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## US-RUSSIA RELATIONS IN THE TRUMP ERA: DOMESTIC POLARIZATION AND FOREIGN POLICY

**Giovanna DE MAIO**

*Visiting Fellow at George Washington University,  
Nonresident Fellow at the Brookings Institution*

**Emmanuel DREYFUS**

*Research Fellow at IRSEM*

### ABSTRACT

During Donald Trump's presidency, US-Russia relations significantly worsened. On top of the tensions over the Ukrainian and Syrian crises, new ones have emerged in other areas, from arms control to geopolitical power politics in the "Greater Middle East". Through an analysis of the main drivers of the relations between the US and Russia over the past four years, this paper explores how the US domestic polarization over how to deal with Russia resulted in ineffective sanctions, weakened cooperation on arms control, and ultimately allowed Russia to gain geopolitical room in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and to continue strengthening its ties with China. The first part of this paper retraces the evolution and polarization of the debate on Russia in the United States, while the second discusses how such trends have resulted in sanctions being the main US foreign policy tool towards Russia. After providing an overview of the impact of the standoff with Russia on arms control, this study shows how the US intervention fatigue has given Russia greater room for actions in the MENA region, but also how deteriorating relations between Moscow and Washington ultimately facilitated more solid relations between Moscow and Beijing. Lastly, this paper discusses the main challenges ahead in the bilateral relation in light of Joseph Biden's recent election as president of the United States.

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## INTRODUCTION

Starting in 2014, with the annexation of Crimea and Russia's support for the rebellion in Donbass, Moscow abruptly returned to the world stage as a "strategic competitor"<sup>1</sup> for the United States. As geopolitical competition grew more intense in several theaters – from Syria to Afghanistan – Russian interference in the US presidential election in 2016 further worsened a declining US-Russia relationship and marked a substantial shift in the American perception of Russia. From an issue of traditional bipartisan cooperation in Washington, it has become a toxic partisan question in domestic politics.

Given President Donald J. Trump's personal connections<sup>2</sup> to Moscow and his numerous Russia-friendly statements,<sup>3</sup> many worried that he would pursue a pro-Russian foreign policy. However, after the four years of the Trump presidency, the relations between the two countries have deteriorated and reached their lowest point since the early 1980s.<sup>4</sup> Sanctions against Russia are not only still in place but their number has increased and their reach has been extended, due to a strong push in the US Congress after 2016. Meanwhile the United States withdrew from two arms control treaties with Moscow. However, Trump's ambiguous narrative vis-à-vis Russia, along with his alienation of American allies, have undermined the efficacy of these sanctions, blurred the goals of the American foreign policy on Russia and eventually allowed Moscow to gain geopolitical leverage in crucial security areas.

## FROM A BIPARTISAN TO A PARTISAN ISSUE: DOMESTIC POLARIZATION

Before the US-Russia relation plunged into a negative spiral after the 2014 events in Ukraine and the Russian interference in the 2016 US elections – following which the US National Defense Strategy referred to Russia as a "revisionist power" – the two countries had embarked on a cooperative partnership that began with a policy of "reset" at the start of the presidency of Barack Obama.

After the signing of the New START treaty on arms control in 2010,<sup>5</sup> cooperation between Washington and Moscow on Iran<sup>6</sup> led to the signing of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA), on an enhanced dialogue on Afghanistan and an increased military cooperation in the field of anti-terrorism.<sup>7</sup> However, after Vladimir Putin returned to the presidency in

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1. US Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 US National Defense Strategy*, January 2018.

2. Congressman Eric Swalwell, *Russia: Trump and his team's ties*.

3. "Donald Trump's Statement on Putin/Russia/Fake News Media," *Lawfare blog*, June 18, 2013.

4. This period (1979-1985), labelled as the Second Cold War, was characterized by rising hostilities between the Soviet Union and the US, such as the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan or the Euromissiles crisis.

5. Signed in 2010 between the US and Russia, the New Start Treaty limits each country to 1,550 deployed nuclear warheads and 700 deployed missiles and bombers. It is the sixth and currently the last remaining bilateral strategic arms control agreement.

6. For instance, Moscow agreed on canceling the sale of S-300 air defense system to Teheran.

7. Sam Charap, "[Beyond the Russian Reset](#)," *Russian Matters*, June 25, 2013.

2012, the “reset” policy experienced a marked slowdown: the US adopted the Magnitsky Act in December 2012 targeting Russian officials responsible for the death of Russian tax lawyer Sergei Magnitsky,<sup>8</sup> while Russia retaliated with specific visa restrictions and banned US citizens from adopting Russian orphans. Meanwhile, in August 2013, it granted asylum status to Edward Snowden, a move that led to the cancellation of a meeting between Obama and Putin scheduled that same month.

