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INTO THE UNKNOWN: U.S.—RUSSIAN RELATIONS UNHINGED

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The last quarter century turns out to have been merely the transition between two worlds: one, the familiar, shape-shifting, sometime dangerous world of the Cold War; the other, a looming new world whose worrying contours and formidable hazards are not yet quite in place, but already gnawing in unsettling ways at our consciousness. They lurk in tensions over access to water that foretell how acute the conflicts will be when the effects of climate change set nation against nation over real and widening resource scarcities and extreme weather events upend the lives of whole populations. They are foreshadowed in the increasingly fitful tension between efforts to preserve a critical level of harmony in U.S.-Chinese relations and a growing perception on each side of the threat posed by the other. They reside in the deep animosity that envelopes Russia's relations with the West and with the United States in particular. And they are there in the swelling discontent among an exploding number of actors over the global status quo—over who gets what, when, and how; over the rules and who makes and/or breaks them; over the unequal distribution of material welfare; and over when and whether might makes right.

How these gathering forces will reshape the existing international order remains unclear, but what most observers call the post-World War II “liberal order” is under assault, even if many disagree over whether the threat is to aspects of that order or to its very being. What people have in mind when they speak of the post-war liberal international order are the institutions created at the close of the Second World War and the principles they were intended to promote: the territorial integrity of states and peace through collective security enshrined in the United Nations; relatively free trade, economic development, and orderly market adjustments entrusted to international financial institutions; and, for the major democratic powers, progress toward the “democratic peace.”

From the beginning it was challenged by the Soviet Union and other communist states as too much the creation of, by, and for the major capitalist states. That challenge, however, faded with the collapse of the Soviet Union and its extended empire. As the twentieth century drew to a close, most assumed, without much reflection, that the liberal international order, for all its imperfections, had triumphed, and everyone could move on. The powerful integrative forces of globalization, erasing borders, entangling economies, and fusing cultures; the effects of modern technology, particularly the internet; and the failure of physically planned economies in authoritarian states seemed to guarantee its permanence.

In the 1990s and even into the first years of the new century, few in any quarter, including in the United States and Russia, thought much about the possibility that the pathologies stirring in an interdependent new post-Cold War world would significantly challenge this presumed sturdy new reality. Few thought the anti-globalization street protests at G-20 meetings; the spread of intra-state violence in weak societies; the growing Sunni-Shia war within Islam; and even the spreading plague of terrorism, while worrying, were relevant to the stability of the larger context within which they were unfolding. In fact, however, the feeble initial protests against globalization were warning cracks in the crust of a deep anger over three decades of growing

economic inequality unaddressed by political elites in too many societies, anger that in its surging anti-establishment/anti-globalization fury did threaten key elements of the liberal international order. The mayhem and violence in the Islamic world would eventually create the flows of desperate people that further fueled the populism and nativism that turned key populations against the openness toward trade, immigration, and trust in economic integration integral to that order. And the rise or restoration of other major powers—China, Russia, India, Brazil, Turkey—discontented with who held sway over the existing order, and ready to challenge the rules and rule-makers added to the strains.

Hence, U.S. and Russian leaders, as they plot their foreign policy, including toward one another, are operating in a suddenly tumultuous context. The international setting is shifting under their feet, and the challenge facing them is not merely to address the issues roiling their bilateral relationship, but to figure out how to do so when all about them is in motion.

The challenge is still greater than they appear to realize. For designing Russia policy toward the United States and U.S. policy toward Russia, when key aspects of the international order are shifting, while scarcely easy, is an unavoidable and comprehensible task. More formidable is the challenge they have not yet grasped—the challenge of dealing with one another in a fashion anticipating what could go terribly wrong as the new world order takes form.

Were one to extrapolate the trouble brewing today into an image of this emergent world, it would have three linked engines of disorder and instability.

