

H-Diplo | ISSF Policy Series

America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

*Trump and Russia—Less than Meets the Eye.*¹

Essay by Angela Stent, Georgetown University, Emerita

Published on **4 February 2022** | issforum.org

Editors: Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

<https://issforum.org/to/ps2021-60>

After all the controversy, accusations, angry tweets, impeachment hearings, and conspiracy theories, how is the Trump administration's Russia policy to be assessed? Russia consumed an unprecedented amount of domestic energy during Trump's presidency, casting a shadow over the White House during the four years Trump lived there. And yet there has been scant systematic analysis of US–Russian relations under Trump, or of the troubled relationship he bequeathed to the Biden administration. With hindsight, the practical results of Trump's Russia policy were less damaging internationally than was initially anticipated, but they had a pernicious and corrosive impact domestically that has survived into the Biden era.

The Trump administration's dealings with Russia represent the most controversial part of its foreign-policy legacy. Russia was from day one a polarizing issue because of questions about Moscow's role during the 2016 election campaign and accusations that the Trump campaign had colluded with Russia to get Trump into the White House. The president's consistent and extravagant public praise for Russian President Vladimir Putin baffled many. For four years, every White House contact with Russia was carefully scrutinized for signs of nefarious intent. Yet a careful examination of the outcomes of US–Russian engagement on a range of bilateral and multilateral issues reveals a mixed legacy.

Because the agenda of problematic issues has not changed that much in the past 30 years, there has been considerable continuity in US policy toward Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union.² Republican and Democratic administrations since 1992 have each tried to reset ties with Russia and to find a better way of dealing with Moscow, only to end their respective terms in disappointment because US and Russian definitions of a productive relationship are so different. In that sense, Trump's refrain, both during the 2016 campaign and after he was elected, that “it would be great if we could get along with Russia” may have lacked subtlety, but resonated with his predecessors' attitudes.³ The Biden administration's advocacy of a “stable, predictable relationship” with Moscow echoes that view, even though the administration has explicitly said it is not seeking a reset.⁴

¹ This essay was first published in different form as “Trump's Russia Legacy and Biden's Response,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 63:4 (2001): 55-80. It appears here with the kind permission of the editors of *Survival*. © 2021 The International Institute for Strategic Studies, reproduced in revised form with permission.

² See Angela Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: US–Russian Relations in the Twenty-first Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

³ See Dan Mangan, “President Donald Trump Says Getting Along with Russia Is ‘Not Terrible, It's Good,’” CNBC, 16 February 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/02/16/president-donald-trump-says-getting-along-with-russia-is-a-good-thing.html>

⁴ White House, “Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia,” 13 April 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/13/readout-of-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-call-with-president-vladimir-putin-of-russia-4-13/>.

Russiagate

Russia became a domestic issue in the United States during the 2016 campaign. Not since the era of Joseph McCarthy has Russia (or the Soviet Union as it was then) played such an outsize role in US politics. Trump was dogged by accusations that his campaign was working with the Russians to bring him to power. These suspicions were amplified by Trump's unprecedented praise for Putin and his reluctance to support Ukraine in its war with Russia. When *Buzzfeed* published the contents of the so-called 'Steele dossier' purporting to document Russian collusion with the Trump campaign, Russia became a key focus of America's highly polarized political discourse.⁵ The Obama administration was slow to react to evidence of Russian meddling in the 2016 election but, on its way out, imposed sanctions on Moscow for its hacking and leaking of Democratic Party emails and its use of social media to inflame the public debate against Hillary Clinton. Days before Trump came to office, the American intelligence community published a declassified version of its report on Russian interference. It concluded:

We assess Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the US presidential election. Russia's goals were to undermine public faith in the US democratic process, denigrate Secretary Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency. We further assess Putin and the Russian Government developed a clear preference for President-elect Trump.⁶

For many Democrats and others who were opposed to Trump, this was proof that he had not been legitimately elected. Trump himself would never admit that there had been Russian interference because he believed that this would cast doubt on his right to occupy the White House. A wiser course might have been to acknowledge possible interference, appoint a commission and move on. Trump's rhetoric about the "Russia hoax" raised more suspicion about his ties to the Kremlin than were in reality warranted. He cast even more doubt on his dealings with Russia during a controversial press conference following a summit with Putin in Helsinki in 2018. In answer to a question about whether he agreed with his own intelligence experts about Russian interference, he responded: "President Putin says it's not Russia. I don't see any reason why it would be."⁷

