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THE UNITED STATES

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Introduction

Concurrent, system-altering events shook the foundations of global order in 1991: the Soviet Union collapsed and the new Russian state was born. The Cold War ended, and Russian and US leaders faced a steep learning curve with respect to the new geopolitical reality. At times, the two nations have enjoyed a convergence of interests; however, their leaders have ultimately failed to normalize Russia-US relations (Sakwa, 2008; Roberts, 2014). The result is a record of mixed accomplishment, a relationship of both convergence and divergence, leaving enduring challenges for the next generation of Russian and US leaders.

Considerable analysis, much of it within the realist school of international relations, emphasizes the geopolitical nature of Russia-US relations: Russia pursues its place among the world's powers and increasingly resists the West's agenda, notably the expansion of NATO, which should come as no surprise (Mearsheimer, 2014). NATO's expansion brings the specter of US military power to Russia's doorstep; according to this narrative, US drive to expand its influence and Russia's defensive response are the key features that animate the relationship.

Another analysis of Russia-US relations is situated along a spectrum of blame in which attribution for the challenges in Russia-US relations are assigned to one or both nations. These accounts range from identifying the influence of anti-Russian sentiment in the United States (Tsygankov, 2009; Feklyunina, 2013), rendering its leadership incapable of fostering a measured relationship with Russia, to accusations that Russian leaders – particularly Putin – have deliberately fomented a new Cold War to project Russian power (Lucas, 2008). Other accounts consider the failings in the relationship against the backdrop of Russia's "backslide" from democracy (McFaul, 1997/98). Western hopes for democracy in Russia faded under President Boris Yeltsin, and disappeared with the ascendancy of Vladimir Putin to the Kremlin. But understanding Russia through the lens of Western liberalism has its challenges; countless assumptions were made about the consolidation of democracy in Russia, and what it would mean for relations with the United States. A democratic Russia would join the liberal order, align its interests with the West, and be an asset to US global leadership. But this failed to materialize; Russian interests did not always align with the priorities of the West, and in some cases US and Russian interests were directly opposed, notably the decision to expand NATO into former Soviet territory, which has been a key point of contention since 1993.

This chapter recognizes the above contributions to the study of Russia-US relations, but aligns with the scholarship that privileges the interplay between structure and agency in the making of Russian foreign policy (Malcolm et al., 1996; Wallander, 1996; McFaul, 1997/98; Robinson, 2000; Donaldson and Noguee, 2009; Roberts, 2017). The structure in which decisions are made, and the agency of individuals within them, are essential to understanding foreign policy decisions. In short, ideas, individuals, and institutions matter. This is true for all foreign policy analysis, but is especially useful in understanding Russian foreign policy making, which features a constitutionally prescribed executive dominance (*Constitution of the Russian Federation*, 1993: Articles 80, 86). Russian “super presidential” powers dwarf the institutional presence of other foreign policy actors (Roberts, 2014). The foreign policy role of the President is important; he identifies Russian interests and enjoys the executive authority to pursue them. The concentration of decision power in the President’s office, coupled with a culture of the popularity of strong leaders, enables the occupant to dominate Russian law and politics completely (Roberts, 2017). For this reason, it is not uncommon to see the phrases, “Putin’s foreign policy” and “Russia’s foreign policy” used interchangeably (Roberts, 2017). The execution of presidential authority has had an important impact upon relations with the West and therefore the post-Soviet presidencies of Yeltsin, Putin, and Dmitry Medvedev, are useful lenses through which to consider the stages of Russia-US relations since the end of the Cold War:

Powerful personalities – Yeltsin and Putin and perhaps to a lesser extent Medvedev – have exercised a tremendous amount of personal discretion and influence when it comes to relations with Washington. Strong executive-centered institutions combined with weaker legislative ones accentuate the importance of the President, thereby revealing the magnitude of both structure and agency in Russian foreign policy making. Given the fluctuation in the tone and priorities of foreign policy toward the US under all three post-Soviet Presidents, it is fair to say that structure enables agency in important ways.

(Roberts, 2013)

Appreciating the dominant role of Russian Presidents in foreign policy making, this chapter highlights the main achievements and challenges in Russia-US relations in four distinct presidential phases: the Yeltsin presidency (1991–1999), the first Putin presidency (2000–2008), the Medvedev presidency (2008–2012), and, finally, Putin’s second presidency (2012–present). But before these phases can be considered, it is first important to explain the primacy of the West – notably the United States – in Russia’s foreign policy calculus.

Why the United States matters

When the Cold War ended, Western governments were optimistic about democratic consolidation in Russia, and Russian leaders expected the West’s help to cultivate the economic and political transition. Beyond this there was also the security relationship to think about. Many years and billions of dollars had been devoted to maintaining the geopolitical balance of power. Despite high expectations for Russia’s political transformation, there was little consensus among Russian leaders about what its foreign policy stance would be. Residual competition from the Cold War, mounting resistance in Russia to the US assertion that they had “won” the Cold War, and fear that the loss of great power status might not be perceived as temporary, all influenced a crisis of identity in Russian foreign policy making that tested relations with the United States (Chafetz, 1996/97; Tolz, 1998). The result was an internal debate about

with whom Russia's interests most naturally aligned. The relationship with the United States influenced Russian thinking about its place in the world, and also within the post-Soviet space.