First would be the return of strategic rivalry among the great powers, most dramatically influenced by a cold war-like competition between China and United States, but transformed into a still more destructive configuration should the standoff between Russia and the United States harden into something lasting. In that event no price will be higher than the one paid for the failure of the major powers, in the forefront Russia and the United States, to begin taming the perils of a new multipolar nuclear world, where non-nuclear as well as nuclear technologies, the weakening of nuclear norms, and the growing discrepancy in the way nine nuclear powers think about the use of nuclear weapons steadily increase the likelihood that these weapons will be used.

Second, the coming disarray, if climate change eludes solution, bad in itself, will be vastly more devastating, if the great powers choose to exploit rather than mitigate its effects.

Third, great power strategic rivalry will lead to great power irresponsibility, and great power irresponsibility will further undermine global governance, particularly if the core tenets of the liberal international order—the territorial integrity of states, equal sovereignty, and relatively free economic exchange—continue to erode.

So, Russian and U.S. leaders, as they contemplate what next in the wake of the U.S. presidential election, are not only making their choices as the ground under them churns,

the choices they make, whether they realize it or not, will bear directly on how dystopian the coming global order will be. Neither they nor much of the political establishment surrounding them may yet be thinking in these terms, but others less encumbered need to.

The context for contemplating the possible direction U.S.-Russian relations may take in the new Trump era, however, is clouded not only by the tumult in the world outside, but by the political watershed the United States is now entering. Like the transformation recasting the international setting, the denouement of this passage will not come soon, but the extraordinary shocks Trump's election has dealt political realities in the United States have brought into sharp relief the forces at work—three in particular, all three of which are mutually reinforcing.

The first is institutional fatigue. For all the strengths of the United States 18th century constitutional order, important features, especially ones that have become warped over the years, are doing serious damage to effective governance. None more than the increasingly distorting effects of manipulated electoral maps that place in office—both at the state and national level, and twice including the presidency—candidates who have lost the popular vote. The gerrymander in the redistricting process, the electoral college, and many Senate rules have long been recognized as dated and in need of change, but suddenly the degree to which they are eroding the legitimacy of election results and accentuating the polarization of U.S. politics has stirred a genuine reform movement. This, however, will meet stiff opposition from those who benefit from things as they are, likely leaving the issue unresolved.

Meanwhile, the polarization that institutional fatigue reinforces drives the second converging force: government dysfunction, particularly at the national level, manifest in the inability of the Congress and the executive branch to deal adequately with key national issues, such as immigration, health care, educational reform, the environment, and infrastructure renewal, not to mention the now openly raw issue of massive income inequality. The failure of government to deal with fundamental problems, including the anxieties of the shrinking middle class, has gelled into a powerful anti-establishment/anti-government sentiment that Trump rode to power, and, more importantly, that creates a volatility whose climax is unpredictable.

This volatility is deepening, because of a third slow-gathering, but profound development: the historic demographic transformation that over the next quarter century will end the white population's majority status. The dimly felt unease among many over this increasingly conspicuous trend converged last November among angry white voters convinced that no one in Washington cares about them. Out of this combustible mix now flows a potent current of populism, with its anti-establishment/anti-government, nativist thrust. Thus, the United States enters a period of fundamental domestic uncertainties at the same time uncertainty in the world at large mounts, leaving the context for U.S. foreign policy both at home and abroad suspended.

While Russia lives within the same unsettled international environment as the United States, inside the country this appears to be a period of political stasis. Foolhardy, however, would be the observer who believes this will endure indefinitely. Whether events begin breaking free a few years or a decade from now, Russia too almost certainly has a date sometime in the foreseeable future with the tumult of internal change. As a consequence divining the course that the two countries will follow in dealing with one another, hard even in the near-term, grows immeasurably more difficult over the longer run as the large-scale uncertainties at the external and internal level work their unpredictable effects.