Throughout the Trump presidency, there were a series of inquiries into the relationship between Russia and members of the Trump administration, the most extensive of these carried out by former FBI director Robert Mueller. While his report detailed illegal acts by a number of people close to Trump, it did not establish that there had been collusion between the president himself and the Russians.⁸ By the end of 2021, the Steele dossier had been discredited after the man who provided Christopher Steele with much of the raw material for the report was arrested for lying to the FBI.⁹ It turned out that much

⁵ Ken Bensinger, Miriam Elder and Mark Schoofs, "These Reports Allege Trump Has Deep Ties to Russia," *BuzzFeed News*, 10 January 2017, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/kenbensinger/these-reports-allege-trump-has-deep-ties-to-russia>

⁶ US Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections," 6 January 2017, p. ii, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf.

⁷ "Trump Sides with Russia Against FBI at Helsinki Summit," *BBC News*, 16 July 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44852812>.

⁸ See Robert S. Mueller, "Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election," March 2019, <https://www.justice.gov/archives/sco/file/1373816/download>.

⁹ Charlie Savage, "Why the Discredited Dossier Does Not Undercut the Russia Investigation," *New York Times*, December 1 2021.

of his material was the product of second-and third-hand rumor. The fact that the US media unquestioningly accepted the dossier as truthful reflected the toxicity of the Trump-Russia connection.

Senior officials who worked with Trump attribute his views to his fascination with Russia going back to his days as a young real-estate developer who viewed the Russian market as an exciting business opportunity. One official said Trump had a nostalgic view of Russia, formed when he first visited the country in the late 1980s, during the era of major summits between US leaders and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Others attribute his refusal to criticize Russia to his general admiration for strongman rulers who are able to get their own way. He told veteran journalist Bob Woodward that he preferred strongmen to democrats: “—the tougher and meaner they are, the better I get along with them.”¹⁰ Trump believed that he understood Putin well, and that together they could get things done. Former national security advisor John Bolton recalled in his memoir that Trump “never offered an opinion” on Putin, “at least in front of me. I never asked what Trump’s view was, perhaps afraid of what I might hear. His personal take on the Russian leader remained a mystery.”¹¹

Trump’s lavish praise for Putin stands in sharp contrast to his harsh criticism of some US allies, particularly German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whom he accused of allowing Germany to fall “captive” to Russia.¹² Trump’s own rhetoric and refusal to criticize Moscow ensured that Russia became such a polarizing subject domestically that it was impossible for the president to implement his version of the reset with Russia that he had advocated on the campaign trail.

The Making of Trump’s Russia Policy

Inconsistency was the hallmark of Trump’s Russia policy. Robert Jervis’s chapter in this series questions whether Trump really wanted a rapprochement with Russia.¹³ Trump often seemed to personally favor a forward-looking policy, seeking to have Russia readmitted to the G8 (from which it had been expelled after its annexation of Crimea in 2014) and inviting Putin to a summit in Washington. According to Fiona Hill, senior director at the National Security Council for Russia and Eurasia from 2017–19, Trump had for some time been focused on issues of nuclear weapons and arms control, believing that he could conclude a ‘huge’ arms-control deal with Putin – as President Ronald Reagan and Gorbachev had done.¹⁴ Trump also believed that improving ties with Russia would persuade Moscow to rethink its increasingly close ties with China, which the White House perceived as the main threat.

So confident was Trump in his ability to understand Russia that he declined preparatory ‘deep dives’ on the subject ahead of phone calls and meetings with Putin throughout his presidency. Trump took his regular intelligence briefings, but was not interested in discussions of policy.¹⁵ Yet he was unable to achieve his goals, partly because of bureaucratic infighting, partly because of the high turnover of White House staff working on these issues, and partly because of his erratic moves and

¹⁰ Fiona Hill, *There is Nothing For You Here*. (Boston and New York: Mariner Books 2021), 219.

¹¹ John Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 63.

