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U.S.-Russian Relations in the Trump Era¹

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In the first half year of the new Trump administration, United States-Russian relations sped through a series of phases only to end suspended basically where they were on Election Day, 8 November 2016—badly damaged, friction-laden, and immobile. Whatever muddled hopes Russian President Vladimir Putin and his entourage may have had for better times with Trump in the White House and whatever obscure intentions President Trump may have had of improving relations, the two sides remain mired in the new Cold War into which they had plunged in the last years of the Obama administration.² Their leaders were like figures in straitjackets: the more they struggled, the more their straitjackets tightened. Straitjackets, it might be noted, of their own manufacture, although each was of a different design. Trump was hamstrung by a Congress angry over the Russians' interference in the presidential election and the possibility that Trump's people had helped them, and in any event, persuaded that he meant to 'go soft' on Putin. Putin's constraints were self-imposed. Much as he may have wished to 'normalize' the U.S.-Russian relationship, his jaded view of what drives U.S. foreign policy left him unwilling or, worse, unable to do his part to make progress possible.

Yes, both appeared to share the view that the two countries were in a deep hole and needed to stop digging. Trump's Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, told the Senate appropriations subcommittee in June 2017, "Our relationship is at the lowest level it's been at since the Cold War and it's spiraling down. The two greatest nuclear powers in the world cannot have this kind of a relationship. We have to stabilize it and we have to

¹ This essay is based on a previously published essay, "Into the Unknown: U.S.-Russian Relations Unhinged," #64 Valdai Papers (April 2017) and republished as "Шаг в неизведанное," Россия в глобальной политике, No. 2 (March/April 2017).

² I have traced the deterioration and justified characterizing it as a new Cold War in *Return to Cold War* (Malden: Cambridge Polity, 2016).

start finding a way back.”³ The day after Trump’s election, Putin, noting the “degraded state of relations” between the two countries, spoke of the need to “restore fully fledged bilateral relations” between them, because of their “special responsibility . . . to sustain global security and stability.”⁴ But neither side seemed to know how, and between November 2016 and June 2017 their mood seesawed.

Putin and his people—indeed, the Russian public in general—clearly wanted Trump to win the election, but they did not think he would. They saw Democratic Party nominee Hillary Clinton as a continuation of the Obama administration, only worse, and many commentators, even among Putin’s critics, predicted an inevitable military confrontation between the United States and Russia soon after she entered office. Trump’s victory came as a pleasant surprise, and, while still wary, they let themselves hope that the new administration would shift course, perhaps even rethink the sanctions regime that was battering the Russian economy. One assumes that they also welcomed the retreat from a traditional U.S. global role implied by the “America first” theme of Trump’s inaugural address. After only a few weeks in office, however, senior administration officials began leveling familiar criticism of Russian actions in Ukraine, Syria, and elsewhere. By the end of February Trump had reversed himself on key issues, and assured Chinese leader Xi Jinping that the United States’ “One China” policy had not changed, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe that the United States remained committed to its mutual defense pact with Japan, and the European Union’s High Representative, Federica Mogherini, that the United States would honor the Iran nuclear deal, creating the impression that he would not after all radically alter U.S. policy, including its surly approach to Russia.⁵

By early April, following the United States’ missile strike on Syria in retaliation for its apparent use of chemical weapons, any early optimism had disappeared into an angry fog of recrimination. Russia’s Prime Minister, Dmitri Medvedev, announced that U.S. actions had “completely ruined” the relationship.⁶ A week later the seesaw tipped in the other direction. Tillerson’s first visit to Moscow, while treated by most observers as more evidence the relationship was floundering, in fact was quite productive. In meetings with Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, he had repeated the U.S. indictment of recent Russian actions—minus any reference to interference in the U.S. election—but stressed the importance of halting the “degradation” in relations and somehow finding a way back on to a more constructive path. The two sides agreed to have deputy foreign ministers consult on ways to remove so-called “irritants” in the relationship—

³ Hearing to Review the FY2018 Budget for the U.S. Department of State, U.S. Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, 13 June 2017, available at: <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/hearings/hearing-to-review-the-fy2018-budget-for-the-us-department-of-state>.

⁴ Vladimir Putin’s Remarks, Presentation of Foreign Ambassadors’ Letters of Credence, 9 November 2016, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53223>.

⁵ True, his later vacillation on whether he would keep the Iran agreement by recertifying Iranian compliance, together with other shifting positions, did raise questions about just where U.S. policy stood.