The Starting Point

If the larger picture defies prediction, the immediate future is scarcely more transparent. In the U.S. case, the known unknowns are numerous. They begin with the question of how much deck furniture Trump is willing to overturn in order to pursue an “America First” strategy. More fundamentally, how likely is it that he really means to abandon a leadership role for the United States in global politics and substitute a stark realpolitik approach to foreign policy issues? Already in the fourth week after a tumultuous first three weeks in office, he and his team had retreated on their more extreme positions: on a “One China” policy in a renewed pledge to Xi Jinping; on the Iran nuclear agreement in a pledge to Federica Mogherini; and on the U.S. mutual defense pact with Japan in a pledge to Shinzō Abe. Toward Russia the language quickly hardened in the speeches of senior foreign and defense policy officials. Thus, early signs suggested that the radical departure implied by the President’s pre- and post-election comments would melt away once harsh reality and difficult choices set in. But who could say for sure?

If initially the Russian leadership welcomed Trump’s election, because of his apparently warmer attitude toward Russia, presumably a deeper source of optimism rested on the hope that the new president intended to confine U.S. policy to the pursuit of more narrowly defined national interests, rather than the traditional role the United States had long assigned itself. If that prospect, however, began to wane or simply lapse into confusion, the Russian leadership had only the vague utterances of Trump and one or two of his entourage on which to fall back. And soon these too gave way to a confusing reformulation designed to reassure nervous allies and cope with the political fallout over Russia’s perceived role in the presidential election.

That the Russian leadership wanted a less hostile U.S. administration and a less confrontational relationship with the United had become plain even before Trump entered

the White House. But whether this was a realistic possibility simply led to the next set of unanswered questions.

First, when Trump spoke of cooperation with Russia as “a good thing” did he have a more or less concrete notion of what that cooperation would entail and how it was to be constructed? Or was it merely a vague impulse, whose only real candidate was the war against ISIS? Even when, at the Munich Security Conference in late February, 2017, Vice-President President Pence attempted to fill in the blanks by saying that Washington intended to “hold Russia accountable, even as we search for new common ground,” did he and the president have any idea of where and how Russia was “to be held accountable” and what might form “new common ground?”

Second, given the strong anti-Russian consensus that prevailed in the U.S. Congress, the media, and large parts of the expert community, with echoes among many of the president’s own foreign and security policy team, would he, if he wished, be able to extend a hand to Russia?

Third, as Russian observers began to suspect and Trump appeared to confess rather awkwardly in his February 16 press conference, the political storm around his team’s Russian contacts during the election campaign threatened to force his hand and, for political reasons, compel him to dump talk of doing “deals” with Putin’s Russia.

The answer to the first question strongly suggested that the idea of a more cooperative relationship with Russia was more impulse than a substantive concept. (True, this did not rule out the possibility that, if a process began, progress would give content to the idea.) The answer to the second question seemed less clear. At first glance the cautioning the Administration would get from NATO allies and members of his own foreign policy team, combined with the stiff resistance of key Republican Senate voices, such as Senators John McCain, Lindsey Graham, and Tom Cotton, backed by Democratic leaders, would seem to be a major obstacle. But, in early February, the refusal of the Senate Republican leadership to sign on to the threat of Senate hardliners to tie the Administration’s hands on Russian sanctions by writing them into law as well as the willingness of others in Congress to entertain conditionally the idea of taking a different tack toward Russia suggested that a determined White House would have more freedom of movement than it at first appeared.

That, however, then defaults to a third question: even assuming the Trump administration wants to move away from the current U.S.-Russian Cold War and can surmount the political opposition that it will face, is it capable of fashioning a strategy that will take it where it wants to go—provided it knows where it wants to go? Is it able to imagine a coherent, workable agenda, and then put ends and means together in a way advancing it? Early indicators are not promising. When the president casually mentions using sanctions relief to reach agreement on nuclear arms limitations, a thought repeated by the vice-president, one does not have much confidence in their grasp of diplomatic reality. Nor does that change, if, as reported, senior officials were

struggling to develop a strategy by which they could, in using the carrot of cooperation, drive a wedge between Russia and Iran.