¹² See Ewan MacAskill, “Angela Merkel Hits Back at Donald Trump at Nato Summit,” *Guardian*, 11 July, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jul/11/nato-summit-donald-trump-says-germany-is-captive-of-russians>; also see William Gray, “Swaggering Home: Trump, Grenell, and Pompeo in Conflict with Germany,” ed., Diane Labrosse, H-Diplo/ISSF Policy Series 2021, 6 July, 2021: <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/ps2021-45>.

¹³ Robert Jervis, “The Trump Experiment Revisited,” ed. Diane Labrosse. H-Diplo/ISSF Policy Series 2021, 11 February 2021; <https://issforum.org/essays/ps2021-7>.

¹⁴ Author’s interview with Fiona Hill.

¹⁵ Author’s interview with Fiona Hill.

complete disregard of official expertise. Hill has recounted that she rarely attended Oval Office meetings on Russia, and recalled only one dedicated meeting ahead of the 2018 Helsinki summit when Jon Huntsman, the US ambassador, was visiting.¹⁶ The president apparently had had his own informal advisers on Russia who did not brief NSC officials on their conversations. Hill's testimony to the congressional impeachment hearings in January 2020, for example, showed that Ukraine policy on key issues was made by a group of Trump's close allies without any communication with the NSC.¹⁷

While some in the White House sought to improve ties with Russia, national security advisors H.R. McMaster and Bolton, along with their staffs, pursued a tougher line, working with the rest of the executive branch. When Rex Tillerson was chosen as secretary of state, many assumed, because he had been CEO of ExxonMobil and had worked with Russian oil giant Rosneft and its CEO Igor Sechin (one of Russia's most powerful men), that he would be favorably inclined toward Russia. But he disappointed the Russians and those hoping for a softer State department line on Russia. By the time of Tillerson's dismissal by presidential tweet, Putin opined that he had "fallen in with bad company."¹⁸ Just before he stepped down, Tillerson backed the British claim that the Russians were responsible for the poisoning with the chemical nerve agent Novichok of former GRU double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter in Salisbury. "Russia," he said, "continues to be an irresponsible source of instability in the world, acting with open disregard for the sovereignty of other states and the life of their citizens."¹⁹

Tillerson's successor, Mike Pompeo came from directing the CIA to the State Department. His views on Russia were hard-line and State continued to support sanctions against Russia for its election interference, the Skripal poisonings and its determination to complete the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. Pompeo criticized Russia for election interference, its treatment of dissident anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny, and its hacking of the US SolarWinds platform. But while the State Department's public statements and actions were often highly critical of Russia, Trump himself remained silent.

The US Congress was deeply divided over most issues during Trump's presidency, but on Russia it spoke with one voice. A bipartisan consensus supported the need to impose sanctions on Russia for its actions and to ensure that the president could not remove them. President Barack Obama had sanctioned Russia in December 2016 by executive order, sanctions which Congress soon acted to preserve. Throughout the Trump administration, the same Republican senators who usually supported Trump voted for punitive measures against Russia.

Arms Control

US–Russia ties are largely defined by the countries' status as the world's two nuclear superpowers. Arms-control treaties and negotiations have been a central feature of this relationship since President Richard Nixon first visited Moscow in 1972 and signed the SALT I treaty limiting strategic nuclear weapons with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. Despite Trump's initial wish to conclude a major arms-control treaty, he ultimately did more to dismantle the 50-year-old arms-control regime. Indeed, during Bolton's tenure, doing so was a key focus. Long a sceptic about arms control, Bolton ensured that the US withdrew from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty after both sides accused each other of cheating.

¹⁶ See Adam Entous, 'What Fiona Hill Learned in the White House', *New Yorker*, 22 June 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/06/29/what-fiona-hill-learned-in-the-white-house>

¹⁷ Nicholas Fandos and Michael D. Shear, "Fiona Hill Testifies "Fictions" on Ukraine Pushed by Trump Help Russia," *New York Times*, 21 November, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/21/us/politics/fiona-hill-impeachment-ukraine.html>

¹⁸ "Putin: Tillerson Fell into "Bad Company'," *UAWire*, 8 September 2017, <http://www.uawire.org/putin-tillerson-fell-into-bad-company>.