⁶ Peter Baker, Neil MacFarquhar, and Michael R. Gordon, “Syria Strike Puts U.S. Relations with Russia at Risk,” *New York Times*, 7 April 2017.

such as the squabbling over the treatment of each side's diplomats and diplomatic facilities—and then explore the possibility of more extensive “strategic stability talks.”⁷

Over the next month or two, despite the growing tempest back in the United States over Russian interference in the U.S. presidential election, the modestly rekindled hopes that the two countries could do business carried through Lavrov's White House meeting with Trump in May and the much-anticipated Putin-Trump encounter at the July 2017 G-20 Hamburg summit. During Lavrov's May visit the two sides had discussed the possibility of working together to establish “de-escalation” zones in Syria, and at the Hamburg summit, they agreed to create one in southwest Syria. Putin said of his meeting with Trump, “If we can build a relationship along the lines of our conversation yesterday, then there is every reason to believe we can restore, at least to a certain degree, the level of co-operation we need.”⁸

Less than a month later, however, Putin ordered the United States to cut its diplomatic presence in Russia by 755 staff. This was in retaliation for U.S. Senate legislation adding new Russian sanctions in response to Russian meddling in the election and blocking the President's authority to remove them without Senate approval. The vote was 98-2, and a reluctant but resigned Trump indicated that he would sign the bill. Said Putin, “We were waiting for quite a long time that maybe something would change for the better, were holding out hope that the situation would change somehow. But it appears that even if it changes someday it will not change soon.”⁹

Thus, as fall approached, the seesaw seesawed, quivering around something of an equilibrium point, but blocked from any significant movement upward by a giant new impediment. The quivering was evident, on the one hand, when, after meeting with Kurt Volker, the Administration's special envoy for Ukraine, on August 21, his Russian counterpart Vladislav Surkov characterized their exchange as “constructive and useful,” saying that it had produced fresh ideas for resolving the Ukrainian crisis.¹⁰ On the other hand, the next day, the U.S. Department of Treasury announced new sanctions imposed on a Russian company and four individuals for aiding North Korea's nuclear and missile-development programs. As summer drew to a close, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, while visiting Ukraine, charged that Russia sought “to redraw international borders by force, undermining the sovereign and free nations of Europe,” and indicated that the Administration was near a decision to provide lethal arms to Ukraine.¹¹ There the relationship stood,

⁷ The effort to deal with “irritants” hit an early snag, when the Russians cancelled an initial April 23 meeting ostensibly as a protest over the Trump administration's decision to reaffirm Obama's December sanctions occasioned by Russian election meddling.

⁸ Guy Chazan and Demetri Sevastopulo, “Putin Praises Trump and Hails New Era of Cooperation.” *The Financial Times*, 8 July 2017

⁹ Max Seddon and David J. Lynch, “Putin Orders Drastic Reduction in US Diplomatic Presence in Russia,” *The Financial Times*, 30 July 2017.

¹⁰ Kremlin Aide Upbeat After First Meeting with U.S. Envoy for Ukraine,” *Reuters*, 21 August 2017, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-russia-usa-idUSKCN1B11V5?il=0>.

¹¹ Idrees Ali and Pavel Palityuk, “Defense Secretary Mattis Promises Support to Ukraine, Says Reviewing Lethal Aid,” *Reuters*, 24 August 2017, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-ukraine-mattis-idUSKCN1B415F>.

wavering unsteadily between moments of minor progress and new instances of heightened tension. The future remained muddy, save for one large looming specter.

By the time the U.S. Senate voted 98-2 for new Russian sanctions and signaled that it meant to keep the Administration on a short tether when dealing with Russia, the issue of Russia's role in U.S. elections—past and future—could no longer be passed off as a side issue or a political distraction. It had emerged as central to the relationship, as important an issue as Ukraine, Syria, or an endangered Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty; indeed, for the U.S. Congress, one that now took precedence over any other. Unless it could somehow be resolved, there seemed small chance the U.S.-Russian relationship would escape its current paralysis.

Escaping seemed all the harder because of the Russian leadership's perspective on the issue. Even if Putin knew, while never confessing, what his government, its agents, or their surrogates did during the U.S. election, almost certainly he and those around him saw the uproar as strangely out of proportion, a curious artifact of American politics and a cudgel used to bash the Trump administration. Yet, unless Russian officials came to understand that the issue was not simply an idiosyncrasy of U.S. politics, but for Senate Democrats and their hardline Republican counterparts as well as most of the U.S. intelligence community a matter of national security because they believed Russia sought to undermine the integrity of the U.S. electoral system, there would be no path forward.