Even if and when all of these questions are answered, two others remain. In the United States fundamentally different notions of what drives Russian foreign policy are at war. Which of them dominates in this Administration will determine how hard it will try and far it will go in shifting the thrust of its Russia policy. For now the widely shared assumption in the Congress and much of the media is that “Putin’s policy” is not a function of developments in the outside world, but of the regime’s internal requirements: it needs an external enemy, hence, the anti-Americanism; it cannot afford democracy creeping toward Russian borders, because of its contagious effects; it substitutes crude appeals to nationalism, such as the annexation of Crimea, when economics weaken as a source of legitimacy. A second assumption, which also rules out significant and durable cooperation with Russia, has it that Putin believes the West led by the United States has been and always will be hostile to Russia and determined whenever Russia rises to weaken it wherever it can; therefore, the first priority of Russian foreign policy must be to counter these efforts, rather than put much faith in finding agreement.

A third assumption that best captures attitudes within the Obama administration, and that would have characterized a Clinton administration, sees Russia as a declining, but still consequential power, bent on undermining a U.S.-led international order, tactically adept, but insecure, and, if the United States remains firm, self-confident, and patient, it can over time build a more stable U.S.-Russian relationship. Off to the side there is a fourth assumption that, were the Trump administration to embrace it, could serve as a basis for policy. As articulated by Thomas Graham, it 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 its 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.¹ If the United States does not distort or inflate the challenge this represents and, if it is willing to live with a relationship that is neither black or white, but a mix of competition and cooperation, something sturdier and more constructive than at present can be constructed.

Alas, a fifth assumption, one that envisages, even exhorts a durable U.S.-Russian strategic partnership, remains a weak afterthought, with little chance of guiding U.S. policy toward Russia any time soon. It attributes no special hold of Russian history over contemporary Russian foreign policy, perceives the ambitions and fears impelling Russian behavior as the product of events, not of irresistible urges or careful planning, and views the large 21st century global security challenges facing both countries as not merely a basis for but an imperative requiring U.S.-Russia collaboration.

¹ Thomas E. Graham, “The Sources of Russian Conduct,” *The National Interest*, August 25, 2016, available at: <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-sources-russian-conduct-17462>

Finally, the answer to a last question will also govern the direction that U.S.-Russian relations will take over the next four years: how far is Russia's leadership willing to go in making the necessary compromises allowing the process of normalizing relations to advance? Its president and foreign minister have said that they are ready to do their part. But they have also insisted that U.S. intentions are fundamentally malevolent, not because of the predilections of any particular presidency, but because the eroding basis for U.S. dominance in international politics pushes the system to excesses that destabilize regions and threaten the interests of others. True, they lay special blame on the Obama administration and confess that they are happy it is gone—as well as relieved that it was not replaced by a Clinton administration. But if their apprehensions over U.S. foreign policy are deeper, their hopes for the Trump administration must be bounded, and particularly so, when they contemplate all of the unanswered questions.

Second, the Putin leadership's sense of foreign policy success (of having weathered a sanctions regime that is tottering, of having outlasted a U.S. leadership intent on punishing Russia, of having outmaneuvered the West in the Syrian conflict, and of having found political cracks to exploit within Western societies) may also dampen any urgency in offering more than token change in tone and minor policy concessions. At a minimum, nothing indicates that the Russian leadership is focused on anything other than the immediate future. Nothing suggests that Putin and those near him have any inclination to frame Russia policy toward the United States in terms of the larger global challenges bearing down on both countries, and, therefore, the need to fashion a partnership capable of addressing them.

Where to?

While it is a fool's errand to predict the course of U.S.-Russian relations over even the next year or so, one can contemplate various alternative directions they might take. Start with the easiest (or safest) prospect, a continuation of the status quo. Perhaps the leadership on both sides will soften their tone, but, because mutual mistrust is so thickly encrusted and the problems that set them at loggerheads defy easy solution, the relationship will inch along, avoiding confrontation, but generating little positive interaction. As now each will regard the other as the source of, not the solution to its foreign policy problems. Presidents will meet and senior officials will attempt to find areas of common ground, but the product of their efforts will be modest and subject to reversal when things go wrong. And rather than labor over a coherent agenda to guide U.S.-Russian relations, each will focus their attention on other foreign policy priorities viewed as more important, more promising, or more urgent.