¹⁹ John Cassidy, "Rex Tillerson Gets Fired the Day After He Criticized Russia," *New Yorker*, 13 March 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/rex-tillerson-gets-fired-the-day-after-he-criticized-russia>

This opened the possibility of the US once again deploying intermediate-range weapons in Europe or Asia. At the end of the Trump administration, the US pulled out of the multilateral 2002 Treaty on Open Skies, which permits each state party to conduct short-notice, unarmed reconnaissance flights over the others' entire territories to collect data on military forces and activities. Russia withdrew six months later.

The one remaining treaty was New START limiting strategic nuclear weapons, which was set to expire on 5 February 2021. The treaty could be extended for five years without a Senate vote, but the administration was determined to negotiate a new deal that would include China's nuclear weapons. The Chinese repeatedly refused to join the negotiations, pointing out that their own nuclear arsenal was much smaller than those of the US and Russia.²⁰ Rather belatedly, arms-control negotiator Marshall Billingslea began to negotiate with his Russian counterpart Sergei Ryabkov to replace New START, but insisted that "the next arms control agreement must cover all nuclear weapons, not just so-called strategic nuclear weapons."²¹ In the end, both sides were unable to reach an agreement, and by the time Trump left office it was unclear whether New START would survive. In one of his first acts after taking office, President Joe Biden extended the treaty

The Trump administration did participate intermittently in talks begun during the Obama years on strategic stability, but Bolton once told German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas that "strategy stability" referred to "what Russia didn't like about America's national missile defense program, which we had no intention of negotiating, let alone modifying or abandoning."²²

Sanctions and Economic Relations

During Trump's presidency rafts of sanctions were imposed on Russian entities and individuals that had been implicated in the 2016 election interference, the poisoning of the Skripals, cyberattacks, and a range of other activities deemed to be malign. In July 2017, the US Senate passed the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) by a vote of 98–2. Among other provisions, the law required the White House to submit to Congress lists of oligarchs and political figures linked to Putin who might be personally sanctioned.²³ The legislation allows for "blocking sanctions," which block all transactions with listed persons and their property in the jurisdiction of a sanctioning country, and "sectoral sanctions," which prohibit entities from participating in select energy projects in Russia, and in new debt and equity transactions with listed entities. Congressional sanctions, unlike those imposed by presidential executive order, are virtually impossible to remove. Since they are largely punitive, they contain few incentives for Russia to modify its behavior. Indeed, the Kremlin has no expectation that these sanctions will be lifted, and even anticipates more. Despite hundreds of designations, Russia has not fulfilled its obligations under the Minsk II agreements to end the conflict in Ukraine, and has not withdrawn support for separatist forces in the Donbas. Sanctions have, however, adversely affected the Russian economy. They have also had a negative impact on US companies in terms of lost business opportunities and negative impacts on global competitiveness.²⁴

²⁰ Leanne Quinn, "China's Stance on Nuclear Arms Control and New START," Arms Control Association, 23 August 2019, <https://www.armscontrol.org/blog/2019-08-23/chinas-stance-nuclear-arms-control-new-start>

²¹ "U.S. Pushes for Broadening of New START Treaty, Pushes for China to Join Accord," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 23 June 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/u-s-pushes-for-broadening-of-new-start-treaty-pushes-for-china-to-join-accord/30686509.html>

²² Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened*, 162.

²³ US Department of the Treasury, "Counter America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act," <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/sanctions-programs-and-country-information/countering-americas-adversaries-through-sanctions-act>

²⁴ See US–Russian Business Council, "USRBC Compendium of Worldwide Sanctions Against Russia," 24 May 2021.

Trump himself mostly opposed the sanctions, saying that when he signed CAATSA into law he believed the act was “seriously flawed – particularly because it encroaches on the executive branch’s authority to negotiate ... I built a truly great company worth many billions of dollars,” he added, claiming that “as president, I can make better deals with foreign countries than Congress.”²⁵ Trump did, however, support sanctions on the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, which targeted not only Russian entities, but German and European companies as well. Trump told Merkel that Germany was “controlled” by Russia and inaccurately accused Germany of becoming “totally dependent on Russian energy.”²⁶

The Kremlin retaliated against the sanctions by seizing two diplomatic properties and ordering the United States to reduce its Moscow Embassy staff by 755 people. The US then ordered the closure of the Russian consulates in San Francisco and Seattle. Eventually, the US consulate in St Petersburg was itself forced to close. The consequence of all these closures was a severe hollowing out of both countries’ diplomatic presence even down to the most basic activities.