Unfulfilled expectations of Western support for Russia's democratic transition coincided with a "paternalistic" tone from a US leadership that expected Moscow to adopt policies favorable to Washington, which would naturally be in Russia's own interest. Domestic political instability, coupled with the absence of clarity around Russia's role in the world, left Russian foreign policy adrift. The perception of Russian weakness, at home and abroad, fueled concerns among Russian leaders about its global power status. Therefore, a desire to "reverse the decline of Russia's international prestige," and to counter the narrative that Russia had lost the Cold War, began to animate foreign policy making (Roberts, 2010). Both Putin and Medvedev feared the emergence of US hegemony at the expense of Russia and identified this as a challenge to Russian interests (Monaghan, 2008; Roberts, 2010). The Cold War may be in the history books, but there is plenty of residual "baggage" that has influenced Russia-US relations, and which prompts Russian leaders to resist the narrative of Russia's diminished power status. This baggage has influenced each presidential era and persistently animates the relationship. The following sections highlight the key issues of record in the Russia-US relationship, some of which span the entire post-Cold War period. Perhaps given the legacy of the Cold War, it follows that security matters dominate the relationship.

The Yeltsin era (1991–1999): birth of a 'new' relationship?

Relations with the United States heavily influenced the internal policy debates during Yeltsin's first presidential term. Presidents Yeltsin and Clinton made efforts to sustain an open and cooperative dialogue between the two nations, but each faced domestic political opposition to this initiative. The shifting power balance between opinion groups in Russia (Bowker, 1997) enabled the presence of disparate foreign policy orientations, ranging from friendly alliance with the West, to overt isolationism, to expansionism with an eye to retaking Russia's rightful geopolitical space. These internal foreign policy debates are well documented (Tsygankov, 1997; Prizel, 1998; McFaul, 1999) and, coupled with the domestic challenges to Yeltsin's authority, as well as conflicting elite conceptions of the national interest, created enough political instability to impair a clear articulation of Russia's position on a host of key issues.

Shuffling off the Cold War mindset has been difficult for Russian leaders, especially given the perception that US power has confronted them at every turn. Despite the vigorous foreign policy debates among Russian elites, one thing they agreed upon was Russia's entitlement to primacy in the former Soviet space (Lynch, 2016). Perhaps it is little surprise that arms control and the new role for NATO have been identified by scholars as the two issues most symbolic of the new world order (Donaldson and Noguee, 2009), and the most conflictual.

NATO expansion

President Clinton drove the expansion of NATO following a 1993 meeting with Czech President Vaclav Havel and Polish President Lech Walesa. Russian leaders rejected the premise of NATO expansion and instead called for a European security framework with Russia's active participation. However, despite a US desire to support Russia's political transition, there was also a perceived need to "hedge their bets" against a resurgent Russia (Goldgeier, 1999: 94). Fears that Russia's past could destabilize its future were captured by US Secretary of State Madeline Albright who described Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov as "he is what he was," implying that the Soviet legacy had a formative influence over its present leadership

(Perlez, 1999). Despite Clinton's assurances that NATO expansion would contain the "three no's" – no surprises, no rush, and no Russian exclusion (Talbot, 2002: 425) – enlargement moved ahead. Furthermore, the further Russia seemed to drift from democratic consolidation, the more intent upon membership some European nations became. Despite registering their opposition to NATO expansion, Russian leaders had little choice but to acquiesce and sought alternate ways of influencing the European security dialogue on US terms. Notwithstanding Russia's entreaties, NATO welcomed Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic in 1999 and Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in 2004. Membership in NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) initiative,¹ as well as the proposal to create a NATO-Russia Charter² were extended to Russia; however, these proposals were criticized as tokenism – a way to co-opt Russia, without extending it the meaningful partnership and recognition it sought as an essential pillar of the European security arrangement.

For Russian leaders, the expansion of NATO coincided with the loss of empire, domestic political instability, and a shifting geopolitical climate in which Russia's status was diminished. Russia remained a key nuclear power, but by any other metric its status as a major global power was in freefall. Russia was essentially denied reasonable opposition to NATO expansion on the grounds that, as an aspiring democracy, it had nothing to fear from a non-hostile alliance that could shoulder the burden of European security in an uncertain time. Russia was denied its rightful position of influence within the former Soviet space, or what some Russian leaders termed, "the Near Abroad," a designation that was understandably disconcerting to Russia's sovereign neighbors, as well as its right to consider the presence of US military power near its borders as a threat to its security interests. NATO's growth in post-Cold War Europe served as a symbol of Western accomplishment and Russian defeat.

There is some disagreement about whether early promises of non-expansion were ever made to Russia; nonetheless, Russia has consistently critiqued expansion as evidence that "the West is an unreliable partner" (Itzkowitz Shiffrin, 2016: 9) and that it failed to acknowledge "Russia's regional primacy" (Lynch, 2016). Furthermore, NATO's reimagined mandate, operationalized in its interventions in the Balkans, also represented a denial of the legitimacy of Russian interests in the former Soviet space. Interventions in Bosnia (1995) and Kosovo (1999) were met with Russian opposition, further testing the Russia-US relationship.

Kosovo

Conflict in the Balkans showcased the tensions in Russia-US relations. Russian leaders balked at NATO's involvement in Bosnia, and reluctantly partnered with NATO during its UN-sanctioned operation in Bosnia in 1995. Yeltsin, in support of Russia's Orthodox Serbian allies, feared a NATO intervention would escalate the conflict, but he directed Russian forces to participate in the NATO-led peacekeeping operation. However, this decision coincided with domestic instability in Russia which compromised Yeltsin's political leverage and rendered him virtually powerless to meaningfully oppose NATO actions there. Circumstances were different in 1999 when Russia vocally opposed NATO efforts to intervene in Kosovo without a UN mandate and obstructed UN decision making on Kosovo, taking umbrage with NATO's actions outside its traditional area of operation, within a region considered to be in Russia's orbit (Stent, 2014: 160).

