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# Competing Powers: U.S.-Russian Relations, 2006-2016

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## Sammanfattning

Studien handlar om förhållandet mellan USA och Ryssland under perioden 2006 till 2016. Utgångspunkten är konstaterandet att de amerikansk-ryska relationerna 2006 tydligt hade försämrats. Denna försämring var inget exceptionellt fenomen. I själva verket har det efter det kalla krigets slut aldrig varit någon period av varaktigt goda relationer mellan USA och Ryssland. Frågan är varför relationerna tenderar att vara dåliga. I studien argumenteras att man för att förstå tendensen till dåliga relationer måste undersöka inte bara de rådande motsättningarna i enskilda sakfrågor utan även och framför allt USA:s och Rysslands långsiktiga storstrategiska visioner om det internationella systemet och världsordningen. En jämförelse av dessa visioner visar att de är i grunden oförenliga och därför en källa till ständig konflikt. USA:s och Rysslands strategiska mål är direkt motstridiga.

USA:s främsta mål är att behålla sin dominerande ställning som världens enda supermakt, vilket innebär att USA vill bevara en unipolär maktstruktur i det internationella systemet. USA strävar också efter att spela en ledande roll i världspolitiken. Ett viktigt inslag i USA:s strategi är att hindra andra stater från att bli jämbördiga strategiska rivaler som kan hota USA som Sovjetunionen gjorde under det kalla kriget. För att åstadkomma detta inriktar sig USA på att upprätthålla militär överlägsenhet och hålla tillbaka potentiella utmanares maktutveckling. Studien visar att USA haft i stort sett samma övergripande strategi sedan början av 1990-talet. De strategiska målen och nationella intressena har inte ändrats radikalt under President Barack Obama. Liksom sina företrädare har Obama utfäst sig att bevara USA:s globala dominans och ledarposition.

Ryssland är motståndare till global unipolaritet och motsätter sig USA:s ledarskapsanspråk. Sedan mitten av 1990-talet syftar den ryska strategin till att främja utvecklingen av ett multipolärt internationellt system där USA inte längre dominerar. Det betyder att Ryssland utmanar USA:s unika maktposition och försöker begränsa USA:s makt. Motståndet mot USA hänger samman med det primära ryska strategiska målet att återupprätta Ryssland som stormakt. Ryssland vill bli en av de ledande makterna i en multipolär värld. För att återvinna stormaktsstatus försöker Ryssland genom ekonomisk och politisk integration upprätta en inflytandesfär i det forna Sovjetunionen. Syftet är att ta kontroll över regionens maktresurser. Det är emellertid på denna centrala punkt som USA:s och Rysslands strategiska intressen direkt strider mot varandra.

I enlighet med målet att hindra uppkomsten av en global medtävlare har USA ett klart intresse av att motarbeta Rysslands försök att dominera sina grannar. USA vill inte tillåta att

Ryssland genom att kontrollera de regionala tillgångarna blir till ett hot av sovjetiska dimensioner och motsätter sig därför en rysk inflytandesfär. Den amerikanska politiken att förvägra Ryssland en sådan sfär är kopplad till USA:s stöd åt f.d. sovjetrepublikers nationella oberoende och territoriella integritet. Inte heller i detta avseende har USA:s politik gentemot Ryssland väsentligt förändrats under Obamas presidenttid. Obama har fortsatt att följa den politiska linje som i praktiken innebär ett tillbakahållande av Rysslands expansionistiska strävan. Det tidiga försöket att ”återställa” relationerna till Ryssland efter Georgienkriget medförde ingen förändring av USA:s geopolitiska syften i det post-sovjetiska territoriet. Återställarpolitiken gällde samarbete mellan USA och Ryssland inom begränsade sakområden och innebar inte någon ansats att komma överens i de stora konfliktämnena.

USA och Ryssland är alltså fortfarande strategiska motståndare till varandra, vilket framgått tydligt av den långvariga krisen i Ukraina. Studien innehåller en undersökning av krisen i sitt strategiska sammanhang och avslutas med några reflexioner över de nu starkt försämrade amerikansk-ryska relationerna.

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## **Transatlantisk säkerhet (Forskning för regeringens behov)**

Under ett flertal år har Institutionen för säkerhet, strategi och ledarskap levererat rapporter till Försvarsdepartementet inom ramen för ”Transatlantisk säkerhet”, som i sin tur ingår i *Forskning för regeringens behov* (FORBE). Denna skrift utgör en uppföljning av redan framtagna rapporter gällande den för Sverige så centrala relationen mellan USA och Ryssland. Författaren till skriften har även tidigare engagerats för dylika syften.

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## Introduction

By the end of 2006, the relations between the United States and Russia had deteriorated markedly. Undoubtedly, most Western observers were surprised at the deterioration. Few had anticipated that the U.S.-Russian rapprochement heralded in the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks would disappear so rapidly. When Russia swiftly aligned itself with the United States in the global war against terrorism, this tactical move was widely interpreted as the manifestation of a fundamental and enduring “strategic choice” to reorient Russian national security policy towards cooperation and integration with the West. The discussion then was about Russia’s decisive “turn to the West,” whereby geopolitical competition would give way to a genuine strategic partnership, and the remaining question seemed to be how close that partnership could become.<sup>1</sup> If this view was the conventional wisdom at the time, it eventually proved more conventional than wise.

The integrationist interpretation of the Russian foreign policy orientation was clearly mistaken. Late in 2006, the talk was no longer about Russia’s political integration into the West. On the contrary, it was argued that Russia had turned its back on the idea of becoming part of the Western transatlantic security community.<sup>2</sup> The main analytical error following Russia’s decision to join the U.S.-led anti-terrorist coalition was to misinterpret this U.S.-Russian cooperation on one specific issue as marking a wholesale westward shift in Russian grand strategy. To be sure, observers acknowledged the limited nature of the cooperation, but there were misplaced hopes for a partnership that would extend far beyond fighting terrorism. As it turned out, however, even cooperation in the key area of counterterrorism remained limited and selective. Though cooperative intelligence exchanges did take place, especially in the initial phase of the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan, by late 2006 it was evident that Russia’s contribution to the anti-terrorist struggle was diminishing while U.S.-Russian disagreement over the definition of terrorism persisted.<sup>3</sup> In Robert Kagan’s opinion, U.S.-Russian cooperation in the war on terror has been “mostly a fiction.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Legvold, “All the Way: Crafting a U.S.-Russian Alliance,” *The National Interest*, no. 70 (Winter 2002-2003), pp. 22-23, 26; Angela Stent and Lilia Shevtsova, “America, Russia and Europe: a Realignment?” *Survival*, vol. 44, no. 4 (Winter 2002-03), pp. 122, 124, 128; Angela Stent, “Putin Shifts the US-Europe-Russia Balance,” *Transatlantic Internationale Politik*, vol. 4, no. 1 (Spring 2003), pp. 41, 43-44, 46; Richard Sakwa, *Putin: Russia’s Choice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 208, 228.

<sup>2</sup> Dmitri Trenin, “Russia Leaves the West,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 85, no. 4 (July/August 2006), p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> Sharyl Cross, “Russia’s Relationship with the United States/NATO in the US-led Global War on Terrorism,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2 (July 2006), pp. 175-192; Andrew Monaghan, “Calmly Critical: Evolving Russian Views of US Hegemony,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 29, no. 6 (December 2006), pp. 1003-1004; Pavel K. Baev, “The Russian Federation: Striving for multipolarity but missing the consequences,” in Graeme P. Herd (ed.), *Great Powers and Strategic Stability in the 21st Century: Competing visions of world order* (London

Another major analytical fallacy contributing to the myth that Russia had set a pro-Western foreign policy course was the failure to grasp the basic continuity of Russian strategic thinking. In fact, Russian grand strategy was not fundamentally altered by the limited partnership forged in 2001. Russia's willingness to cooperate with the United States on counter-terrorism on the basis of shared security concerns did not signify a repudiation of long-standing Russian national interests and ambitions, conceived in ways that postulated an intrinsically adversarial U.S.-Russian relationship. Nor did it mean that Russia abandoned its stance on contentious international issues. Thus, the Russians continued to strongly oppose further enlargement in Europe of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and remained very hostile to the U.S. deployment of a strategic missile defence system.

Some in the West have identified the 2003 Iraq War as a turning point in the relationship between the United States and Russia.<sup>5</sup> From Washington's perspective, Russia's diplomatic effort to prevent the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq meant that it had actively sought to thwart U.S. national security policy on a matter of great concern for the United States. For Russia, the invasion served to reinforce its prevailing grievance against a United States that was considered to take unilateral military action without regard to international law. However, the Iraq War did not represent a watershed in which the U.S.-Russian relationship was instantly destroyed. Despite the differences over the war, the counter-terrorism agenda continued to unite the United States and Russia, at least on the surface. In St. Petersburg, shortly after the war began, U.S. President George W. Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin reaffirmed their partnership, declared in Moscow in May 2002. Meeting again at Camp David in September 2003, they both called their countries allies in the war on terror.

Whatever the real longer-term significance of the Iraq War itself may have been, relations between the United States and Russia became increasingly tense after the war. Observers understood that they were in a downward spiral since 2003. In the succeeding years, growing discord and distrust came to the fore. By 2006, the bilateral relationship had deteriorated to the point where it reached a "state of helpless acrimony," as Celeste A. Wallander termed it.<sup>6</sup>

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and New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 125; Angela E. Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 67.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), p. 85.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Graham, *U.S.-Russia Relations: Facing Reality Pragmatically* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2008), p. 1; Ilai Z. Saltzman, "Russian Grand Strategy and the United States in the 21st Century," *Orbis*, vol. 56, no. 4 (Fall 2012), pp. 547, 553, 561.

<sup>6</sup> Celeste A. Wallander, "Suspended Animation: The US and Russia after the G-8," *Current History*, vol. 105, no. 693 (October 2006), p. 320.

This paper focuses not on the specific issues about which the United States and Russia contend but on the fundamentally adversarial underlying nature of U.S.-Russian relations. It endeavours to explain the persistent tendency towards a troubled relationship in terms of incompatible strategic visions and conflicting national interests and objectives. There are, of course, other factors in the relationship that can explain why it tends to deteriorate. The issue of democracy is one important factor to which a whole section of the present study is devoted. Such discrete contentious issues dominate the news and even some academic works. However, the tension between the United States and Russia stems not only from these matters but also, and critically, from a continuing disagreement about the international system and the world order.

The purpose of the study is to examine the grand strategies of the United States and Russia in order to clarify the fundamental conflict that underlies the relationship between the two countries. U.S. and Russian grand strategies define national interests and objectives in starkly opposing terms. What are the major differences in world view that generate conflict and competition and tend to impede sustained good bilateral relations?

The research is carried out in two ways. First, there is an overview of the relevant recent literature. This is followed by a close and in this respect actually unprecedented study of official documents and public statements of senior U.S. and Russian officials. Developments in the literature are noted and appraised. Thus, scholars have in recent years developed an improved and more accurate understanding of Russian grand strategy. Jeffrey Mankoff and others have made commendable efforts to set the state of research straight. What this study contributes to the literature is mainly an update on the course of U.S.-Russian relations for the period from 2006 to 2016. Another contribution is a comparative approach juxtaposing examinations of U.S. and Russian strategic thinking in the same study. Usually, the grand strategies of the United States and Russia are studied separately by different scholars. In this paper, both sides of the complex strategic U.S.-Russian equation are investigated and compared. U.S. and Russian official statements are studied with an eye to possible changes in world view and grand strategy. Are the contents of U.S. and Russian strategic thought roughly the same or have they changed significantly over time? On the U.S. side, it is worth investigating the strategic objectives pursued by the administration of President Barack Obama, who came to power suggesting major changes in the foreign policy of the United States. One additional question to be addressed is whether the Obama administration significantly changed U.S. policy relative to Russia. In this context, the study includes an inquiry into the attempt by the administration to



“reset” the relations between the United States and Russia. The reset came to characterize the relations during Obama’s first term in office, but what was it, what did it accomplish, why did it come to an end and did it have any lasting impact? After the reset has come a period marked by a renewal of tension and confrontation in U.S.-Russian relations. The Ukraine crisis is the term used to label this development. The paper seeks to determine how this crisis fits into the overall pattern of fundamentally conflicting U.S. and Russian strategic interests and objectives.

As indicated, the paper places heavy reliance on the detailed presentation and analysis of official statements. The sources used to describe and analyze U.S. and Russian foreign policy include speeches, interviews, press conferences and articles. No strict limitations have been imposed on the choices of officials representing the United States and Russia. Most of the cited statements are made by the presidents on both sides and by the U.S. secretary of state and the Russian minister of foreign affairs, but these statements are complemented by statements made by other senior officials. There is a certain discrepancy between the U.S. and Russian sources used here in that more officials below the cabinet level are included to convey the U.S. view. This circumstance reflects Russia’s diminished role in the post-Cold War world and the resulting practice in the U.S. government to downgrade its relationship with Russia. Much of the regular preoccupation with Russia has in fact devolved to the bureaucracy. If there is a methodological problem with the selection of U.S. officials here, it is probably a minor one. After all, the selected group is rather small. There is no obvious reason not to regard the lower-ranking, politically appointed members of this group as loyal and authoritative representatives of their country. It is assumed here that although their interpretations of world events may differ slightly from those of their superiors, they usually strive to present government policy as accurately as possible in their public remarks. This is especially the case when senior U.S. officials testify before congressional committees, submitting carefully prepared statements and providing rehearsed answers to questions.

The present paper is in some measure a follow-up to a previous study appearing in two versions, first as a chapter of an edited book and later in expanded form as a separate research monograph.<sup>7</sup> That study noted, as a conceptual starting point, that the power structure of the international system was transformed by the disappearance of the Soviet Union. The bipolar structure with two superpowers was replaced by a unipolar structure with the United States as

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<sup>7</sup> Håkan Karlsson, “The United States and Russia: A clash of strategic visions,” in Jan Hallenberg and Håkan Karlsson (eds.), *Changing Transatlantic Security Relations: Do the US, the EU and Russia form a new strategic triangle?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006); Håkan Karlsson, *Grand Strategies in Collision: U.S. and Russian Visions of the World*, Studies in Security 4 (Stockholm: National Defence College, Department of Security and Strategic Studies, 2007).

the sole superpower. The preceding study also took note of structural realism (or neorealism), a theory of international relations outlined by Kenneth N. Waltz and others. Structural realists recognize that the current international system is unipolar, but they have consistently since the early 1990s anticipated a power transition from unipolarity to multipolarity, a global structure of power with no superpower but several great powers of roughly equal rank. Drawing on traditional realist balance-of-power logic, they contend that the emergence of a multipolar world is inevitable because new great powers will rise and balance against the United States.<sup>8</sup> Other scholars, perceiving an absence of counterbalancing, maintain that the U.S.-dominated unipolar system is in fact stable and durable.<sup>9</sup> This scholarly debate and the theoretical concepts used in it are highly pertinent to the subject of this paper.

As observed in the previous study, unipolarity is conducive to the national security interests of the United States. From the U.S. point of view, a unipolar international system is desirable because it offers several advantages to the system's superior pole. Under unipolarity, the United States is unquestionably far more secure than it was under bipolarity when it had to face the rival Soviet superpower. The dominant power position of the United States in the world also gives the U.S. leadership tremendous freedom of action in conducting its foreign policy. The United States is much less constrained politically and militarily than it was during the Cold War when the Soviet Union constituted a counterweight to U.S. strength. It has therefore a strong incentive to maintain unipolarity and prevent new great powers from rising and balancing against it. This author's previous study argued that the United States clearly prefers a unipolar international system and actually seeks to preserve its unique position of dominance in the system. It also contended that Russia has an interest in constraining U.S. power and promoting global multipolarity. The study examined conflicting policies of the United States and Russia with respect to certain national security issues. What was missing from the study was an examination of their policies in the Eurasian region of the former Soviet Union, the theatre of conflict where U.S. and Russian interests and objectives inexorably collide. This paper is intended to fill that great void. The research task is all the more urgent now because of the recent events in Ukraine, where the U.S.-Russian geopolitical disagreements have come to a head.

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<sup>8</sup> Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise," *International Security*, vol. 17, no. 4 (Spring 1993), pp. 8, 42; Kenneth N. Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," *International Security*, vol. 25, no. 1 (Summer 2000), pp. 32, 38.

<sup>9</sup> William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security*, vol. 24, no. 1 (Summer 1999), pp. 8-9, 28, 37; William C. Wohlforth, "U.S. Strategy in a Unipolar World," in G. John Ikenberry (ed.), *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2002), pp. 98, 118.

## The Issue of Democracy

A key determinant behind the aggravation of U.S.-Russian relations was Russia's internal evolution. Russia had frequently been described as a country "in transition" from communist dictatorship to liberal democracy. For years, the Bush administration in Washington harboured lingering but false expectations about the democratization of Russia. In 2003, Bush saw no reason to question Putin's alleged commitment to democracy. At the Camp David meeting, he somewhat surprisingly and inopportunistly stated: "I respect President Putin's vision for Russia: a country at peace within its borders, with its neighbors, and with the world, a country in which democracy and freedom and rule of law thrive."<sup>10</sup>

In fairness to Bush, the illiberal and anti-democratic tendencies of the Putin regime became more evident in 2004, but even then the president and some members of his administration downplayed the disturbing signs of democratic backtracking and were reluctant to level any criticism at the regime for obvious steps backward such as diluting the independence of judicial institutions and bringing broadcast mass media under tight state control. As remembered by Thomas E. Graham Jr., who served as special assistant to the president and senior director for Russian affairs at the U.S. National Security Council staff in 2004-2007, the "defining moment" for the Bush administration in recognizing Russia's steady retreat from democratization came in the fall of 2004, when Putin decided to further centralize political power by abolishing popular elections of regional governors, replacing such elections with presidential appointments.<sup>11</sup> Shortly thereafter, prominent American and European personalities issued an open letter to Western heads of state and government decrying Putin's domestic and foreign policies. The letter, in which Putin was charged with systematically curtailing the freedom of the press and destroying the democratic checks and balances in the Russian political system, apparently had an impact on the Bush administration, causing some rethinking.<sup>12</sup> Still, even as late as October 2004, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell insisted publicly that there was no unequivocal movement by the Russians away from democratic

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<sup>10</sup> "President Bush Meets with Russian President Putin at Camp David," September 27, 2003, available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/09/20030927-2.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Graham, *Resurgent Russia and U.S. Purposes* (New York: The Century Foundation, 2009), p. 13. Condoleezza Rice, in her memoirs, also highlights this change. See Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2011), p. 364.

<sup>12</sup> "Documents on Democracy," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 16, no. 1 (January 2005), pp. 180-181.

norms and principles. “I think they are still moving in the correct direction,” he said.<sup>13</sup> During the 2004 presidential election campaign in the United States, Bush repeated the claim about Russia being in transition.<sup>14</sup> What the administration was slow to acknowledge was that the Russian transition was in fact not democratic. Under Putin, Russia’s form of government, while retaining a façade of formally democratic institutions and procedures, became increasingly authoritarian.<sup>15</sup>

U.S. policy on Russia’s domestic affairs did not begin to change until Bush announced his “freedom agenda” and Condoleezza Rice became his secretary of state. Bush’s second inaugural address in January 2005 was entirely devoted to the promotion of freedom and democracy worldwide. Proclaiming that the advance of these ideals was an “urgent requirement” of U.S. national security, the president further stated: “So it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.”<sup>16</sup> Obviously, the speech represented no fundamental reorientation of U.S. foreign policy. Democracy promotion had been a long-standing key objective of the United States. However, the speech did dramatically increase the salience of the U.S. commitment to spreading democracy around the world. It also made explicit the enduring but often obscured link between security interests and political values in U.S. strategic thinking.

In his memoirs, Bush maintains that the choice of making democratization “a central part of our foreign policy was one of my most consequential decisions as president.”<sup>17</sup> It certainly had repercussions on U.S. relations with Russia. Although the intended focus of the freedom agenda, as the president’s 2005 State of the Union address made clear, was the Middle East, the sweeping vision of democracy “in every nation” inevitably pitted the United States against Russia. After the inauguration of Bush to his second term, pressure mounted from critics in the U.S. Congress to address the Putin regime about its backsliding on democracy. Stuck in his own soaring rhetoric, Bush could not ignore the calls for a tougher policy. He vowed to place

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<sup>13</sup> “Interview With the USA Today Editorial Board: Secretary Colin L. Powell,” October 18, 2004, available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/37184.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> “Remarks by President Bush and Senator Kerry in First 2004 Presidential Debate,” October 1, 2004, available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2004/10/20041001.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Steven Rosefielde and Romana Hlouskova, “Why Russia is Not a Democracy,” *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 26, no. 3 (May 2007), pp. 215-216, 223; Celeste A. Wallander, “Russian Transimperialism and Its Implications,” *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 2 (Spring 2007), p. 116; Pierre Hassner, “Russia’s Transition to Autocracy,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 19, no. 2 (April 2008), pp. 7-10.

<sup>16</sup> “President Sworn-In to Second Term,” January 20, 2005, available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/01/20050120-1.html>.

