

ISSUE BRIEF UPDATE ON “ENGAGING RUSSIA” REPORT
FOR THE MARCH 2017 WASHINGTON MEETING

Key U.S.-Russia issues confronting the new U.S. Administration

with perspectives from North America, Russia, Europe and Asia

U.S.-Russia Relations

Current relations between the United States and Russia are frozen. Trump’s election unleashed in Russia expectations of a new reset, but the honeymoon was over before it began. Trump and Putin preside over nations with very different interests. In light of the controversy regarding alleged Russian interference in the U.S. 2016 presidential elections, prospects for another “reset” with Moscow appear dim. In a recent Gallup poll, seven in ten Americans told pollsters they have an unfavorable view of Russia.

Russia’s officially stated goal towards the United States is to secure a partnership based on mutual respect, equality, and non-interference in domestic affairs. In reality, Russia does not accept a U.S.-centered world order and resists the West whenever and wherever it can to strengthen its influence. The United States is facing a Russia that seeks to weaken and break down the post-Cold War European security and political architecture and undermine U.S. global leadership. Russia acts as an adversary with respect to an entire range of regional and global issues. Indeed, it is difficult to identify an issue on which Moscow is engaged in genuine cooperation with Washington. Our assessment in the 2014 report, “Engaging Russia: A Return to Containment?” remains true today, “There is a national consensus that Russia should regain its status as a serious geopolitical player. Putin is trying to create a geopolitical and geo-economic demand for Russia.” (p. 28).

Ukraine

Russia and the West remain divided on the issue of Ukraine’s sovereignty. Russia has unlawfully annexed Crimea and continues to engage in aggression in eastern Ukraine. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has reiterated that Russia must “honor its commitments to the Minsk agreements.” Meaningful progress in the Minsk process, however, is unlikely before Germany’s elections in September and prospects for a breakthrough are bleak.

Syria and the Greater Middle East

Russia and the West are at odds on the role Assad should play in Syria’s transition and the contours of a political settlement to end the country’s civil war. Talks in Astana and Geneva provided minimal results. A political solution — given that it requires the concerted efforts of the great powers, Arab states, Iran and Israel — is highly unlikely in the nearest future. Russia’s decision to get involved in Syria was motivated by a desire to be recognized as a great power, but this move has now saddled Moscow with an expensive commitment. From the West’s perspective, Russia is now committing war crimes in Syria and aiding Iran’s ambitions to dominate the Middle East.

Terrorism

The primary obstacle to greater U.S.-Russian cooperation on counter-terrorism is the countries' diverging interests in Syria. Russia's military campaign, while ostensibly directed at the Islamic State, is inflicting a devastating toll against Syrian civilians. And there are questions whether Moscow's anti-terrorism campaign is focused narrowly on averting threats to Russia or whether it is guided by broader geopolitical ambitions.

Arms Control

There has been little movement on the arms control front since the conclusion of New START. At a time when nuclear weapons have been reintegrated into Russian military doctrine, agreement between the United States and Russia on sensitive issues like missile defense deployments will be challenging. The United States considers recent deployments of Russian cruise missiles to be a violation of the INF Treaty "in its spirit and intent." Russia denies these allegations, and the deployment of ABM systems in Poland and the Czech Republic adds to tensions on the arms control front. If there is no agreement on the missile defense issue, the United States could escalate pressure by expanding missile defenses in Europe and deploying sea-based/air-based nuclear missiles. Moscow's mixed record of compliance on its arms control obligations casts doubts on its suitability as a reliable arms control partner.

NATO

Relations between NATO and Russia have been at a standstill since Crimea's annexation. During Medvedev's presidency, NATO and Russia carried out approximately 600 joint activities, including mock-up maneuvers. Today, the NATO-Russia Council is hardly functioning.

