is up. But that would be unwarranted. In a world of cascading crises and intensifying great power rivalry, there is no shortage of triggers for US-Russia confrontation. Containing tensions will not be easy over a prolonged period, regardless of whether a Democrat or a Republican sits in the White House. US power projection will become more assertive in areas of critical interest to Russia, such as the Asia-Pacific, and Moscow will push back. (It has been outspoken in its criticism of the Quad and AUKUS.)<sup>81</sup> The Kremlin has shown little inclination to forego cyber-operations and disinformation activities as key tools of Russian foreign policy. It is developing new-generation ballistic and nuclear missile technologies. And it will ratchet up tensions over Ukraine and European security until it gets what it wants.

Three other elements are likely to exacerbate existing fault-lines. The first is the inequality between the United States and Russia. Notwithstanding the wishful thinking of the Putin elite, the United States will remain the number one power in the world for at least the next decade, and perhaps for much longer. Russia, on the other hand, is set on a path of long-term relative decline, most clearly vis-à-vis China, but also the United States. These realities will condition the foreign policy behavior of Washington and Moscow in coming years and decades. America's ongoing project of global primacy will butt

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80. There is a view in Moscow that America will not go to war even to defend its primary security interests in the Asia-Pacific, for example if Beijing were to attempt the forcible reunification of Taiwan with the Chinese mainland. See A. Kortunov, "Shared Territorial Concern, Opposition to US Intervention Prompt Russia's Support to China on Taiwan Question", *Global Times*, October 14, 2021, available at: [www.globaltimes.cn](http://www.globaltimes.cn).

81. "Tsepnaia reaktsiia khaosa. Nikolaj Patrushev—o chuzhdykh Rossii soiuzakh i tsennostiakh" [Chaotic chain reaction. Nikolai Patrushev—on foreign alliances and alien values], interview in *Argumenty i fakty*, September 21, 2021, available at: <https://aif.ru>.

constantly against Russia's self-identification as an independent center of world power (with all the prerogatives that status implies). The sense of strategic self-entitlement on each side will exacerbate the already considerable contradictions in their relationship.

The second major factor shaping the future of US-Russia relations is the continuing rise and growing assertiveness of China. One plausible scenario is that relations between Washington and Beijing become yet more confrontational, while the Sino-Russian partnership maintains its upward trajectory. Although this would appear to enhance Moscow's leverage, the Kremlin could face some delicate choices. It is keen to stay out of a possible US-China confrontation, but in that event would come under intense pressure from Beijing to offer more than simply political and moral support.<sup>82</sup> Its ability to maintain an independent foreign policy would be seriously tested.

Finally, the progressive thinning-out of the bilateral agenda will entrench alienation as the default mode of US-Russia interaction. Of course, circumstances could arise where there is an immediate and compelling need for a more positive engagement. In a hyper-globalized world, collective approaches to problem-solving are needed more than ever. But the accumulated mistrust and loathing on both sides are such that it would require something exceptional to break the vicious cycle. Their competing approaches towards the development and distribution of coronavirus vaccines in 2020 illustrated the difficulties. Faced with a common problem, Washington and Moscow chose vaccine nationalism over cooperation.

It may be that the best that can be achieved in the US-Russia relationship is a state of controlled antipathy. Cooperation would be on a case-by-case and transactional basis. The values-gap would be quasi-formalized. Old antagonisms would remain. But there would be a measure of stability, aided by low expectations,<sup>83</sup> and with guard-rails to avoid the worst. The trouble, however, is that "avoiding the worst" is a hope, not a strategy. It does little to reduce the risk of sleepwalking into a conflict through a combination of complacency, myopia and hubris.

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82. B. Lo, "The Sino-Russian Partnership and Global Order", *op. cit.*, p. 321

83. According to Angela Stent, the cycle of expectations followed by disappointment has marked the four resets in US-Russia relations: George H. W. Bush following the collapse of the USSR; Bill Clinton with Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s; Putin post-9/11; and the Obama reset. See A. Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: US-Russia Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, updated edition, Princeton, 2015, pp. 259-271.

## Lessons for Western Policy-Makers

There is no silver bullet to transform the US-Russia relationship. Yet there are certain areas where American (and European) policy-makers can improve in their approach towards Moscow.

The first step is to treat Russia as a priority deserving proper attention *in its own right*. Declining it may be in several respects, but Russia remains a determined and formidable power, with a still significant capacity to harm Western interests.<sup>84</sup> One of the major failings of the Biden administration has been to view relations with Russia largely through the prism of competition and confrontation with China.<sup>85</sup> Although both are authoritarian regimes, they are strategically autonomous actors. Putin is not a pliant instrument in the service of Xi Jinping, but pursues his own distinct “Russia-first” agenda. Washington’s (and European) efforts to revive Cold War triangularism by weaning Moscow away from Beijing are naive and counter-productive.<sup>86</sup>

Another common Western misconception is to believe that accommodating Moscow’s “legitimate” concerns, for example over Ukraine, will lead to more reasonable Russian behavior or positive *quid pro quo*.<sup>87</sup> This is not how the Kremlin operates. Concessions made out of fear or apprehension are regarded, rightly, as evidence of weakness, not of sagacity. Experience suggests that Moscow is likely to become bolder in the face of Western inattention or muddled attempts at conciliation.

Conversely, expanding dialogue is critical. The worse relations are with Russia, the more important it is to engage with it at all levels. The conversations will inevitably be difficult, and in many (perhaps most) cases leave unsatisfactory outcomes. Western policy-makers will be criticized for effectively tolerating or rewarding bad behavior. But there is no alternative. It is encouraging that the United States and Russia have instituted a regular Strategic Dialogue and that official contacts are multiplying. But we are only at the start of what

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84. J. Mankoff, “Russia in the Era of Great Power Competition”, *The Washington Quarterly*, Fall 2021, p. 120.

85. M. Kofman and A. Kendall-Taylor, “The Myth of Russian Decline”, *op. cit.*

86. For an excellent summation of the flaws of such triangularism, see E. Rumer and R. Sokolsky, “Kissinger Revisited. Can the United States Drive a Wedge Between Russia and China?”, Carnegie Moscow Center, March 2, 2021, available at: <https://carnegiemoscow.org>.

87. S. Charap, “The US Approach to Ukraine’s Border War Isn’t Working. Here’s What Biden Should Do Instead”, *Politico*, November 19, 2021, available at: [www.politico.com](http://www.politico.com).

needs to become a much broader and more systematic process, as opposed to a series of ad hoc responses to Russian actions.

Finally, US and Western decision-makers must decide what they want with Russia. What are their strategic goals? What critical interests are at stake? How badly do they want to realize them? What costs are they prepared to pay? In recent years, Putin has had a much clearer sense of purpose than his Western counterparts, and this has enabled him to consistently outplay them. He has cared little about his or Russia's popularity, so long as he gets his way. Western governments could learn something from this cold-blooded approach. In the end, what matters are not "good relations", since this is an abstraction, but how engagement serves concrete objectives from arms control to de-confliction to crisis management. The Western fixation with vague, feel-good generalities—"rules-based international order", "right side of history", "the free world"—needs to end if there is to be any prospect of a liveable new "normal" in relations with Russia.

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