<sup>17</sup> George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010), p. 398.

democratic reform “at the heart” of his dialogue with Putin.<sup>18</sup> A summit meeting in Bratislava, Slovakia, in February 2005 gave him an opportunity to do so. The meeting, in which Bush and Putin discussed democracy and Bush expressed his concerns about the Russian situation, was later described by Graham, then Bush’s chief White House adviser on Russia, as “testy.”<sup>19</sup> Stephen J. Hadley, the former national security adviser to the president, has called it a “low point.”<sup>20</sup>

The appointment of Condoleezza Rice as secretary of state brought into U.S. foreign policy a modest reappraisal of the rhetorical approach to Russia in conformity with the congressional criticism. While Bush remained hesitant to criticize Putin’s domestic course in public, Rice was prepared to take a stronger and more vocal stand against Russia’s democratic regression. Already at her confirmation hearing in the Senate, she conceded that the Russians were veering from democracy. In her words, “where they’re going is simply not very good. It is something to be deeply concerned about, and we will speak out.”<sup>21</sup> Rice did speak out in a series of interviews in 2005, voicing displeasure with the centralization of state power and the “virtual absence” of independent broadcast media in Russia. She also warned that Russia’s democratization was a prerequisite of a deepened relationship with the United States. Such a relationship, she explained, would be possible only on the basis of shared democratic values.<sup>22</sup> By this logic, the negative trend in Russian politics carried sinister implications for the future of U.S.-Russian relations. The United States could not have a genuine and durable strategic partnership with an undemocratic Russia. This theme of Russian democratization as a crucial factor in determining the extent of possible cooperation was repeated by Graham at an organization event in October 2005. There he pointed out that “shared values of democracy and freedom are the essential foundations for an enduring U.S.-Russian partnership.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> “President Discusses American and European Alliance in Belgium,” February 21, 2005, available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/02/20050221.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Graham, *U.S.-Russia Relations*, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Stent, *The Limits of Partnership*, p. 86.

<sup>21</sup> *The Nomination of Dr. Condoleezza Rice to be Secretary of State: Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 109th Congress, 1st Session*, S. Hrg. 109-151 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2005), p. 115.

<sup>22</sup> “Interview With Reuters and Agence France-Presse: Secretary Condoleezza Rice”, February 1, 2005, available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/41460.htm>; “Briefing En Route to Moscow: Secretary Condoleezza Rice”, April 19, 2005, available at <http://2001-2005.state.gov/secretary/rm/44868.htm>; “Interview With Aleksey Venediktov of Ekho Moskvy Radio: Secretary Condoleezza Rice”, April 20, 2005, available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/44968.htm>.

<sup>23</sup> “Russia: Today, Tomorrow – and in 2008” [transcript], October 14, 2005 (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 2005), available at <http://www.aei.org/files/2005/10/14/Russia-Today-Tomorrow-and-in-2008.html>.

Increasingly, the Bush administration was concluding that Russia was moving in the wrong direction domestically. The situation worsened demonstrably in early 2006, when Putin, in what was seen as yet another step backward for democratization, imposed restrictions on the activities of non-governmental organizations. Given the administration's growing disappointment with the evolution of Russia's political system, it was a bit of a surprise to hear Rice deemphasize the strains in the U.S.-Russian relationship. "In general, I think we have very good relations with Russia," she declared. "Probably the best relations that have been there for quite some time."<sup>24</sup> Actually, a review by the administration of its Russia policy was under way in February 2006. There had been disagreement within the administration about how to deal with Russia as reality belied the initial expectations that the country was democratizing. Vice President Richard B. Cheney and officials at the Department of State advocated a tougher policy towards Russia whereas Graham at the White House was still true to the discredited spirit of integration and advised against a confrontational approach. For Bush, a policy change that would brand Russia as a case of failed transition represented an embarrassing turn. It meant that he had misjudged Putin, with whom he had a cordial personal relationship. Hence, he was loath to abandon his sanguine view altogether. Rice assumed a mediating role in the internal deliberations, favouring a frank approach but cautioning that pushing Russia too hard on democracy might be counterproductive.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, the Bush administration was no longer able to avoid modifying its Russia policy. The new line was reflected in the National Security Strategy report issued by the White House in March 2006. Gone were the fanciful references to a strategic partnership between the United States and Russia. The document merely noted that the United States in the future would seek to cooperate with Russia on issues of common interests and "manage" issues on which the interests diverged. Democracy obviously had emerged as one of the most contentious issues in U.S.-Russian relations. On the Russian shortcomings in this field, the strategy report lamented: "Recent trends regrettably point toward a diminishing commitment to democratic freedoms and institutions."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> "Interview With Bob Schiffer of CBS's Face the Nation: Secretary Condoleezza Rice", February 12, 2006, available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/60969.htm>.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Baker, "Russian Relations Under Scrutiny," *The Washington Post*, February 26, 2006, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/25/AR2006022501399.html>; John Vinocur, "Putin's Brazen Moves Push Bush to Recalibrate," *International Herald Tribune*, February 27, 2006, p. 2; Stent, *The Limits of Partnership*, pp. 101-102, 135.

<sup>26</sup> *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, March 2006), p. 39.

The changed course adopted by the Bush administration meshed neatly with the conclusions and recommendations of a report released by the prestigious Council on Foreign Relations. Insisting that “U.S.-Russian relations are clearly headed in the wrong direction,” the report flatly rejected the very idea of strategic partnership with Russia as no longer realistic. It called instead for “selective cooperation” and “selective opposition” on the grounds that the bilateral relationship was characterized by a growing number of disagreements and a shrinking cooperative base. Not surprisingly, the report focused on the “rollback of Russian democracy.” Russia’s “authoritarian drift” was considered likely to be the most important negative factor in U.S.-Russian relations in the coming years.<sup>27</sup>

“I haven’t given up on Russia,” Bush gamely remarked after the release of the National Security Strategy report, but he had in fact gradually revised his early posture.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, other senior officials sharpened their public criticism of Putin’s assault on democracy. Rice talked about “authoritarian tendencies.”<sup>29</sup> However, the most publicized denunciation of the developments inside Russia, widely noted for its accusatory tone, was a speech by Cheney in Vilnius, Lithuania. In blunt language, the U.S. vice president accused the Russian government of “unfairly and improperly” restricting the rights of its citizens and seeking to reverse the democratic gains of the past decade. He suggested that Russia could be a strategic partner, thereby implying that the U.S.-Russian strategic partnership declared in 2002 was now defunct.<sup>30</sup> Cheney’s tough words captured the official view of the Bush administration, and Rice took pains to affirm that they were really a codification of U.S. policy.<sup>31</sup>

Weary of the sustained U.S. dissatisfaction with the state of Russia’s affairs, Russian leaders reacted angrily to Cheney’s speech. Putin never directly commented on the speech itself. Instead, he retorted by making his infamous “comrade wolf” remark, in which he denounced the perceived U.S. propensity to use military force unilaterally in disregard of other states. Addressing the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, Putin obliquely compared the United States to a predator on the prowl: “As they say, ‘comrade wolf knows whom to eat.’

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<sup>27</sup> *Russia’s Wrong Direction: What the United States Can and Should Do*, Independent Task Force Report No. 57 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, March 2006), pp. 4-9, 16, 19, 21, 26, 56, 70-71.

<sup>28</sup> “President Discusses Democracy in Iraq with Freedom House,” March 29, 2006, available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2006/03/20060329-6.html>.

<sup>29</sup> “Opening Remarks and Q&A Session at Chicago Council on Foreign Relations: Secretary Condoleezza Rice,” April 19, 2006, available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/64797.htm>.

<sup>30</sup> “Vice President’s Remarks at the 2006 Vilnius Conference,” May 4, 2006, available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2006/05/20060504-1.html>.

<sup>31</sup> “Interview With the NBC Editorial Board: Secretary Condoleezza Rice,” May 8, 2006, available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/66020.htm>.



He eats and doesn't listen to anyone."<sup>32</sup> This confrontational remark further attested to the growing acrimony in the relationship between the United States and Russia.

Following the stir caused by Cheney's speech, State Department officials stated reassuringly that the United States and Russia still had a partnership, even though it fell short of strategic status. "It is fair to say, of course, that the promise of strategic partnership post 9/11 has not been fulfilled," one of them admitted.<sup>33</sup> The actual partnership was described as "realistic," which meant that there had to be limits on cooperation with Russia. As long as the Russian leadership remained authoritarian, the partnership would be limited.<sup>34</sup>

It had taken the Bush administration some time to recognize the authoritarianism of the Putin regime. The process had been gradual and tortuous, but by the end of 2006 even Bush was convinced that the regime had no intention to make Russia more democratic. Reluctantly, he had gone from enthusiasm to disappointment. Although he avoided open expressions of his feelings, Bush voiced profound disillusionment with his "friend Vladimir" in private talks with aides and foreign leaders. "We have lost Putin," he reportedly said in several conversations.<sup>35</sup>

As the erosion of democracy continued in Russia, the U.S. rhetoric on the subject became increasingly stern. Rice, in testimony before Congress in May 2007, very frankly noted that there had been a "turning back" from democratic reforms.<sup>36</sup> How far Bush had come in revising his opinion about Putin's democratic merits was finally revealed by a speech he delivered in Prague in June 2007: "In Russia, reforms that were once promised to empower citizens have been derailed, with troubling implications for democratic development."<sup>37</sup> This hard-hitting language was quite different from that which prevailed in 2003 and 2004.

Once the issue of democracy became a major point of contention, it tended to eclipse other key features of the U.S. relationship with Russia in the mainstream American public discourse. In so far as government and mass media in the United States paid any attention to

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<sup>32</sup> "Poslanie Federal'nomu Sobraniyu Rossiyskoy Federatsii" [Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation], May 10, 2006, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23577>.

<sup>33</sup> "After the G-8: The Future Orbit of U.S.-Russian Relations: Remarks at the Heritage Foundation," David Kramer, Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, July 21, 2006, available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/69323.htm>.

<sup>34</sup> "NATO: Upcoming Summit in Riga, Latvia: Remarks to Defense Writers Group: Daniel Fried, Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs", November 21, 2006, available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/76737.htm>.

<sup>35</sup> Jim Hoagland, "Don't Give Up On Russia," *The Washington Post*, November 17, 2006, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/11/16/AR2006111601361.html>.

<sup>36</sup> *State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2008: Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, United States Senate, 110th Congress, 2nd Session*, S. Hrg. 110-521 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008), p. 164.

<sup>37</sup> "President Bush Visits Prague, Czech Republic, Discusses Freedom," June 5, 2007, available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/06/20070605-8.html>.



Russia, it was largely focused on democratic backsliding and the rise of authoritarianism.<sup>38</sup> As a result, the geopolitical context became obscured. It is not that the significance of the democracy issue as a primary factor in the deterioration of U.S.-Russian relations was exaggerated. As shown here, Russia's anti-democratic evolution did corrode the relations and eventually led to a change in U.S. policy towards Russia. From an analytical perspective, however, it is necessary to look beyond this particular issue in order to fully understand the rift between the United States and Russia. As a matter of fact, it would be a grave mistake to seek to explain the negative dynamics of U.S.-Russian relations simply in terms of specific contentious issues. This is because the central source of friction in the relationship is strategic. Any agreement or disagreement over specific issues should not disguise the fact that the United States and Russia have overriding strategic objectives that are directly opposed to one another. The core of the schism between the two countries is an inevitable clash of fundamentally incompatible strategic visions of the world. The United States and Russia hold starkly conflicting views about the international system and their respective roles in it. Despite some common interests, they are therefore likely to have a basically competitive relationship.

## **The Rift Explained: U.S. Grand Strategy**

Since the early 1990s, the United States has effectively embraced what academics usually call a grand strategy of primacy aimed at maintaining the preeminent U.S. power position achieved after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.<sup>39</sup> A primacist grand strategy means preserving the current unipolar structure of the international system with the United States, the sole

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<sup>38</sup> Congressional attention clearly showed this pattern. In 2005-2006, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee held three hearings on Russia, two of which dealt specifically with the democracy issue. See *Democracy in Retreat in Russia: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 109th Congress, 1st Session*, S. Hrg. 109-83 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2005); *Russia: Back to the Future: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 109th Congress, 2nd Session*, S. Hrg. 109-811 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2007).

<sup>39</sup> Robert Jervis, *American Foreign Policy in a New Era* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), p. 89; Richard K. Betts, "The political support system for American primacy," *International Affairs*, vol. 81, no. 1 (January 2005), pp. 2-3, 6-7; Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 127-152; Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion Revisited: The Coming End of the United States' Unipolar Moment," *International Security*, vol. 31, no. 2 (Fall 2006), p. 7; Bradley A. Thayer, "In Defense of Primacy," *The National Interest*, no. 86 (Nov./Dec. 2006), p. 32; Barry R. Posen, "Stability and Change in U.S. Grand Strategy," *Orbis*, vol. 51, no. 4 (Fall 2007), pp. 563-565; David S. McDonough, "Beyond Primacy: Hegemony and 'Security Addiction' in U.S. Grand Strategy," *Orbis*, vol. 53, no. 1 (Winter 2009), pp. 6-7, 12, 15-16, 19; Mackubin Thomas Owens, "The Bush Doctrine: The Foreign Policy of Republican Empire," *Orbis*, vol. 53, no. 1 (Winter 2009), pp. 25-27; Steven Hurst, "Is the Bush Revolution over?" *International Politics*, vol. 46, nos. 2/3 (March 2009), pp. 161, 164; Amir Stepak and Rachel Whitlark, "The Battle over America's Foreign Policy Doctrine," *Survival*, vol. 54, no. 5 (October-November 2012), pp. 51-52.

remaining superpower, as the system's single pole of vastly superior power. The theoretical concept unipolarity refers to a highly asymmetrical distribution of power resources among the states in the international system. According to an authoritative definition, the system is unipolar if one state has an overall share of capabilities that places it unambiguously in a class by itself compared to all other states.<sup>40</sup> In keeping with this definition, U.S. primacy definitely makes the international system unipolar. The United States is indeed in a category of its own because it possesses capabilities that far exceed those of any other state.

Inconveniently enough for the analysts, U.S. policy makers have carefully avoided the academic language aptly describing the grand strategic orientation of the United States. Throughout the past two decades, they never used the words "primacy" or "unipolarity" to articulate their global ambitions. However, they have repeatedly acknowledged their country's position of preeminence in the world and made clear their desire to retain it for as long as possible, thus indirectly revealing a strong preference, even enthusiasm, for American primacy and a unipolar world order. This ambitious approach to grand strategy is particularly salient in the realm of military power. As a central component of the assertion of overall primacy, the objective of maintaining U.S. military supremacy has evolved into a strategic consensus position in American politics. It attracts virtually universal bipartisan political support. Leaders from both major political parties have unequivocally committed themselves to the preservation of a massive imbalance of military strength in favour of the United States.<sup>41</sup> The underlying idea is that the U.S. armed forces should possess such overwhelming capabilities that other countries would not even try to challenge the United States by engaging in military competition. On this score, Democratic and Republican administrations, in their statements of grand strategy, have made strikingly similar proclamations. The Clinton administration declared in 1998 that "we will ensure that U.S. forces continue to have unchallenged superiority in the 21st century."<sup>42</sup> Likewise, the Bush administration in 2002 reaffirmed that a paramount goal of U.S. grand strategy was to "build and maintain our defenses beyond challenge." It also professed to be confident in the ability of the U.S. armed forces to discourage foreign powers from competing with the United States militarily: "Our forces will be strong enough to

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<sup>40</sup> Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 13; G. John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno, and William C. Wohlforth, "Introduction: Unipolarity, State Behavior, and Systemic Consequences," *World Politics*, vol. 61, no. 1 (January 2009), p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> Barry Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers: World Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p. 173; Alexandra Homolar, "How to Last Alone at the Top: US Strategic Planning for the Unipolar Era," *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 34, no. 2 (April 2011), pp. 189, 193, 213.

<sup>42</sup> *A National Security Strategy for a New Century* (Washington, DC: The White House, October 1998), p. 23.

dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States.”<sup>43</sup> The administration’s commitment to upholding military superiority was vigorously restated in 2006. “We must maintain a military without peer,” Bush declared.<sup>44</sup> This ambition was ingenuously linked to Bush’s freedom agenda in that the United States presented itself as the dominant power seeking to promote a global balance of power that favoured freedom.<sup>45</sup>

The primacist emphasis placed on the maintenance of military superiority is not simply political rhetoric. In practice, the U.S. government makes enormous investments in the nation’s armed forces. The American share of all global defence spending is a valid measure of the magnitude of this vigorous effort. It was estimated that the United States by the end of the Bush presidency spent almost as much on defence as all the other countries of the world combined.<sup>46</sup> In terms of actual military capabilities, the United States is clearly above the rest of the world. It is the only country that can project very large amounts of military power globally.<sup>47</sup>

Arguably the most famous and exciting statement of the primacist grand strategy of the United States appeared as early as February 1992 in the draft of a classified U.S. Department of Defense planning document known as the Defense Planning Guidance (DPG) for fiscal years 1994-1999. The statement has been available to the public for more than two decades because excerpts from the draft DGP were published in the *New York Times* in March 1992. It was subsequently cited in scholarly works on U.S. grand strategy.<sup>48</sup> There are three reasons for taking a new look at the contents and implications of this much-discussed strategic blueprint. Firstly, the official text is now partially declassified. Secondly, the gist of the original statement can be found in an unclassified strategy document overlooked by scholars. Thirdly, the

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<sup>43</sup> *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, September 2002), pp. 29-30.

<sup>44</sup> *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (2006), p. ii.

<sup>45</sup> Rice, *No Higher Honor*, pp. 323-326.

<sup>46</sup> Josef Joffe, *Überpower: The Imperial Temptation of America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), p. 27; Thomas S. Mowle and David H. Sacko, *The Unipolar World: An Unbalanced Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 146; Josef Joffe, “The Default Power: The False Prophecy of America’s Decline,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 88, no. 5 (September/October 2009), p. 26; Iwan Morgan, “The American Economy and America’s Global Power,” in Nicholas Kitchen (ed.), *The United States After Unipolarity*, Special Report SR 009 (London: LSE Ideas, December 2011), p. 31.

<sup>47</sup> Mowle and Sacko, *The Unipolar World*, p. 146.

<sup>48</sup> Colin S. Gray, *The Sheriff: America’s Defense of the New World Order* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004), pp. 80-81; P. Edward Haley, *Strategies of Dominance: The Misdirection of U.S. Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2006), pp. 42-43; Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 25.

statement's continued validity as a compelling exposition of America's post-Cold War grand strategy has been confirmed.

After the Department of Defense had declassified portions of the draft guidance in December 2007, that material was published on the George Washington University's National Security Archive web site.<sup>49</sup> Large sections of the text remain secret, and the Pentagon withheld even some passages that the *New York Times* had already printed in 1992. Nevertheless, the released version does contain the essential part calling for the United States to maintain its geopolitical dominance by precluding the rise of any future peer competitor in the vein of the Soviet Union. It is thus possible to quote directly from the draft document itself. The draft unapologetically states that the United States seeks to "prevent the reemergence of a new rival, either on the territory of the former Soviet Union or elsewhere, that poses a threat on the order of that posed formerly by the Soviet Union." Achieving this fundamental strategic objective "requires that we endeavor to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power."<sup>50</sup>

As the strategic plan for maintaining U.S. dominance laid out in the leaked draft DPG ran into political controversy, the bold and candid language about preventing a powerful rival from emerging was omitted in the final planning guidance. It reappeared forcefully in unclassified form in a document issued by the Department of Defense in January 1993 as America's regional defence strategy for the 1990s. This document was soon forgotten, however. Few outside observers were interested in dwelling on the strategic plans of an outgoing administration. Only when the second Bush administration had taken office did the report prepared by the first receive some public attention, since it was expected that the new Bush team would build on the conceptual groundwork of the old one.<sup>51</sup>

In the Pentagon's 1993 strategy paper, the dominance theme of 1992 was reiterated. The wording was not identical but very similar to the controversial expressions used in the draft DPG. The regional strategy looked to "preclude the emergence of a hostile power that could present a global security threat comparable to the one the Soviet Union presented in the

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<sup>49</sup> William Burr, "Prevent the Reemergence of a New Rival": *The Making of the Cheney Regional Defense Strategy, 1991-1992*, Electronic Briefing Book no. 245 (Washington, DC: The George Washington University, the National Security Archive, February 26, 2008), available at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nukevault/ebb245/index.htm>.

<sup>50</sup> *Defense Planning Guidance, FY 1994-1999* [draft] (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 18 February 1992), p. 2, available at [http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nukevault/ebb245/doc03\\_full.pdf](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nukevault/ebb245/doc03_full.pdf).