Obstacles and Imperatives

U.S.-Russian relations are where they are because of the actions, some misguided, some inadvertent, by both sides over the two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991—none more destructive than the Russian seizure of Crimea and intervention in the separatist war in eastern Ukraine. This was the turning point that sent the relationship careening over the cliff. But the headwind that stymies any effort to dig out of the hole where the two are lodged has been generated by the stories each side tells itself about the other. The dominant catchphrase on the U.S. side says Russia is bent on undermining a U.S.-led global order. For many in Washington, the U.S. media, and much of the expert community, this is not because of Russia's interaction with the outside world, including the United States, but because of the regime's needs: it needs an external enemy, hence, the anti-Americanism; it cannot afford democracy creeping toward its borders, hence, its actions in Ukraine; and when economics as a source of legitimacy flags, it resorts to crude nationalism, hence, the theft of Crimea.

On the other side, the equally warped and debilitating narrative has it that the United States, in its frustration as its preponderance in world politics crumbles, still insists on imposing its fiat by force without regard to international law or the interests of others. Its core strategy has become regime change wherever and by whatever means it chooses, ultimately targeting Russia itself. Needless to say, one narrative set against the other leaves little room for repairing this badly damaged relationship.

Against this headwind, even modest progress requires the two leaderships to set aside for the moment their prevailing narratives, and entertain a relatively risk-free alternative. In the U.S. case this might be one that takes Russia now and into the future as an embodiment of its past, insistent on its great-power status as essential to the country's survival, less set on damaging U.S. policy than on compelling U.S. respect, driven by historical notions of what makes the state strong, not least because the strong state is seen as the essence of

Russia's being, and willing to push against external barriers until met with superior force.¹² On the Russian side, it might be one that views the United States as struggling to redefine its global role, unnerved by the turmoil in the greater Middle East and potential instability in Europe and East Asia, prone to react in ways Moscow disapproves of, but not an existential threat to the regime or determined to destroy its legitimate security interests.

They then might test the plausibility of this alternative narrative by first gingerly trying to engage in a strategic dialogue with the other side. Led by senior officials who hold confidence of the two presidents, the point would be to get at the underlying sources of the trouble—some way to face directly the wellsprings of mistrust, the mismatch in narratives, the basis for their grievances, and the limited hopes they have.¹³ In May the two sides agreed to hold “strategic stability talks” at the deputy foreign ministers level.¹⁴ This is a start, but their focus remains unclear and so too whether they will probe deeply enough to get to the root of the problem.

They should also, however, test this scenario in another way, either by interrupting the tit-for-tat cycle of retaliatory measures or by cautiously offering a constructive first step. When the United States imposed its latest round of sanctions on Russia in August 2017 and Russian officials indicated that their side would not respond, this may have been a modest attempt to break the cycle.¹⁵ Similarly, were Russia to execute the large quadrennial military exercise planned in September on NATO's borders (Zapad 2017) at levels lower than anticipated by nervous NATO allies and without the usual nuclear phase, it can be seen as a constructive first step, and the United States and NATO would need to consider how to respond in kind. (Of course, the signaling will be quite different, if Zapad 2017 is done maximally, with 100,000 troops, ambitious combined forces maneuvers, and a nuclear component, particularly one that involves forward-deployed Iskander-M missiles.) It would not take extraordinary imagination to devise other steps that satisfy one or the other criterion, only the will to try.

But unless the two leaderships find some way to remove the large obstacles that block a path forward, these moves will lead nowhere. First among these barriers is the question of Russian meddling in U.S. elections. It stands athwart almost any imaginable cooperative outcome in the Ukrainian crisis, any durable partnership in dealing with the Syrian civil war, and any likely resolution saving the INF treaty. In this case as in the others, no progress is likely, unless both sides—and the stress must be on both sides—rethink the way they have

¹² It is articulated in Thomas E. Graham, “The Sources of Russian Conduct,” *The National Interest*, 25 August 2016, available at: <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-sources-russian-conduct-17462>.

¹³In *Return to Cold War*, 140-142 I explore earlier efforts at U.S.-Russian strategic dialogue, their character, and the results.

¹⁴ Steven Pifer, “Taking the Edge Off U.S.-Russia Strategic Relations,” *Russia Matters*, 16 June 2017, available at: <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/taking-edge-us-russia-strategic-relations>.

