

US-Russia Relations
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I’m pleased to have the opportunity to speak to this important conference about US policy toward Russia. The timing is ideal, not only because the new Administration is still settling in, and still struggling to define its strategy toward Moscow.

Three years ago this month, Russia illegally annexed Crimea and laid the groundwork for its ongoing campaign to destabilize Ukraine. That moment marked the end of a period of more than twenty years when the countries of the West looked to Russia as a partner. Of course, even before 2014, Russia had demonstrated a pattern of destabilizing countries in its neighborhood, particularly Moldova and Georgia. But Russia’s aggression against Ukraine – including the first changing of borders by force in Europe since World War II – represented a new strategic reality, and a wake-up call for the United States and its Allies.

Three years, later, the Russian challenge to the international order has become even more serious: Russia has not only continued its aggression against Ukraine; it has also engaged in *political* aggression against our societies, using cyber-attacks, disinformation, and influence operations to affect the outcome of elections and undermine confidence in our democratic institutions.

In essence, Russia is trying to undo decades of progress toward a more stable and integrated Euro-Atlantic community, and to go back to the days when Russia dominated its neighbors through force and coercion. It aims to weaken and divide NATO and the European Union, and to reduce their attractiveness to other European nations. It even sponsored an armed coup d’état in Montenegro last year to derail its accession to NATO. All of this is driven by a determination to preserve the Putin regime’s grip on power by discrediting any Western-oriented alternative and distracting the public from Russia’s economic decline.

And Moscow’s challenge to the international rules-based order now extends beyond Europe to Syria and the broader Middle East. Its aggressiveness is underpinned by a massive upgrading of Russian military forces, both conventional and nuclear, in every domain – some of it in violation of arms control obligations like the INF Treaty.

So, while we should always seek constructive relations with Russia, we should approach the relationship without illusions. We need to recognize that it is Russia’s actions which have fundamentally changed our relationship, and that any change for the better depends on changes in Russian behavior.

To get there, we need a comprehensive strategy that builds upon the combined material and moral strength of our close Allies and partners in Europe and around the world. As in the Cold War, we must engage with Russia, but we must do so from a position of strength.

A comprehensive strategy should have several elements, starting with bolstering deterrence and defense. As you know, I spent the last five years as Deputy Secretary General of NATO, and I am pleased to say that the Alliance is in a much stronger position than it was three years ago – militarily and politically – to meet the Russian challenge.

Since 2014, NATO has carried out the most significant increase in its collective defense posture for a generation. Allies have begun to reverse the decline in defense spending, with total spending up 3% last year. They have increased NATO's ability to reinforce any Ally at short notice, increased the scale and frequency of military exercises, boosted cyber and missile defenses, strengthened intelligence sharing, and sped up decision-making in a crisis.

At the Warsaw Summit last July, Allies decided that credible deterrence also requires additional forces on the ground. So they agreed to deploy multinational battalions in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, and to increase NATO's presence in southeastern Europe as well. Now, if Russian troops (or little green men) crossed NATO's borders, they would immediately face troops from across the Alliance, from both sides of the Atlantic, rather than just national forces.

The US is playing a key role in implementing these decisions, leading the battalion in Poland, and contributing additional combat capabilities under the European Deterrence Initiative. EDI is critical to the credibility of NATO's defense and deterrence posture, and I hope it will continue to receive full support from the new Administration and the Congress.

Let me add that the US is not carrying an outsized share of the burden in these efforts. The UK, Canada and Germany are leading NATO's battalions in the three Baltic States, and 12 other Allies are providing units. And 7 European Allies are serving as lead nation for NATO's rapidly deployable "spearhead" force. So there's good transatlantic teamwork. Nevertheless, there's more that our Allies need to do in the coming years, including providing more of the follow-on forces and enablers needed to reinforce the forward battalions, and investing more in air and missile defense, precision strike, and anti-submarine warfare capabilities to counter Russian A2AD capabilities

Allies must also strengthen their resilience in areas like cyber defense; civil preparedness, and protection of critical infrastructure. Resilience is the first rung of the deterrence ladder.

Moreover, we can't just circle the wagons and strengthen NATO's 28 members alone. Allies also need to bolster the capabilities of Russia's neighbors who are directly threatened by Moscow, and strengthen NATO's partnerships with Sweden and Finland, who can help the Alliance in the Baltic Sea. NATO's "packages" of support for Ukraine and Georgia have helped with defense reforms, but would benefit from more resources.

Bilaterally, the US non-lethal defensive weapons assistance and training has helped Ukraine's armed forces prevent further Russian incursions in the Donbas. We should consider expanding

this support – quantitatively and qualitatively – to include lethal systems such as anti-tank weapons and air defenses, if Russia continues its aggression in Eastern Ukraine.