Given the powerful inertia currently constraining relations, it would not take much to keep the relationship on its present path. It would only require disappointed hopes on one side or the other, either because those hopes were too high, or, more likely, because the effort to test them was too timid. Or, on the U.S. side, the political obstacles at home may thwart the Trump administration's best intentions or possibly a battle over its domestic agenda will crowd out significant foreign policy initiatives. Or the suspicions over the Trump camp's earlier dealings with Russia might well—indeed, already seemed to—encourage him and his team to adopt a tougher approach toward Moscow. And, on the Russian side, the temptation to push too far or to place too much of the burden for change on the U.S. side would also leave the two countries stuck where they are.

Alternatively, unfortunately the risk of a sharp deterioration in relations also remains. Were the violence in Ukraine to spin out of control, drawing in Russia and frightening the United States' European allies, even if the Trump administration wished to stay aloof, it is doubtful that it could. The same would be true of a collision over any other part of the world deemed vital by each side. While this is the usual way analysts envisage a turn to a darker scenario, two other paths seem to me more probable. The United States and Russia veered into their new Cold War not as the result of a single event, although the Ukrainian crisis finally drove them over the cliff, but through the long, slow accumulation of ever-more acute grievances. Similarly a downward path would, again, likely be from the cumulative effect of multiple tensions left to fester. Or, alternatively, the descent might occur more as it did in the last part of George W. Bush's first administration, when key aspects of U.S. foreign policy, such as the rush to war in Iraq, troubled the Russian leadership far more than the Administration's Russia policy. Were the Trump administration to act recklessly in going to war with Islam, or in dealing with Iran, North Korea, China, or elsewhere, creating an indirect threat to Russia, even if its policy toward Russia remained relatively benign, the damage would be done.

Or, at the other end of possibilities, conceivably the two governments could halt the drift deeper into a hardened adversarial relationship and begin turning in another more positive direction. Progress, however, will not come easy. Standing in the way are not simply the obvious impediments—the deeply layered mistrust built up over the last two decades, the stories each has been telling itself about the other, and the feeling in many quarters on both sides that, as former Deputy Secretary of State William Burns put it in a *New York Times* op-ed, a “fundamental disconnect [exists] in outlook and about each other's role in the world,”² together with the number of areas where their interests do genuinely conflict.

Less obvious are the trends set in motion over the last three years with the collapse in relations, and that now have a momentum of their own. First, Russia and the United States have again made the other a defense priority. Each now, as in the original Cold War, treats the other as unambiguously a major military challenge, and the thrust of each side's

² William Burns, “How We Fool Ourselves on Russia,” *The New York Times*, January 7, 2017.

military programs and defense spending is being reoriented to deal with what is seen as the recrudescing threat posed by the other side. Even a thaw in the relationship will not change that. Each side will continue to plan for a range of military contingencies involving the other (including the United States plus NATO against Russia and Russia against the United States plus NATO). And each side will increasingly design and justify the strengthening of its military forces, including the modernization of its nuclear forces, as a necessary response to the programs of the other side.

Second, while restoring the practical forms of cooperation that had been launched under the U.S.-Russian Bilateral Presidential Commission's twenty working group as well as the working groups under the NATO-Russia Council would seem to be an important and sensible step in any effort to put the relationship back on track, doing so will be hard. A lot of glass has been broken; ties too long severed cannot be easily mended; participants will be leery of investing heavily in collaborations so easily undone.

Third, while President Trump and some around him may bring a fresh eye to the relationship, President Putin and his most trusted advisors have a settled view of U.S. policy—and it is harsh. Their reflex will be to return to it whenever trouble intervenes, as it surely will.