Russia viewed NATO's drafting of the Rambouillet peace deal as a provocation – an excuse to bomb Serbia upon Belgrade's "bad faith" rejection of the deal. In fact, tensions were so high that Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, en route to Washington, ordered his plane to be returned to Moscow in protest; soon afterward NATO air strikes in Kosovo began.

Yeltsin warned Clinton of potential Russian military involvement with the caution, “don’t push Russia into this war!” (Talbot, 2003: 428). At the end of the war, Russia and NATO agreed to contribute peacekeeping troops to stabilize Kosovo, although there was some disagreement about just where and how Russian troops would be involved; this disagreement saw Russian troops ordered to the Pristina airport to ensure that Russia not be excluded from the post-war arrangement. The significance of this incident cannot be understated; while no direct conflict between Russian and NATO troops ensued, the incident revealed just how high tensions had become between the two sides. Kosovo was an important symbol of the deteriorating relationship. Russia was compelled to assert its entitlement to interests befitting a major power, and through this effort showed that Kosovo – still considered by Russia to be part of Serbia – fell within Russia’s sphere of interest.

Arms control and missile defence

Arms control issues have understandably been a high priority for Russia and the United States. Highlights of these efforts were the containment of “loose nukes” through the Cooperative Threat Reduction Act,³ the US abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002, the ratification of START II, and the signing of the 2010 New START Treaty. But the record of accomplishment on this file is mixed. Given the perceived decline of Russian power and prestige, it is perhaps understandable that arms control has been a Russian priority, in part because its nuclear arsenal has guaranteed it an enduring seat at the table during a time in which its voice has otherwise been muted.

Presidents Yeltsin and George HW Bush signed the START II Treaty in January 1993, promising a reduction in nuclear arsenals by about two-thirds, as well as the elimination of large multiple warhead missiles deemed less necessary in the new political climate; however, the deal met with resistance in a Russian Duma populated by communists and nationalists who resisted Russian acquiescence to the West. It was not ratified until 2000, and in fact it was used by Russian leaders, unsuccessfully, as a bargaining chip in the campaign to obstruct NATO expansion and also to prevent the United States from embarking upon a ballistic missile defence (BMD) program following their withdrawal from the 1972 ABM Treaty.

The ABM Treaty formed the backbone of strategic stability between the two countries in the 1970s and 1980s. The Treaty constrained the development of anti-missile technology, but the US leadership grew increasingly concerned about the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to rogue states and non-state actors, and this, combined with uncertainty about Russia, seemed to be enough to reanimate a discussion about the viability of a missile shield for the United States. In the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, President George W Bush notified Russia of his intent to withdraw the United States from the ABM Treaty, enabling the pursuit of missile defence technology. Russia has categorized the potential placement of US missiles and defence systems in close proximity to Russia, as a security threat. As NATO continued its expansion closer to Russian territory, the proximity of missile defences has continued to be prioritized by President Putin.

Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission

The 1993 US-Russia Joint Commission on Economic and Technical Cooperation, known informally as the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission, was tasked with managing some of the most difficult issues facing the two countries. The Commission contained a strategic stability group comprised of US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbot and Russian Deputy Minister Yuri Mamedov. US Vice President Al Gore and Russian Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin

sought to “institutionalize the concept of partnership,” by convening a high-level mechanism of communication (Stent, 2014), as well as working groups in key areas such as energy, joint space exploration, and the environment. Yeltsin’s leadership was increasingly confronted by domestic opposition; Clinton’s decision to support Yeltsin politically (Talbot, 2003) required keeping the lines of communication open. The bi-national Commission was re-invigorated under Presidents Obama and Medvedev during the reset, in the form of the Russia-US Bilateral Presidential Commission.

Assessing the Yeltsin era

Ultimately, the Yeltsin era is best described as one of tentative, restrained cooperation between Russia and the United States. For Russia, its failure to consolidate democracy was influential in foreign policy making, especially with respect to relations with Washington (Lynch, 2016). The struggle to institutionalize the democratic process and the rule of law, in concert with the absence of effective leadership in these areas, left a vacuum in which an identity crisis, of sorts, flourished, and in which competing visions for Russian foreign policy clashed, culminating in a foreign policy based less upon ideology and more upon a pragmatic assertion of Russian national interests. For the Americans who wanted to support Russia’s political transition, there was skepticism about whether democracy could truly take root there, which enabled an already latent fear of Russia to perpetuate. Some observers have suggested that mistrust of Russia manifested itself in a form of *Russophobia* (Tsygankov, 2009; Feklyunina, 2013), which is visible in some of the foreign policy decisions taken by the Clinton Administration, notably the expansion of NATO, the consideration of various missile defence platforms, and the denial of a role for Russia in the Balkan conflicts. The Cold War legacy loomed large and rendered interactions motivated less by common values and more by power calculations (Lynch, 2016).

The first Putin presidency (2000–2008): from partnership to break-up

When Vladimir Putin took office in 2000, he was not a new figure in Russian politics. His tenure as Prime Minister enabled his role as the chief architect of Russian opposition to NATO’s occupation of Kosovo (Lynch, 2016). Putin viewed Russia’s interests pragmatically, asserted them stridently, and rejected Western criticism of Russia’s domestic affairs (Roberts, 2014). His consolidation of the vertical power structure enabled an emboldened assertion of his priority to restore Russia’s rightful status among the world’s powers. Credited at home with decisive action in Chechnya and able stewardship of the Russian economy, Putin could assert Russian interests more vigorously on the world stage. In the early 2000s, this took the form of seeking a strategic partnership with the United States, which enabled cooperation on terrorism and the advancement of an arms control agenda that was beneficial to both countries. However, despite an encouraging first meeting in which President Bush claimed to have looked into Putin’s eyes and “saw his soul,” relations between the two deteriorated in short order. An era that began with Putin’s historic phone call to President Bush after 9/11, ended with heightened tensions and a need to reset the relationship.