Following the events in Ukraine in the spring of 2014, the US completely set aside the reset policy and, jointly with the EU, implemented a series of sanctions against Russia, targeting individuals and entities involved in the annexation of Crimea, in the military intervention in Donbass and in the shooting down of the Malaysian Airlines flight MH-17. Additional sectoral sanctions were applied to targeted sectors such as the Russian defense industry.<sup>9</sup>

Bipartisan consensus on Russia was definitively gone by 2016, when Russia meddled in the US presidential elections through a combination of cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns, and exacerbated domestic divisions in the country over the election of Donald Trump. After that, the relationship with Russia ceased to be a foreign policy matter and it became the subject of toxic domestic divisions along partisan lines. In this respect, under the Trump presidency, both Republicans and Democrats in Congress significantly changed their traditional approach to Moscow.

On the one hand, the Republican Party abandoned its traditionally hostile stances towards Russia. Since the Cold War, Republicans have been the champions of the anti-Communist crusade in the name of freedom and national security – which is still reflected in their present opposition to any form of so-called “socialist policies”. Such stances, as James Goldgeier points out,<sup>10</sup> were so pervasive inside the party that even then-president Ronald Reagan, who had run in 1980 against the “Détente” policy of easing relations with Moscow implemented by Jimmy Carter, was harshly criticized by his own party ahead of his first meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev in Geneva in November 1985.<sup>11</sup>

Fast forward to the Obama years, Republicans were particularly opposed to the president’s policy of reset, maintaining that it was a sign of weakness vis-à-vis Russia following the 2008 Georgian-Russian War. As a matter of fact, in 2012, the Republican candidate challenging Obama for the presidency was Mitt Romney, who had often been described as hawkish on Russia – Obama had compared Romney’s approach as akin to Cold War politics.<sup>12</sup> After the Ukrainian crisis, Republicans continued to argue that the response of the Obama administration was feckless and that it ultimately enabled Putin to pursue his destabilization endeavors in eastern Ukraine.

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8. After 2016, the scope of this act was extended globally to include any human rights offender.

9. European Parliament, [Sanctions over Ukraine: impact on Russia](#), 2016.

10. James Goldgeier, “[Republicans used to compare talking to Moscow to talking to Hitler. Trump’s startling new tweet shows that’s changed.](#)” *The Washington Post*, December 14, 2017.

11. The Geneva Summit was held in 1985. It was the first time that President Reagan met with Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev to discuss the arms race.

12. Nicolas Ross Smith, *A New Cold War? Assessing the Current US-Russia Relationship*, Palgrave Pivot, 2020, p. 61.

Yet, after the 2016 elections, the Republican Party (Grand Old Party, GOP) changed its approach to Russia completely. The party did not just support Donald Trump when he was campaigning for a new Russian reset, but turned a blind eye on election interference – including cyberattacks targeting democratic candidate Hillary Clinton and the Democratic party. Also, the GOP did not criticize Trump for his personal connections to Moscow, even after it became known that the president’s son, Donald Trump Jr., had met with Russian lawyer Natalia Veselnitskaya to gather damaging information on Clinton. In this regard, the investigation conducted by special counsel Robert Mueller on Russian interference during the 2016 US elections produced a 400-page report compiling information establishing Trump’s connections with Russia, and providing evidence of Russian interference in US elections and of the Russian interest in supporting Trump for the presidency. While not exonerating him, Mueller did not find enough evidence to label Trump’s actions as criminal,<sup>13</sup> and Republicans once again turned a blind eye to the president’s actions.

However, it was only with the impeachment inquiry opened in 2019 that Republicans more clearly and concretely changed their approach towards Moscow. Following the leaks from a White House whistle-blower denouncing Trump for using his presidential power to “solicit foreign interference,”<sup>14</sup> House speaker Nancy Pelosi initiated the impeachment process against the president. The House Intelligence, Oversight and Foreign Affairs committees held hearings with several witnesses to investigate Trump’s call to congratulate the newly-elected president of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky. During this call, according to the notes released by the White House, Trump threatened to withhold military aid to Ukraine unless Ukraine started an investigation targeting Hunter Biden, the son of his then probable Democratic opponent Joe Biden. Hunter Biden had been working at the Ukrainian energy company Burisma while his father served as vice-president of the United States.