So, with these limitations in mind, what might the two governments do? What should they do? On the first count, they already have begun retreating from the steady barrage of shrill rhetoric hurled at the other side, and signaled their desire to get back to a more normal and businesslike relationship. Notwithstanding the U.S. side's return to sharper language, if this spirit prevails when they engage one another, particularly when the two presidents meet, some of the ice will begin melting. Finding subjects to talk about should not be difficult. The trick will be finding ways to talk about them that lifts the conversation out of its current rut.

That may be easiest around the Syrian nexus. Controlling the wild mix of warring parties in the Syrian civil war will not be easy and achieving a political settlement may be impossible, but there is a basis for political progress in Syria that Washington and Moscow can both live with: this would be a secular minority Alewite regime (with or without Bashar al-Assad) that is striving for some meaningful accommodation with the Sunni majority population. Even without a major diplomatic breakthrough, if the violence in Syria can be contained and if the U.S. and Russian militaries will temporarily risk trusting the other side, the two should be able to achieve at least a loose coordination of their military efforts against the Islamic State.

Beyond that, however, movement on the three other issues blocking a way forward will require more fundamental adjustments. The three obstacles are Ukraine, cyber hacking, and the fate of the INF treaty. Each will need to be addressed. None can simply be set aside or worked around. To do so, however, both governments will need, first, to suspend, at least momentarily, their worst assumptions about the other side, and, second, pause and rethink where their real interests lie in each case.

In the Ukrainian case, despite Trump's apparent readiness to walk away from the problem, reality will not accommodate him. The constant risk of escalating violence and the undiminished threat perceptions of allies will, as key members of his administration already understand, force him to make progress on Ukraine a part of any effort to find common ground with Moscow on other issues. That will not be on the basis of the full implementation of the Minsk II agreement. The half of the agreement pointing to a political settlement is a dead end. It will not happen. Hence, progress will have to be achieved on other grounds, beginning with the other half of Minsk II—that is, securing a stable and predictable peace in Donbass.

No side—neither Russia, the United States, Europe, Ukraine or the separatists—can get what it currently wants. Each needs to weigh afresh what realistically are its optimal interests. For Russia, is that not to begin reversing its increasingly poisonous relations with Ukraine, rather than counting on the failure of the Poroshenko regime to give way to a more pliable alternative, and hoping that the unsettled picture in the east will help bring it about? Provided Russia's economic interests are protected, Ukraine's entry into NATO is foreclosed, and everyone's goal is to make Ukraine a bridge between Europe's two halves, is it not in Russia's deeper interest to normalize relations, including constructive economic relations, with its largest and most important neighbor?

On the Western side, including the Americans, should it not be in their interest for Russia to become part of the solution to the Ukrainian crisis rather than its source, but on terms that work? Rather than making the political settlement of the war, let alone the return of Crimea, a precondition for progress, does it not make more sense for the United States and the Europeans, first, to focus their attention on ensuring Russia's full support in securing the peace in Donbass and then on facilitating a larger and more helpful Russian role in addressing Ukraine's economic problems, and to do so by together reconsidering the conditionality by which the West's non-Crimean sanctions would be lifted?

In short, only if the United States and Russia reframe their priorities in the Ukrainian case can they achieve progress, and only if they achieve something that all sides see as progress, can the U.S.-Russian relationship move forward. The same is true of the problem surrounding the issue of cyber hacking. That is, the United States, Russia, and major European countries, need to rethink the noisy, vindictive way they are currently handling what has become a heavy weight on the relationship, and, quietly, in bilateral and multilateral contexts, begin negotiating where the lines are that must not be crossed. As they go about their so-called cyber "skirmishing"—that is, collecting whatever information they can by snooping in the computer systems of friends and foes—surely one such forbidden line will be the overt manipulation of stolen material to influence electoral outcomes and by extension clandestine collaborations with participants in those elections.