9/11 and the counterterrorism agenda

The 9/11 attack on the US homeland, and Russia’s brutal war in separatist Chechnya, led both nations to perceive a convergence of interests in the fight against terrorism. In fact, the early goodwill was so strong that Russia was asked to consider a possible military intervention in

Afghanistan, which they declined (Mankoff, 2009); however, this enabled intelligence cooperation, the opening up of Russian airspace, and Russia's diplomatic assistance in Central Asia to enable Afghanistan operations. Russia also assisted with search and rescue operations and arming anti-Taliban fighters in Afghanistan (Tsygankov, 2013). Given its ties with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, Russia could be an important conduit, which had the added benefit of giving Russia influence in US military operations there (Mankoff, 2009). Russia temporarily enjoyed a degree of influence befitting a great power, consistent with its psychology of *derzhava*, implying the inevitability of Russia's return to greatness and its challenge to presumptive US hegemony.

This military and civilian intelligence sharing enabled cooperation on other priorities such as dealing with WMD proliferation and the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs. However, as Mankoff (2009) aptly observes, this cooperation was indicative only of overlapping interests, and not of a more profound commitment to meaningful civilizational or strategic convergence (2009: 115). Instead, 9/11 and its aftermath represented for Putin "an opportunity to achieve several long-standing aims of Russian foreign policy," but it was not an unconditional commitment to partnership (Mankoff, 2009: 115). Issue convergence enabled a short-lived cooperative phase in Russia-US relations but the common ground on counterterrorism did enable US goals of painless ABM withdrawal and the inclusion of the Baltic States in NATO; however, these resurfaced as items of contention when the rapprochement began to dissolve.

Arms control

The arms control agenda, embodied by the START agreements, underwent a transformation during Putin's first term. The Bush administration sought to retain a robust US nuclear arsenal capable of guarding against a nuclear threat from rogue nations (Stent, 2014). US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty enabled its plan for missile defence deployment, ostensibly aimed at rogue nations and not at Russia; however, despite repeated assurances, Moscow was unconvinced. Nonetheless, Putin did not mount serious resistance to the ABM withdrawal, probably because any protestations would have fallen on deaf ears anyway, which might have accentuated the limits of Russian influence. Instead, it appears a calculation was made that Russia might be able to pursue other priorities (such as keeping BMDs out of Europe, and slowing NATO's growth) in exchange for its muted response. Still, Russia did express concerns about missile defence, and Putin requested a new arms reduction agreement, which Bush was willing to consider, likely as a form of appeasement (Stent, 2014).

In 2002 Putin and Bush signed the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT), a minimalist treaty which, while committing both sides to overall reductions, did not oblige the destruction of stockpiles, nor impose a rigid system of compliance verification (Stent, 2014), and was silent on missile defence. This was a partial victory for Putin as it symbolized Russia's stature as an equal partner in weapons reductions and nonproliferation. SORT also brought Russia closer to parity with the United States at a time when budgetary constraints rendered the building of new offensive weapons impossible (Mankoff, 2009). Ultimately, despite some gains, the arms control agenda was derailed by Bush's insistence upon missile defence deployment in Europe, which intensified Putin's related concerns about NATO expansion, both of which brought the specter of US military power closer to Russia's doorstep.

NATO expansion, missile deployment, and the color revolutions

The accession of the Baltic States to NATO prompted Putin to express his expectation that NATO's expansion was now complete. Of special concern was the potential membership of

Georgia and Ukraine, viewed by Russia as historical allies, and well within the sphere of interest to which it was entitled. Political demonstrations in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004), known as the color revolutions, and motivated in some measure by anti-Russian sentiment and a pivot toward the West, were met with US sympathy. Both revolutions saw the replacement of Russia-friendly leaders with pro-Western ones anxious to make overtures to a cautiously supportive West. US support for the color revolutions, as well as Russia's response to them, notably its 2008 military intervention in Georgia, precipitated a serious deterioration in the relationship, which did not rebound until 2009. Russia's actions in Georgia, in response to concerns of a NATO presence there, as well as a Georgian attack on South Ossetia,⁴ prompted the White House to cut working level relations between the two nations, withdraw the agreement on peaceful nuclear energy cooperation from the Senate's consideration, and suspend the NATO-Russia Council (Charap, 2010: 281; Roberts, 2014).

This rift was further exacerbated by US outrage over Putin's domestic crackdown on political dissent, symbolized by the high profile deaths of Russian journalists critical of the Kremlin, and the prosecution of Russian billionaire Mikhail Khodorkovsky, as well as the gas supply and pricing standoff with Ukraine which had consequences for some European countries (Roberts, 2014). Emboldened by high oil and gas revenues, Russia's willingness to assert forcefully its security interests in the region effectively ended any serious talk of Georgian membership in NATO and muted the advocacy of an expanded NATO closer to Russian territory.