During the hearings, Republicans in the House Intelligence committee openly supported the false narrative regarding Ukraine meddling in the 2016 elections on behalf of Hillary Clinton, which, in the words of the then-National Security Council adviser on Russia and Europe Fiona Hill, was “a fictional narrative that has been perpetrated and propagated by the Russian security services themselves.”<sup>15</sup> As the Senate voted against impeachment and the whole inquiry fell apart, the discourse around Russia kept on rolling in a toxic spiral in which the only common ground between Republicans and Democrats was the implementation of new sanctions against Moscow: the first to show that the administration was tough on Russia in spite of Trump’s narrative, the second in the hope of retaliating against election interference and cyberattacks.

Meanwhile, the Democratic Party also flipped its traditionally open approach towards Moscow after 2016. As stated above, during the Obama administration, democrats widely supported a reset with Moscow that brought some progress in the bilateral relation on several theaters. Nevertheless, Democrats were also reluctant to publicly hold Russia

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13. US Department of Justice, *Report on the Investigation Into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election*, March 2019.

14. US House of Representatives, Permanent select committee on intelligence, *The Trump-Ukraine impeachment inquiry report*, 2019.

15. US House of Representatives, Permanent select committee on intelligence, *Opening Statement of Dr Fiona Hill*, November 21, 2019.

accountable for its human rights violations and breaches of the INF treaty as they planned on repealing the 1974 Jackson Vanick<sup>16</sup> Act and had initially tried to prevent the passing of the Magnitsky Act.<sup>17</sup> While the reset was falling apart after the 2014 Ukraine crisis, it was only with the election of President Trump, and the evidence of Russian interference, that Democrats set aside their hopes for a cooperative engagement and embraced a fierce crusade against Moscow.

Because of the bitterness of the disenchantment following the election results, Democrats exaggerated their claims and blamed Moscow for Trump's victory, maintaining that the President was nothing more than a puppet in Putin's hands.<sup>18</sup> Doing so, Democrats failed to frame electoral interference as a national security question, which would have made it a bipartisan issue addressing the domestic patterns and divisions that led to such a result. Granted that neither Republicans nor Democrats had a positive view of Russia, opinion polls also reflected a shift in the electorate as favorable views of Russia among Democrats dropped from 26% to 17%, and rose among Republicans from 19% to 30% between February 2015 and February 2019.<sup>19</sup>

With time, geopolitical and economic competition with China slowly replaced Russia as both the number one security threat for the United States and the most widely discussed subject in Washington's foreign policy environment. The China issue also found a wide consensus across party lines. Meanwhile, Trump's attempt at bringing Russia back at the G7 table,<sup>20</sup> to line up Moscow against Beijing, was strongly opposed by the Democratic Party.

## A PROLIFERATION OF SANCTIONS

With such high level of partisanship, sanctions have become the primary tool of the United States' Russian policy, mostly implemented in Congress thanks to Democrats siding with some Republicans as they tried to balance the president's accommodating approach towards Russia and its leaders. On multiple occasions, President Trump claimed that "nobody has been tougher on Russia"<sup>21</sup> than himself. Indeed, during his administration, the US made the decision to provide lethal weapons to Kyiv,<sup>22</sup> a move that the Obama administration had considered but did not implement amid concerns on endangering the peace process and the opposition of France and Germany, both involved in the Minsk Peace Process, to supplying Ukraine with lethal weapons. However, as diplomacy was set aside and no progress had been made, Congress and the White House battled over the imposition of new sanctions.

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16. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *The State of Human Rights and the Rule of Law in Russia: U.S. Policy Options*, Testimony by Assistant Secretary of State Philip H. Gordon, December 14, 2011.

17. Jamila Trindle, "The Magnitsky Flip-Flop," *Foreign Policy*, May 15, 2014.

18. Ginger Gibson, "Clinton accuses Trump of being Putin's 'puppet'," Reuters, October 20, 2016.

19. Lydia Saad, "Majority of Americans Now Consider Russia a Critical Threat," Gallup, February 27, 2019.

20. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *No Russia in G7 Act*, October 17, 2019.

21. White House, *Remarks by President Trump before Marine One Departure*, July 29, 2020.

22. "US agrees to provide lethal weapons to Ukraine," AP News, December 23, 2017.