¹⁵ More specifically, Sergey Ryabkov, Russia's first deputy foreign minister, said that Russia did not want to be “guided by the erroneous logic of sanctions and counter-sanctions, where regardless of the consequences . . . we must repay the action in kind,” particularly if those consequences “would be detrimental to Russia itself.” (“Comment by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov on New US Anti-Russian Sanctions,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 22 August 2017, available at: http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2841501).

formulated the problem, adjust the outcome they seek, and alter the method for achieving it. A solution to the election interference issue can only be found through quiet diplomacy, forward-looking and without the pillory, and focused on the heart of the matter (a disruption or tainting of the actual voting process), with the aim of agreeing on verifiable red lines.

Progress here may then facilitate progress elsewhere—but, again, only if positions are rethought. In Ukraine, the mutual objective should be a stable peace in eastern Ukraine, an end to Russia’s direct patronage of the separatist regimes in Donbas, and steps leading to the normalization of bilateral Russian-Ukrainian relations, particularly in the economic sphere. Holding a resolution of the Ukrainian crisis hostage to the full implementation of the 2015 Minsk II agreement—that is, to the political settlement required by the agreement—guarantees a permanent stalemate.¹⁶

In the Syrian case, progress should be easier, because, in the abstract, Russia and the United States share objectives: *viz.*, an end to the violence, a stable government in Damascus with legitimacy in the eyes of the Sunni majority population and secure against jihadist control, and a common fighting front against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In reality, however, moving in this direction requires each side to risk trusting the other in the initial phases of cooperation—say, the expansion of de-escalation zones—and without progress on the election interference and other issues, the readiness to risk trust will not be there.

In the case of the imperiled INF treaty, the two sides need to stand back and weigh seriously how much they value the agreement and whether they are willing to bear the costs of losing it. Does the United States want to answer the alleged Russian violation, as many in Congress urge, by funding a new weapons system that clearly violates the treaty and encourages Russia to move toward full-scale development of a system directly threatening the United States’ European allies or by threatening to block the renewal of the New START agreement when that time comes in 2021? The Russian military and others in the national security establishment have never cared for the INF treaty, persuaded as they are that in a neighborhood of states with intermediate-range nuclear weapons, they need their own. But is the Russian leadership ready to sink this treaty, if the consequence will be to ensure no chance that the U.S. Senate will approve any new arms control agreement, including further constraints on strategic nuclear arms?

So, considering the strength of the headwind and the modest odds that the two governments will recast their approach to the large roadblocks standing in their way, including the paroxysmal issue of Russian election interference, a betting person is likely to wager that if the two sides manage to ease tensions and do some business together, their *détente* will be a limited and fragile affair. In short, the watchword will at best be ‘averting confrontation’ or ‘skillfully managing’ rather than hoping to ‘permanently resolve’ the basic tensions dividing the two countries.¹⁷ This is as ambitious as most commentators in both countries, including the most

¹⁶The two parts of the February 2015 Minsk II agreement signed by the leaders of Ukraine, Britain, France and Russia provided for an end to the violence in eastern Ukraine and measures designed to resolve the political conflict between the central Ukrainian government and the Donbas separatists.

¹⁷ Eugene B Rumer, Richard Sokolsky, and Andrew S. Weiss, “Trump and Russia: The Right Way to Manage Relations,” *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2017), 12-19.

constructive, dare be. It falls short—far short of what should be the calculations driving U.S. and Russian policy.

The Stakes

If, as it feels to many, the world is stumbling into an unknown but potentially dangerous future, and, if the country with the greatest capacity for good or ill also faces an uncertain road ahead, foreign policy, whether Russian or U.S., should not be trifling. It should not be fixed on narrow near-term preoccupations. And it should not be without strategic vision. That it is so in both countries ought to be a major source of concern, and a focus for fresh and bolder thinking among serious analysts.

Before the United States loom two profound challenges—neither of which in the present political circumstances it is capable of addressing, and both of which have immense implications for the U.S.-Russian relationship. One cuts to the core of the U.S. role in the world. The other involves a vital strategic choice. In the first instance, if U.S. leadership wishes, as it should, to see the post-World War II liberal international order sustained, it must reconceive the way that the United States plays its role. No longer can the United States be the system's ultimate arbiter and guarantor. No longer can it impose its standards, worthy as they may be, on whomever it thinks necessary and by whatever means it chooses. And no longer can it operate with an open-ended understanding of what constitutes the liberal international order, including the intrusive promotion of human rights, a normative basis for determining the legitimacy of sovereign states, and a selective norm for justifying the use of force. Instead, if the United States is to contribute effectively to saving an order that has served it well, it will have to learn to lead in partnership with others, to co-manage, not preside over the system, to modify rules and give voice to rising powers that feel disenfranchised by the system as currently structured, and to accept curbs on when and how it uses its power as well as who and what gives it license to act.