The perception in Russia was that NATO enlargement brought formerly Soviet countries into the West's orbit, sought to deny Russia its sphere of influence, and made possible the deployment of missile defence systems closer to Russia (Bush officials had discussed placing missile radar systems and interceptors in the Czech Republic and Poland). This served as a reminder to Russians that, not only had they lost the Cold War, but their influence did not hold the currency it once had. Its protests over enlargement seemed to have little impact, although they did drive NATO leaders to strike the NATO-Russia Charter, the effectiveness of which has been subject to the fluctuating tone of the relationship. Moreover, NATO's involvement in the Balkans, notably in Kosovo, operationalized a new European security arrangement that excluded Russia. Kosovo confirmed Russia's worst fears about NATO expansion: despite assurances to the contrary, NATO was prepared to take offensive action to defend against a perceived direct threat to a member state, even if against Russia's wishes, and they would be prepared to do so without a UN Security Council mandate (Lynch, 2016: 108).

Putin aired his grievances at the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest, calling upon NATO leaders to show restraint, to avoid pursuing their security at Russia's expense, and warning of possible retaliatory measures should expansion continue. Nonetheless, it was in Bucharest that Croatia and Albania were invited to join NATO, and talk of Georgian and Ukrainian membership was introduced. For Russia this symbolized the perceived decline of Russian power and the denial of its rightful interests.

The Munich speech

The frosty turn in Russia-US relations is best visible in Putin's speech to the 2007 Munich Security Conference in which he accused the United States of unilateral abuses of power, fomenting global instability, and selectively applying international law (Putin, 2007). Putin warned that US interventions, ostensibly to protect human rights, make things worse, as witnessed in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen, and Egypt (Kaylan, 2014: 15). The speech was a watershed moment in which Putin integrated Russia's long-standing concerns into "a structured broadside at a prestigious international gathering" (Stent, 2014: 149). For some, Putin's

speech was an apt response to an earlier address by US Vice President Dick Cheney in Vilnius, in which he vowed to defend “the frontlines of freedom in the modern world,” referenced the unfinished business of the color revolutions, and lectured about democracy, the rule of law, and free markets (Cheney, 2006). This was viewed as a rhetorical “shot across the bow” given his referencing of reform in Ukraine and Belarus, and his calling out of Russia’s illiberal government. When the Munich speech followed, not quite a year later, it was met with musings about a “new Cold War” (Roberts, 2017). Putin doubled down with his own comparison of US presumption of hegemony to Hitler’s Third Reich. The relationship had descended to an unprecedentedly low level. When Putin and Bush left office, relations were broken, and their predecessors perceived the need for a reset.

The Medvedev presidency (2008–2012): the reset

Presidents Obama and Medvedev seemed committed to a period of renewal in which the two nations could collaborate on missile defence, arms control, and re-establishing the United States and Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission. When Secretary of State Hillary Clinton presented her Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, with a reset button in 2009, hopes were high for what the reset could accomplish. By many accounts, the reset enjoyed some successes. It is difficult to know for certain the nature of Medvedev’s commitment to the reset due to the complexities of the tandem presidency; however, it appeared as though he was committed to pursuing the relationship. His public praise for neo-conservative icons Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher fostered optimism in the West that he may be someone with whom they could cooperate.

For Russia, the reset enabled better engagement with NATO, movement on a New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), and a return to membership talks with the World Trade Organization (WTO). From Russia it required supporting sanctions against Iran and greater cooperation generally in the UN Security Council, as well as cooperating with allies in Central Asia to facilitate NATO operations in Afghanistan. It also meant revival of the agreement on peaceful nuclear energy cooperation, which had been suspended in 2008, but which Obama successfully submitted to the US Senate for ratification in 2010. The warming of the relationship also awarded Russia the respect to which it felt entitled: President Obama acknowledged Russia as a key player on the world stage, without whose cooperation the United States’ most significant national security interests and priorities would be less easily achieved (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2010). Both countries benefitted from this renewed cooperation; the chief accomplishments of the reset are discussed below.

Bilateral Presidential Commission

The re-establishment of working level ties between the two governments symbolized its positive momentum. The United States and Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission was “dedicated to identifying areas of cooperation and pursuing joint projects and actions that strengthen strategic stability, international security, economic well-being, and the development of ties between Russian and American people” (United States and Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission, 2009). The Commission, co-chaired by the Presidents themselves, included key ties between Secretary Clinton and Minister Lavrov, as well as lower tier working groups in 15 policy areas: Policy Steering Group; Nuclear Energy and Nuclear Security; Arms Control and International Security; Terrorism; Drug Trafficking; Business Development and Economic Relations; Energy; Environment; Agriculture, Science and Technology; Space Cooperation; Health; Cooperation in Prevention and Handling of Emergency Situations; Civil Society; Educational,

Sport and Cultural Exchanges; and Military Cooperation (United States and Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission, 2009; Roberts, 2014). Just a few short years later, Obama suspended the Commission's work following Russia's 2014 actions in Crimea, diverting US funds for Commission operations to an aid package for Ukraine.

Arms control

START II, signed in 1993, was ratified by both countries, but was terminated when Putin announced Russia's withdrawal in 2002, in response to the US abrogation of the ABM Treaty. The Obama administration seemed to feel that reinvigorating the arms control agenda could reinforce the positive momentum of the reset, especially given that the 2002 SORT treaty was about to expire. New START sought to reduce deployed strategic nuclear weapons by half, and to establish new verification protocols (Roberts, 2014). Both sides agreed to strategic offensive weapons reductions and quickly ratified the treaty in 2010. Critics of new START felt it did not go far enough to restrict Russian development of new weapons technologies. On the Russian side, there was concern that New START was silent on missile defence, which was a key priority for Moscow. However, the agreement did reinvigorate the stalled arms control dialogue, which was integral to the credibility of each country's contributions to the non-proliferation regime (Roberts, 2014).