The most significant measure came in July 2017, when a new framework for sanctions, the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act<sup>23</sup> (CAATSA), dramatically extended the reach of US sanctions with a greater space for "secondary sanctions" – which apply to any foreign individual or entity trading with an individual or entity subject to primary sanctions and designated on a list established by the Office of Foreign Assets Control.<sup>24</sup> CAATSA was particularly important since it allowed Congress to play a greater role in the introduction of new sanctions, whereas previous sanctions were mostly adopted through executive orders. This move was motivated by Congress' fear that President Trump could eventually ease or lift sanctions towards Moscow without congressional authorization. As a matter of fact, in his statement in reaction to the passing of CAATSA, Trump expressed displeasure in the enforcement of potential sanctions decided by Congress.<sup>25</sup>

As an example, in 2017, Republicans and Democrats prevented Trump from removing the sanctions that Obama imposed in 2014 following the Russian annexation of Crimea, and those specifically targeting the Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska. Moreover, the United States continued to impose primary and secondary sanctions on several Russian and non-Russian entities, such as Rosoboronexport, Russia's arms export agency, commercial entities doing business with the Syrian and the North Korean regimes and those involved in the construction of the TurkStream and Nord Stream 2 pipelines.<sup>26</sup> Russian individuals suspected of having participated in the poisoning of former Russian secret agent Sergei Skripal were also targeted. Because of their extraterritorial reach and given the number of companies involved in the construction and in the finalization of the Nord Stream pipeline, such sanctions have raised concerns among EU countries, especially Germany<sup>27</sup>, which complained that the United States for using Russia's so-called "energy weapon" as a pretext to promote US exports of natural gas to Europe. In a statement written in February 2020 on behalf of the European Commission, Josep Borrell declared that "the EU does not recognize the extraterritorial application of US sanctions, which it considers to be contrary to international law".<sup>28</sup> For now, no European company has been affected by American sanctions under the Protecting Europe's Energy Security Act (ESAS), which has nevertheless already disturbed the construction of the pipeline: in December 2019, the Swiss company Allseas halted its participation to North Stream 2.<sup>29</sup>

While in practice sanctions proliferated in a variety of sectors, they were not necessarily accompanied by a clear enforcement nor use for diplomatic leverage. Even when the sanctions imposed against Deripaska's aluminum company Rusal resulted in dramatic losses for his business, the Trump administration did not leverage this to extract concessions from Russia and it eventually removed Rusal from the sanctions list in January 2019.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the Trump administration delayed the application of sanctions for the assassination of Skripal. In addition, ahead of the 2018 midterm elections, Trump prevented Congress from

23. US Department of the Treasury, *Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act*.

24. Office of Foreign Assets Control, *Ukraine/Russia-related sanctions*.

25. White House, *Statement by President Donald J. Trump on signing the CAATSA*, August 2, 2017.

26. US Department of State, *Protecting Europe's Energy Security Act (PEESA)*.

27. "Nord Stream 2: Germany unhappy with new US sanctions," *Deutsche Welle*, June 14, 2020.

28. European Parliament, *Answer given by Vice-President Borrell*, February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

29. "Allseas stops Nord Stream 2 works citing US sanctions," *OffshoreEnergy*, December 23, 2019.

30. Patricia Zengerle, "Rusal shares soar, aluminium falls as U.S. lifts sanctions," *Reuters*, January 27, 2019.

passing legislation aimed at deterring foreign election interference by passing an executive order that copied the language of the bill while crossing off the automatic renewal of sanctions.<sup>31</sup>

More recently, the US has not joined its European allies in imposing sanctions on Russian officials linked to the poisoning of Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, the measures adopted by the Treasury Department against Ukrainian oligarch and alleged Russian agent Andriy Derkach – who had met with Rudy Giuliani, Donald Trump’s personal lawyer, in 2019 – as he stood accused of having meddled in the American elections are likely to have a very limited impact on his assets and thus on the Kremlin’s behavior.

While it is true that the US policy towards Russia was quite fragmented during the past four years, given the excessive accumulation of sanctions that were not supported nor enforced by the executive branch, it is also true that the lack of coordination between the US and Europe in some domains (on the poisoning of Russian agents abroad and on election interference) weakened their efficacy. In addition to it, the permanent nature and increasing number of sanctions significantly reduced incentives for Russia to change its behavior whereas it would be inclined to do so if both the White House and Congress agreed on targeted sanctions that could be quickly eased or removed in exchange of proven efforts and advanced negotiations.

## DIPLOMACY OFF THE TABLE: ARMS CONTROL

The case of arms control offers a valid example of how Trump’s lack of diplomatic strategy endangered Western security and resulted in an advantage for Russia.<sup>33</sup> With the withdrawal from the Intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) and Open Skies treaties, the US interrupted a pattern of arms control that had unfolded since the 1970s and led to a fruitful engagement. The relevance of the INF, in particular, lies in the fact that this treaty eliminated this specific kind of forces, instead of setting limits to their existence.