<sup>51</sup> David Armstrong, "Dick Cheney's Song of America: Drafting a plan for global dominance," *Harper's Magazine*, vol. 305, no. 1829 (October 2002), pp. 76, 80; James Mann, "The True Rationale? It's a Decade Old," *The Washington Post*, March 7, 2004, p. B2.

past.”<sup>52</sup> To achieve this objective, the United States would seek to “preclude any hostile power from dominating a region critical to our interests,” thereby raising a “barrier to the rise of any serious global challenge.”<sup>53</sup> The Soviet Union had obtained global power and challenged the United States by having control over the resources in a vast region of Eurasia. Hence, it was not in the U.S. interest to permit any non-democratic great power hostile to the United States to consolidate control over substantial resources in a key region of the world. “Consolidated, nondemocratic control of the resources of such a critical region could generate a significant threat to our security,” the strategy report said.<sup>54</sup> The primary worries in this regard were directed at Russia. Preventing a new global threat built on Russian domination of the post-Soviet space was a top priority for the United States. The report assumed that the “most effective guarantee” against the emergence of such a threat would be “successful democratization.” The United States had a “significant stake” in the transformation of Russia into a benign democracy.<sup>55</sup> At the same time, the Pentagon planners recognized the possibility that democracy in Russia might fail, that the country could revert to an “authoritarian and hostile” regime.<sup>56</sup> Some future Russian leadership, they reasoned, could, after an authoritarian reversal, “adopt strategic aims threatening a global challenge similar to that presented by the Soviet Union in the Cold War...”<sup>57</sup>

The release of the regional strategy document, signed by then-Secretary of Defense Cheney, proved that the draft DPG accurately reflected the official views of the George H.W. Bush administration. Far from abandoning the notion of maintaining U.S. global dominance brought forward in the draft guidance, the administration, in its final days, officially embraced it. Accordingly, the grand strategy adopted in 1993 was one of primacy. But the impact of the Pentagon’s draft in shaping policy went further. Extolling the drafting as the “most important attempt” to outline an appropriate grand strategic vision of the post-Cold War world, Eric S. Edelman, under secretary of defence for policy in 2005-2009, confirms that this effort became the intellectual basis for a bipartisan U.S. grand strategy for the following sixteen years.<sup>58</sup> In other words, the presidential administrations of William J. Clinton and George W. Bush

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<sup>52</sup> *Defense Strategy for the 1990s: The Regional Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, January 1993), p. 5.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 11.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 19, 21.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 21.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>58</sup> Eric S. Edelman, *Understanding America’s Contested Primacy* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010), pp. 20-21, 78.

followed the main conceptual thrust of the draft DPG. As Edelman puts it, the “powerful ideas” of the document “successfully underpinned” U.S. national security policy throughout the Clinton and Bush administrations.<sup>59</sup> Edelman was the senior defence official overseeing strategy development and representing the Pentagon in interagency policy planning. He also had access to the internal policy documents prepared by the Clinton administration. Drawing on this experience, he stresses the continuity in U.S. policy across post-Cold War administrations. In his considered opinion, three successive administrations were clearly “committed to a strategy of continued United States primacy” in a unipolar world. “The Clinton administration,” he insists, “largely continued the effort to maintain US primacy.”<sup>60</sup>

Policy makers in the Clinton administration eschewed the language of primacy and unipolarity, speaking instead of the U.S. role as superpower and world leader. “We are the world’s only superpower,” President Clinton said in his first State of the Union address, adding that the United States during his presidency would be prepared to lead the world.<sup>61</sup> “We must continue to bear the responsibility of the world’s leadership,” he intoned three years later.<sup>62</sup> U.S. leadership in global affairs was a principal element of the grand strategic vision presented in the Pentagon’s 1993 report. The need to sustain U.S. world leadership was emphasized repeatedly.<sup>63</sup> Senior Clinton officials eagerly seized upon this theme. Remarkably, they felt more comfortable advertising their country’s hegemonic aspirations than proclaiming the goal of extending unipolarity. However, their insistence that the United States should assume a leadership role betrayed a primacist world outlook, since primacy is necessary in order to exercise global leadership. The U.S. quest for acknowledged global hegemony was epitomized by the famous “indispensable nation” phrase, which was coined in 1996 and became an oft-repeated favourite of Clinton’s.<sup>64</sup> In his second inaugural address in 1997, for example, the president asserted: “America stands alone as the world’s indispensable nation.”<sup>65</sup> Bush never used Clinton’s words, but he was equally committed to the notion of U.S. leadership in the

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<sup>59</sup> Eric S. Edelman, “The Strange Career of the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance,” in Melvyn P. Leffler and Jeffrey W. Legro (eds.), *In Uncertain Times: American Foreign Policy after the Berlin Wall and 9/11* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 77.

<sup>60</sup> Edelman, *Understanding America’s Contested Primacy*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>61</sup> *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton 1993* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994), Book 1, p. 119.

<sup>62</sup> *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton 1995* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996), Book 2, p. 1546.

<sup>63</sup> *Defense Strategy for the 1990s*, pp. 8, 11.

<sup>64</sup> Ted Galen Carpenter, “Delusions of Indispensability,” *The National Interest*, no. 124 (March/April 2013), p. 47.

<sup>65</sup> *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton 1997* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1998), Book 1, p. 44.

world. “America must continue to lead,” he wrote in the introduction to his administration’s 2006 National Security Strategy report.<sup>66</sup>

That world leadership is part of the U.S. grand strategy of primacy does not, of course, mean that the United States actually leads the world. Primacy and hegemony are not automatically coterminous. Although being the lone superpower, the United States falls well short of global hegemony. It has the capacity and inclination to play a leadership role on the world scene, and it has proven extremely successful in providing widespread leadership. After all, the United States presides over a global alliance system comprising more than 60 countries and including several of the world’s major powers. Never before in history has a country had so many allies tied to itself.<sup>67</sup> However, the exercise of U.S. hegemonic power is beset by considerable external constraints. The legitimacy of U.S. leadership is not universally acknowledged. Moreover, it has become almost a commonplace to assert that America’s legitimacy in world affairs was undermined by the policies pursued during the early years of the Bush administration. In some cases, it may be difficult for the United States as a self-appointed leader to attract and hold followers even among its allies.<sup>68</sup>

Under both the Clinton and Bush administrations, U.S. grand strategy entailed preventing any hostile power from becoming a Soviet-scale threat to the United States by dominating a critical region of the world. The Clinton administration was quite explicit that all attempts to attain such regional hegemony would be adamantly opposed. Its 1998 National Security Strategy report stated: “The United States will not allow a hostile power to dominate any region of critical importance to our interests.”<sup>69</sup> Specifically, the U.S. strategy was designed to forestall a possible Russian threat emanating from hegemonic reconsolidation in Eurasia. As Bush’s adviser Graham writes, the “key geopolitical goal” was “the prevention of the rise of a threat on Soviet dimensions in the Eurasian heartland.” In practical terms, that meant preventing the creation of an anti-Western bloc of neighbouring states under Russian control capable of challenging U.S. global dominance.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (2006), p. ii.

<sup>67</sup> G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 238-239; Robert J. Lieber, *Power and Willpower in the American Future: Why the United States Is Not Destined to Decline* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 133.

<sup>68</sup> Barry Buzan, “A Leader Without Followers? The United States in World Politics after Bush,” *International Politics*, vol. 45, no. 5 (September 2008), pp. 556, 565.

<sup>69</sup> *A National Security Strategy for a New Century*, p. 5.

<sup>70</sup> Thomas Graham, “U.S. Policy Options for Managing Relations with Russia in the Former Soviet Space,” in Paul J. Saunders (ed.), *Enduring Rivalry: American and Russian Perspectives on the Former Soviet Space* (Washington, DC: Center for the National Interest, June 2011), pp. 52-53.

The United States pursued the goal of making certain that Russia did not reemerge as a threatening Eurasian hegemon in two ways. The first was by seeking to influence the Russian regime, trying to promote both an ideological conversion to democratic rule and an acceptance of geopolitical retrenchment. Clinton assigned a high priority to the successful democratization of Russia, but he also believed it was critical to U.S. interests that the Russians moved towards a post-imperial relationship with neighbouring countries (i.e., one that did not involve dominating the neighbours). Speaking in Moscow in January 1994, he encouraged them, in a roundabout way, to give up traditional great-power ambitions and refrain from expansionism. Russia, he said, was called upon to “redefine its greatness” in terms that were different from the past and more appropriate to the future.<sup>71</sup>

The second way the United States pursued the goal of ensuring that Russia did not rebuild its regional power position in order to threaten U.S. interests was by engaging in a renewed containment of Russia. Under this approach, which gained in importance as the Russian democratic project folded and the nature of the Russian regime became increasingly authoritarian and hostile, the United States simply sought to preclude Russia’s attainment of regional domination. It was an approach that in substance if not in name amounted to neo-containment.

The vital strategic interest of the United States in preventing the reemergence of a Russian Eurasian empire that could challenge it translated into a policy explicitly aimed at safeguarding the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the former Soviet states against Russian efforts to dominate the region. In its strategy document of 1998, the Clinton administration expressly stated that it was important to the United States to keep these states independent.<sup>72</sup> This American policy endured during the Bush administration. “We will continue to bolster the independence and stability of the states of the former Soviet Union,” the administration’s 2002 strategy report declared.<sup>73</sup> Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Daniel Fried in 2005 testified in a congressional hearing on “our strong interest in supporting the development of these countries as sovereign, stable, democratic and prosperous nations.”<sup>74</sup> In February 2008, Secretary Rice told Congress that “we are absolutely

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<sup>71</sup> *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton 1994* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1995), Book 1, pp. 58, 62.

<sup>72</sup> *A National Security Strategy for a New Century*, p. 41.

<sup>73</sup> *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (2002), p. 27.

<sup>74</sup> *U.S. Security Policy in Central Asia (Part I): Hearing before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia of the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, 109th Congress, 1st Session, Serial No. 109-132* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006), p. 9.



devoted to the independence and sovereignty of Ukraine and of the other states that were once as part of the Soviet Union.”<sup>75</sup> It was no mere coincidence that Rice singled out Ukraine in her testimony. Of all the Soviet successor states bordering Russia, Ukraine was by far the most important for the new U.S. strategic policy of containing the expansion of Russian influence. There can be no doubt that Russian domination of Ukraine would precipitate a major geopolitical power shift. If Russia could establish control over Ukraine, it would regain the possibility of becoming a powerful imperial state. Conversely, preservation of Ukrainian independence offered a strong guarantee against the reemergence of a Russian threat of Soviet dimensions in Eurasia. Without dominating Ukraine, Russia would probably not be able to rebuild its lost empire.

It was the U.S. position that the post-Soviet states should be treated by Russia as genuinely sovereign and independent entities, free to decide their own military-political orientation. The Baltic states joined NATO in 2004. Integrating other states of the defunct Soviet Union into Euro-Atlantic Western security structures was a long-term prospect, subject to a number of reservations. The main thing for the United States in the short term was to uphold their independence from Russia.

The American policy of defending the independence of Russia’s neighbours did not extend to denying Russia any influence in these countries. There was no need to counter all Russian designs in the region, and some Russian influence there was not necessarily seen as a threat to U.S. interests. What the United States intended to strongly oppose was any Russian effort to create an exclusive sphere of influence that would supplant the West and ensure the incorporation of subservient nations along Russia’s borders. Speaking on behalf of the Clinton administration, Stephen Sestanovich, a senior State Department official responsible for U.S. relations with Russia and other former Soviet states, made that commitment absolutely clear in testimony before a congressional committee in 1998: “This administration categorically rejects the idea of a Russian sphere of influence.”<sup>76</sup> The Bush administration took exactly the same unambiguous position. As pointed out in April 2007 by Assistant Secretary Fried, it wanted Russia not to see its neighbours as a sphere of influence.<sup>77</sup> In its regional strategic planning, the

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<sup>75</sup> *The President’s Foreign Affairs Budget: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 110th Congress, 2nd Session*, S. Hrg. 110-741 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2009), pp. 26-27.

<sup>76</sup> “U.S. Policy Toward Russia: Stephen Sestanovich, Ambassador-at-Large and Special Adviser [to the Secretary of State] for the New Independent States before the House International Relations Committee,” July 16, 1998, available at [http://1997-2001.state.gov/policy\\_remarks/1998/980716\\_sestanovich\\_russia.html](http://1997-2001.state.gov/policy_remarks/1998/980716_sestanovich_russia.html).

<sup>77</sup> “Transatlantic Priorities: The Short List: Daniel Fried, Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, Remarks Before the Center for National Policy,” April 18, 2007, available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2007/may/84922.htm>.

administration was well aware of the tremendous difficulties facing the United States in this regard because of Russia's considerable advantages in the region, especially its residual economic leverage and geographical proximity. The Strategic Plan covering fiscal years 2007-2012 prepared by the Department of State described Russia's policy towards its neighbours as a "major challenge" for U.S. foreign policy.<sup>78</sup>

## **The Rift Explained: Russian Grand Strategy**

A Russia's grand strategy is fundamentally at odds with that of the United States. In fact, the Russian grand strategic vision of the world literally by definition presupposes opposition to the U.S. vision. Russia's central, overarching strategic objective is to be a great power, and to be treated as such by other countries. Realistically speaking, the great power ambition is concerned with restoring Russia as a great power, although Russian leaders officially adhere to the overblown notion that their country already has that standing by virtue of its significant material resources, including large nuclear forces, and its special position as a permanent member on the United Nations Security Council. In economic terms, despite several years of strong resource-based growth, Russia is not obviously a great power. For analytical purposes, it is therefore reasonable to suggest that the Russian leaders are determined to restore Russia's great power status even if they consistently prefer talking about their aspiration to enhance it.<sup>79</sup> This determination goes back to the mid-1990s, when Yevgeny Primakov became minister of foreign affairs. Primakov set out on a foreign policy course that asserted Russia's rank as one of the great powers in the world.<sup>80</sup>

There is a substantial degree of continuity between the Primakovian grand strategic agenda and the Putinist one. In a perceptive study of Russia's strategic resurgence, Jeffrey Mankoff has written that "the overall set of ideas and preferences driving Russian foreign policy has remained broadly similar since at least the mid-1990s."<sup>81</sup> As Putin promised when he assumed the presidency, the overall direction and substance of Russia's foreign policy has not

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<sup>78</sup> *Strategic Plan, Fiscal Years 2007-2012* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State/U.S. Agency for International Development, April 2007), p. 49.

<sup>79</sup> Eugene B. Rumer, *Russian Foreign Policy Beyond Putin*, Adelphi Paper no. 390 (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, May 2007), p. 20; Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), pp. 23, 302; Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, "Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy," *International Security*, vol. 34, no. 4 (Spring 2010), pp. 66, 88.

<sup>80</sup> Karlsson, *Grand Strategies in Collision*, p. 14; Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, pp. 5, 30.

<sup>81</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, p. 4.

changed fundamentally. Thus, Putin's main policy line is a direct continuation of the course pursued by Primakov.<sup>82</sup> "Putin," Mankoff observes, "has refined and consolidated Primakov's approach to foreign policy without changing its basic orientation."<sup>83</sup> The fundamental feature underpinning Russian foreign policy under both Primakov and Putin is the great-power conception.<sup>84</sup> Putin has been clear since he first came to power as to his commitment to restoring Russia's status as an undisputed great power. Shortly after taking office, he approved two official grand strategy documents providing guidelines for Russian foreign policy. The National Security Concept of the Russian Federation, approved in January 2000, declared that Russia's national interests in the international sphere lay in "strengthening its position as a great power," and the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, approved in June 2000, similarly stated that Russia's foreign policy was directed towards achieving for the country a "solid and respected" position in the world that would "in the greatest measure meet the interests of the Russian Federation as a great power, as one of the influential centres of the modern world..."<sup>85</sup>

Underlying Putin's entire grand strategic approach is a reigning consensus regarding the core imperatives of Russian foreign policy that prevailed under Primakov in the mid-1990s. This consensus within the Russian political and bureaucratic elites has stabilized under Putin, and it is now so entrenched that significant change in Russian foreign policy is highly unlikely, at least under the present regime. The foundation of this consensus is the idea that Russia should be a great power.<sup>86</sup>

Contrary to U.S. interests and the admonitions from President Clinton more than twenty years ago, Russian leaders have evinced an archaic 19th-century understanding of national greatness. According to this view, a great power pursues aggressive expansionist policies in its neighbourhood and exerts coercive domination over the countries there. For Russia, the regional target of its great-power ambition is the territory of the former Soviet Union. In direct contravention of U.S. strategic aims, Russia seeks to dominate this region. It sees regional

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<sup>82</sup> Karlsson, *Grand Strategies in Collision*, p. 25.

<sup>83</sup> Jeffrey Mankoff, "Russia and the West: Taking the Longer View," *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 2 (Spring 2007), p. 126.

<sup>84</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, p. 293.

<sup>85</sup> "Kontseptsiya natsional'noy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii" [National security concept of the Russian Federation], 10 January 2000, available at <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/1.html>; "Kontseptsiya vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii" [Foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation], 28 June 2000, available at <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/25.html>.

<sup>86</sup> Leon Aron, *Vladimir Putin's Long – and Very Dangerous – Game*, AEI Russian Outlook (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, Spring 2014), p. 1; Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, pp. 12, 22, 42.

domination in the post-Soviet space as an essential vehicle for its restoration as a great power. At the heart of the Russian attempt to secure predominant influence over its former Soviet neighbours in order to achieve great-power status lies a vital strategic interest in regaining control over the political and material assets lost by Russia in the collapse of the Soviet Union. Recovery for Russia of these power resources is central to Russia's aspiration to become a great power with a global reach.<sup>87</sup>

The Russian policy of reintegration does not appear to be aimed at recreating the Soviet Union, but Russia is bent on establishing, as part of its quest for great-power status, a sphere of influence in Eurasia encompassing much of the former Soviet space. Russian leaders have simply not accepted the full independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of all post-Soviet countries. Again, this is in direct contradiction to the strategic aims of the United States. Russia's desire for a sphere of influence has long been in evidence. Putin gave early warning at the beginning of his presidency, when he openly and bluntly spelled out Russia's neo-imperialist intentions. In a programmatic statement published in several newspapers in February 2000, he laid unabashed claim to a Russian sphere of influence, using ostensibly euphemistic language, as his temporary presidential successor Dmitry Medvedev did in a much-noted remark eight years later. Discussing Russia's priorities and its need to concentrate on the internal strengthening of the economy, Putin sounded a stark note of caution. "I would like to state that our saving of strength in no way means that we do not have external expansion," he warned. "We too envision for ourselves what they in other countries call zones of vitally important interests."<sup>88</sup>

The United States and Russia conflict directly in the post-Soviet space. U.S. and Russian strategic objectives regarding the area are in fundamental conflict. They are in fact basically incompatible. Because precisely regional domination is Russia's main objective and the U.S. main objective is to prevent this, a vigorous geopolitical confrontation is unavoidable. The consequences of this confrontation are profound. Post-Soviet Eurasia has turned into a zone

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<sup>87</sup> Rumer, *Russian Foreign Policy Beyond Putin*, p. 25; Bertil Nygren, *The Rebuilding of Greater Russia: Putin's foreign policy towards the CIS Countries* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 7-8, 12, 232, 238; Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, pp. 244, 265, 272; Leon Aron, *Structure and Context in US-Russian Relations at the Outset of Barack Obama's Second Term*, AEI Russian Outlook (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, Winter 2013), pp. 1-3.

<sup>88</sup> "Otkrytoe pis'mo' izbiratelyam" ['Open letter' to the voters], 25 February 2000, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24144>.

of increasingly sharp strategic competition between the United States and Russia.<sup>89</sup> U.S. senior officials used to deny in public that the United States was engaged in rivalry with Russia in the region, but this is really how many in Washington viewed the relationship since at least 2005.<sup>90</sup> In retrospective writings, the reality of geopolitical struggle has been forthrightly acknowledged. Condoleezza Rice, in her memoirs, admits that the growing tension over Russia's irredentist policies towards its neighbours eventually "would become the core of the conflict between Moscow and Washington."<sup>91</sup> Thomas Graham describes this tension, arising from a "fundamental difference in perspective and interest," as the "most contentious" aspect of U.S.-Russian relations. Given the clearly "conflicting interests," he concludes, "inevitable competition" ensued. Graham recounts that "stiff competition" in Eurasia characterized the U.S.-Russian relationship during "the better half of the Bush administration."<sup>92</sup>

The most intriguing feature of Russian strategic thinking is ideas regarding the current and future state of the international system that are diametrically opposed to those of the United States. Despite the weight of evidence of unrivalled U.S. primacy, Russian leaders do not accept as a fact the proposition that the international system is unambiguously unipolar. In their view, the system is in a state of transition from the bipolarity with two superpowers of the Cold War to a multipolar configuration marked by the existence of several roughly equal great powers. On the face of it, the Russian view does not seem to make much sense, but it should not be interpreted in strict accordance with the academic discourse, where unipolarity refers narrowly to an unequal distribution of measurable capabilities. In the political discourse, the meaning of unipolarity is more vague. Russian leaders apparently think of it in broad material and political terms, taking into account hegemonic influence and the ability to achieve policy goals. They abhor what they term a tendency in world politics towards unipolarity and champion the anticipated power shift to multipolarity. In their grand strategic vision, Russia would be one of the main power centres of an emergent multipolar world. Their principled rejection of the concept of a unipolar world dominated by the United States is inseparable from their notion of Russia as a great power.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> R. Craig Nation, "U.S. Interests in the New Eurasia," in *Russian Security Strategy Under Putin: U.S. and Russian Perspectives* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, November 2007), p. 26; Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, pp. 241, 244, 280.

<sup>90</sup> Stent, *The Limits of Partnership*, p. 98.

<sup>91</sup> Rice, *No Higher Honor*, p. 366.

<sup>92</sup> Graham, *U.S.-Russia Relations*, p. 12; Graham, *Resurgent Russia and U.S. Purposes*, pp. 26-27; Graham, "U.S. Policy Options for Managing Relations with Russia in the Former Soviet Space," pp. 51, 53.

<sup>93</sup> Karlsson, *Grand Strategies in Collision*, pp. 14-16, 26-27, 54.

It was Primakov who first put Russia on the path of promoting the emergence of global multipolarity. He did this within the intellectual framework of the classical balance of power concept. Primakov yearned for a more balanced world and conceived of Russia's role in international politics as that of a balancer or counterweight to the United States at the global level. Since Russia clearly lacked the means to produce systemic balance by changing the unipolar structure of the international system and relegating the United States to the position as one among other equally capable great powers, Primakov's short-term approach to power balancing was to seek to contain U.S. power.<sup>94</sup> This approach has continued to inform Russian security policy ever since. A resource buildup to match U.S. capabilities remains far beyond Russia's economic strength. Nevertheless, Putin has not wavered from the grand strategic idea of counterbalancing, or more correctly constraining, the United States in order to foster multipolarity.<sup>95</sup>

The community of scholars has in recent years increasingly acknowledged that the creation of a multipolar international system is a basic aim of Russia's grand strategy.<sup>96</sup> A decade ago, it was still fashionable to advance a completely different analytical assessment of the strategic priorities of the Putin regime. The grand strategy documents issued early in Putin's presidency contained strong pro-multipolar language. They articulated in unambiguous terms the Russian determination to strive for multipolarity. "Russia will seek to achieve the formation of a multipolar system of international relations," the Foreign Policy Concept of 2000 stated clearly.<sup>97</sup> Despite such firm declarations, Russia's limited and selective cooperation with the United States in the global campaign against terrorism sparked a wave of academic doubt over Putin's continued adherence to the Primakovian multipolarity concept. Among some scholars, Putin's alleged strategic tilt towards the West in the wake of the dramatic events of September 11, 2001 fed the argument that he had largely abandoned the pursuit of

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<sup>94</sup> Christopher Browning, "Reassessing Putin's Project: Reflections on IR Theory and the West," *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 55, no. 5 (September/October 2008), p. 6; Karlsson, *Grand Strategies in Collision*, pp. 14-16.