NATO expansion and missile defence

NATO welcomed Albania and Croatia during Medvedev's tenure, and recognized the membership aspirations of Georgia, Ukraine, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Montenegro. NATO's Membership Action Plan for Georgia and Ukraine came on the heels of Georgia's 2008 military conflict with Russia, and was enacted in parallel with US efforts to suspend the NATO-Russia Council. These efforts were US driven and were understandably met with concern by the Russian leadership. In fact, the day after President Obama's election, and well before the reset, Medvedev gave a speech denouncing Georgia, condemning the presence of NATO warships in the Black Sea, and threatening to respond to US missile defence deployment plans in Europe with his own deployment of Iskandar missiles in Kaliningrad, perilously close to NATO territory (Stent, 2014).

Concerns about NATO's enlargement and the potential deployment of missile defences near Russia's borders were raised during the New START negotiations, but Obama gave assurances that the United States would reconsider the Bush-era plans for missile defence. To the disappointment of some European allies, he announced plans to abandon the placement of missile interceptors in Poland and the Czech Republic (Stent, 2014). Continental missile defence was not abandoned, but the United States sought to negotiate its plans, in cooperation with Russia, through the NATO-Russia Council (Stent, 2014). This prompted Medvedev to attend the Lisbon summit and though this momentum was positive, Russian leaders (notably Prime Minister Putin) remained suspicious about the real motivations behind missile defence deployment in Europe. Even Medvedev, upon receiving assurances from the United States that its missile defence systems would not target Russia, still threatened Russian withdrawal from New START and the possible counter-deployment of Russian missiles in Kaliningrad (Stent, 2014). The reset enabled a dialog between the two countries, but it was not enough to resolve the issues dividing them.

Assessing the reset

Resetting Russia-US relations was never as easy as the term implied (English, 2009); however, there did seem to be a desire to elevate shared interests above disagreements. For the

United States, benefits of the reset included Russian logistical support to NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, which involved enabling a supply line from Latvia through Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan as an alternative to a route through Pakistan (Charap, 2010: 283; Roberts, 2014). As Charap (2010) notes, Moscow also agreed to support a proposal to enrich Iranian uranium, and even agreed to stronger sanctions against North Korea, and a new protocol on the disposal of weapons-grade plutonium (Charap, 2010: 283; Roberts, 2014). For Russia, the reset generated the investor confidence necessary to support the Russian purchase of 65 Boeing planes as well as a major investment commitment from Pepsi (Charap, 2010: 283; Roberts, 2014). The hope in Washington was that both members of the tandem presidency were on board with the reset and therefore the United States could expect policy continuity after Putin's 2012 re-election (Stent, 2014: 251). But this did not happen. Ultimately, the reset is probably best understood as a relic of the Medvedev presidency, quickly reversed upon Putin's return to the Kremlin.

The second Putin presidency (2012-present): the end of the reset

Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, just days after the Sochi Winter Olympics, was a transformational moment in Russia-US relations. The move prompted speculation about Putin's revanchist plans for the geopolitical order. Hillary Clinton likened Putin to Hitler in the 1930s (Rucker, 2014). While Crimea was undoubtedly a seminal moment, there were earlier signs of strain in the relationship, notably the revelation of a Russian spy ring in the United States and the WikiLeaks security breach, which involved the release of classified communications from the US Embassy in Russia which were of an incendiary nature. Additionally, the Justice for Sergei Magnitsky Act was gathering momentum in Congress. Passed in 2012, the Act instituted a travel visa ban for, and froze the assets of, Russian officials believed to be responsible for the unjust and inhumane treatment of Sergei Magnitsky, a Russian banker who had accused key Russian officials of tax fraud. He had been held in Russia, uncharged, for over a year, and subjected to inhumane incarceration, where he later died. For the Americans, the Magnitsky List was a form of protest of Russia's illiberal and authoritarian regime. Russia responded in kind, issuing a similar ban on high-level US bureaucrats. Putin lamented that the relationship had been "poisoned" (Stent, 2014).

The 2012 re-election of Putin marked a deeper divergence in Russia-US relations. Pro-democracy protests in Russia over allegations of voter fraud were said to be encouraged by Washington, and Putin swiftly reinvigorated his long-standing criticisms about NATO expansion, abuses of US power and the dangers of US unilateralism. In fact, Russia's 2014 military doctrine listed NATO as a direct threat to Russia, and asserted Russia's preparedness to defend its sphere of interest by any means necessary. This was a deliberate response to NATO's condemnation of Russian military aggression in Ukraine. Moreover, Putin's decision to grant asylum to NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden, who turned over classified documentation about US government surveillance programs to journalists in 2013, and is wanted in the United States for treason, reflected the growing wedge in the relationship. In his 2015 address to the UN General Assembly, Putin blamed the expansion of NATO for fomenting unrest in Ukraine (Putin, 2015). NATO enlargement had perpetuated the idea that Europe was divided, and it asked nations to choose between east and west, which has done little but destabilize the continent.

Since the beginning of Putin's third term, there have been no accomplishments of record in Russia-US relations. The relationship remains animated by concerns about the further expansion of NATO and its deployment of missile defences, but this climate of discord has given rise

to other issues that have come to dominate the agenda and which have possibly set back the relationship irreparably: Russia's 2014 actions in Crimea and the ongoing civil war in Syria.