Unlike the Obama administration, that detected Russian breaches of the INF treaty and decided to put pressure without public accusations, the Trump administration perceived Russian actions as a violation of the US sovereignty and proceeded to withdraw from this treaty, which ultimately freed Russia from any formal restrictions. Some argued that Donald Trump’s decision was driven by a willingness to compete freely with China – which is not bound by the treaty and has recently been increasing work on its intermediate range nuclear forces. However, and even if it had been the case, denouncing Russian violations only exacerbated tensions and cannot be construed as a valid substitution to an

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31. White House, *President Donald J. Trump Is Working to Protect Our Nation’s Elections from Foreign Interference*, September 12, 2018.

32. European Council/Council of the European Union, *Use of chemical weapons in the assassination attempt on Alexei Navalny: EU sanctions six individuals and one entity*, October 15, 2020.

33. Ricardo Alaro, *“Ideology, not Russia or China, explains US pullout from the INF,”* Istituto Affari Internazionali, February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

American diplomatic engagement that should have ideally tried to bring Beijing within this framework, rather than destroying such an important security structure.

Similarly, in May 2020, the US announced its withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty<sup>34</sup> – which promoted transparency and trust between its members by allowing unarmed aerial surveillance flights over their respective territories – following alleged Russian violations of the document which further weakened US-Russia security relations. Moreover, the New Start Treaty, a legacy of the Obama reset signed in April 2010 and which limits the development of strategic nuclear warheads and intercontinental delivery systems by both the US and Russia, is also under threat as Washington has so far refused to agree on its extension, even though it was expected to be automatically renewed in February 2021.

Such deterioration of the bilateral relationship also reverberated at the United Nations Security Council, where Russia frequently sided with China to block several resolutions initiated or backed by the US and EU member states, such as the ones condemning human rights violations in Syria, Venezuela and Myanmar. In December 2019, Moscow and Beijing also blocked a statement by the UNSC condemning an attack by protesters against the US embassy in Baghdad.<sup>35</sup> While such opposition at the Security Council does not represent an element of novelty in the traditional US-Russia relationship – especially on human rights –, it does testify to the dramatically reduced room for cooperation between the US and Russia.

## US INTERVENTION FATIGUE: MORE ROOM FOR RUSSIA IN THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST

President Trump's electoral campaign in 2016 firmly insisted on the necessity for the United States' to "end endless wars, bringing the soldiers back home"<sup>36</sup> in order to reduce the human and financial cost of foreign interventions. As a result, his administration focused on trying to find ways to implement the withdrawal of US troops from Syria, Afghanistan, opting for more targeting drone strikes instead, and keeping their distance from the turmoil in the Mediterranean Sea. However, while some of these trends had already started during the Obama administration, the fact that these actions were not coordinated internationally and/or supplemented through an effective strategy to avoid power vacuums, left room for Russia to advance its own geopolitical and security interests.

In Syria, Moscow's intervention in 2015 paved the way for a growing role for Russia in the Middle East and led to Bashar al-Assad's regime taking the upper hand in the conflict and getting back control of the vast majority of the Syrian territory. Despite some degree of stabilization in the fighting between the rebels and Assad's regime, there was no sign of progress in the US-Russia dialogue over the fate of Syria, where tensions could escalate as a result of increased military involvement.

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34. US Department of Defense, *DOD Statement on Open Skies Treaty Withdrawal*, May 21, 2020.

35. United States Mission to the United Nations, *Media Note: Attack on U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, Iraq*, January 6, 2020.

36. White House, *President Donald J. Trump Is Taking A Historic Step To Achieve Peace In Afghanistan And Bring Our Troops Home*, February 29, 2020.



Unlike the previous administration, President Trump authorized the use of the American military against both Syrian and Russian military objectives on several occasions. As a punitive measure against the chemical attack conducted by the Syrian regime against the rebel stronghold in Idlib in early April 2017, the US targeted a Syrian airbase with 59 Tomahawk missiles.<sup>37</sup> In February 2018, the US launched an airstrike against a group of pro-regime fighters – which included Russian mercenaries from the so-called Wagner private military group – which started an attack aimed at retaking oil fields located in eastern Syria controlled by US-supported Syrian Democratic Forces.<sup>38</sup>

While these strikes aimed at pushing back against Assad’s regime and its allies, the Trump administration demonstrated a lack of strategy and a general unpreparedness for their collateral effects. Advertised as a way to “bring the soldiers back home,”<sup>39</sup> the sudden and uncoordinated withdrawal of troops from northern Syria – an area that had been protected and patrolled by Kurdish people, allies of the United States in the fight against Daesh – had dramatic consequences as it provided Turkey with an avenue to establish control over this contested region.