<sup>95</sup> Andrew C. Kuchins and Igor A. Zevelev, "Russian Foreign Policy: Continuity and Change," *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 1 (Winter 2012), pp. 154, 158.

<sup>96</sup> Monaghan, "Calmly Critical," pp. 995, 998; Mankoff, "Russia and the West," p. 127; Andrew Monaghan, "'An enemy at the gates' or 'from victory to victory'? Russian foreign policy," *International Affairs*, vol. 84, no. 4 (July 2008), p. 726; Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, pp. 15, 27, 31; Susan Turner, "Russia, China and a Multipolar World Order: The Danger in the Undefined," *Asian Perspective*, vol. 33, no. 1 (January 2009), p. 183; Saltzman, "Russian Grand Strategy and the United States in the 21st Century," pp. 547, 561; R. Craig Nation, "Reset or rerun? Sources of discord in Russian-American relations," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 45, nos. 3-4 (September-December 2012), p. 384; Martin A. Smith, "Russia and multipolarity since the end of the Cold War," *East European Politics*, vol. 29, no. 1 (March 2013), p. 43.

<sup>97</sup> "Kontseptsiya vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii" (2000).

multipolarity.<sup>98</sup> That argument turned out to be woefully premature. Putin's choice to join the anti-terror coalition left Russia's grand strategy intact.

During the fallout between the United States and Russia over Iraq in 2003, the language of multipolarity, which had been scarce in Putin's post-September 2001 public statements, "returned with a vengeance," as Thomas Ambrosio has put it.<sup>99</sup> Since then, the Russian rhetoric about the dangerous U.S. drive towards the establishment of a unipolar world order and the need to oppose this through the promotion of an alternative multipolar order has been loud and consistent.<sup>100</sup> Rhetoric is cheap, however. The decisive question is whether Russia has actually made any practical efforts to advance multipolarity. It is sometimes claimed that there is little evidence of such efforts designed to balance against the United States, but this is clearly mistaken.<sup>101</sup> The attempts to block certain major U.S. policy initiatives, including NATO expansion and missile defence deployment, should count as prominent examples of balancing behaviour. Russia's greatest concrete effort to act on the idea of a multipolar world is evident in its regional policy. The policy of reclaiming Russian domination and excluding U.S. influence in the former Soviet space constitutes the regional component of the global multipolarity scheme. The long-term plan is to use restored control over the power resources in this space as the foundation of a transformation of Russia into one of the most influential poles in a future multipolar international system. According to one study published in 2006, Russia's multipolarism has focused primarily on Asia.<sup>102</sup> The Russian actions to counter and curtail the U.S. military presence in Central Asia supporting military operations in Afghanistan certainly fit this description. Understandably, they raised alarm in Washington. It is hard not to identify them as balancing steps.<sup>103</sup>

The analysis presented here suggests that a deteriorating U.S.-Russian relationship needs to be understood in the context of the fundamentally conflicting character of perceived

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<sup>98</sup> Stent, "Putin Shifts the US-Europe-Russia Balance," p. 40; Sakwa, *Putin: Russia's Choice*, p. 215; Stephen E. Hanson, "Russia: Strategic Partner or Evil Empire," in Ashley J. Tellis and Michael Wills (eds.), *Strategic Asia 2004-05: Confronting Terrorism in the Pursuit of Power* (Seattle, Washington: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2004), p. 170.

<sup>99</sup> Thomas Ambrosio, "The Russo-American Dispute over the Invasion of Iraq: International Status and the Role of Positional Goods," *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 57, no. 8 (December 2005), p. 1190.

<sup>100</sup> Karlsson, *Grand Strategies in Collision*, pp. 55-56, 58-60.

<sup>101</sup> Brooks and Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance*, pp. 71, 95.

<sup>102</sup> Mark N. Katz, "Primakov Redux? Putin's Pursuit of 'Multipolarism' in Asia," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, vol. 14, no. 1 (Winter 2006), pp. 144, 147;

<sup>103</sup> Ruth Deyermond, "Matrioshka hegemony? Multi-levelled hegemonic competition and security in post-Soviet Central Asia," *Review of International Studies*, vol. 35, no. 1 (January 2009), pp. 169, 172; Alexander Cooley, "Behind the Central Asian Curtain: the Limits of Russia's Resurgence," *Current History*, vol. 108, no. 720 (October 2009), pp. 325-330; Martin C. Spechler and Dina R. Spechler, "Is Russia Succeeding in Central Asia?" *Orbis*, vol. 54, no. 4 (Fall 2010), p. 619.

national interests and the conflicting objectives derived from those interests. The unipolar-multipolar dichotomy, representing antagonistic and irreconcilable strategic visions of the world, gives the relations between the United States and Russia a powerful conceptual logic. This logic puts the two countries on a perennial geopolitical collision course. The United States wants to maintain a unipolar world and Russia covets the exact reverse. Clamours for a balanced multipolar world constantly push Russia to conceptual, but also increasingly tangible or direct, confrontation with a United States that remains committed to sustain its superpower status. The United States is totally unwilling to countenance Russian great-power ambitions defined in opposition to U.S. strategic goals. While U.S. officials have avoided any public description of these goals in terms of unipolarity, they have indeed articulated their hostility to multipolarity. In the U.S. understanding, multipolarity implies conflict and competition. Rice is on the record calling it “a theory of rivalry.”<sup>104</sup> This criticism paved the way for an outright rejection of the multipolar alternative to the existing unipolar world. Bush once made his position very clear. “I think we need to work against multi-polarity,” he said in 2003.<sup>105</sup> Bush’s ambassador to France, Howard H. Leach, even went so far as to say that the multipolarity concept was “anti-American.”<sup>106</sup>

## Exposing the Conflict: The Russian Challenge

The Russian rhetoric in favour of multipolarity and against unipolarity acquired greater salience and intensity during 2006 and 2007 as relations between the United States and Russia worsened. President Putin on several occasions reiterated that Russia’s policy was to “come out for a multipolar world.”<sup>107</sup> Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov indicated that the “multipolar

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<sup>104</sup> “Remarks by Dr. Condoleezza Rice, International Institute for Strategic Studies,” June 26, 2003, available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/06/20030626.html>.

<sup>105</sup> “Interview of the President by Trevor Kavanagh of ‘The Sun,’” November 14, 2003, available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031117-3.html>.

<sup>106</sup> “Franco-American Relations After the Nov 2 Elections: Forum du Futur Breakfast Debate” December 1, 2004, available at <http://france.usembassy.gov/archives/leach/2004/120104.htm>.

<sup>107</sup> “Stenogramma internet-konferentsii Prezidenta Rossii” [Transcript of internet conference with the President of Russia], 6 July 2006, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23691>; “Interv’yu telekanalu Si-Ti-Vi (Kanada)” [Interview for the television channel CTV (Canada)], 12 July 2006, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23702>; “Zayavleniya dlya pressy po itogam rossiysko-venesuelskikh peregovorov” [Statements for the press on the results of Russian-Venezuelan negotiations], 27 July 2006, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23733>; “Interv’yu indiyскому telekanalu ‘Durdarshan’ i informatsionnomu agentstvu ‘Pi-Ti-Ay’” [Interview for the Indian television channel ‘Doordarshan’ and the information agency ‘PTI’], 18 January 2007, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24009>; “Interv’yu zhurnalistam pechatnykh sredstv massovoy informatsii iz stran-chlenov ‘Gruppy vos’mi’” [Interview with journalists of print mass media from “Group of Eight” member countries], 4 June 2007, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24313>;



architecture of international relations” that Russia had been touting for a decade was increasingly turning into objective reality.<sup>108</sup> According to Lavrov, there were no grounds for talking about a unipolar world as a real phenomenon.<sup>109</sup> The “illusiveness of the ‘unipolar world’ is becoming ever more obvious,” he claimed. Meanwhile, the appearance of “new global centres of influence” was seen as laying the “material foundation for a multipolar world order.” Russia’s growing economic strength sustained Lavrov’s definition of his country as one of the rising powers contributing to the reality of an incipient global multipolarity with a more even distribution of power resources. Russia, he contended, was “an increasingly self-confident power” that had become “able on an equal footing with the other leading powers to participate not only in realizing but also in shaping the global agenda.”<sup>110</sup> Lavrov explained that the United States was “experiencing a difficult stage of adaptation to the new international reality” and would have to get used to the new-found assertiveness of Russia in foreign affairs.<sup>111</sup> He assumed that Russia’s resurgence had surprised the U.S. leadership. “We understand that some did not expect Russia to restore its prestige as one of the leading countries in the world so fast,” he said and intimated that Russia would wait for them to accept it.<sup>112</sup>

If by the opening of 2007 there were any remaining doubts about the veracity of Putin’s espousal of a Primakovian worldview, his notorious speech at the annual Munich Conference on Security Policy, delivered on February 10, should have finally dispelled them. He spoke in a strident, bellicose manner that was bound to draw attention and raise awareness of the true content of Russia’s strategic policy. The fiery speech was a frontal rhetorical attack against the

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“Interv’yu Iranskomu gosteleradio i informatsionnomy agentstvu IRNA” [Interview for the Iranian state television and radio and the information agency IRNA], 16 October 2007, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24603>.

<sup>108</sup> “Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na 61-y sessii General’noy Assembly OON” [Remarks by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov at the 61st session of the UN General Assembly], 1606-22-09-2006, 21 September 2006, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2006](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2006).

<sup>109</sup> “Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova, opublikovannoe v gazete ‘Krasnaya zvezda’” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov, published in the newspaper “Krasnaya zvezda”], 12 December 2006, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2006](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2006).

<sup>110</sup> “Tezisy vystupleniya Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na vstreche so studentami Fakul’teta mirovoy politiki MGU im. M.V. Lomonosova” [Main points of remarks by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov at meeting with students of the Faculty of world politics of the M.V. Lomonosov Moscow state university], 2194-11-12-2006, 11 December 2006, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2006](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2006).

<sup>111</sup> “Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na temu: ‘Rossiya i SShA: mezhdunarodnyye otnosheniya v budushchim’ v Sovete po mezhdunarodnym otnosheniyam Los-Andzhelesa” [Remarks by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov on the subject: “Russia and the USA: between the past and the future” at the Los Angeles World Affairs Council], 1624-22-09-2006, 26 September 2006, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2006](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2006).

<sup>112</sup> “Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova agentstvu ‘Interfaks’” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the agency “Interfax”], 19 December 2006, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2006](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2006).

concept of unipolarity. Putin began the attack by defining a unipolar world. He defined it as a world with “one centre of power, one centre of force, one centre of decision making. This is a world of one master, one sovereign.” To Putin, the implications of such a world would be “pernicious.” While he insisted that the present international system was not unipolar, arguing that a unipolar model was “not only unacceptable but also on the whole impossible,” he railed at attempts to make it so. He then proceeded to identify the prime mover of these efforts: “The United States has exceeded its national bounds in all spheres, in economics, in politics, and in the humanistic sphere, and imposes itself on other states.” Ironically, the unipolar power politics of the United States was depicted as a very serious danger even as the unipolar concept was dismissed as flawed and illusory. Among the negative consequences of the U.S. aspirations to establish unipolarity listed by Putin were “unilateral and often illegitimate actions,” “a hypertrophic use of force contained by almost nothing in international affairs,” and “a greater disdain for the basic principles of international law.” This, Putin claimed, was “extremely dangerous” because it meant that “no one feels secure.”<sup>113</sup>

Putin’s speech in Munich had the effect of a cold shower on U.S. officials. “We were very surprised at his analysis and the tone of his remarks,” one of them said.<sup>114</sup> The substance of the speech should not have come as a surprise. It was largely a reiteration of theses that had already been advanced by senior Russian officials over many years. However, the speech did represent a dramatic change in tone. Putin now criticized U.S. policy fiercely and openly. According to one observer, he voiced “the sharpest criticism of Washington that has been made by a Russian leader since the end of the Soviet Union.”<sup>115</sup> Previously, Putin had made oblique but pointed critical references to the United States, but in Munich he explicitly mentioned the American superpower by name when he castigated what he saw as its efforts to impose a unipolar order on the world. A few months later, he reverted to his old rhetorical style, launching another verbal attack against U.S. policy that was fiercer still. In remarks at the Moscow military parade commemorating the Soviet Union’s victory in the Second World War, he likened the United States obliquely to Nazi Germany. He lashed out at the unnamed perpetrators of new threats of war, and went on to say: “In these new threats, just as in the

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<sup>113</sup> “Vystuplenie i diskussiya na Myunkhenskoy konferentsii po voprosam politiki bezopasnosti” [Remarks and discussion at the Munich conference on security policy issues], 10 February 2007, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

<sup>114</sup> “Munich Conference on Security Policy: Kurt Volker, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs: Interview With Thomas Nehls of WDR German Public Radio,” February 12, 2007, available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/80542.htm>.

<sup>115</sup> Mark A. Smith, *A Review of Russian Foreign Policy*, Russian Series 07/20 (Swindon: Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, Conflict Studies Research Centre, July 2007), pp. 1-2.

times of the Third Reich, are the same contempt for human life, the same pretensions to world exceptionality and dictate.”<sup>116</sup> It was not long before Putin and his aides realized that he had overreached himself in taking political invective to an outrageously low level and needed to step back. The first Russian clarification readily acknowledged that Putin in his speech was indeed referring to the United States.<sup>117</sup> Soon, however, Russian diplomats protested that no comparison between the United States and Nazi Germany was intended, and the U.S. side magnanimously accepted that explanation.

Although Putin’s rhetoric had turned explicitly anti-American, the Bush administration clearly sought to downplay its impact. “I’m told that we misunderstood the comments that President Putin made about Nazi Germany, that in fact that was not aimed at the United States,” Secretary Rice said during a mission to Moscow to improve the tone of the U.S.-Russian relationship.<sup>118</sup> But the tone was not significantly improved. Within weeks, Putin was at it again and accused the United States of trying to make the world unipolar by pursuing dictatorial and imperialistic policies. He said there was a desire by some states to “dictate their will to everyone,” and considered this to be “very dangerous and harmful.” They were, in Putin’s view, trying to replace the norms of international law with “nothing different from dictate, nothing different from imperialism.”<sup>119</sup> In later remarks, Putin noted that “there are those who would like to build a unipolar world, who would themselves like to rule all mankind.”<sup>120</sup>

The U.S. reactions to the Russian rhetorical excesses, culminating with Putin’s Victory Day speech, were remarkably measured. “I don’t think that the relationship is helped by language of that kind,” Rice explained.<sup>121</sup> Hence, the Bush administration showed considerable restraint in its public rejoinders. As Fried noted in June 2007, it wanted to avoid a “rhetorical

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<sup>116</sup> “Vystuplenie na voennom parade v chest’ 62-y godovshchiny Pobedy v Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyne” [Remarks at the military parade commemorating the 62nd anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic war], 9 May 2007, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24238>.

<sup>117</sup> Andrew E. Kramer, “Putin Is Said to Compare U.S. Policies to Third Reich,” *The New York Times*, May 10, 2007, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/10/world/europe/10russia.html>.

<sup>118</sup> “Press Roundtable in Moscow, Russia: Secretary Condoleezza Rice,” May 15, 2007, available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2007/may/84922.htm>.

<sup>119</sup> “Zayavleniya dlya pressy i otvety na voprosam po itogam peregovorov s Prezidentom Gretsii Karolosom Papul’yasom” [Statements for the press and answers to questions on the results of negotiations with the President of Greece Karolos Papoulias], 31 May 2007, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24311>.

<sup>120</sup> “Beseda s kursantami voennykh uchilishch i predstaviteliymi molodezhnykh organizatsiy” [Meeting with students of military schools and representatives of youth organisations], 4 November 2007, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24647>.

<sup>121</sup> “Interview on Fox News Sunday With Chris Wallace: Secretary Condoleezza Rice,” February 25, 2007, available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2007/feb/81037.htm>.

race to the bottom.”<sup>122</sup> Senior U.S. officials were also disinclined to engage in philosophical polemics about the post-Cold War world order, predicated on the dominant position of the United States. They were inhibited from responding directly to Putin’s criticism by their usual reluctance to discuss world politics in terms of unipolarity. This reluctance was on full display during an interview with Secretary Rice in December 2007.<sup>123</sup> R. Nicholas Burns, the under secretary of state for political affairs, made an awkward attempt to extenuate the transformation of the United States into a unipolar power, arguing that the demise of the Soviet Union, not U.S. policy, led to the emergence of a unipolar international system: “It certainly wasn’t the policies of the United States that created what you perceive to be a unipolar world, it was history. It was the collapse of communism and of the Soviet Union.”<sup>124</sup> Of course, the major global shift of power in favour of the United States came with the disappearance of the Soviet state, but Burns did not care to talk about the continuing growth of America’s material capabilities. He failed to mention that U.S. power had increased significantly since the end of the Cold War as the result of a conscious grand strategy of the United States to maintain its primacy in world affairs.

Another way U.S. officials tried to deflect critical discussion on the U.S. unipole position was by dismissing Russia’s stark rejection of unipolarity as mostly rhetorical. This attitude obviously reflected their appreciation of Russia’s diminished relative significance for U.S. national security in the post-Cold War period. They surely understood that the Russian revisionist strategy was real and that Russia likely would build a new architecture of international relations if it had the wherewithal to do so. However, they had no reason to believe the Russians were up to the task. Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates questioned “whether they actually think they can create some sort of alternative architecture,” and he stated confidently: “I don’t think it’ll be successful, even if they are trying it.”<sup>125</sup>

In their comments on Putin’s tough rhetoric, senior U.S. officials lamented that it did not accord with either their own world view or with the character of U.S.-Russian relations as they saw them. Approaching the troubled relations in the typical American problem-solving frame

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<sup>122</sup> *Strategic Assessment of U.S.-Russian Relations: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 110th Congress, 1st Session*, S. Hrg. 110.565 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008), p. 6.

<sup>123</sup> “Interview With Josef Joffe of Die Zeit Newspaper: Secretary Condoleezza Rice,” December 20, 2007, available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/12/97976.htm>.

<sup>124</sup> “Challenges and Opportunities Facing the Transatlantic Community: R. Nicholas Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs, Center for European Policy Studies,” March 26, 2007, available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/p/us/rm/2007/82886.htm>.

<sup>125</sup> “U.S. Defense Secretary Says ‘Nobody Wants a New Cold War’,” *RFE/RL Newslines*, October 24, 2007, available at <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1143979.html>.

of mind, they focused narrowly on specific issues where they still thought they could cooperate constructively with the Russians (notably counterterrorism and non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction) and where they mostly disagreed with the Russian stance (notably U.S. missile defence and the undemocratic development in Russia) rather than on the larger strategic context within which the relations had to be understood. Though the relationship with the Russians did not occupy a central position in their minds, there was a sense among them that the United States should reengage Russia in a more thorough dialogue on the issues. Consequently, the Bush administration decided to make a new effort to reach out to the Russian leaders and clarify U.S. policies through intensified consultations in order to salvage the bilateral relationship.<sup>126</sup>

When questioned about the deteriorating state of U.S.-Russian relations at a press conference in the White House, Bush said “it’s a complicated relationship,” what became the official catch-phrase describing his administration’s interactions with the Russians.<sup>127</sup> In an interview, Bush admitted that “there is a lot of tension with Russia,” but he would not characterize the relationship as adversarial.<sup>128</sup> Amazingly, he considered it reasonable despite the unfriendly Russian rhetoric to say: “Russia is a friend.”<sup>129</sup> At the level of Washington’s national security bureaucracy, officials held a more sombre view, even in public. “Russia may look at the United States as an adversary,” Fried noted.<sup>130</sup> He indicated that U.S. relations with Russia were likely to remain a “complex mix” of partnership and competition.<sup>131</sup> Peter W. Rodman, who had attended the Munich conference as assistant secretary of defence for international security affairs, could allow himself to be even more frank after leaving office. In

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<sup>126</sup> Thom Shanker and Helene Cooper, “U.S. Moves to Soothe Growing Russian Resentment,” *The New York Times*, March 6, 2007. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/06/washington/06diplo.html>.

<sup>127</sup> “Press Conference by the President,” February 14, 2007, available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/02/20070214-2.html>. Also see congressional testimony by Fried on May 24, 2007 in *Russia: In Transition or Intransigent? Hearing before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 110th Congress, 1st Session* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010), p. 10 and “Press Briefing by National Security Advisor Steven Hadley on the President’s Trip to the G8 Summit and Europe,” June 1, 2007, available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/06/20070601-11.html>.

<sup>128</sup> “Transcript of Reuters interview with President Bush,” Reuters, London, May 22, 2007, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/newsOne/idUSBAU24821120070522>.

<sup>129</sup> “Roundtable Interview of the President by Foreign Print Media,” May 31, 2007, available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/06/20070601-3.html>.

<sup>130</sup> “Press Roundtable With Edward R. Murrow Journalist Exchange Participants: Daniel Fried, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs,” April 11, 2007, available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/83001.htm>.