The third looming hazard, Russia's asserted violation of the 1987 INF treaty, although out-of-sight, buried among obscure nuclear arms control issues, may be the least amenable

to solution. And, unless a solution is found, the consequences will reach much beyond this specific agreement. With the operational deployment of the SS-8, Russia's new ground-launched cruise missile, Russia, from Washington's point of view, is now in formal violation of the treaty. What the United States will do in response is not clear— or even that the new president fully understands the intricacy of the issue and its four-year negotiating history. But if, as the mounting evidence suggests, the Russian military, with some sympathy on the part of political leadership, values the weapon system more than the treaty, there may be no available solution. In that case, whether the Trump administration lives with the violation and responds with countermeasures or abandons the treaty, the fate of the INF agreement seems sure to guarantee that further steps in strategic nuclear arms control will have little chance with the U.S. Congress.

If the two governments make an effort to improve relations, they can do so even if the nuclear arms control process stalls. But no improvement can advance far or survive the inevitable tests to come, if the tensions over Ukraine, Syria, and cyber hacking are left unabated. Progress in these cases, however, will simply open a door that is now closed; it will not ensure that the two countries, in Trump's phrase, "get along," or, more importantly, that they develop a working relationship allowing them to contain their disagreements and concentrate on areas where they can cooperate.

For that to happen the two sides will have to engage at a deeper level. They will need to find some way 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. This would best be done in a formal, sustained, well-focused strategic dialogue between senior officials who have the full confidence of their national leaders. Alas, there is little evidence that leadership on either side has either the will or the capacity to do this. Senior figures in the Obama administration doubted that there would be any utility in such a dialogue, convinced as they were that the conflict in interests and purpose was too great to be usefully discussed. The Trump administration, at this stage, appears too scattered and ill-focused to understand the need for and role of a strategic dialogue, let alone how one might be organized. And the Russian leadership seems uninterested in developing a strategic vision for U.S.-Russian relations or seriously exploring the obstacles that stand in the way.

So, 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. It might include an expanded agreement to regulate military operations risking dangerous air and sea incidents along the European coast, something both sides say they favor. It could include reviving some the working groups under the U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission. There may be efforts to intensify economic cooperation outside the areas affected by the sanctions regime or the sanctions regime may be softened in limited and tentative fashion. Perhaps encouraged by the Europeans, NATO and Russia may toy with trying new confidence-building measures (CBMs) or constraining military exercises where NATO and Russian forces meet in Central Europe.

In short, the watchword of this positive but limited turn will be “averting confrontation” or “skillfully managing” rather than hoping to “permanently resolve” the basic tensions dividing the two countries. This is as ambitious as most commentators in both countries, including the most constructive, dare be. It falls short—far short of what should be the calculations driving U.S. and Russian policy.

Back to Basics

If 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, should not be fixed on narrow near-term preoccupations. It should not be without strategic vision. That it is in both countries ought to be a major source of concern, and a focus for fresh and bolder thinking among serious analysts.

Start with the United States. It cannot be in the long-term U.S. interest to see the liberal international order for which it has labored and sacrificed over more than seven decades crumble into disarray. It cannot be in its interest to see the norm of open markets and unimpeded trade and investment collapse; the ideal of preserving states’ sovereignty and territorial integrity—even when honored in the breach—cast aside; or the notion of counting on international institutions, rather than unilateral fiat, to keep the peace discredited, even if it has itself more than once abused it. Hence, it remains in the U.S. interest to play an active role in defending and strengthening that order.

Trump’s slogan of “America first,” if it has any meaning, pushes in the opposite direction. The more fully formed world view of his new alter ego, Stephen Bannon³, stresses “economic nationalism” and strident anti-globalism, a nativist sense of national sovereignty, and a skeptical attitude toward alliances and international institutions. It is the liberal international order’s antithesis. If it prevails within the White House—or even if it competes with other more traditional views urged by others in the Administration—it will spell a period of a turbulent U.S. foreign policy marked by incoherent aims and unpredictable actions.