Prior to filling the vacuum left by the United States in northern Syria, Turkey had significantly deepened its involvement in the Syrian crisis thanks to an hitherto unseen *rapprochement* with Moscow. After the relations between the two countries almost collapsed after a Russian Su-24 was shot down in November 2015, Ankara and Moscow reconciled in the summer of 2016, a shift that was materialized by Erdogan’s visit to Moscow where he extended his apologies for the pilot’s death, and where Moscow gave its green light for the Turkish military’s Operation Euphrates Shield in northern Syria which was launched in late August 2016. The defense partnership between the two countries quickly expanded, from high-level consultations over military operations in Syria to cooperation between their defense industries, which culminated with the purchase by Ankara of S-400 air defense systems. The deal was finalized in December 2017 and the first deliveries of S-400 systems to Turkey started in July 2019, which provoked unequivocal consternation in both parties in Washington. Ankara’s participation in the F-35 program has been suspended but, despite repeated calls by Congress, no sanctions against Ankara were passed.

Similarly, in North Africa, Moscow has taken advantage of the American disengagement that started under the Obama administration. In Libya for example, Russia has benefited from European uncertainties to play on two fronts: if it has publicly endorsed the UN-backed government of Fayeze al-Sarraj, but it has more concretely sided with his opponent, General Khalifa Haftar in Tobruk, alongside Egypt. Moscow’s support for the Tobruk camp was materialized, among other things, in the deployment, starting in the fall of 2018, of hundreds of mercenaries from the Wagner Group who participated in various unsuccessful military offensives against the Tripoli government.<sup>40</sup> Growing concerns

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37. US Department of Defense, *Trump Orders Missile Attack in Retaliation for Syrian Chemical Strikes*, April 6, 2017.

38. Emmanuel Dreyfus, “[Private Military Companies in Russia: not so quiet on the Eastern Front](#),” IRSEM Research Paper 63, October 2018.

39. Donald J. Trump, “[Coming Home](#),” Twitter, October 25, 2019.

40. US House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *The GRU, Yevgeny Prigozhin, and Russia’s Wagner Group: Malign Russian Actors and Possible U.S. Responses*, Testimony by Kimberly Marten, July 7, 2020.

about Russian involvement in Libya has been voiced by several American officials, including the US Africom Director of Operations, Brigadier General Bradford Gering, who declared in June 2020 that “Russia’s sustained involvement in Libya increases the violence and delays a political solution.”<sup>41</sup> But it is very unlikely that the United States will seek to intervene in North Africa given that both Republicans and Democrats are running on a platform advocating ending endless wars, especially in a region no longer perceived as key to the national security of the United States.

Beyond the Middle East, Russia has also capitalized on the “US intervention fatigue” to promote its geopolitical and security interests in Afghanistan. As the United States embraced a substantial withdrawal of troops from the country between 2014 and 2019, Moscow started eyeing a stronger role in the Afghan peace process. For example, Russia organized a peace conference gathering representatives from the Taliban, Afghanistan’s High Peace Council and from a dozen countries in November 2018; it organized additional intra-Afghan talks in February 2019, attended by representatives from the Taliban and other Afghan political forces but not from the official government in Kabul. Russia’s leverage over Afghanistan remains limited and Moscow publicly supports the US-led peace process that recently received a boost under president Trump. Still, he has also announced further withdrawals of troops by the end of the year. But Afghanistan is far from being secure and, without a US and NATO presence, Moscow is likely to seek more influence and opportunities in the region. Furthermore, without commenting on their veracity, the mere resonance of the allegations about the existence of a Russian bounty program that supported the killing of US soldiers in Afghanistan – that some US official have analyzed as a revenge against the February 2018 airstrikes in Syria – illustrates that, seen from Washington, Afghanistan has also become a new spot for Russia in its competition against the US.<sup>42</sup>

## RUSSIA-CHINA RELATIONS: FROM AN “AXIS OF CONVENIENCE” TO A “QUASI-ALLIANCE”

Russia’s own *rapprochement* with China, the United States’ other strategic competitor identified in the 2017 National Security Strategy, was, among other things, a consequence of the deterioration of Russia’s relations with the West. Nowadays, given its extent, this *rapprochement* has also become a cause of the further decline of US-Russia relations.