<sup>131</sup> “Europe’s Role in the World: Daniel Fried, Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs: Remarks at the Europa Forum Program,” May 9, 2007, available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/84621.htm>.

a talk given on March 28, 2007, he described Putin's speech as "anti-American stuff," and concluded ruefully: "The bottom line is we have a Russia problem."<sup>132</sup>

While Putin in Munich condemned the unipolar world he alleged the United States was seeking to create, he did not say much there about the multipolar alternative he envisaged instead of U.S.-dominated unipolarity. On other occasions, however, he was astonishingly outspoken in elaborating on Russia's idea of multipolarity as a system of checks and balances. These statements were as important as the Munich speech but not as highly publicized. Their significance lay in Putin's communication of the message that Russia's pursuit of a multipolar world was concerned with balancing against the United States. "Russia," he said, "will strive to bring a balanced, multipolar world into being." Accordingly, he put Russia forward as a rival to the United States that would use its power resources to challenge U.S. primacy. "Russia's economic, military and political capabilities are obviously growing, and a new competitor in the world is emerging," Putin declared.<sup>133</sup> "Russia has enough potential to influence the construction of a new world order so that the future architecture of international relations will be balanced," he asserted with hyperbolic confidence.<sup>134</sup> Putin threw down a direct challenge to the United States when he stated that Russia's actions "are aimed at securing balance in the world."<sup>135</sup>

Putin's Munich speech was followed by a cascade of pronouncements that laid out Russia's basic philosophy on world politics. In March 2007, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a review of Russia's foreign policy approved by Putin, and some of its main points were elucidated by Foreign Minister Lavrov in several speeches, articles and interviews. The review was notable both for conveying the notion that the global balance of power was shifting at the expense of the United States and for its criticism of U.S. policy. It argued that a more even distribution of resources in the world was "laying an objective foundation for a multipolar construct of international relations." A stronger and more self-confident Russia was seen as "an important integral part" of this "positive change." The review claimed that the

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<sup>132</sup> Peter W. Rodman, *The Emerging Pattern of Geopolitics* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, September 2007), p. 6.

<sup>133</sup> "Press-konferentsiya po itogam peregovorov s Predsedatelem Soveta ministrov Italii Romano Prodi" [Press conference on the results of negotiations with Chairman of the council of ministers of Italy Romano Prodi], 23 January 2007, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24011>.

<sup>134</sup> "Interv'yu mezharabskomu sputnikovomu telekanalu 'Al'-Dzhazira" [Interview for the inter-Arabic satellite television channel "Al-Jazeera"], 10 February 2007, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24035>.

<sup>135</sup> "Zayavleniya dlya pressy i otvety na voprosam po itogam peregovorov s Prezidentom Gretsii Karolosom Papul'yasom" [Statements for the press and answers to questions on the results of negotiations with President of Greece Karolos Papoulias], 31 May 2007, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24311>.



unipolar model of world leadership had turned out to be unworkable by virtue of insufficient capabilities. It expressed confidence in the “impossibility of providing the pretensions to individual leadership with adequate military-political and economic resources...”<sup>136</sup> Lavrov talked about the “mythology of a unipolar world,” insisting that the United States had insufficient resources “for imperial building.”<sup>137</sup> The “unipolar project” was, in his view, not only unacceptable but also non-viable.<sup>138</sup> On the other hand, the Russians were clearly worried about U.S. policy and actions in the world, especially in the former Soviet region. They paradoxically regarded Russia as being under security threat despite its supposed ascent.

“Along with the positive changes negative tendencies also persist,” the Russian foreign policy review reported on the state of world development. It recognized with alarm that “attempts continue to create a ‘unipolar world’,” and it exposed the fundamental divergence of strategic vision between the United States and Russia. “There is a momentous difference in the vision of a future world order: the American unipolar and the Russian, based on multipolarity,” the review noted, but it also suggested disingenuously that this difference did not predetermine confrontation.<sup>139</sup> Echoing the review’s muddled thinking, Lavrov argued that it was “absolutely unjustified” to regard multipolarity as a set-up for confrontation with the United States.<sup>140</sup> At the same time, however, the Russians pronounced the return of competition among great powers, a dreaded phenomenon that the United States under the Bush administration hoped to prevent.<sup>141</sup> The Russian foreign policy review contended that “equilibrium and a competitive environment are gradually being restored.” It envisaged competition with the United States “across the entire spectrum of international problems and everywhere in the world, including

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<sup>136</sup> “Obzor vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii” [Review of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation], 431-27-03-2007, text posted on the web site of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on March 27, 2007 and available at [http://www.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/0/3647DA97748A106BC32572AB002AC4DD](http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/3647DA97748A106BC32572AB002AC4DD).

<sup>137</sup> “Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na XV Assamblee Soveta po vneshney i oboronnoy politike” [Remarks by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov at the XV Assembly of the Council on foreign and defence policy], 363-17-03-2007, 17 March 2007, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2007](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2007).

<sup>138</sup> “Stenogramma vystupleniya Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v Moskovskom gosudarstvennom lingvisticheskom universitete” [Transcript of remarks by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov at the Moscow linguistic university], 225-20-02-2007, 20 February 2007, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2007](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2007).

<sup>139</sup> “Obzor vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii.”

<sup>140</sup> “Stat’ya Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova ‘Nastoyashchee i budushchee global’noy politiki: vzglyad iz Moskvy,’ opublikovannaya v zhurnale ‘Rossiya v global’noy politike’ no. 2 (mart-aprel’ 2007 goda)” [Article by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov “The present and the future of global politics: the view from Moscow,” published in the journal “Russia in global politics” no. 2 (March-April 2007)], available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2007](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2007).

<sup>141</sup> *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (2006), p. 35.

the post-Soviet space...”<sup>142</sup> This competitive view of the world was underscored by Lavrov. “I think the paradigm of contemporary international relations is determined precisely by competition,” he said.<sup>143</sup> Lavrov emphasized Russia’s role in the revival of great-power competition: “As Russia grows stronger, perhaps for the first time in history upholding her national interests with the use of all competitive advantages at her disposal, a competitive environment is gradually restored in international relations.”<sup>144</sup> According to Lavrov, Russia braced itself to cope with that kind of environment. “Russia is ready for competition,” he said.<sup>145</sup> Like Putin, Lavrov described Russia’s role in balance-of-power terms and presented his country as a counterweight to the United States: “Russia will actively continue to play a balancing role in global affairs, using its capabilities in the present-day world.”<sup>146</sup>

Criticism of the hegemonic aspirations of the United States was an enduring part of the Russian political discourse. The foreign policy review referred disapprovingly to an American striving to arrange international relations according to a “leader and led scheme.”<sup>147</sup> Lavrov followed Primakov in making clear that Russia refused to be put in a position of being led by the United States. “We simply have no reasons to be in the role of a follower,” he said.<sup>148</sup> Russia rejected a subordinate role for itself and demanded full equality with the United States, including equality in decision making. “The main thing is that the USA and Russia should perceive each other as equal partners,” Lavrov declared. “Any other form of relationship is unacceptable to us today.”<sup>149</sup> As the necessary alternative to what the Russians termed “individual leadership” by the United States, Lavrov proposed an informal collective leadership

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<sup>142</sup> “Obzor vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii.”

<sup>143</sup> “Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na XV Assamblee Soveta po vneshney i oboronnoy politike.”

<sup>144</sup> “Stat’ya Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova ‘Global’noy politike nuzhny otkrytost’ i demokratiya,’ opublikovannaya v gazete ‘Izvestiya’” [Article by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov “Global politics needs openness and democracy,” published in the newspaper “Izvestiya”], 24 April 2007, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2007](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2007).

<sup>145</sup> “Otvety Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na voprosy bel’giyskogo zhurnala ‘Knak’” [Answers by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov to questions from the Belgian journal “Knack”], 26 December 2007, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2007](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2007).

<sup>146</sup> “Stat’ya Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova ‘Vneshnyaya politika Rossii: novy etap,’ opublikovannaya v zhurnale ‘Ekspert’” [Article by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov “The foreign policy of Russia: a new phase,” published in the journal “Expert”], 17 December 2007, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2007](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2007).

<sup>147</sup> “Obzor vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii.”

<sup>148</sup> “Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na XV Assamblee Soveta po vneshney i oboronnoy politike.”

<sup>149</sup> “Stenogramma vystupleniya i otvetov na voprosy Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na seminare po sluchayu 200-letiya ustanovleniya dipotnosheniy mezhdu Rossiei i SShA v Moskovskom tsentre Karnegi” [Transcript of remarks and replies to questions by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov at seminar on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Russia and the USA at the Carnegie Moscow Center], 997-21-07-2007, 21 June 2007, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2007](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2007).



by a core group of the major states of the world. “This may be called a ‘concert of the powers of the 21st century’,” he said.<sup>150</sup> The institutional basis for such an informal mechanism to govern the world could, in his view, only be provided by the United Nations.<sup>151</sup> How this murky idea of collective global governance squared with the steely notion of revived international competition as a key driving force in world affairs was not explained.

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<sup>150</sup> “Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v MGIMO(U) po sluchayu nachala novogo uchebnogo goda” [Remarks by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov at the Moscow state institute of international relations (university) on the occasion of the start of a new academic year], 1315-03-09-2007, 3 September 2007, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2007](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2007).

<sup>151</sup> “Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na 62-y sessii General’noy Asamblei OON” [Remarks by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov at the 62nd session of the UN General Assembly], 1513-29-09-2007, 28 September 2007, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2007](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2007).

## **Towards a New Cold War?**

After the shockwaves from Putin's diatribe in Munich had subsided, the strategic world order considerations receded into the background even though they actually were the critical determinants of the U.S.-Russian relationship, while specific contentious issues came to the fore. There was no shortage of such issues between the United States and Russia, and the list of bilateral disputes kept growing. The most contentious issue in 2007 appeared to be missile defence. Russia vociferously objected to the Bush administration's newly unveiled plans to deploy elements of the U.S. strategic missile defence system in Eastern Europe to counter a possible ballistic missile threat from Iran. The proposed deployment would include long-range missile interceptors in Poland and an associated radar installation in the Czech Republic. Despite repeated U.S. assurances to the contrary, the Russians continued to insist that missile defence of the United States and its European allies would pose a threat to their strategic nuclear forces. Another sharp disagreement emerged in 2007 concerning Russia's suspension of its compliance with the original Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE), a landmark arms control agreement signed in 1990. The most obvious reason why Russia suspended treaty implementation was the refusal of NATO member countries to ratify an adapted version of the CFE Treaty negotiated in 1999. That refusal, in turn, was prompted by Russia's failure to fulfill the commitment it made in conjunction with the adapted treaty to withdraw military forces from Moldova. In 2007, the United States and Russia also disagreed on how to manage their strategic arms control relationship. Russia wanted to negotiate a major new treaty to follow the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), which would expire in December 2009, whereas the Bush administration, suggesting there was no more need for detailed treaties reducing and limiting nuclear weapons, preferred a less voluminous post-START accord. As Secretary Gates noted, the administration did not believe the United States should negotiate another "telephone book-size agreement" on the reduction and limitation of strategic offensive arms.<sup>152</sup>

The accumulation of disputes elicited pessimistic comments by journalists and scholars in the United States, Western Europe and Russia about the deteriorating relations between the United States and Russia. Zbigniew Brzezinski summarized the general view in the West that there was room for further deterioration: "America's relationship with Russia is on a

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<sup>152</sup> "Remarks by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates," March 17, 2008, available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/03/102315.htm>.

downward slide.”<sup>153</sup> According to Dimitri K. Simes, U.S.-Russian relations were “worsening by the day.”<sup>154</sup> Observing growing “signs of mutual tension, distrust, and even hostility,” Marshall I. Goldman noted that prospects for the relationship “are not especially promising.”<sup>155</sup> R. Craig Nation agreed that “the current state of Russian-American relations is grim and shows no signs of immediate improvement.”<sup>156</sup> An even gloomier assessment was given by Stephen J. Blank. “East-West relations have become essentially adversarial,” he wrote.<sup>157</sup> Russian commentators reached similar conclusions about the relations. “In reality, Russian-American cooperation today has a limited character, and tension between Washington and Moscow is growing on the majority of international issues,” Sergey Rogov reported. “In the political, economic, and military spheres of the Russian-American relations, the tendencies towards rivalry, not towards cooperation, have begun to prevail.”<sup>158</sup> Sergei Karaganov saw signs of what he termed a “new epoch of confrontation.”<sup>159</sup> There was even speculation about a possible emerging new cold war between the West and Russia.<sup>160</sup>

In concert with the deterioration in U.S.-Russian relations, politicians in the United States saw Russia in an increasingly negative light. Hostility to Russia was especially rampant in the U.S. Congress, where leaders from both parties had long set themselves up as vocal critics of Russian domestic and foreign policies. Representative Thomas (Tom) Lantos, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, was known for his sustained criticism of Russia. In May 2007, he presided over a hearing with the ominous title “Russia: Rebuilding the Iron Curtain.”<sup>161</sup> Senator Joseph R. Biden Jr., chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, had a reputation as harsh critic of the anti-democratic regression in Russia. “Since President Putin took office in 2000, Russia has experienced, in my view, the biggest rollback of

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<sup>153</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, “How to Avoid a New Cold War,” *Time*, vol. 169, no. 25 (June 18, 2007), p. 28.

<sup>154</sup> Dimitri K. Simes, “Losing Russia: The Costs of Renewed Confrontation,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 86, no. 6 (November/December 2007), p. 36.

<sup>155</sup> Marshall I. Goldman, “Russia and the West: Mutually Assured Distrust,” *Current History*, vol. 106, no. 702 (October 2007), p. 319.

<sup>156</sup> Nation, “U.S. Interests in the New Eurasia,” p. 23.

<sup>157</sup> Stephen J. Blank, *Towards a New Russia Policy* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, February 2008), p. 4.

<sup>158</sup> Sergey Rogov, “Strategicheskoe partnerstvo vse eshche vozmozhno” [A strategic partnership is still possible], *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, no. 53 (19 March 2007), available at [http://www.ng.ru/courier/2007-03-19/13\\_strategia.html](http://www.ng.ru/courier/2007-03-19/13_strategia.html).

<sup>159</sup> Sergey Karaganov, “Novaya epokha protivostoyaniya” [The new epoch of confrontation], *Rossiia v global'noy politike*, vol. 5, no. 4 (July-August 2007), p. 58.

<sup>160</sup> Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War: Putin's Russia and the Threat to the West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 3.

<sup>161</sup> *Russia: Rebuilding the Iron Curtain: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 110th Congress, 1st Session, Serial No. 110-65* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2007).

democracy that's occurred anywhere in the world in decades," he asserted in June 2006.<sup>162</sup> A year later, he was harsher still. "Russia has, in my view, slipped into a mire of authoritarianism," he declared.<sup>163</sup> Biden had also been at the forefront advocating a tougher and more confrontational policy towards Putin's Russia. "I'm not a big fan of Putin's, and I think we should have a direct confrontation with Putin politically," he told an interviewer in December 2006.<sup>164</sup> Biden's predecessor as committee chairman, Senator Richard G. Lugar, usually voiced moderate views, but in August 2006 he famously ranked Russia among the adversaries of the United States.<sup>165</sup> The foremost critic of Russia in Congress was Senator John McCain. He had been ahead of most actors in U.S. politics in advancing a clear-sighted view of Russia's evolution towards authoritarianism. As early as November 2003, when Bush and his advisers still hoped Putin was a democrat, he stated on the Senate floor that "a creeping coup against the forces of democracy and market capitalism in Russia is threatening the foundation of the U.S.-Russia relationship and raising the specter of a new era of cold peace between Washington and Moscow." At the time, McCain also took a much harder rhetorical line than Bush in the regional struggle for geopolitical advantage, arguing that Russia "presents a fundamental challenge to American interests across Eurasia." He realized early that Russia was trying to expand its influence over its neighbours in an effort to establish control of the former Soviet space: "Under President Putin, Russia has pursued a policy in its 'near abroad' that would create an empire of influence and submission, if not outright control."<sup>166</sup>

Russia did not figure prominently in the initial phase of the presidential election campaign in the United States, but it did crop up occasionally in debates and not in a positive light, especially not after Putin's attack on U.S. policy in Munich. While the Bush administration was unwilling to respond in kind, some contenders for presidential nomination were eager to take up a hostile attitude towards Russia. In the first Democratic debate, Biden identified Russia as one of the three nations representing the biggest threat to the United States, along with North Korea and Iran.<sup>167</sup> Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, in a revealing

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<sup>162</sup> *Russia: Back to the Future: Hearing*, p. 17.

<sup>163</sup> *Strategic Assessment of U.S.-Russian Relations: Hearing*, p. 1.

<sup>164</sup> "Senator Biden is interviewed on FOX News Sunday with Chris Wallace," December 3, 2006, available at <http://biden.senate.gov/newsroom/details.cfm?id=266238&&>.

<sup>165</sup> "Lugar Speech at Lugar-Purdue Summit on Energy Security," August 29, 2006, available at <http://lugar.senate.gov/press/record.cfm?id=262155&&>.

<sup>166</sup> *Congressional Record*, vol. 149, no. 158 (November 4, 2003), pp. S13866-S13867.

<sup>167</sup> "The Democrats' First 2008 Presidential Debate," *The New York Times*, April 27, 2007, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/27/us/politics/27debate-transcript.html>; "Democratic Presidential Candidates Debate at South Carolina State University in Orangeburg," April 26, 2007, available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=74349>.

formulation, pointed out that it would be a mistake to see Russia “only as a threat.”<sup>168</sup> McCain’s tough talk set the tone of the subsequent discussion about Russia in the primaries. His campaign rhetoric was largely a reiteration of what he said in the past about Russia’s policies being fundamentally at odds with U.S. interests. “Putin wants to restore the days of the old Russian empire, and he continues to repress democracy, human rights, and freedom of the press,” he said in an interview.<sup>169</sup> In a major speech on foreign policy, he called for “addressing the dangers posed by a revanchist Russia...”<sup>170</sup>

One of the leading presidential candidates, Senator Barack Obama, a liberal Democrat, was conspicuously cautious about Russia during the primary campaign. He made few public statements on the topic as if he was playing safe. “We know that Russia is neither our enemy nor close ally right now,” he said in his foreign policy speech.<sup>171</sup> Even this bland comment was expressly omitted in an article in *Foreign Affairs* that was based on the speech. The article did, however, provide a rare glimpse of Obama’s thinking. In it, Obama argued that the United States should cooperate with Russia in areas of common interest, above all in preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, while also pushing for democracy in Russia.<sup>172</sup> Thus, Obama appeared as one of the least critical of Putin’s Russia among the contenders. It was nonetheless presumed that all of Bush’s potential successors (Clinton, Obama and McCain) would be tougher on Putin than Bush had been.<sup>173</sup> After all, Putin had become a rather reviled figure in the United States, subjected to rude attacks on the campaign trail. “This is a dangerous person,” McCain said in a debate.<sup>174</sup> When campaigning in New Hampshire on January 6, 2008, Clinton dropped all diplomatic politeness to attack the Russian president. Pointing to Putin’s shady past as a KGB officer and Bush’s innocuous but ridiculed remark that he got a

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<sup>168</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Security and Opportunity for the Twenty-first Century,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 86, no. 6 (November/December 2007), p. 13.

<sup>169</sup> “The Unvarnished McCain,” *Business Week*, no. 4037 (June 4, 2007), available at [http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/07\\_23/b4037095.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/07_23/b4037095.htm).

<sup>170</sup> “Remarks by John McCain to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council,” March 26, 2008, available at <http://www.johnmccain.com/Informing/Speeches/872473dd-9ccb-4ab4-9d0d-ec54f0e7a497.htm>; John McCain, “Remarks to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council,” March 26, 2008, available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=77121>.

<sup>171</sup> “The American Moment: Remarks to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs,” April 23, 2007, available at [http://www.barackobama.com/2007/04/23/the\\_american\\_moment\\_remarks\\_to.php](http://www.barackobama.com/2007/04/23/the_american_moment_remarks_to.php); Barack Obama, “Remarks to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs,” April 23, 2007, available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=77043>.

<sup>172</sup> Barack Obama, “Renewing American Leadership,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 86, no. 4 (July/August 2007), p. 8.

<sup>173</sup> Michael Freedman, “Why America May Take a Harder Line Against Russia,” *Newsweek*, vol. 151, nos. 16/17 (April 21/April 28, 2008), p. 4.

<sup>174</sup> “The Republican Debate on Fox News Channel,” *The New York Times*, October 21, 2007, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/21/us/politics/21debate-transcript.html>.

sense of Putin's soul at their first meeting in 2001, she quipped insultingly: "By definition he doesn't have a soul."<sup>175</sup>

By 2008, the U.S.-Russian relationship had deteriorated steadily over the past few years. As Angela E. Stent suggested, it could at best be described as a selective partnership in which cooperation on some issues coexisted with competition or disagreement on other issues.<sup>176</sup> The final Bush-Putin summit meeting in Sochi in April inspired a faint sense of hope that the bilateral relations had weathered what some observers perceived as a crisis and would eventually improve. At the meeting, the two leaders signed a joint "strategic framework declaration" setting forth a comprehensive agenda for cooperation. The curious document stated that the United States and Russia were dedicated to moving their relationship "from one of strategic competition to strategic partnership." This startling language amounted practically to an indirect recognition that the relationship was in fact mainly competitive, but the United States and Russia in the declaration pledged to find areas where their interests coincided and cooperation therefore was possible. Five general areas of cooperation were identified by the document itself: strategic arms control, nuclear nonproliferation, counterterrorism, economic development, and measures against climate change.<sup>177</sup> The declaration encouraged Rice to contend that while relations between the United States and Russia remained "complex and characterized simultaneously by competition and cooperation" and had been "sorely tested by Moscow's rhetoric," the United States had finally "found common ground" with Russia.<sup>178</sup> Unfortunately, the facts contradicted this misleading assessment of what really happened in Sochi. The United States and Russia actually shared few interests, and the rhetoric on both sides held out little promise of improved relations. In the United States, the campaign rhetoric had turned explicitly hostile to Russia. Meanwhile, the public statements of Russian leaders continued to manifest a decided anti-Americanism. During a visit to France in May 2008, Putin, now Russia's prime minister, called the United States "a frightening monster abroad."<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Ellen Wulforst, "Hillary Clinton, campaigning, ponders Putin's soul," Reuters, January 7, 2008, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article?articleId=USN0633656720080107>.