Embedded at the heart of what it will take to recast the U.S. role to save a liberal international order is a new strategic imperative. Although not framed in these terms, Zbigniew Brzezinski and Paul Wasserman, in Brzezinski's final contribution before his death, wisely urged President Trump "to recognize that the ideal long-term solution is one in which the three militarily dominant powers—the United States, China and Russia—work together to support global stability."¹⁸ A modified and more equitable liberal international order cannot be achieved unless the United States, China, and Russia work together. On the three great issues that threaten to undermine any international order—liberal or otherwise—the rising threat of nuclear catastrophe in an increasingly dangerous multipolar nuclear world; the chaos from conflicts generated by climate change; and the prospect of turbulent change in and around the Eurasian core, cooperation (or not) among these three will be decisive.

If order rather than disorder is to prevail in coming years, global governance will likely depend on a honeycomb of disparate collaborations: a G-10 or G-12 of the world's largest economies to ensure global economic growth and stability; cooperation between the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and NATO to deal with instability in the Northern Tier; the six-party talks to address North Korean nuclear weapons (like the five-party effort in the Iranian case); bilateral and multilateral formats to constrain the most destabilizing

¹⁸ Zbigniew Brzezinski and Paul Wasserman, "Why the World Needs a Trump Doctrine," *The New York Times*, 20 February 2017.

developments among nuclear-weapons possessing states; and a restructured UN Security Council to manage explosive regional conflicts. If this honeycomb of mechanisms is to have coherence and a cumulative effect, it will only be because the United States, China, and Russia are collaborating, not competing. The same will be true of a second dimension required for a stable liberal international order: dueling integration projects, such as the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union as well as competing trade regimes like the follow-on to the Transpacific Partnership (TPP) and China's Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) will have to be reconciled. This will not happen if China and the United States or Russia and the West led by the United States remain at odds.

If in the penumbra of a vague but potentially fraught international future and a convulsive domestic passage, the United States faces historic choices (whether its leaders realize it or not), the same is true of Russia. Sergey Karaganov has argued that “the world's three largest powers—the ‘big troika’—must come together to create the conditions for a peaceful transition to a new, more stable world order.”¹⁹ His urging rests on the assumption that a “more stable world order” should be based on enlarging the field of cooperation among a widening circle of major powers, eventually leading to a “concert of powers,” the starting point for which should be collaboration among the United States, China, and Russia. This is not terribly different from the international order that Dmitri Trenin envisages in his new book, *Should We Fear Russia?:* “a transcontinental/ transoceanic system,” based on a “rough equilibrium among the great powers,” in which the United States, China, and Russia “are essentially satisfied that their security is not threatened by one or both of the other two great powers,” a system tolerant of “political-ideological pluralism” and dependent on “mutual respect.”²⁰

Only if Russia does its part—and China too—does any of this have a chance. This is where the larger issues at stake intrude; where the price paid for the new U.S.-Russian Cold War surfaces; and where the low expectations and lethargy that dominate the mood in Moscow and Washington exert their destructive pull. Adequately addressing the grave challenges that Russia and the United States will face over the next two decades requires two prerequisites. The first is that each side discipline the casual assumptions that have misdirected its policy toward the other. The second longer-term and more substantial requirement is that each develop a strategic vision for how the U.S.-Russian relationship is to fit into the international order that it wishes to see emerge.

In *Return to Cold War* I tried to do that for the U.S.-Russian component.²¹ Its five parts reflect the vast stakes the two countries have in the relationship, but are failing to act on, a failure that bears directly on how dystopian the emerging international order will be. They begin with the need for U.S. and Russian leadership to bring greater stability to a new and increasingly dangerous multipolar nuclear world. The perils present during the original Cold War remain—namely, the risk of a nuclear accident (and there were many), the accidental use of a nuclear weapon, the inadvertent escalation to nuclear war, and a war consciously fought with nuclear weapons. One of them, the chance of an inadvertent nuclear conflict, poses a growing risk, and,

¹⁹ Sergey Karaganov, “Mutual Assured Deterrence,” *Project Syndicate*, February 17, 2017, available at: <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/russia-role-in-new-world-order-by-sergei-karaganov-2017-02>.