While it's not our focus today, NATO needs to look South as well as East when it comes to strengthening neighbors. A bigger effort to build the defense capacity of partners in the Middle East – such as Iraq, Jordan or Libya – could address the root causes of terrorism and migration.

Russian interference in the US presidential election and its similar efforts in Europe call for a strong response at the national level, but there is also a role for NATO and the EU as well.

Nationally, we need to ensure the integrity of our election processes and institutions against cyber-attacks and foreign manipulation; devote additional resources to detecting and analyzing Russian propaganda and influence operations; work with social media platforms to label or take down false stories before they go viral; and expand radio, TV and internet broadcasting – especially in the Russian language – aimed at debunking disinformation and “fake news.” We shouldn't fight propaganda with propaganda, but project a positive narrative of what the West stands for.

Multilaterally, we should urge our NATO allies to support a bigger Alliance role in countering influence operations, disinformation and “active measures” by Russia. These are not traditionally problems within NATO's mandate, but defending our societies is just as important as defending our borders. Ideally, the US and NATO should join forces with the European Union, in forging an integrated strategy for countering hybrid warfare.

That brings me to how to engage with Russia. First of all, we need a unified approach with our democratic allies, one that is consistent with our shared values and principles.

This means, most importantly, that engagement should address head-on the fundamental reason why relations have deteriorated in the first place – Russia's aggression against Ukraine and its violation of the rules that have kept the peace in Europe since World War II.

Time is of the essence. In recent days, Russia has increased its military and political pressure on Ukraine. The Minsk process, led by Germany and France, has prevented a further deterioration of the situation up until now, but does not provide sufficient leverage to induce Russia to reverse course and withdraw its forces and its proxies from the occupied territories.

Stronger, high-level US diplomatic engagement, working with Kyiv, Berlin and Paris, may be necessary to achieve real progress and avoid another intractable frozen conflict. I would therefore urge the Trump Administration to make solving the conflict in Eastern Ukraine the litmus test and the essential first step in any reengagement effort with Moscow.

Any “bargain” should be contingent on fully implementing the Minsk agreements and restoring Ukrainian sovereignty over the Donbas, including control of its international borders. Anything less would reward Russian aggression and only embolden Putin further.

Even with a solution to the Donbas, Crimea would still be a long-term problem, since the international community cannot – and should not – ratify Russia’s illegal actions there. But the restoration of Ukraine’s sovereignty over Donbas would allow us to turn the page and ease most of the sanctions. NATO and Russia could resume practical cooperation, and we could get back to building a cooperative security order in Europe and beyond.

If Russia turns the Donbas into another frozen conflict, however, the US and its Allies will have no choice but to increase the pressure on Russia even further by tightening sanctions and stepping up military and economic assistance to Ukraine.

Pending a solution to the Donbas, we need to be realistic. The first goal should be, to use the Cold War terminology, “peaceful coexistence.” As the most urgent priority, we should try to restore stability, to reduce the risk of incidents escalating to unintended conflict, and to increase transparency and predictability of our military activities.

This means reinforcing agreements like INCSEA and the OSCE Vienna Document, reinvigorating military-to-military exchanges both bilaterally and in the NATO-Russia Council, reviving CFE negotiations and US-Russian Strategic Stability Talks. It means developing CBMs to alleviate Russia’s exaggerated concerns about NATO missile defense and about NATO’s forward battalions in Poland and the Baltic States. It means maintaining the New START Treaty (and hopefully reducing its ceilings) and, most urgently, restoring Russia’s compliance with the INF Treaty.

In short, until we can resolve the core issues that divide us, we need to manage a competitive relationship, drawing on the Cold War playbook.

We should, of course, also try to find areas for cooperation on geopolitical topics where our interests align or overlap: defeating ISIS and other terrorist threats, stopping North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs, stabilizing Afghanistan. Even here, however, cooperation will not necessarily be easy. CT cooperation was never very substantial, even in the friendly days after 9/11, and we see differing agendas in Syria and in what may be the next focus area, Libya. I still need to be convinced that Russia is not motivated first and foremost by the goal of diminishing US influence, rather than fighting common enemies. But we should try our best.

Those are my thoughts on the main elements of a strategy towards Moscow. But let me say one more thing. We should also continue to support the aspirations of the Russian people by speaking out for democratic rights, engaging with opposition politicians and NGOs, and encouraging more people-to-people contacts. This is, realistically speaking, a long-term effort. President Putin, fearful of a “Russian Maidan,” will continue to make it very difficult to carry out such engagement. But we shouldn’t give up on efforts to reach out to the successor generation and support what remains of Russian civil society, since they are the keys to Russia’s future – and to better relations between the West and Moscow – over the longer term (i.e. after Putin departs the scene).