Crimea 2014–2015

US praise for Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution was a sore point for Putin, as were the overtures made to Ukraine in response to the 2013 Euromaidan movement which sought closer ties between Ukraine and Europe. Pressure from Russia caused Ukrainian president Victor Yanukovich to announce his withdrawal from a trade deal with the EU, which caused widespread pro-EU protests in western Ukraine in fall 2013. Protests continued throughout the Sochi Olympics, and within days of their conclusion, pro-Russian forces seized government buildings in Crimea, and Putin deployed Russian troops, ostensibly to stabilize the region. Russia's military presence quickly led to annexation, with Putin issuing a presidential decree recognizing Crimea to be sovereign and independent. A questionable referendum shortly followed, which saw Crimea residents vote to unify with Russia. This was met with stern reprisal from the West, which accused Russia of violating the sovereignty of Ukraine and of instigating unrest in Crimea; sanctions and travel restrictions were imposed upon key Putin officials (Roberts, 2017).

Putin claimed that Russian support to the legally elected sovereign government of Ukraine was within the bounds of international law and that Russia had an ethical and legal obligation to protect and defend the interests of Russians in Ukraine who were at risk of being persecuted by the Western leaning, nationalist impulses threatening to destabilize the country. The Russian Constitution of 1993 confers upon the President a responsibility to protect Russian speakers abroad, and Putin argued that he had a responsibility to prevent a looming humanitarian crisis in Eastern Ukraine, given the escalation of hostilities there. Putin reminded the West of its own humanitarian rationale for the illegal Kosovo intervention in 1999, absent a UN Security Council mandate. Moreover, Putin argued that:

Russia's Black Sea Fleet was vulnerable to this regional instability, which constituted a strategic threat to Russian security and therefore Russia had the legal right to defend itself under Article 51 of the UN Charter. The US had made a similar case for its preemptive war of self defence against Iraq in 2003.

(Roberts, 2017)

Putin seemed to be deliberately employing US rhetoric in making his case: human rights and national security were reasonable justifications for the use of force. But Western leaders did not see it this way.

The absence of President Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry at the 2015 70th Anniversary Victory Day military parade in Moscow's Red Square symbolizes the hostility that now permeates the relationship. Failure to commemorate Russia's sacrifice in liberating Europe from Nazi Germany was interpreted by some as a denial of Russia's sacrifice and its rightful place in the global power structure (Roberts, 2017). At present it seems as though Russia and the United States are locked in a "war of values" (Lynch, 2016: 101). Putin defends Russia's right to protect its borderlands, and accuses the West of denying Russia its rightful place as a regional power, and the defence of its diaspora. On a global scale, the events in Crimea reflect Russia's rejection of the supremacy of Western values and its interpretation of international law, proferring a Russian alternative for those who do not subscribe to Western hegemony. While Putin

seemed to share with Yeltsin a desire to “square Russia’s interests in profitable and harmonious relations with the Western world with its intense desire to be recognized as a great power” (Lynch, 2016: 108), the former could be sacrificed in favor of the latter. The priority continues to be that “Russia be granted the status of dominant power along its historical borderlands” (Lynch, 2016: 108). Russia’s desire to be a respected regional and global power informs its actions both in its borderlands, and also in Syria, where it retains a powerful foothold due to its support for the Syrian regime. In these areas, key Russian and US interests are in conflict, and resolution does not appear to be on the horizon.

Syria 2011–2016

The continuing Syrian crisis illustrates the meaningful divergence of interests in Russia-US relations. Nonetheless, both seem to recognize the dangers of allowing Syria to bring them closer to the brink of conflict, and both have navigated the crisis carefully. Russia’s backing of Bashar-al-Assad, its financial and military support of his regime, and its willful obstruction of a UN Security Council mandate to intervene in the civil war, have impeded the US objective of removing Assad from power. Western efforts to force him out, to support anti-Assad rebels in Syria, and to combat the Islamic State (IS) in a now destabilized Syria, have been impeded by Russian support for the regime and an unwillingness to risk further destabilization of Syria should Assad be forcibly removed. Putin was reluctant to support a UN Security Council mandate in Syria, given the manner in which he claims NATO used its mandate to patrol Libya’s no-fly zone as an excuse to hunt Gaddafi. Putin was critical of US efforts to overstep the bounds of international law in a region whose instability was the consequence of US interference. In his 2015 UN address, Putin criticized those who presume to possess an “exceptional” entitlement to ignore international law and illegally circumvent the authority of the UN. He blamed the United States for meddling in the Middle East under the guise of democracy building when it is clear that the concern for human rights was a smokescreen for the pursuit of other interests (Putin, 2015). He connected the 2003 invasion of Iraq with the founding and growth of IS, and warned of the perils of working against Assad to combat terrorism (Putin, 2015).

A critical moment in the Syrian crisis occurred following Assad’s use of chemical weapons in Damascus in 2013; Obama issued a weak ultimatum about the consequences of using chemical weapons. Putin stepped in with an offer to broker a deal to commit Assad to destroying his stockpile. This met with suspicion in Washington given that Russia was a key supplier of weapons to Syria in the first place. Putin’s involvement inserted Russia into the resolution of the crisis and legitimized a regime that Western leaders sought to replace.

Prolonged civil war enabled IS to gain a foothold in a destabilized Syria, claiming a temporary caliphate in Aleppo in 2014 (though later reclaimed by government forces in December 2016). The intensified conflict between Assad and IS has further complicated the roles of Russia and the United States. With Russia supporting Assad, and both the United States and Assad fighting IS, cooperation between Washington and Moscow became necessary. When Russia announced a military operation to fight IS alongside Syria, matters were further complicated by the simultaneous presence of Russian and NATO troops in close proximity. In fact, concerns about battlefield contact were realized in March 2017 when Russian airstrikes accidentally bombed Syrian fighters being trained by the United States. Tensions continue as NATO allies and Russia define the conflict somewhat differently; they do not always perceive the same enemy, they disagree on tactics and also on precisely what the end goal should be. Despite a

temporary ceasefire late in 2016, brokered by Russia and Turkey to enable the evacuation of civilians, the Syrian civil war remains a source of tension in Russia-US relations.