While it is anything but new, the Russo-Chinese partnership has entered a new phase starting in 2014 and the crisis in the relations between Russia and the West. Back then, the mainstream position within the US debate was that this *rapprochement* would be short-lived, given the unlikelihood that Russia would accept becoming and remaining China’s junior partner. Six years later, not only the scope, but also the very nature of Russo-Chinese relations have considerably broadened, a shift which has been the cause of a growing alarm

41. US AFRICOM, *New evidence of Russian aircraft active in Libyan airspace*, June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

42. House Armed Service Committee, *Hearing by General Mark A. Milley before the House Armed Service Committee*, July 9, 2020.

for the US administration. The 2018 US National Defense Strategy indicates that “it is increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model – gaining veto authority over other nations’ economic, diplomatic, and security decisions.”<sup>43</sup> In his January 2019 hearing before the US Senate Committee on Intelligence, Dan Coats, the then-Director of National Intelligence stated: “China and Russia are more aligned than at any point since the mid-1950s, and the relationship is likely to strengthen in the coming year as some of their interests and threat perceptions converge.”<sup>44</sup>

In 2014, defense cooperation was the backbone of the Russo-Chinese partnership and mostly consisted in Russian arms sales to China. But, since then, it has considerably broadened to encompass the shared development of strategic weapons in the spheres of missile defense, artificial intelligence, and space exploration but also military exercises, including in regions close to NATO and EU borders – in the Mediterranean Sea in May 2015 and in the Baltic Sea in July 2017 – as well as joint air patrols in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>45</sup> In addition to their defense partnership, Moscow and Beijing have increasingly been aligning their positions on each other’s regional priorities. For instance, as Beijing favors every Russian-initiated veto on UNSC resolutions on Syria, Moscow, over the past few years, has been weighing in the North Korean proliferation crisis and has aligned its policy on the Chinese one. With the digital decoupling between US and China looming large, digital and technological ties may well become another pillar of the Russo-Chinese partnership, as Huawei develops its 5G cooperation with Russia: last June, a deal was signed between the Chinese telecom giant and Mobile TeleSystem (MTS), Russia’s largest mobile network provider, to develop a 5G pilot network in Moscow.<sup>46</sup>

In light of these considerations, the United States has grown more conscious of the threats that its geopolitical competition with Russia and China poses to its national security and it has ultimately become a self-fulfilling prophecy: the Russo-China *rapprochement* is partially a consequence of America’s deteriorating relationship with Moscow. Over the past few years, the Trump administration has dismissed diplomacy as a foreign policy tool not just with Russia but more broadly with its European allies – alienated by Trump’s transactional approach to security and his uncoordinated bouts of decision-making – and it has engaged in a trade war with China for questionable economic advantages. Such actions have offered Moscow and Beijing more chances and incentives to work together rather than engaging with the West to appease animosities and cooperate on global challenges. At this stage, it would be difficult to argue that Russia and China share a geopolitical agenda; yet, their closeness poses a significant challenge to US national security and US leadership on the world stage. Eventually, as the stakes become higher, the closer Moscow will get to Beijing, the tougher it will be for the US to rebuild a cooperative engagement with Russia.

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43. US Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 US National Defense Strategy*, January 2018.

44. US Director of National Intelligence, *Worldwide threat assessment of the US Intelligence community*, January 29, 2019.

45. Russian Ministry of Defense, *Relations between Moscow and Beijing are entering a new era*, October 21 2019.

46. Ranine Awwad, “MTS collaborates with Huawei to deploy 5G in Moscow despite US sanctions”, *InsideTelecom*, September 16, 2020.

## CONCLUSION: CHALLENGES AHEAD FOR US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

Soon, the new Biden administration will take office and will need to address these and other foreign policy topics and cope with heightened competition in the international arena with both China, Russia, and China and Russia together.

So far, the toxic nature of the debate over Russia that has polarized US politics along party lines has resulted in the failure to provide a consistent strategy that could ensure continuity in diplomacy without compromising on democratic values and security. Nevertheless, with new allegations<sup>47</sup> concerning Russian (and Iranian) actors meddling with the 2020 elections, disseminating divisive contents and targeting the Democratic candidate Joe Biden, there is not so much cause to be optimistic about a new cooperative engagement.

In this regard, the main challenge for the United States would be not just overcoming the animosity between Republicans and Democrats, but most importantly the harsh political divisions in their ranks on how to deal with Russia and its leader, given their different worldviews, geopolitical interests and values. There are at least two main streams that can be identified: one calling for a return to diplomacy and limited cooperation, the other advocating for a tougher approach with very little compromise.

The first group<sup>48</sup> points out the importance of engaging with Russia in tackling old and new global challenges, from nuclear weapons to climate change and artificial intelligence – and the rise of China – in order to prevent the current rivalry from turning into a catastrophic conflict. This group considers it paramount to extend the new START treaty as a first step towards further improvements in the field of arms control, which has grown increasingly multifaceted given the impact of new technologies.