²⁰ Dmitri Trenin, *Should We Fear Russia?* (Polity, 2017), 106 and 109.

²¹ Trenin, 138-164.

if unchecked, raises uncomfortably high the likelihood that nuclear weapons will be used at some imaginable point in the not too distant future. Unrecognized—or, at least, unacknowledged—by either side, the destabilizing effects of technological advances as the United States, Russia, China, India, and Pakistan modernize their nuclear forces; the line increasingly blurred between conventional and nuclear warfighting; the loss of control as bilateral nuclear competitions become triangular; the stunningly disruptive potential of cyber weapons incorporated into nuclear deterrence; the geometric complexity from the asymmetries among nine nuclear powers; and the disparity in the way the nine conceive of the role of these weapons make this threat all too real. They also underscore how urgent it is for the United States and Russia to refocus their attention on the way nuclear trends are slipping from their control and to combine their efforts—and those of China—in order to prevent this new nuclear era from ending in tragedy.

The stakes are roughly as high in four other realms. How seriously have Russian and U.S. leaders paused and reflected on the perverse irony that having contributed to the dismantling of the Cold War's massive military face-off in the center of Europe, they are again restoring it farther east? It may not be on the same scale as the earlier confrontation, but its implications are the same, or conceivably worse, given the shaky peace in the territories abutting the line where the two militaries meet. Washington and Moscow have a choice to make. They can, given the inertia of their narrowly defined priorities, carry on, eying the military steps taken by the other side, beefing up their and their allies' responses, focusing on the likely range of contingencies for which their forces would be used, and girding themselves for that moment. Or, provided that impediments, such as the Ukrainian imbroglio, are reduced (even if not eliminated), they can concentrate their attention on reversing course, pulling back militarily, and focusing on steps enhancing mutual security. The stake over the next twenty years is a Europe that adds to the global map one more arena of instability and military competition or one that introduces an enclave of stability whose resources and leadership can take the lead in addressing the twenty-first century's global security challenges.

By extension, the Arctic, the world's next new great oil and gas frontier and until now the beneficiary of basic cooperation among the five littoral states, is wobbling in the direction of increased military activity on all sides, including military exercises that go beyond protecting legal claims and sea passages. If this region, rather than remaining a sanctuary apart from the military confrontation in Europe, becomes its extension, and cooperation among the five erodes, the damage to both European security and to the struggle to contain the environmental damage from climate change will be immense. Here too the stakes are large: do the United States and Russia wish to lead in making the politically virgin territory of the Arctic a building block and prototype for a more stable Euro-Atlantic security system or are they content to let events take whatever course they may, including a descent deeper into cold war?

Add to these three concerns a fourth: trouble in and around the Eurasian core (essentially the former Soviet Union) and the concentric circle surrounding it led to the current U.S.-Russian Cold War, and it will be decisive in determining the level of disruption in the broader international setting in the years ahead. No three countries have a larger stake in how that turns out than the United States, Russia and China. Again, they can continue to let matters drift as in the past, responding in tardy and *ad hoc* fashion to each new rupture of the peace, or they can make a conscious effort to achieve a *modus vivendi* built around compatible and, where possible, coordinated policies anchored on promoting stable change and *mutual* security in and around this Eurasian core. What they choose from this point on will produce two very different international futures twenty-five years from now.

Finally, if, as thoughtful U.S. and Russian voices have argued, the critical strategic underpinning for a stable future international order is collaborative U.S.-Chinese-Russian leadership, leaders in all three capitals will have to reorient policy in fundamental ways. The bilateral framework that is so thoroughly dominant in how each approaches the other two powers will have to give way to a trilateral framework. Progress in dealing with any major problem requires a three-way interaction. Second, a constructive three-way interaction will come about only if all three governments make it a priority. Third, making it a priority will require what they have not managed to this point—*i.e.*, a willingness to resist the temptation to approach issues, tensions, and conflicts of interests dividing the other two countries in ways designed to disadvantage the country they most want to disadvantage. If approached as a strategic contest, as it is now, “the troika” will become a dangerous centrifuge of great-power rivalry and a fundamental threat to global peace and stability.

Thus, at a moment when the future of the international order and its most important member grows cloudy, Russian and U.S. leaders have choices to make. They are choices of far greater portent than either appears to realize. They may be choices that political realities in both countries preclude. Narrow preoccupations, occluded politics, and the ascendance of small-minded thinking on both sides at all levels may be inescapable. If so, it will not be the first time in history that the great powers sleepwalk through defining moments—and pay the price.

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