<sup>176</sup> Angela E. Stent, "Restoration and Revolution in Putin's Foreign Policy," *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 60, no. 6 (August 2008), p. 1096.

<sup>177</sup> "U.S.-Russia Strategic Framework Declaration," April 6, 2008, available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/04/20080406-4.html>.

<sup>178</sup> Condoleezza Rice, "Rethinking the National Interest: American Realism for a New World," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 4 (July/August 2008), pp. 3-4.

<sup>179</sup> "V.V. Putin dal interv'yū frantsuzskoy gazete 'Le Mond'" [V.V. Putin gave an interview to the French newspaper "Le Monde"], 31 May 2008, available at <http://archive.premier.gov.ru/visits/world/6048/events/1708>.

Only two months later, dramatic events in the post-Soviet space delivered a shock that unravelled the U.S.-Russian relationship.

### **The Georgian Crisis and Its Aftermath**

With the Russian-Georgian war of August 2008, the larger strategic considerations suddenly returned to the centre stage of U.S.-Russian relations. The war sparked an acute and grave crisis in the bilateral relationship and threw into sharp relief the irreconcilable differences between the United States and Russia in their views regarding the international system and the global order. It demonstrated the great lengths to which Russia was ready to go to suppress the sovereignty and repudiate the territorial integrity of Soviet successor states in order to block their entry into Euro-Atlantic security structures. Russia's invasion of Georgia, conducted in clear violation of international law, formed part of the broader long-term grand strategic ambition to reestablish regional dominance. This ambition called, at a minimum, for a drive to halt the expansion of NATO. By seeking to prevent further NATO enlargement, Russia meant to secure its opportunities to dominate the ex-Soviet region. The invasion was followed by official Russian statements claiming a regional sphere of influence, or a sphere of "privileged interests" in government parlance. Thus, the military intervention was designed mainly to prevent Georgia from joining NATO. Russian leaders, of course, refrained from describing their reasons for attacking Georgia in such terms, although Putin's first public remarks after the invasion indicated that he had the prospect of Georgian NATO membership very much on his mind.<sup>180</sup> Russian analysts have discussed the main strategic rationale for Russia's actions leading up to the war with Georgia. Noting that Russia pursued the overriding geopolitical goal of stopping NATO's eastward advance, Dmitri Trenin observed: "In the run-up to the war, it was the prospect of a NATO membership for Georgia that played the key role in Russian considerations and practical actions."<sup>181</sup> The same logic obviously applies to the war itself. It was the general determination to end NATO expansion that impelled Russia to attack Georgia. The war should be seen in the context of Russia's consistent policy of attempting to thwart

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<sup>180</sup> "Glava Pravitel'stva V.V. Putin provel soveshchanie v svyazi s sobyitiyami v Yuzhnoy Osetii" [Head of Government V.V. Putin chaired a conference in connection with the events in South Ossetia], 9 August 2008, available at <http://archive.premier.gov.ru/visits/ru/6046/events/1683>.

<sup>181</sup> Dmitri Trenin, "Russia in the Caucasus: Reversing the Tide," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, vol. 15, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2009), p. 146.



Georgia's aspiration to join NATO. Richard Sakwa is correct that it was "a war to stop the enlargement of the Western alliance."<sup>182</sup>

Strongly supported by the United States, Georgia and Ukraine actively sought membership in NATO, but both countries were faced with seemingly insurmountable obstacles to their ambitions of joining the alliance. In Ukraine, NATO accession was a highly controversial political issue dividing the nation. The Georgian Western-oriented security policy, centred upon integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures, enjoyed strong popular support. However, Georgia's eligibility for NATO membership was dependent on the country's unrewarding efforts to resolve its internal conflicts with the Russian-backed breakaway provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Georgia had to consider that NATO's established principles of enlargement, as stated in the 1995 Study on NATO Enlargement, made resolution of the conflicts a prerequisite to Georgian membership in the alliance. While the NATO study declared that there were no fixed or rigid criteria for admitting new member states, it defined the conditions which prospective members would have to meet to join NATO. Under the study's guidelines, candidate states with unresolved "ethnic disputes or external territorial disputes" must settle those disputes before they can be admitted. "Resolution of such disputes would be a factor in determining whether to invite a state to join the Alliance," the study stated.<sup>183</sup> As if the conditionality set by the NATO study was not explicit enough, Germany went out of its way to explain that Georgia failed to meet NATO's admission standards. According to the German government, Georgia could not qualify for accession to NATO as long as the conflicts with South Ossetia and Abkhazia remained unresolved. "Countries involved in regional or internal conflicts cannot, from my point of view, be members of NATO," Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel stipulated in March 2008.<sup>184</sup>

Inasmuch as Russia openly supported the secessionists in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and therefore was directly involved in the conflicts with Georgia, NATO's enlargement principles played into the hands of the Russian leaders, providing them with the main tools for their policy to preclude any genuine Georgian independence in pursuing a Euro-Atlantic orientation. The Russians systematically and ruthlessly exploited the principles as a way of

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<sup>182</sup> Richard Sakwa, "Conspiracy Narratives as a Mode of Engagement in International Politics: The Case of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War," *The Russian Review*, vol. 71, no. 4 (October 2012), p. 582.

<sup>183</sup> "Study on NATO Enlargement" (Brussels: North Atlantic Treaty Organization, September 1995), available at [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_24733.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_24733.htm).

<sup>184</sup> "Rede von Bundeskanzlerin Dr. Angela Merkel auf der 41. Kommandeurtagung der Bundeswehr am 10. März 2008 in Berlin," *Bulletin*, 23-2, available at <http://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Bulletin/2008/03/23-2-bk-Kommandeur.html>.



blocking Georgia's path to NATO membership. They in reality relied on NATO's own policy to prevent the alliance from expanding into the Caucasus. As might have been expected, Russia sought to perpetuate indefinitely the conflicts over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. It did not want to resolve the conflicts, and consequently abstained from doing anything diplomatically that might lead to peaceful settlements. On the contrary, it played an obstructionist role geared to keep the conflicts unresolved so as to retain its critical leverage. Russia's intransigence left Georgia in an extremely difficult position. The Georgians had few options to bring about a resolution of the separatist question. Bearing in mind that accession to NATO required elimination of the issue, they feared that the existence of the territorial disputes threatened to permanently sink Georgia's chances at NATO membership. The need to reintegrate the breakaway entities into Georgia forced them to contemplate drastic measures.

Russia's war against Georgia was preceded by a series of provocative Russian actions obviously aimed at undermining Georgia's territorial integrity. The Russian pressure on Georgia increased dramatically after NATO's Bucharest summit in April 2008. At the summit, NATO welcomed Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations and declared unequivocally that "these countries will become members of NATO."<sup>185</sup> Notwithstanding this extraordinary language, the summit failed to bring Ukraine and Georgia closer to membership. As U.S. officials explained later, the two countries still had to meet NATO's admission standards. That was not mentioned in the summit declaration but clearly understood by all interested parties, including the Russians.<sup>186</sup> Nevertheless, the declaration antagonized Russia. Attending the summit, Putin gave a speech in which he reiterated the vehement Russian opposition to the expansion of NATO. He then told a press conference that NATO's appearance at Russia's borders would be perceived as "a direct threat to the security of our country."<sup>187</sup> In a radio interview, Lavrov laid bare Russia's readiness to derail Georgia's and Ukraine's bid to join NATO by the most forceful means possible, implicitly including military

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<sup>185</sup> "Bucharest Summit Declaration Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bucharest on 3 April 2008," NATO press release (2008) 049, available at [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_8443.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_8443.htm).

<sup>186</sup> See testimony by Fried on April 23, 2008 in *The Bucharest Summit and the Way Forward for NATO: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Europe of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 110th Congress, 2nd Session*, Serial No. 110-166 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008), p. 11.

<sup>187</sup> "Zayavlenie dlya pressy i otvety na voprosy zhurnalistov po itogam zasedaniya Soveta Rossiya-NATO" [Statement for the press and answers to journalists' questions on the results of a meeting of the Russia-NATO Council], 4 April 2008, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24903>.

action. “We will do everything to prevent the admission of Ukraine and Georgia to NATO,” he announced.<sup>188</sup> Russia’s war in Georgia revealed that this was no empty threat.

In early August 2008, the South Ossetian separatists, apparently encouraged by Russia, began shelling Georgian villages in breach of a 1992 armistice and Russian military units illegally entered into South Ossetia. Georgia rashly responded to these manifestly aggressive actions by attempting to recapture South Ossetia by force. U.S. officials had warned the Georgians against using force to restore Georgia’s territorial integrity, even in the face of escalating provocations, not because the United States questioned the sovereign right of Georgia to do so in a military enforcement operation against separatists within its internationally recognized borders, but because the United States wanted Georgia to avoid a military confrontation with Russia. The Georgians went ahead anyway. It was a desperate gamble to resolve the territorial issue and thereby remove one of the primary obstacles to NATO membership. For Russia, the Georgian move was absolutely unacceptable. Russia was not going to allow Georgia to regain control over South Ossetia. If Georgia had achieved the forcible reintegration of the province, that would have signified the collapse of Russia’s policy of using the conflict to prevent Georgia’s accession to NATO. Russia launched a large-scale military invasion, defeated Georgia, occupied South Ossetia and Abkhazia in contravention of the ceasefire agreement brokered by the European Union (EU), and officially recognized both as “independent” states.<sup>189</sup> These actions, the Russians assumed, effectively halted NATO’s

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<sup>188</sup> ”Interv’yu: Rossiysko-amerikanskie otnosheniya: Sergey Lavrov, ministr inostrannykh del RF”

[Interview: Russian-American relations: Sergey Lavrov, minister of foreign affairs of the Russian Federation], Radio “Ekho Moskv,” 8 April 2008, available at <http://www.echo.msk.ru/programs/beseda/506017-echo>.

<sup>189</sup> For accounts and analyses of the war, see Roy Allison, “Russia resurgent? Moscow’s campaign to ‘coerce Georgia to peace,’” *International Affairs*, vol. 84, no. 6 (November 2008), pp. 1145-1171; Timothy L. Thomas, “The Bear Went Through the Mountain: Russia Appraises its Five-Day War in South Ossetia,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol. 22, no. 1 (January 2009), pp. 31-67; C.W. Blandy, *Provocation, Deception, Entrapment: The Russo-Georgian Five-Day War*, ARAG Caucasus Series 09/01 (Shrivenham: Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, Advanced Research and Assessment Group, March 2009); Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr (eds.), *The Guns of August 2008: Russia’s War in Georgia* (Amonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2009); Roy Allison, “The Russian case for military intervention in Georgia: international law, norms and political calculation,” *European Security*, vol. 18, no. 2 (June 2009), pp. 173-200; Vicken Cheterian, “The August 2008 war in Georgia: from ethnic conflict to border wars,” *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 28, no. 2 (June 2009), pp. 155-170; *Report*, vols. 1-3 (Geneva: The Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, September 2009); Wolfgang Richter, “Initial Military Operations during the War in Georgia in August 2008,” in *The EU Investigation Report on the August 2008 War and the Reactions from Georgia and Russia*, Caucasus analytical digest, no. 10 (Zurich: Russian and Eurasian Security Network, Center for Security Studies at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, 2 November 2009), pp. 5-9; Ronald D. Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Matthew Light, “The Russo-Georgian War of 2008: A Conflict Announced in Advance?” *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 62, no. 9 (November 2010), pp. 1579-1582; Mike Bowker, “The War in Georgia and the Western Response,” *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 30, no. 2 (June 2011), pp. 197-211; Ariel Cohen and Robert E. Hamilton, *The Russian Military and the Georgia War: Lessons and Implications* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, June 2011); John B. Dunlop, “The August 2008 Russo-Georgian War: Which Side Went First?” in Maria Raquel Freire and Roger E. Kanet (eds.), *Russia and its Near Neighbours:*

eastward enlargement. Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's permanent representative to NATO, in early 2011 stated candidly that "we fulfilled the basic set of tasks that confronted us. Neither Ukraine nor Georgia entered NATO. NATO has stopped its expansion to the east."<sup>190</sup> President Medvedev later told Russian officers that NATO probably would have continued to expand if Russia had not won the August 2008 war: "I can say that if in 2008 ... we had faltered, the geopolitical layout would have been different now. And a whole range of countries, which they tried to almost artificially drag into the North Atlantic alliance, would have most likely been there."<sup>191</sup> The outcome of the war indeed significantly complicated Georgia's efforts to gain entry into NATO, since the country was partly occupied by the Russians. Early accession to the alliance appeared even more unlikely than before the war. In 2009, Rogozin noted with satisfaction and undisguised sarcasm that Georgia now was "further away" from NATO membership. He derisively described NATO's dilemma as follows: either the alliance admits Georgia without South Ossetia and Abkhazia and recognizes the two territories as independent states or it admits Georgia with the territories while reconciling itself with the Russian military bases and troops there.<sup>192</sup> Needless to say, Rogozin considered neither scenario realistic. "Georgia's road to NATO in the present circumstances is closed," he pointedly concluded in 2011. "The potential for expansion of NATO is exhausted."<sup>193</sup>

In the aftermath of the war in Georgia, a spate of rhetorical bombast affirmed the creation of a multipolar world as a basic aim of Russian foreign policy. Shortly before the war, in July 2008, Medvedev had approved a new Foreign Policy Concept in which the clamour for multipolarity was missing. The insipid document mentioned multipolarity only as a fundamental tendency of modern development.<sup>194</sup> To be sure, the 2008 concept stated that its predecessor, published in 2000, remained valid, supplemented by the renewed concept version,

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*Identity, Interests and Foreign Policy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 89-105; Rick Fawn and Robert Nalbandov, "The difficulties of knowing the start of war in the information age: Russia, Georgia and the war over South Ossetia, August 2008," *European Security*, vol. 21, no. 1 (March 2012), pp. 57-89; Emmanuel Karagiannis, "The 2008 Russian-Georgian war via the lens of Offensive Realism," *European Security*, vol. 22, no. 1 (March 2013), pp. 74-93; Marcel H. Van Herpen, *Putin's Wars: The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

<sup>190</sup> "Realisty izuchayut avtomat Kalashnikova" [Realists study the automat Kalashnikov], *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 13 January 2011, available at <http://www.rg.ru/2011/01/13/rogozin-site.html>.

<sup>191</sup> "Vstrecha s ofitserami Yuzhnogo voennogo okruga" [Meeting with officers of the Southern military district], 21 November 2011, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/13605>.

<sup>192</sup> "Rogozin: posle desyatiletii kholodnoy voyny NATO rasteryana" [Rogozin: after decades of cold war, NATO is confused], *Vesti*, 3 April 2009, available at <http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=271117>.

<sup>193</sup> "Formiruya vzaimoponimanie" [Forming an understanding], *Krasnaya zvezda*, 17 November 2011, available at [http://old.redstar.ru/2011/11/17\\_11/3\\_01.html](http://old.redstar.ru/2011/11/17_11/3_01.html).

<sup>194</sup> "Kontseptsiya vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii" [Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation], 15 July 2008, available at <http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/785>.

but just a month after its approval the Russian leaders evidently deemed it necessary to issue a reminder of their unswerving commitment to promoting multipolarity. In a television interview on August 31, 2008, shortly after the end of the Russian-Georgian war, Medvedev gave a carefully prepared reply to the question of how he saw the future world order. He replied by saying that he would carry out Russia's foreign policy on the basis of the position that "the world must be multipolar." Medvedev stressed that Russia would fight U.S. unipolar policies. "Unipolarity is unacceptable," he stated succinctly. "We cannot accept a world order in which all decisions are made by one country, even as serious and respected one as the United States of America."<sup>195</sup> Another political position enunciated by Medvedev in the same interview was closely connected to the larger Russian strategy of promoting the emergence of a multipolar world with Russia as one of the leading and competitive poles. "Russia, like other countries in the world, has regions in which there are privileged interests," he claimed. Asked if this sphere of privileged Russian interests comprised the states on Russia's borders, Medvedev answered that the border states were priorities.<sup>196</sup>

Medvedev's positions were termed the "Medvedev Doctrine," but it would be more accurate to associate the so-called doctrine with Putin.<sup>197</sup> What Medvedev actually said in the interview was not new. Rather, it was a reformulation of already known strategic principles guiding Russia's foreign policy. Medvedev merely reiterated the long-held Russian position on the need for multipolarity. His notion that there is an area where Russia has privileged interests is strongly reminiscent of Putin's reference in 2000 to a zone of vital Russian interests. Medvedev's term "privileged interests" arguably does sound more compelling than the language used by Putin. It clearly implies that Russia demands special privileges in the form of deference from states in the region of former republics of the Soviet Union to what it perceives as its national interests. Anyway, the two leaders essentially asserted the strategic principle of a Russian sphere of influence encompassing the post-Soviet space. That is how Medvedev's statement was widely interpreted in the West.<sup>198</sup> Svante E. Cornell went even

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<sup>195</sup> "Interv'yu Dmitriya Medvedeva rossiyskim telekanalam" [Interview of Dmitry Medvedev for Russian television channels], 31 August 2008, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/1276>.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> George Friedman, "The Medvedev Doctrine and American Strategy," *Stratfor Geopolitical Intelligence Report*, September 2, 2008, available at <http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/medvedev-doctrine-and-american-strategy>; Owen Matthews and Anna Nemtsova, "The Medvedev Doctrine," *Newsweek*, vol. 152, no. 22 (December 1, 2008), pp. 44-47; Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, p. 31.

<sup>198</sup> Andrew E. Kramer, "Russia Claims Its Sphere of Influence in the World," *The New York Times*, September 1, 2008, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/01/world/europe/01russia.html>; Stephen J. Blank, "Georgia: The War Russia Lost," *Military Review*, vol. 88, no. 6 (November-December 2008), p. 39; Steven

further, calling it the announcement of “an overtly imperialist doctrine.”<sup>199</sup> Trenin has tried, rather unconvincingly, to establish that the sphere of privileged interests proclaimed by Medvedev is not the same as a traditional sphere of influence.<sup>200</sup> Medvedev himself later sought to downplay the negative perception in the West of his statement. He argued that it was interpreted “quite maliciously” and that what he had really meant was “the privileges of building special, very good relations with neighbours.”<sup>201</sup> There is a clear contradiction between this late and highly questionable explanation and the original assertion of the controversial Russian position in the wake of Russia’s brutal use of military force to subdue a neighbouring country.

Medvedev’s positions were considered so important by the Russian leadership that he repeated them in a September 2008 interview, although this time he called them principles.<sup>202</sup> Most poignantly, he highlighted the struggle for the shape of the world order, again rejecting the notion of global dominance by one power. Medvedev emphasized that “the world must not be unipolar. It must comprise various poles.”<sup>203</sup> Lavrov backed him up by certifying that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in implementing Russia’s foreign policy strictly followed the principles articulated by Medvedev.<sup>204</sup>

Among the most striking aspects of the aftermath of the Russian-Georgian war was the Russian proclivity to perceive the victorious war in vindictory geopolitical terms. The war cemented the way Russian officials thought of global affairs. It was squeezed into the philosophical framework underlying their grand strategy. The philosophy compelled them to frame the war’s outcome as a devastating blow to the hegemonic aspirations of the United

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Pifer, *Reversing the Decline: An Agenda for U.S.-Russian Relations in 2009*, Policy Paper no. 10 (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, January 2009), p. 8; Eugene Rumer and Angela Stent, “Russia and the West,” *Survival*, vol. 51, no. 2 (April-May 2009), p. 94; Henry R. Nau, “Obama’s Foreign Policy,” *Policy Review*, no. 160 (April/May 2010), p. 37; Stephen J. Blank, “The Real Reset: Moscow Refights the Cold War,” *World Affairs*, vol. 173, no. 3 (September/October 2010), p. 87.

<sup>199</sup> Svante E. Cornell, “No Reset in the Post-Soviet Space,” *The Journal of International Security Affairs*, no. 20 (Spring/Summer 2011), p. 19.

<sup>200</sup> Dmitri Trenin, “Russia’s Spheres of Interest, not Influence,” *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 4 (October 2009), pp. 4, 12.

<sup>201</sup> “Interv’yu gazete ‘Faynenshl Tayms’” [Interview for the newspaper “Financial Times”], 20 June 2011, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/11630>.

<sup>202</sup> “Interv’yu Dmitriya Medvedeva televizionnomu kanalu ‘Evron’yus’” [Interview of Dmitriy Medvedev for the television channel “Euronews”], 2 September 2008, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/1294>.

<sup>203</sup> “Stenograficheskiy otchet o vstreche s uchastnikami mezhdunarodnogo kluba ‘Valday’” [Stenographic report on a meeting with participants in the international club “Valдай”], 12 September 2008, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/1383>.

<sup>204</sup> “Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova, opublikovannoe v pol’skoy gazete ‘Gazeta Wybarcha’” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov, published in the Polish newspaper “Gazeta Wyborcza”], 1348-11-09-2008, 11 September 2008, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2008](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2008).