While Congress and the executive branch were busy imposing sanctions, the White House tried to promote a high-level business dialogue with Russia. Trump, who had for decades unsuccessfully tried to secure Russian business deals, favored this, as did Huntsman, his first ambassador to Russia. Preparations had begun for this dialogue prior to the 2018 Helsinki summit, and both presidents announced it during their joint press conference.²⁷ Unfortunately for the business community, however, Trump’s denial of Russian election interference during the same press briefing immediately undermined the establishment of the working group, which was intended to create space for both business and political dialogue. American CEOs faced the political fallout from the press conference and the limitations imposed by the sanctions, which placed restrictions on US businesses and listed a number of key Russian CEOs. Russia did not help matters by arresting Michael Calvey, a prominent US businessman and advocate for closer economic ties with Russia, over a dispute with a Russian partner. Instead of being adjudicated in a civil proceeding, the dispute became a criminal case. The business dialogue never happened.

NATO

One of the reasons for the Kremlin’s interest in Trump’s bid for the White House was his denigration of the NATO Alliance, which for Putin is “the main opponent.”²⁸ Trump consistently criticized NATO, calling it ‘obsolete’ and accusing most of its members of acting as free-riders on the US taxpayer by not living up to their 2014 commitment to spend 2% of GDP on defense by 2024. Trump became increasingly irritated with the allies and convinced that the United States should leave the Alliance, a move that would have demolished the post-war transatlantic security architecture. In his memoir, Bolton recalled tense moments during the July 2018 NATO summit, when even he was unsure whether Trump would announce that the US was pulling out. In the end, Trump told the allies that he was with NATO “a thousand million percent” while admonishing them to double their contributions.²⁹ As one senior official put it: “We saved NATO.”

²⁵White House, “Statement by President Donald J. Trump on Signing the ‘Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act,’” 2 August 2017, <https://ru.usembassy.gov/statement-president-donald-j-trump-signing-countering-americas-adversaries-sanctions-act/>

²⁶Rick Noack, “Trump Accused Germany of Becoming ‘Totally Dependent’ on Russian Energy at the U.N. The Germans Just Smirked,” *Washington Post*, 25 September 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/09/25/trump-accused-germany-becoming-totally-dependent-russian-energy-un-germans-just-smirked/>

²⁷Jennie Neufeld, “Read the Full Transcript of the Helsinki Press Conference,” Vox, 17 July 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/7/16/17576956/transcript-putin-trump-russia-helsinki-press-conference>

²⁸Vladimir Putin, *First Person* (New York: Public Affairs, 2000), 6.

²⁹Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened*, 145.

While Trump was unconvinced of the value of NATO, much of his administration understood the need to shore up the Alliance against an increasingly assertive Russia. In his speech to the 2017 Munich Security Conference, vice president Mike Pence pledged US support for NATO and acknowledged the need to contain Russia.³⁰ All of Trump's defense secretaries reiterated this stance. Moreover, the administration strengthened its military presence in the Baltic states and Poland, signing the US–Poland Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement in 2020 to increase the number of US troops and military installations in Poland.

Ukraine

Ukraine, and Ukrainians with ties to Russian intelligence, occupied an outsized role in the events leading to Trump's first impeachment trial in January 2020, and in the 2020 presidential campaign. Trump had always been ambivalent about Ukraine, possibly because his first campaign manager, Paul Manafort, had worked for ousted Ukrainian president Victor Yanukovich and a number of prominent Russian oligarchs, and viewed the post-2014 Ukrainian government as hostile to his interests. Trump had implied on the campaign trail that Crimea was Russian and that Russia had not invaded Ukraine.³¹ Once in office, his skepticism about Ukraine grew, as he became convinced that the Ukrainians had interfered on Clinton's behalf in the 2016 election.