The 2016 US presidential election

The 2016 US presidential election campaign exacerbated the deteriorating relationship. In his bid for the White House, Donald Trump brought Russia to prominence as an election issue. His praise for Putin met with extreme criticism from Hillary Clinton, who repudiated Putin sharply for his illiberal leadership of Russia and his dangerous support for Assad; she also alleged that Russian hackers had been responsible for a security breach at the Democratic National Committee, which saw the release of numerous private emails embarrassing to the party's leadership. Clinton accused Russia of trying to orchestrate a Trump victory. Never has Russia figured so prominently in a US election; as a result, by November 2016, relations between Russia and the United States were arguably at their lowest point in the post-Cold War period. The 2017 inauguration of Donald Trump ushered in a promise to repair relations, and possibly lift sanctions against Russia. But despite these assurances, serious concerns persist about personal and/or business connections between White House officials (and Trump himself) and the Kremlin. In fact, a number of key White House officials came under fire after it was revealed that they had undisclosed conversations with Russian intelligence officials during the election campaign, and prior to Trump's inauguration. Just how deep these Russian connections go is as yet unknown; however, it is worth noting Trump's sharp reversal of President Obama's stance toward Russia. He avoided calling for an investigation into allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, leading Congress to undertake this role. Trump has also talked of lifting sanctions on Russia, has celebrated better relations with Putin, has been publicly skeptical of NATO, and has blamed Russia's annexation of Crimea on Obama, forcefully warning that, if he (Trump) had been President, Putin would have stayed out of Ukraine (Bradner and Wright, 2016). As Congress investigates the depth of the Trump administration's ties to the Kremlin, Russia-US relations hang in the balance.

Russia-US relations: as good as it gets

Russian foreign policy toward the United States has been influenced by its leadership and by its diminishing global status. In response to the perception of US imperviousness to Russia's plight, evidenced by the forward march of NATO enlargement, the intent to deploy missile defences in Europe, and an overall failure to acknowledge Russia's regional power entitlements, Russia has pursued a reactionary foreign policy. Russian leaders felt as though the United States treated post-Soviet Russia like a defeated power, leaving it out of the post-Cold War European order. As Sakwa (2015) notes, Russia, treated as an enemy, eventually became one; the Crimea crisis can be viewed as the culmination of 20 years of exclusion and neglect. The animosity that now permeates Russia-US relations may well endure, in part because Russia today is better placed than it was in the 1990s to be taken seriously as a major power, and it is willing to act in support of this goal. Putin has been relatively successful at insulating Russia's borderlands from encroachment by other powers (Lynch, 2016); this is key to projecting power on the world stage. The stronger Russia perceives itself to be, the more emboldened it is to obstruct US initiatives. It is reasonable to expect an equally strident Russia in the future.

Ultimately, the record of post-Cold War Russia-US relations is mixed. A periodic convergence of interests has enabled some accomplishments (loose nukes, arms control, cooperation in counterterrorism), but long-standing irritants (NATO enlargement, missile defence, criticism of

Putin's leadership) have animated the relationship, perpetuating a discordant climate in which serious disagreements (Syria, Crimea) threaten to permanently polarize the relationship.

Perhaps Putin was right when he suggested that Russia-US relations were poisoned. Both nations have brought baggage to the relationship, some of it understandable given the relatively recent history of adversity. It does seem as though Russia's desire to be powerful, and relatedly, to offer a legitimate alternative to those who would resist US global dominance in so doing, has driven the two nations into a war of values. But, if the past 20 years offer any lessons, it is that the two countries will sometimes have to work together to accomplish their most important goals. Antagonism as an operating principle helps neither. Both must avoid lapsing into "new Cold War" rhetoric when relations are tested. The trick will be to find open channels of communication despite a meaningful divergence of values and interests. It is in both countries' interests to do so.

Notes

- 1 The 1994 Partnership for Peace program promoted bilateral cooperation and stable security relationships between NATO and other Euro-Atlantic area nations. The PfP was seen by potential countries desirous of NATO membership as a stepping stone to NATO entry. For NATO, the PfP was used to incentivize democratic reform, and also to build cooperation in key areas of defence planning, civil-military relations, joint military exercises, and emergency preparedness. Russia agreed to join the PfP in 1995.
- 2 Formally the 1997 *Founding Act of Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security Between NATO and Russia*, the Charter sought to promote mutual trust and cooperation, and contained provisions for creating the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council, a mechanism for regular and emergency consultation and decision making chaired by the Secretary General of NATO. Russia established a permanent mission to NATO for consultation in security, conflict prevention, joint operations, information sharing, policy planning, arms control and proliferation issues, and terrorism. The Permanent Joint Council was suspended by NATO in 2014 after Russia annexed Crimea.
- 3 The 1991 US Cooperative Threat Reduction Act, also known as the Nunn-Lugar Act, provided American funding and training to assist in the retrieval, dismantling, and decommissioning of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons in the former Soviet Union.
- 4 South Ossetia, a breakaway republic in Georgia, is comprised of Russian speakers whose independence has long been disputed by the Georgian government. When President Mikhail Saakashvili ordered an invasion by Georgian troops in August 2008 Russia successfully intervened and officially recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

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