States. According to the Russians, the war had far-reaching transformative systemic consequences. It had, in their view, demonstrated that a U.S.-dominated system of global governance was unviable. They also spoke in this context about the failure of the NATO-centric European security architecture. The existing transatlantic security structures, they contended, not only failed to prevent the Georgian conflict but actually encouraged it. As argued by Lavrov, the war in Georgia was caused by “attempts to arrange this architecture under the rules of unipolarity...”<sup>205</sup> However, the unipolar leadership scheme, in the words of Lavrov, “showed its complete incapability in Georgia...”<sup>206</sup> In the fog of hubris after their moderately successful effort to counterbalance the United States and NATO in Eurasia, the Russians alleged the final demise of the concept of unipolarity. “One of the most important lessons of the August events is that the myth of a ‘unipolar world’ has irrevocably gone to the past, and attempts to revive it are futile,” Lavrov stated.<sup>207</sup> Russia’s own engagement in political mythmaking did not, however, go so far as to announce the sudden arrival of multipolarity. Fresh from their military victory, the Russians still believed that the formation of a new world order was a long, slow process. “Of course, the Caucasian crisis did not make the world polycentric in the twinkling of an eye,” Lavrov conceded. “But it has shown most convincingly that a unipolar world does not exist.”<sup>208</sup>

The initial reaction of the United States to Russia’s assault on Georgia was swift but restrained. Some would describe the U.S. response as tepid.<sup>209</sup> Bush immediately declared that the Russian actions were unacceptable and expressed his continued support for Georgia. “We

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<sup>205</sup> ”Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na 63-y sessii General’noy Asamblei OON” [Remarks by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov at the 63rd session of the UN General Assembly], 1494-20-09-2008, 27 September 2008, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2008](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2008).

<sup>206</sup> ”Stenogramma otvetov Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na voprosy v khode vstrechi s chlenami Soveta po mezhdunarodnym otnosheniyam” [Transcript of replies by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov to questions during a meeting with members of the Council on Foreign Relations], 1531-06-10-2008, 24 September 2008, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2008](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2008).

<sup>207</sup> ”Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova abkhazskomu obshchestvenno-politicheskomu zhurnalu ‘Apsny’” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the Abkhaz socio-political journal “Apsny”], 153-01-02-2009, February 2009, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2009](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2009).

<sup>208</sup> ”Stat’ya Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova ”Vneshnyaya politika Rossii i novoe kachestvo geopoliticheskoy situatsii” dlya ”Diplomaticheskogo ezhegodnika 2008”” [Article by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov “Russia’s foreign policy and the new quality of the geopolitical situation” for “Diplomatic yearbook 2008”], 15 December 2008, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2008](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2008).

<sup>209</sup> Stephen Blank, “America and the Russo-Georgian War,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 20, no. 2 (June 2009), pp. 425, 437-443.



insist that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia be respected,” he said.<sup>210</sup> The war accentuated the progressive worsening of relations between the United States and Russia. In fact, it rapidly brought the U.S.-Russian relationship after the Cold War to an unprecedented depth and reportedly caused a sharp turnabout in the Bush administration’s view of Russia. Secretary Gates revealed that the Russian attack had forced a fundamental reassessment of the administration’s Russia policy.<sup>211</sup> As to the likely political motives behind the invasion, Gates held the view that Russia wanted to do two things: punish Georgia for trying to integrate with the West and deter other countries in the former Soviet space from making the same attempt. This, Gates argued, was an indication of Russia’s interest in reasserting a sphere of influence so as to regain its great power status.<sup>212</sup> His analysis was consistent with the way former secretary of state Madeleine K. Albright perceived the strategic objectives pursued by the Russians: “They want to re-integrate a large part of what was the Russian empire.”<sup>213</sup>

As Russia persisted in violating Georgia’s territorial integrity and even recognized the “independence” of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in order to create a formal basis for its military presence in the secessionist territories, the U.S. criticism of the Russian conduct sharpened. The American rhetoric shifted slowly, however, despite the avowed rethinking. Only in September 2008 did U.S. officials begin to talk about Russia’s war in Georgia in terms of aggression. Vice President Cheney spearheaded this rhetorical escalation.<sup>214</sup> He was followed by lower-level officials testifying before congressional committees. Fried bluntly denounced “Russia’s current aggression against Georgia” and pointed out that the strategic stakes in the regional conflict were “fairly high.” He said the administration was troubled by the implications of what the Russian leadership after the war had laid out as an apparent doctrine. Of course, what he referred to was Medvedev’s enunciation of privileged interests, which he interpreted as a self-aggrandizing claim to a sphere of influence. The United States, Fried assured Congress, flatly rejected such a claim: “Russia should not be allowed to declare that certain nations belong to Moscow’s ‘sphere of influence’ and, therefore, cannot join the

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<sup>210</sup> “President Bush Discusses Situation in Georgia, Urges Russia to Cease Military Operations,” August 13, 2008, available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/08/20080813.html>.

<sup>211</sup> Steven Lee Myers and Thom Shanker, “Bush Aides Say Russia Actions in Georgia Jeopardize Ties,” *The New York Times*, August 15, 2008, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/15/world/europe/15policy.html>.

<sup>212</sup> “DoD News Briefing with Secretary Gates and Gen. Cartwright from the Pentagon,” August 14, 2008, available at <http://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=4275>.

<sup>213</sup> “Diplomats Analyze U.S. Response to Georgia Conflict,” PBS NewsHour, August 13, 2008, available at [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/europe/july-dec08/georgiaction\\_08-13.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/europe/july-dec08/georgiaction_08-13.html).

<sup>214</sup> “Vice President’s Remarks at the Ambrosetti Forum,” September 6, 2008, available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/09/20080906-1.html>.

institutions of Europe and the transatlantic region.”<sup>215</sup> Edelman likewise decried “Russia’s aggression” and further testified: “Russia’s invasion of Georgia highlights a new aggressiveness in Russian foreign policy and a willingness to use military force to achieve its goals in the near abroad.”<sup>216</sup> The long-established U.S. policy of preventing a Russian sphere of influence was essentially restated in testimony by William J. Burns, under secretary of state for political affairs.<sup>217</sup> Finally, Rice did what she had not done before as secretary of state. She devoted an entire speech to the subject of U.S.-Russian relations. After trying for years to gloss over the deep antagonism between the United States and Russia, emphasizing time and again that Russia is not the Soviet Union, she ended up belatedly pronouncing a scathing judgement on Russian policy. The political course of Russia “has taken a dark turn,” Rice noted in her hardline speech. “Russia’s actions,” she told her audience, “fit into a worsening pattern of behavior over several years now.” Then she declared: “The picture emerging from this pattern of behavior is that of a Russia increasingly authoritarian at home and aggressive abroad.” Rice also confirmed that the post-Soviet space constituted the main geopolitical battleground between the United States and Russia. She stated that “the United States and Europe are continuing to support – unequivocally – the independence and territorial integrity of Russia’s neighbors. We will resist any Russian attempt to consign sovereign nations to some archaic ‘sphere of influence’.”<sup>218</sup>

In a series of valedictory interviews, Rice unsurprisingly identified the clash of interests in the post-Soviet area as the biggest problem and the key source of tension in U.S.-Russian relations. As she described the conflict, Russia believed that it ought to have a special influence in the area enabling it to dictate the foreign political choices of its neighbours, whereas the United States believed in the right of every state on Russia’s periphery to act independently and choose its own foreign policy course.<sup>219</sup> “That,” Rice later wrote in her memoirs, “had turned out to be an irreconcilable difference.”<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> *U.S.-Russia Relations in the Aftermath of the Georgia Crisis: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 110th Congress, 2nd Session*, Serial No. 110-221 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008), pp. 14, 21, 34, 37.

<sup>216</sup> *The Current Situation in Georgia and Implications for U.S. Policy: Hearing before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, 110th Congress, 2nd Session*, S. Hrg. 110-736 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2009), pp. 8, 12.

<sup>217</sup> *Russia’s Aggression Against Georgia: Consequences and Responses: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 110th Congress, 2nd Session*, S. Hrg. 110-707 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2009), p. 20.

<sup>218</sup> “Secretary Rice Addresses U.S.-Russia Relations At The German Marshall Fund,” September 18, 2008, available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/09/109954.htm>.

<sup>219</sup> “Interview With Robert McMahon of Council on Foreign Relations: Secretary Condoleezza Rice,” December 18, 2008, available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/12/113356.htm>; “Interview



## The Reset of the Obama Administration

The Georgian crisis made U.S.-Russian relations a salient issue in the final phase of the U.S. presidential election campaign. As a result of the crisis, the dynamics of the campaign briefly changed in favour of McCain. Obama temporarily slipped back in the opinion polls since Russia invaded Georgia. However, McCain seemed unable to seize the opportunity he was offered by the crisis. Obama, by contrast, quickly adapted to the new political circumstances, skillfully shed his conciliatory image, and began to sound tough on Russia. Unlike the president, both candidates hastened to condemn the Russian aggression against Georgia. Obama further indicated that the aggressive Russian actions marked a “turning point” in Russia’s relations with the United States.<sup>221</sup> “There is no possible justification for Russia’s actions,” he said in a speech a few days later.<sup>222</sup> Interviewed by Bill O’Reilly on the Fox News television talk show “The O’Reilly Factor,” Obama adopted a decidedly confrontational tone, making it clear that he considered Russia a major problem with which the United States would have to deal in the coming years. “It’s one of our biggest problems,” he said. O’Reilly then asked the Democratic nominee: “So you’re going to have to confront Putin?” Obama replied: “That’s exactly right.”<sup>223</sup> This answer would later prove darkly prescient. During the televised debates, Obama upstaged McCain in strongly criticizing Russia’s policy in the post-Soviet space. In the first debate, Obama argued that “our entire Russian approach has to be evaluated, because a resurgent and very aggressive Russia is a threat to the peace and stability of the region.”<sup>224</sup> He was even more critical of the Russians in the second debate. “I think

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With the Financial Times: Secretary Condoleezza Rice,” December 19, 2008, available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/12/113414.htm>; “Interview With Rita Brauer of CBS Sunday Morning: Secretary Condoleezza Rice,” December 22, 2008, available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/12/113501.htm>.

<sup>220</sup> Rice, *No Higher Honor*, p. 693.

<sup>221</sup> “Statement of Senator Barack Obama on the Conflict in Georgia,” August 11, 2008, available at [http://www.barackobama.com/2008/08/11/statement\\_of\\_senator\\_barack\\_ob\\_22.php](http://www.barackobama.com/2008/08/11/statement_of_senator_barack_ob_22.php); “Statement of Senator Barack Obama on the Conflict in Georgia,” August 11, 2008, available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=91078>.

<sup>222</sup> “Remarks of Senator Barack Obama at the VFW National Convention,” August 19, 2008, available at [http://www.barackobama.com/2008/08/19/remarks\\_of\\_senator\\_barack\\_obam\\_106.php](http://www.barackobama.com/2008/08/19/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_106.php); Barack Obama, “Remarks to the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention in Orlando, Florida,” August 19, 2008, available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=78053>.

<sup>223</sup> “Part 4: Obama Discusses His Energy Plan, Dealing With Putin in Final Part of O’Reilly Interview,” Fox News Network, September 10, 2008, available at <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,420865,00.html>; “Barack Obama: Interview with Bill O’Reilly of Fox News – Part 4 of 4,” September 10, 2008, available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=78649>.

<sup>224</sup> “The First Presidential Debate,” *The New York Times*, September 26, 2008, available at <http://elections.nytimes.com/20087president/debates/transcripts/first-presidential-debate.html>; “Presidential

they've engaged in an evil behavior," he said. He also reiterated that "the resurgence of Russia is one of the central issues that we're going to have to deal with in the next presidency."<sup>225</sup>

Once the election was over, President-elect Obama changed his tone again, conveying an eagerness to accommodate and cooperate rather than confront. Very quickly he made public his desire to significantly improve relations with Russia. On December 5, 2008, he indicated that seeking a more constructive relationship with "the newly assertive and, I believe, inappropriately aggressive Russia" would be a foreign policy priority.<sup>226</sup> In an interview on NBC's "Meet the Press" two days later, he publicly stated the importance for the United States to "reset U.S.-Russian relations." What Obama intended to initiate was a cooperative reengagement with the Russians on a range of specific and immediate international issues. He told the interviewer: "We want to cooperate with them where we can, and there are a whole host of areas, particularly around nonproliferation of weapons and terrorism, where we can cooperate."<sup>227</sup> In the midst of a big financial crisis, the outgoing administration failed to take punitive economic action against Russia in response to its aggression in the post-Soviet space. It was quite clear that the new administration would not punish Russia at all over the invasion of Georgia. Sanctions could not be reconciled with an attempt to inaugurate a new era of cooperation in U.S.-Russian relations.

The first major outline of the new administration's emerging Russia policy was given by Vice President Biden at the Munich Security Conference in February 2009. Biden was sent to Munich with instructions to make the announcement of the president's intentions concerning Russia the focus of his speech. Paraphrasing President Obama, he suggested that in view of the recent "dangerous drift" in relations between the United States and Russia it was "time to press the reset button" on these relations and revisit the areas where the two countries could work together.<sup>228</sup>

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Debate at the University of Mississippi in Oxford," September 26, 2008, available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=78691>.

<sup>225</sup> "The Second Presidential Debate," *The New York Times*, October 7, 2008, available at <http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/president/debates/transcripts/second-presidential-debate.html>; "Presidential Debate at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee," October 7, 2008, available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=84482>.

<sup>226</sup> "The Interview: Person Of the Year Barack Obama," *Time*, vol. 172, no. 26 (December 29, 2008-January 5, 2009), p. 54.

<sup>227</sup> "Meet the Press' transcript for Dec. 7, 2009: President-elect Barack Obama," National Broadcasting Company, December 7, 2009, available at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/28097635/>.

<sup>228</sup> "Remarks by Vice President Biden at 45th Munich Conference on Security Policy," February 7, 2009, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-vice-president-biden-45th-munich-conference-security-policy>.

When the Obama administration took office in January 2009, the tensions in the U.S.-Russia relationship that resulted from the Georgia War remained high and the attitude towards Putin's Russia in the United States was still very negative. Among those who subscribed to a dark view of Russia were senior members of Obama's security policy team. Biden had honed an image of himself as a critic of Russian foreign and domestic policies. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton enjoyed a similar reputation, in part dating from her intemperate characterization of Putin as a soulless former intelligence operative. "I came into office skeptical of Russia's leadership," she admits in her memoirs.<sup>229</sup> Early on she openly stated her view. "Russia's recent actions have been reprehensible," she told Congress.<sup>230</sup> Although she had only modest expectations, Clinton toed the line and supported Obama's policy of "reset" on Russia.<sup>231</sup> She professed to be hopeful that the United States and Russia could cooperate without pretending to be friends.<sup>232</sup> Like Clinton, Robert Gates, who stayed on as secretary of defence, was deeply suspicious of Putin.<sup>233</sup> While serving the Bush administration, he had not insulted the Russian leader in public, but privately he called him a "stone-cold killer."<sup>234</sup> Even if Gates and Clinton did not assign the reset policy much chance of success, they both thought it was worth a try.<sup>235</sup> "I had no objection to Obama's reaching out to Moscow," Gates recalled later.<sup>236</sup> Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs William J. Burns, who led the State Department's planning on Russia policy, agreed the United States had an opportunity to reset its relations with Russia, but he was cautious about the prospects. "U.S.-Russian relations will continue to be characterized by a complex mix of cooperation and competition," he warned.<sup>237</sup> The man often identified as the principal architect of the reset, Dr. Michael A. McFaul, a Stanford University professor of political science named special assistant to the president and senior director for Russian and Eurasian affairs at the U.S. National Security Council, was rightly labelled a hardliner on Russia. Before joining the Obama administration, while he

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<sup>229</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Hard Choices* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2014), p. 230.

<sup>230</sup> *Nomination of Hillary R. Clinton to be Secretary of State: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 111th Congress, 1st Session*, S. Hrg. 111-249 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010), p. 122.

<sup>231</sup> Peter Baker, "U.S.-Russian Ties Still Fall Short of 'Reset' Goal," *The New York Times*, September 2, 2013, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/03/world/europe/us-russian-ties-still-fall-short-of-reset-goal.html>.

<sup>232</sup> *Nomination of Hillary R. Clinton to be Secretary of State: Hearing*, p. 122.

<sup>233</sup> Peter Baker, "3 Presidents and a Riddle Named Putin," *The New York Times*, March 23, 2014, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/24/world/europe/3-presidents-and-a-riddle-named-putin.html>.

<sup>234</sup> Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (London: WH Allen, 2014), p. 169.

<sup>235</sup> Baker, "3 Presidents and a Riddle Named Putin."

<sup>236</sup> Gates, *Duty*, p. 329.

<sup>237</sup> "Remarks at Russia World Forum: William J. Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs," April 27, 2009, available at <http://www.state.gov/p/us/rm/2009a/122279.htm>.

advised the Obama presidential campaign and persuaded Obama to toughen his campaign rhetoric, he was remarkably outspoken. He branded Putin as a “paranoid leader” who “understands the world primarily in zero-sum terms,” and he described Russia’s grand strategy as “anti-American, anti-Western, non-cooperative, and confrontational.”<sup>238</sup> After the Russia-Georgia war, he contended that Russia was a “threat to the Western world.”<sup>239</sup>

The most immediate aim of the reset policy was to halt and reverse what the Obama administration termed a “dangerous drift” in the U.S.-Russia relationship, a phrase coined by McFaul as early as 2005.<sup>240</sup> The view that the relationship had drifted to a dangerous extent was expressed repeatedly by administration officials. They noticed that the relations between the United States and Russia had deteriorated so badly that the two countries were no longer actively engaged with each other on matters of strategic importance. Cooperation had been displaced by increasing acrimony and distrust. The administration decided that it did not serve U.S. interests to allow this situation to continue. There was a feeling that the inherited poisonous atmosphere caused by the Georgian crisis would be detrimental to the national security of the United States. Thus, the administration was determined to put an end to the drift, or deterioration, in U.S.-Russian relations and create a recalibrated bilateral environment in which the United States and Russia could again build a substantive working relationship.<sup>241</sup>

Obama’s pledge to make improving relations with Russia a foreign policy priority did not really signify a high level of interest in Russia itself. Russia did not come first in the internal discussions of the new national security team in Washington. Obviously, Russia is not as important for the United States as was the Soviet Union. From Washington’s vantage point, Russia’s relative geopolitical significance has significantly declined. In this context, Obama and his team saw the Russia problem primarily through the prism of other major international security problems facing the United States. Accordingly, the reset was actually less about U.S.-Russian relations per se and more about giving the United States additional leverage in other

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<sup>238</sup> *Russia: Rebuilding the Iron Curtain: Hearing*, p. 20.

<sup>239</sup> “Lou Dobbs Tonight,” Cable News Network, August 14, 2008, available at <http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0808/14/ldt.01.html>.

<sup>240</sup> Michael McFaul, “Russia and the West: A Dangerous Drift,” *Current History*, vol. 104, no. 684 (October 2005), pp. 307-312.

<sup>241</sup> “Advancing Our Interests: Actions in Support of the President’s National Security Strategy,” May 27, 2010, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/advancing-our-interests-actions-support-presidents-national-security-strategy>; “U.S.-Russia Relations Under the Obama Administration: Philip H. Gordon, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs,” June 16, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/143275>; *The Reset Button Has Been Pushed: Kicking Off a New Era in U.S.-Russian Relations: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Europe of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 111th Congress, 1st Session*, Serial No. 111-42 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2009), p. 12; Samuel Charap, “The Transformation of US-Russia Relations,” *Current History*, vol. 109, no. 729 (October 2010), p. 282.

areas. For Obama, Russia's continuing importance in U.S. security policy formation was largely instrumental. He viewed Russia as instrumentally important because of its alleged potential to affect the pursuit of some key U.S. national interests, including counterterrorism, nuclear non-proliferation, and the stabilization of Afghanistan.<sup>242</sup> This pragmatic approach to Russia was not controversial in the analytical community of the United States. In fact, it was quite fashionable. By the beginning of the Obama administration, the belief in Russia's relevance to the achievement of essential U.S. foreign policy goals had become prevalent among Russia specialists and other analysts. In 2009, numerous reports, papers, and articles were published advising the incoming administration on how to manage its relations with Russia. The premise behind the advice offered by the majority of these studies was the dubious view that the United States needed cooperation with Russia in order to advance its national interests on a number of issues.<sup>243</sup> The Obama administration never claimed publicly that Russian cooperation was necessary for progress in fighting terrorism, preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, or stabilizing Afghanistan, but it evidently was influenced by the pervasive assumption that Russia could support U.S. efforts to resolve these problems.

Administration officials sometimes talked about the theory or philosophy of the reset. The theoretical foundation was a simple and shallow one. When it was established during the administration's initial review of Russia policy, the starting point was a delineation of U.S. national interests. The next step was to single out limited issues where U.S. and Russian national interests arguably converged and where cooperation seemed possible. Unsurprisingly, the administration assumed that the United States and Russia had common interests regarding several issues. These included strategic arms control, counterterrorism, nuclear non-proliferation, stability of Afghanistan, environmental protection, and economic development. Then the administration set out to cooperate with Russia on the selected issues. It hoped that such cooperation at least in some urgent cases would produce mutually advantageous "win-win outcomes" clearly advancing U.S. interests. Specifically, the administration's idea was that the United States would elicit Russian support for the American-led fight against international terrorism, for America's and NATO's war in Afghanistan, and for tougher diplomatic actions

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<sup>242</sup> Ruth Deyermond, "Assessing the reset: successes and failures in the Obama administration's Russia policy, 2009-2012," *European Security*, vol. 22, no. 4 (December 2013), p. 509; Stent, *The Limits of Partnership*, p. 258.