Throughout Trump's time in the White House, a group of close aides and advisers led by Trump's personal lawyer, former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, pursued an agenda in Ukraine that was at odds with the priorities of the rest of the executive branch. Gordon Sondland, the US ambassador to the European Union, was one of their recruits. As Hill put it, Sondland's role was to carry out a "domestic political errand" that undermined US national security and foreign policy, as well as the diplomatic apparatus that was in place to serve those ends.³² This 'errand' was securing Trump's re-election by collecting negative information on Ukraine's role in 2016 and on the activities of Joe Biden's son Hunter, who sat on the board of Ukrainian gas company Burisma. It also involved engineering the firing of the well-respected US ambassador in Kyiv, Marie Yovanovitch, whose firm anti-corruption message to the Ukrainians was weakened by requests from Trump's inner circle for compromising material on the Bidens. Ultimately, Trump told Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky that the US would withhold security assistance to Ukraine unless the Ukrainians provided damaging information on the Bidens. This information was leaked to the media, and Ukraine blew up in the White House's face. After riveting testimony about his dealings with Ukraine, Trump was impeached by the House of Representatives for abuse of power, only to be acquitted by the Republican-controlled Senate.

While the White House pursued its own Ukraine policy, the rest of the executive branch increased its support for Kyiv by supplying it with defensive lethal weapons, something the Obama administration had refused to do. Tillerson appointed Kurt Volker, the former US ambassador to NATO, as special representative for Ukraine negotiations, in which role he met with his Russian counterpart, Vladislav Surkov, in Kyiv, the Donbas, and Moscow to try to resolve the frozen conflict in the Donbas. Volker's negotiations paralleled the French and German efforts to implement the Minsk II agreements, but were unable to advance the peace process.

Syria and the Middle East

³⁰ Mike Pence, address at the 53rd Munich Security Conference, 18 February 2017, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mikepencemunichsecurityconference2017.htm>

³¹ Brian Naylor, "How the Trump Campaign Weakened the Republican Platform on Aid to Ukraine," NPR, 6 August 2016, <https://www.npr.org/2016/08/06/488876597/how-the-trump-campaign-weakened-the-republican-platform-on-aid-to-ukraine>

³² Zack Beauchamp, "The Key Moment from Fiona Hill's Testimony," Vox, 21 November 2019, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/11/21/20976364/impeachment-hearing-dr-fiona-hill-trump-errand>

The Trump administration's dealings with Russia in the Middle East were complex, cooperative in some instances and confrontational in others. Both Russia and the US were committed to defeating the Islamic State (ISIS), but Russia focused more on other anti-Assad groups. When Trump proposed to pull all US troops out of Syria, Putin agreed, arguing that the US had no right to a military presence there, unlike Russia, which had been invited in by President Bashar al-Assad in September 2015.

In the event, most US troops did leave Syria, but a contingent remained in the northeast. It was there that they came into direct conflict with troops from Wagner, a mercenary group owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close Putin associate. The Russian troops had entered an area controlled by US and allied forces next to the Tabiya natural-gas plant formerly owned by Conoco in Deir ez-Zor. In the ensuing battle, 200–300 Russians were killed, but Russia refused to even acknowledge that the firefight had taken place.³³ Senior US officials say that Russia admitted that the Wagner troops had violated an agreement signed with the US, and accepted the casualties without pushing back. When the Trump administration bombed Syrian chemical-weapons facilities after Assad used chemical weapons on his own people, the Russians were given advance warning.

The focus of Trump's Middle East policy was to counter Iran and, if possible, change the regime in Tehran. The administration pulled out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that the Obama administration, along with the other permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (the P5) and Germany, had negotiated with Iran. Moscow criticized the withdrawal and Washington's decision to subsequently impose sanctions on Iran, but was clearly ambivalent about Iran's role in Syria and its support of Hizbullah, a group with which Russia was working, at least in theory, to keep Assad in power. On several occasions, Putin told Bolton that Russia did not want the Iranians in Syria.³⁴ According to James Jeffrey, Trump's special envoy for Syria, the Russians realized that the Iranians were trying to create a state within a state in Syria and to bypass existing institutions.³⁵ At an unusual meeting with the Israeli and Russian national security advisers in Israel, Bolton and his counterparts agreed that Iran should eventually leave Syria, although Nikolai Patrushev, secretary of Russia's Security Council, continued to praise Russia's ties with Tehran.³⁶