Because of the Trump administration’s disheveled sense of direction, compounded by the deeper political upheaval seizing the country, the United States will not soon produce

³ *Currently Assistant to the President and White House Chief Strategist in the Trump administration.* – **Ed. note.**

a foreign policy in equilibrium, let alone one adequate to the choices it needs to make. Before it loom two profound challenges—neither of which, in present political circumstances, is it capable of addressing. 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 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 a broad 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 have 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.”⁴ 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 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.

⁴ Zbigniew Brzezinski and Paul Wasserman, “Why the World Needs a Trump Doctrine,” *The New York Times*, February 20, 2017.

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, such 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 also 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.”⁵ 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.”⁶

Only if Russia does its part, however, does any of this have a chance—and China too. 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. Addressing in any way adequate to the grave challenges that Russia and the United States will face over the next two decades has two prerequisites. The first requirement is that each side discipline the casual assumptions that it has allowed to misdirect 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.

On the first score, each needs to step back from the narrative currently driving policy. The United States can legitimately object to much in Russian behavior, but assuming, as senior Obama administration officials have, that the things to which it objects are because “the Russians have moved into an offensive posture that threatens the very international order,” and that it is determined “to encourage the ‘breakup’ of the European Union, destabilize NATO, and unnerve” the United States, overdrawn as it is, both deepens the new Cold War and encourages the wrong

⁵ 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>

⁶ Dmitri Trenin, *Should We Fear Russia?* (Polity, 2017), pp. 106 and 109.

foreign policy responses.⁷ Similarly, Russia is not alone in criticizing U.S. policy in Iraq, Syria, and even Ukraine, but to assume, as Russia's leadership does, that all of this is a consciously malevolent policy intended ultimately to undermine Russian national security and destroy its current political leadership guarantees an inflamed and largely counterproductive Russian response.

Second, the common assumption on both sides that the value divide between the two countries makes anything other than limited and sporadic cooperation impossible is not merely crippling, but inverted in its logic. Historically few common enterprises—take for example the Coal and Steel Community in Europe or NATO in the early stages or the fore-runners to the World Trade Organization—would ever have been launched, if common values had been the prerequisite for cooperation. More often, compatible, if not always common values are the slow, hard-earned product of cooperation.

Finally, the second critical requirement. Sketching the outlines of a modified liberal international order is the easy part—for, notwithstanding their objections to the status quo and the United States' overweening role in it, neither China nor Russia wish to overthrow a better version of it or have an alternative to it. Harder is designing a strategic vision leading there, along with an agenda and strategy that are mutually acceptable and politically feasible.

In *Return to Cold War I* I have tried to do that for the U.S.-Russian component.⁸ 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, as said earlier, how dystopian the emerging international order will be. They begin with the need for U.S. and Russian leadership in bringing greater stability to a new and increasingly dangerous multipolar nuclear world. The perils present during the original Cold War remain—namely, the occurrence of a nuclear accident (of which 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, however, the chance of an inadvertent nuclear conflict, poses a growing risk, and, if unchecked, raises uncomfortably high the likelihood that nuclear weapons will be used at some imaginable point in the 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 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 equally important those of China—to prevent this new nuclear era from ending in tragedy.

⁷ Evan Osnos, David Remnick, and Joshua Yaffa, "Active Measures," *The New Yorker* (March 6, 2017), p. 44.

⁸ Robert Legvold, "Return to Cold War" (*Polity*, 2016), pp. 138-164.

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 faceoff 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 out of the inertia of their currently narrowly defined priorities carry on, eyeing the military steps taken by the other side, beefing up their and their allies' response, focusing on the likely range of contingencies for which their forces would be used, and girding themselves for that moment. Or, provided 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 that introduces an enclave of stability whose resources and leadership can lead in addressing the 21st 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 large. 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 first 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 how disrupted the broader international setting will be 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. How they choose, beginning now, 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 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 it most wants 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 sleepwalked through its defining moments—and paid the price.

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