President Trump has reiterated Washington's support for NATO while insisting that alliance partners "meet their financial obligations." As Vice President Pence noted in his Munich speech, the United States believes that NATO would be strengthened if its members contribute 2 percent of their GDP to the alliance's defense. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has agreed on the need for "fair burden-sharing" in the alliance, but it remains to be seen whether NATO states will bolster their defense spending.

Energy

Russia's economic dependence on its energy sector is an important point of leverage for the West amid negotiations over Ukraine and other issues. Significantly, a number of Central European countries are looking at alternative energy sources so as to solidify their energy security. The United States is potentially well-positioned to exhaust an economically-weak Russia, particularly because of Moscow's tendency to overextend itself in external escapades from Syria to Ukraine. Some analysts believe, however, that doing so would heighten the risk of a serious conflict between the United States and Russia.

Russian analysts tend to argue that a balanced dialogue with Russia would be a better approach than a strategy of economic pressure. A dialogue, they argue, could be reconstructed through Track-1, Track-2 consultations of the sort that produced the Brezhnev-Ford détente and the Reagan-Gorbachev breakthrough.

Europe

Relations between Europe and Russia are in limbo. Moscow is seeking to fragment the EU and NATO and undermine Euro-Atlantic institutions. Russian experts, meanwhile, are entertaining the idea of a “Greater Eurasia,” which would involve Eurasian integration with Central Asia and China while treating the EU as a partner. An obstacle in bringing “Greater Eurasia” to fruition, however, is that Russia, with the exception of transport corridors, does not have a great deal to offer to China. Without serious structural reforms internally, Russia would be worse off in a “Greater Eurasia” scheme than it would under a return to the concept of a common economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok.

Relations between Russia and Europe could be impacted by the outcomes of the May elections in France and the German elections four months later. An important factor is the allegations of Russian interference in Europe’s elections by prominent figures in the United States and Europe.

Russia and the Asia-Pacific

Since 2012, Putin has turned his attention to the east in both domestic and foreign policy. In 2014, an open conflict with the West impelled Russia to proclaim “the turn to the East” as the conceptual basis of their strategy on foreign policy and external economic issues.

Concrete measures to implement this strategy, however, have been minimal. Although Putin is cultivating a close relationship with the PRC as a partial recompense for the loss of relationships with western leaders, there are very few people in Russia who favor a turn to the east. Russia, in its current state, can offer very little to the east, apart from raw material exports and anti-American rhetoric. The socio-economic development of Russia’s eastern regions would help expand the Asia-Pacific economic space, but it remains a difficult, long-term venture.

The Trump administration has reiterated U.S. commitments to its alliances in Asia, reducing the likelihood of any drastic shifts in the Asian balance of power. From the perspective of some Asian analysts, U.S.-Russian relations are largely peripheral to growing challenges to U.S. extended deterrence for Asia—such as tensions with China and North Korea’s nuclear weapons and missile development. Russia prioritizes its role as a raw material exporter and ultimately has more of a stake in encouraging security, stability and long-term economic growth in the Asia-Pacific than it does in undermining Washington’s position in the region.

China-Russia Relations

Russia and China have shown commitment in developing their political and economic bilateral contacts, but there is no clear understanding in either country on how exactly these contacts fit in the context of the global and regional policies of the two nations.

Prospects for a Russian-Chinese partnership are further complicated by Japan's direct interest in resisting Chinese domination of the region. Moscow and Tokyo strengthened relations when Putin and Prime Minister Abe met in December 2016.

The relationship between Russia and China remains a marriage of convenience. Analysts disagree on the extent to which Moscow would be willing to support U.S. efforts vis-à-vis China in exchange for substantial concessions on other core Russian interests.

Human Rights/Democracy

The State Department's country report on human rights noted that Russia has a "highly centralized, authoritarian political system dominated by President Vladimir Putin." The OSCE/ODIHR report on Russia's state Duma elections reported that the country's "electoral environment was negatively affected by restrictions to fundamental freedoms and political rights, firmly controlled media and a tightened grip on civil society." How one should influence Russia's record on human rights and democracy remains one of the most contentious issues dividing the international community.