Trump's major achievement in the Middle East was the Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between Israel and Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Some of the work to facilitate the accords was carried out through a private channel between Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner and Kirill Dmitriev, head of the Russian Direct Investment Fund, whom Putin had used as an envoy to the Trump administration when it first came into office and who had business interests in the UAE.³⁷

Venezuela

³³ Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "How a 4-hour Battle Between Russian Mercenaries and U.S. Commandos Unfolded in Syria," *New York Times*, 24 May 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/world/middleeast/american-commandos-russian-mercenaries-syria.html>

³⁴ Bolton, *The Room Where it Happened*

³⁵ Author's interview with Ambassador James Jeffrey

³⁶ Tovah Lazaroff, "US, Russian, Israeli Understanding Iranian Forces Will Leave Syria," *Jerusalem Post*, 25 June 2019, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/us-russia-and-israel-meet-in-unprecedented-trilateral-summit-watch-live-593609>

³⁷ Erin Banco, "Revealed: Jared Kushner's Private Channel with Putin's Money Man," *Daily Beast*, 24 August 2020, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/jared-kushners-private-channel-with-putins-money-man-kirill-dmitriev>

The Trump administration and Russia were firmly at odds over Venezuela. After the authoritarian Nicolás Maduro remained in power following a disputed election in 2018, Russia was instrumental in thwarting the administration's attempts to support his rival, Juan Guaidó (president of the National Assembly of Venezuela), who was recognized by 60 countries, including the United States, as the legitimate president, in line with the constitution. Venezuela was in debt to Russia to the tune of \$6 billion, and Rosneft was active in Venezuela's oil sector. Russia sent around 200 government troops to back Maduro, as well as officials to train the security services, although Cuba remains the backbone of Maduro's security structure. According to Elliott Abrams, Trump's special representative for Venezuela, Moscow wanted to "ensure that the US did not create a "color revolution" in Venezuela."³⁸ In April 2019, an attempted uprising by forces loyal to Guaidó failed to install him as president. There is some evidence that in May, Russia dissuaded Maduro from leaving the country to go into exile³⁹ Trump officials viewed Russia as the main spoiler as Venezuela descended into poverty and violence

The Trump Administration's Balance Sheet

By the end of Trump's presidency, given the continuing questions about election interference in 2016 and 2020, the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, cyberattacks, and the poisoning and imprisonment of the Kremlin's opponents, US–Russian relations were worse than they had been when Trump entered the White House. The COVID-19 pandemic complicated the administration's outreach to Russia because it prevented the in-person meetings that both leaders sought, including Trump's attendance at the Victory Day parade in Moscow in June 2020 to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, and Putin's hosting of a P5 summit at the UN to discuss the future of world order. By November 2020, the Russians had come to believe that Trump was too unpredictable and unable to deliver the improved relationship he had initially promised, and that Moscow desired. Yet Putin waited until 14 December 2020, after the vote of the electoral college, to congratulate Biden on his victory in the presidential election in November, and some Russian media outlets continued to propagate the Trumpian 'stolen election' myth both before and after the 6 January 2021 assault on the US Capitol.

As Robert Legvold points out in his essay in this series, there were three distinct Russia policies during the Trump administration, that of the President, that of the rest of the executive branch, and that of Congress Policy was inconsistent and at times incoherent.⁴⁰ The US-Russia relationship under Trump began at a low point and it ended at an even lower point with very limited accomplishments. Given this legacy, the Biden administration came into office needing to remove Russia as a toxic domestic issue while at the same time seeking to renew channels for engagement.

Angela Stent is Professor Emerita at Georgetown University and a Senior Non-Resident fellow at the Brookings Institution. She is the author, most recently, of *Putin's World: Russia Against the West and with the Rest* (Twelve books, 2020).

© Copyright 2022 The Authors | 

³⁸ Author's interview with Elliott Abrams

³⁹ See Nicole Gaouette and Jennifer Hansler, "Pompeo Claims Russia Stopped Maduro Leaving Venezuela for Cuba," CNN, 1 May 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/30/politics/pompeo-maduro-russia/index.html>

⁴⁰ Robert Legvold, "The Biden Administration and Russia: Digging Out of a Deep Hole," ed. Diane Labrosse, H-Diplo/ISSF Policy Series 2021, 13 May 2021; <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/ps2021-30>.