From arms control, this group advocates for more structured diplomatic engagements to restore dialogue and draw clear red lines with the Russians on crucial issues like Afghanistan, Syria and others. In this strategy of deterrence and “détente”, this group advocates for Republicans and Democrats to come together and envision a closer relation with the European Union to regularly assess the Russian threat as well as options to cooperate constructively.

Unlike the first one, the second group<sup>49</sup> views diplomatic engagement as a reward for Russia’s good behavior, and opposes any reset with Moscow. Instead, it points the finger at Putin’s unwillingness to reciprocate American efforts in seeking opportunities of engagement. Under this perception, easing diplomatic relations and encouraging a strategic dialogue substantially undermine the United States’ position by making concessions to Putin, enabling his authoritarian behavior, and ultimately compromising on US values that include supporting democracy and human rights. According to them, no progress can be made, and no dialogue will be fruitful, until Russia admits its faults in Ukraine and Donbass and shows a clear willingness to cooperate. For this reason, the main policy suggestions this

47. Luke Barr, “[Russia spreading disinformation about Biden’s mental health: DHS](#),” *ABC News*, September 8, 2020.

48. Fiona Hill et al., “[Why we still need to rethink Russian policy: a rebuttal](#),” *Politico*, September 25, 2020.

49. David J. Kramer, “[No, now is not the time for another Russia reset](#),” *Politico*, November 8, 2020.

group makes include offering support to the Russian civil society as well as military, economic and political support to Russian neighbouring states; lastly, they advocate tougher sanctions until Russia changes its behavior.

Both groups are critical of the Trump administration because of its overall lack of strategy and its inconsistency in oscillating between tough actions, such as providing lethal weapons to Ukraine, and friendly political statements endangering the efficacy of existing sanctions. Moving forward, given the high level of polarization that the debate over Russia has brought over the past four years, it will be hard for Republicans and Democrats to come together on this matter and to restore some sort of cooperative engagement in the short term.

As Biden mentioned during his campaign,<sup>50</sup> his administration will be strongly committed to seeking cooperation on arms control, especially in the renewal of the New START treaty before February 2021, on which Putin has already shown some interest.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, while Trump has proven an unreliable interlocutor, it is likely that Biden will try to establish more regular diplomatic consultations which would increase the predictability of his administration. At the same time, a Biden administration doesn't mean a new reset.<sup>52</sup> Biden was personally invested in building a consensus in Europe to impose sanctions on Russia during the crisis in Ukraine, and he is thus likely to work with allies to put pressure on Russia on Donbass. In addition to this, the president-elect's tough stances towards authoritarianism, his longstanding support for NATO and recent commitment to democratic resilience<sup>53</sup> might create tensions with Moscow. At the same time, Biden's clearer positions would at least put an end to the show of surprise that animated the previous administration, and hence unwanted escalations, which is something that Moscow would also appreciate.

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50. Joe Biden website, "[The power of America's example: the Biden plan for leading the democratic world to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century](#)," 2020.

51. Andrew Higgins, "[U.S. Rebuffs Putin Bid to Extend Nuclear Arms Pact for a Year](#)," *The New York Times*, October 16, 2020.

52. Steven Pifer, "[Trump's loss not necessarily Russia's](#)," Brookings, November 10, 2020.

53. Joe Biden website, "[The power of America's example: the Biden plan for leading the democratic world to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century](#)," 2020.

Giovanna De Maio is a visiting fellow at George Washington University, and a nonresident fellow and former visiting fellow at the Center for the United States and Europe (CUSE) at the Brookings Institution. She analyzes security aspects of transatlantic relations, with a specific focus on Europe's relations with great powers. Prior to joining Brookings, she held positions as transatlantic post-doctoral fellow at the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) in Paris and at the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) in Washington, DC, where she focused on West-Russia relations. De Maio holds a Ph.D. in international relations from the University of Naples, L'Orientale, with a thesis on the repercussions of the Ukraine crisis on Russia's domestic and foreign policy.

Contact: [giovanna.demaio89@gmail.com](mailto:giovanna.demaio89@gmail.com); Twitter @giovDM

Emmanuel Dreyfus is Associate Doctoral Research Fellow at IRSEM and a former Visiting Fellow (2018-2020) at the Institute for Russian, European and Eurasian Studies at the Elliot School of International Affairs, George Washington University and at the Kennan Institute, Wilson Center. He conducts research into Russian foreign and defense policy at the Thucydide Center, Paris II Panthéon-Assas University.

Contact: [emmanuel.dreyfus@gmail.com](mailto:emmanuel.dreyfus@gmail.com); Twitter @EmmDreyfus