<sup>243</sup> This notion was most clearly articulated in *The Right Direction for U.S. Policy toward Russia: A Report from the Commission on U.S. Policy toward Russia* (Washington, DC: The Nixon Center, March 2009), pp. i, 1, 14; Eugene B. Rumer and Angela Stent, *Repairing U.S.-Russian Relations: A Long Road Ahead* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies and Georgetown University, School of Foreign Service, Center for Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies, April 2009), pp. 3, 19.

to contain Iran's nuclear programme without having to make any significant and difficult political concessions elsewhere because that support would be in Russia's interest as well.<sup>244</sup>

Even though the White House in a statement issued in May 2010 self-assuredly proclaimed that the reset with Russia was a "substantial strategy shift from previous Russia policy," such a description must necessarily be rejected as misleading and even mischievous.<sup>245</sup> There was no sharp break from the previous administration in this regard. Obama's Russia policy did not depart radically from Bush's. For years, Bush administration policy towards Russia had involved efforts to cooperate with the Russians wherever possible. The Obama administration did not significantly change Bush's line of conduct. It largely continued and built on the policy it inherited from its predecessor. The clearest difference of any significance between the two administrations concerned strategic arms control. This is also the realm in which the Obama administration's early efforts to reset U.S.-Russian relations amounted to accommodating Russia. The accommodation consisted in accepting Russia's position on the type of formal agreement that should replace the START Treaty. Obama agreed to negotiate a comprehensive new treaty. As secretary of defence in the Bush administration, Gates had been forthright about the U.S. willingness to placate the Russians on the issue of refurbishing strategic arms control arrangements. He stated that the United States "already made a major concession" when it accepted Russia's call for a legally binding treaty as a follow-on to START, and he cautioned against working out a Cold War-type treaty that would be the size of a telephone book.<sup>246</sup> In April 2009, Obama and Medvedev announced the beginning of bilateral negotiations to replace START with exactly such a detailed treaty. Unperturbed by critical observations to the effect that strategic arms control, appearing increasingly irrelevant to U.S.

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<sup>244</sup> *Nomination of Hillary R. Clinton to be Secretary of State: Hearing*, pp. 120-122; "Press Availability after NATO Meeting: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State," March 5, 2009, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2009a/03/120068.htm>; "U.S.-Russia Relations Under the Obama Administration: Philip H. Gordon, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs," June 16, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2010/143275.htm>; "Barack Obama: President Medvedev and I are looking for win-win outcomes," Interfax Information Service (Moscow), June 24, 2010, available at <http://www.interfax.com/interview.asp?id=173222>; Michael McFaul, "Sustaining the Momentum of the Reset," December 7, 2010 (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010), available at [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/McFaul\\_Transcript\\_edited.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/McFaul_Transcript_edited.pdf); Michael A. McFaul, "What Does the Reset Entail and Has It Brought Success?" April 15, 2011 (Washington, DC: The Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2011), available at <http://www.iie.com/publications/papers/transcript-20110415mcfaul.pdf>; Michael McFaul, "Assessing the 'Reset': Past Progress, Future Steps" [presentation], April 15, 2011, available at <http://www.iie.com/publications/papers/mcfaul20110415.pdf>; Deyermond, "Assessing the reset," p. 508; Mark N. Katz, "Can Russian-US Relations Improve?" *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, vol. 8, no. 2 (Summer 2014), p. 129.

<sup>245</sup> "Advancing Our Interests: Actions in Support of the President's National Security Strategy," May 27, 2010, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/advancing-our-interests-actions-support-presidents-national-security-strategy>.

<sup>246</sup> "Remarks by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates," March 17, 2008, available at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/03/102315.htm>.



national security interests, had lost most of its genuine urgency and that the pursuit of formal, complex arms control regimes logically implies a prior adversarial relationship between the states involved, Obama willingly, even enthusiastically, turned U.S. foreign policy back to the traditional arms control perspective mired in outdated Cold War mentalities. At the same time, he resolved that he would not let arcane negotiations on the limitation and reduction of nuclear weapons assume the exclusive centrality they had during the Cold War. He sought to develop a multi-dimensional cooperative relationship with Russia and definitely did not want U.S.-Russian relations to be just about strategic arms control, which in essence belonged to a bygone era.<sup>247</sup>

While insisting that there was “great potential” to improve U.S.-Russian relations, Obama and other administration members acknowledged the limitations of the opening reset policy towards Russia and deliberately tried to rein in expectations. Since the whole idea behind the administration’s policy was selective cooperation in areas where it believed the United States and Russia shared the same interests, the policy’s objectives were, in fact, rather modest.<sup>248</sup> The reality was that the Russian leadership did not, for the most part, share U.S. interests or values. In consequence, the significantly improved relationship and the expanded agenda of extensive cooperation that Obama wanted to achieve would prove illusive.

Initially, the Obama administration exhibited prudence and reticence in dealing with the Russians so as to keep expectations realistic. At their first meeting in London in April 2009, Obama and Medvedev issued a joint statement outlining an agenda for bilateral cooperation. The document was very similar to the joint declaration agreed almost a year before by Bush and Putin in Sochi in that it identified the same general areas of potential cooperation, but it was not a grandiose statement about cooperating as partners or allies. It did not pronounce anything like the vision of strategic partnership that was projected in 2002 and again in 2008.<sup>249</sup> As conceived by the Obama administration during its first months in office, partnership with Russia was more of an ambitious aspiration than a real phenomenon. The aspirational

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<sup>247</sup> ”Press Briefing by ... Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Russia and Central Asian Affairs Mike McFaul on the Upcoming Visit of President Medvedev of Russia,” June 22, 2010, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/conference-call-briefing-with-administration-officials-president-medvedevs-visit-wh>; McFaul, ”Sustaining the Momentum of the Reset”; McFaul, ”What Does the Reset Entail and Has It Brought Success?”; McFaul, ”Assessing the ‘Reset’.”

<sup>248</sup> ”Transcript of the joint press conference in [Strasbourg] by the President of the Republic Nicolas Sarkozy and the President of the United States Barack Obama,” April 3, 2009, available at <http://ambafrance-us.org/spip.php?article1294>; McFaul, ”Sustaining the Momentum of the Reset”; Deyermond, ”Assessing the reset,” pp. 508, 510.

<sup>249</sup> ”Joint Statement by President Dmitriy Medvedev of the Russian Federation and President Barack Obama of the United States of America,” April 1, 2009, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/joint-statement-president-dmitriy-medvedev-russian-federation-and-president-barack->

character of the matter was stressed by Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Philip H. Gordon at a congressional hearing in June 2009. He testified that the administration looked forward to forming a cooperative partnership with Russia.<sup>250</sup> At the July 2009 summit in Moscow, Obama envisaged “forging a future in which the United States and Russia partner effectively...”<sup>251</sup> Delivering an address during his only visit to Moscow as president of the United States, he rejected the “view that the United States and Russia are destined to be antagonists,” but he acknowledged that it would be “difficult to forge a lasting partnership...”<sup>252</sup>

In 2010, U.S.-Russian relations had improved to the point where occasional references to Russia as a partner on global issues insidiously crept into the rhetoric of the Obama administration.<sup>253</sup> When the New START Treaty was signed in Prague in April after nearly a year of difficult negotiations, Obama got carried away by the accomplishment and called Medvedev “my friend and partner.”<sup>254</sup> Later in the year, after NATO’s Lisbon summit at which NATO and Russia agreed to begin discussing missile defence cooperation, Obama went even further and declared: “We see Russia as a partner, not an adversary.”<sup>255</sup> Gordon, in an interview, told *Le Figaro* the same thing: “We do not consider Russia an adversary, but a partner.”<sup>256</sup> Obama’s chief Russia adviser McFaul, however, did not use such unrestrained language. He stuck to the administration’s original tough-minded approach in explaining the

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<sup>250</sup> *Strengthening the Transatlantic Alliance: An Overview of the Obama Administration’s Policies in Europe: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Europe of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 111th Congress, 1st Session*, Serial No. 111-20 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2009), p. 19.

<sup>251</sup> “Press Conference by President Obama and President Medvedev of Russia,” July 6, 2009, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/press-conference-president-obama-and-president-medvedev-russia>.

<sup>252</sup> “Remarks by the President at the New Economic School Graduation,” July 7, 2009, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-new-economic-school-graduation>.

<sup>253</sup> “Remarks on the Future of European Security: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State,” January 29, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/01/136273.htm>; “The United States and Russia in a New Era: One Year After ‘Reset’,” William J. Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs,” April 14, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/p/us/rm/2010/140179.htm>.

<sup>254</sup> “Remarks by President Obama and President Medvedev of Russia at New START Treaty Signing Ceremony and Press Conference,” April 8, 2010, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-and-president-medvedev-russia-new-start-signing-cere>.

<sup>255</sup> “Press Conference of the President after NATO Summit,” November 20, 2010, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/11/20/press-conference-president-after-nato-summit>.

<sup>256</sup> “Phil Gordon: ‘La Russie est notre partenaire’,” *Le Figaro*, 23 November 2010, available at <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2010/11/23/01003-20101123ARTFIG00735-phil-gordon-la-russie-est-notre-partenaire.php>.



theory of the reset: “We’re not interested in a good or happy or friendly relationship with President Medvedev or the Russian government or Russia in particular.”<sup>257</sup>

According to Secretary Clinton, the reset was by 2010 well-established, but if it was supposed to lay the groundwork for a durable partnership between the United States and Russia, the momentum would have to be sustained and the cooperative agenda expanded. The administration recognized this and made clear its aspiration to develop U.S.-Russian relations on the foundation that had been established.<sup>258</sup> As McFaul put it, “we’re just midstream in what I hope to be a long game...”<sup>259</sup> Obama believed that the reset’s record of achievement formed a solid basis for expanding the U.S.-Russian cooperation to additional areas.<sup>260</sup> “We’ll continue to advance our relationship with Russia,” he said in December 2010.<sup>261</sup> “The challenge,” Under Secretary Burns elaborated in February 2011, “is how to build on this momentum, to move beyond the reset, to widen and deepen our cooperation in a range of areas...”<sup>262</sup> Even the usually highly sceptical Gates appeared inordinately hopeful about the future of U.S.-Russian relations during a visit to Russia in March 2011. He argued that the relations were moving “towards closer partnership” and were on the way of becoming similar to U.S. bilateral relations with close allies like Great Britain and Canada.<sup>263</sup> When Obama met Medvedev again in May 2011, he maintained that the United States had already “built an outstanding relationship” with Russia.<sup>264</sup> Thus, a familiar cyclical pattern of unfounded optimism and unreasonably high hopes for the relationship between the United States and Russia repeated itself. At that point, however, the much-advertised reset project had already

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<sup>257</sup> “Russia after the Global Economic Crisis” [keynote address by Michael A. McFaul], June 10, 2010 (Washington, DC: The Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2010), available at [http://www.iie.com/events/event\\_detail.cfm?EventID=154&Media](http://www.iie.com/events/event_detail.cfm?EventID=154&Media).

<sup>258</sup> “Interview with Yevgenia Albats, The New York Times: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State,” March 15, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/03/138354.htm>; McFaul, “What Does the Reset Entail and Has It Brought Success?”

<sup>259</sup> McFaul, “Sustaining the Momentum of the Reset.”

<sup>260</sup> “Barack Obama: President Medvedev and I are looking for win-win outcomes,” Interfax Information Service (Moscow), June 24, 2010, available at <http://www.interfax.com/interview.asp?id=173222>.

<sup>261</sup> “News Conference by The President,” December 22, 2010, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/12/22/news-conference-president>.

<sup>262</sup> “Interview With Interfax of Russia: William J. Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs,” February 10, 2011, available at <http://www.state.gov/p/us/rm/2011/156449.htm>.

<sup>263</sup> “Media Availability with Secretary Gates enroute to Russia, from Andrews Air Force Base,” March 20, 2011, available at <http://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=4788>; “Robert Gates: U.S. will very soon recede back into supportive role in Libya,” Interfax Information Service (Moscow), March 22, 2011, available at <http://www.interfax.com/interview.asp?id=230430>.

<sup>264</sup> “Remarks by President Obama and President Medvedev of Russia after Bilateral Meeting in Deauville, France,” May 26, 2011, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/26/remarks-president-obama-and-president-medvedev-russia-after-bilateral-me>.

entered its death throes. Over time, it would become clear that the aspiration for increased U.S.-Russian cooperation was an illusion.

The Obama administration's early focus on policy areas where cooperation was possible meant that the real source for the repeated deterioration of U.S.-Russian relations, namely the fundamental strategic conflict between the United States and Russia, again moved off centre stage temporarily. Obama initially avoided direct engagement with the most serious features of the relationship. His administration, much like the Bush administration before it, did not want to encourage the return of great-power rivalry. The sentiment that such rivalry should be a thing of the past pervaded its worldview. That did not mean the administration was willing to paper over the broad areas of conflict where U.S. and Russian interests were diametrically opposed. It may be true that Obama generally is reluctant to see the world in competitive terms, shies away from differences and confrontation, prefers instead to emphasize shared interests, and tends to downplay the fact that nations do have clashing interests, but he and his advisers came into office with no illusions about the very core disagreements of a principled character between the United States and Russia.<sup>265</sup> They were fully aware of the underlying strategic friction in U.S.-Russian relations. Vice President Biden acknowledged that the United States continued to have disagreements with Russia on "matters of basic principle."<sup>266</sup> The major differences between the two countries in terms of worldview were highlighted by Secretary Clinton. "There was a very big gap in how we were seeing the world," she said. "Now, we're not going to see the world the same way."<sup>267</sup> Assistant Secretary Gordon to some extent clarified the Obama administration's understanding of the contrasting American and Russian images of the world by recognizing Russia's resentment over the status of the United States as the world's sole superpower.<sup>268</sup> Russia's revisionist, anti-status quo grand strategy designed to challenge the U.S.-dominated unipolar world order was well known in the White House. In his previous incarnation as campaign adviser, when he still could set aside diplomatic finesse, McFaul had conveyed a clear understanding of the Russian grand strategy

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<sup>265</sup> Robert Kagan, "Obama's Year One: Contra," *World Affairs*, vol. 172, no. 3 (January/February 2010), p. 15; Henry R. Nau, "Obama's Foreign Policy," *Policy Review*, no. 160 (April/May 2010), pp. 29, 34, 36; Samuel Charap, "Beyond the Russian Reset," *The National Interest*, no. 126 (July/August 2013), p. 42.

<sup>266</sup> "Remarks by Vice President Biden On America Central Europe and A Partnership for the 21st Century," October 22, 2009, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-vice-president-biden-america-central-europe-and-a-partnership-21st-century>.

<sup>267</sup> "Remarks On the Obama Administration's National Security Strategy: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State," May 27, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/05/142312.htm>.

<sup>268</sup> *The U.S. Security Relationship with Russia and Its Impact on Transatlantic Security: [Hearing], Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives, 111th Congress, 1st Session*, H.A.S.C. No. 111-91 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010), p. 30.

based on realist balance-of-power thinking, warning publicly that Russia sought to counterbalance the United States: “Putin now sees balancing against the West, and the United States in particular, as the central objective of Russian foreign policy.”<sup>269</sup> During the Georgian war, McFaul had called attention to the hegemonic regional aspirations demonstrated by the Russians in the post-Soviet space: “They want to establish hegemony in the whole entire region. They want to be the imperial power that they once were.”<sup>270</sup>

At least initially, the focus of the Obama policy on short-term cooperation and achievable agreements rather than on long-term conflict and competition also meant that the specific contentious issues that had strained U.S.-Russian relations for so long and remained unresolved were marginalized in the decision-making process on Russia. There was, however, a repeated acknowledgement that there were many issues on which the United States and Russia disagreed and would continue to disagree.<sup>271</sup> The Obama team thought these disagreements should not prevent cooperation on other issues where interests converged, but it was equally intent on standing firm where interests diverged. While the administration believed many issues do not need to be zero-sum, it accepted the reality that some still are.<sup>272</sup> On the critical issues of contention, there was no profound change of Russia policy under Obama. His administration did not appease Russia, as some critics have claimed. It sought cooperation with Russia without yielding on the U.S. positions most resented by the Russians. The reset did not involve ruling out NATO expansion further east or abandoning missile defence deployment in Europe. “We’re not going to reassure or give or trade anything with the Russians regarding NATO expansion or missile defense,” the president’s Russia hand McFaul declared before the 2009 summit in Moscow.<sup>273</sup> After the summit, Gordon reiterated the U.S. commitment to Ukraine and Georgia moving towards NATO membership: “We continue to support their NATO aspirations, and are working with them on becoming stronger candidates.”<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Michael McFaul, “Russia: More Stick, Less Carrot,” *Hoover Digest*, no. 1 (January 2008), available at <http://www.hoover.org/research/more-stick-less-carrot>.

<sup>270</sup> “Glenn Beck,” Cable News Network, August 11, 2008, available at <http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0808/11/gb.01.html>.

<sup>271</sup> “Interview With Mark Mardell of BBC: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State,” March 6, 2009, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2009a/03/120108.htm>; *The Reset Button Has Been Pushed: Kicking Off a New Era in U.S.-Russian Relations: Hearing*, p. 13.

<sup>272</sup> “The United States and Russia in a New Era: One Year After ‘Reset’,” William J. Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs,” April 14, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/p/us/rm/2010/140179.htm>; McFaul, “Assessing the ‘Reset’.”

<sup>273</sup> “Press Briefing on the President’s Trip to Russia, Italy, and Africa by ... Michael McFaul, Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Russian and Eurasian Affairs,” July 1, 2009, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/press-briefing-presidents-upcoming-trip-russia-italy-and-africa>.

<sup>274</sup> *The U.S. Security Relationship with Russia and Its Impact on Transatlantic Security: [Hearing]*, p. 28.

## **The Obama Administration and U.S. Grand Strategy**

At the worldview level of grand strategy, the Obama administration's approach to Russia was a principled engagement. Even as the administration pursued a better relationship with Russia, it made clear that it would stand by the core principles of its worldview. It was not prepared to improve U.S.-Russian relations at the expense of any of these principles. Rather than sacrificing its strategic principles, the administration would unyieldingly defend them.<sup>275</sup> "As we advance our relations with Russia, we will not abandon our principles," Gordon promised in July 2009.<sup>276</sup> In its strategic planning, the administration ceded no ground to Russia. There was no backing away from long-standing U.S. strategic principles and interests. None of the key elements of America's traditional post-Cold War grand strategy was sacrificed. As a result, the strategic vision of the world espoused by the Obama administration was in fundamental conflict with the Russian vision. At first, this did not appear very obvious to all outside observers. Some suggested that accommodation to the Russian worldview was implicit in the administration's words and actions. Others complained that the administration lacked a coherent grand strategy.<sup>277</sup> These observations were simply wrong. A close examination of the Obama administration's rhetoric and practical policies actually reveals a quite coherent and logically consistent overarching mind-set, one that embodies strategic intentions basically incompatible with those of Russia and exhibits an essential continuity with the strategic thinking of the Clinton and Bush administrations.

The Obama administration came into office finding itself saddled with proliferating predictions of American decline and an imminent global power shift from unipolarity to multipolarity. By 2009, the argument that the United States was in unprecedented relative decline had gained widespread acceptance. It was widely perceived that the existing unipolar world order was on the wane owing to a rapidly growing international diffusion of power, to be replaced in the near future by a quite different multipolar global order. An increasing number of writers were caught up in this wave of declinist commentary. In the scholarly

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<sup>275</sup> *Strengthening the Transatlantic Alliance: An Overview of the Obama Administration's Policies in Europe: Hearing*, pp. 24, 26; "U.S.-Russia Relations Under the Obama Administration: Philip H. Gordon, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs," June 16, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2010/143275.htm>.

<sup>276</sup> *The Reset Button Has Been Pushed: Kicking Off a New Era in U.S.-Russian Relations: Hearing*, p. 17.

<sup>277</sup> A. Wess Mitchell, "Obama's multipolar moment," *Los Angeles Times*, November 23, 2008, available at [http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-mitchell23-2008nov23\\_0,3844969.story](http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-mitchell23-2008nov23_0,3844969.story); Leslie H. Gelb, "The Elusive Obama Doctrine," *The National Interest*, no. 121 (September/October 2012), pp. 18, 21; Richard Perle and Jonathan Perle, "America Self-Contained?" *The American Interest*, vol. 9, no. 5 (May/June 2014), p. 33.

debate over the future of the international system, it became common currency to forecast America's declining power, the nearing end of U.S. primacy, and the coming of multipolarity.<sup>278</sup>

What primacist scholar William C. Wohlforth has termed "multipolar mania" found official expression in a deficient report issued by the U.S. National Intelligence Council soon after the presidential election in 2008.<sup>279</sup> Projecting global trends over the next 15 years, the report offered a clearly declinist appraisal. Its key geopolitical finding was that the international system is undergoing a dramatic transformation in which unipolarity will gradually give way to multipolarity. "A global multipolar world is emerging," the report predicted confidently. The emergence of multipolarity was declared as one of the "relative certainties" of the future global landscape. The report attributed this to the rise of emerging powers. It did not, however, suggest that these new great powers within two decades can acquire enough power to counterbalance the United States. Rather, the report projected that the United States will have only a slightly diminished relative share of global power. The United States, the report

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<sup>278</sup> For contributions to this debate, see Immanuel Wallerstein, "Precipitate Decline: The Advent of Multipolarity," *Harvard International Review*, vol. 29, no. 1 (Spring 2007), pp. 50-55; C. Dale Walton, *Geopolitics and the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century: Multipolarity and the revolution in strategic perspective* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007); Michael Lind, "Beyond American Hegemony," *The National Interest*, no. 89 (May/June 2007), pp. 9-15; Michael Cox, "Is the United States in decline – again?" *International Affairs*, vol. 83, no. 4 (July 2007), pp. 643-653; David P. Calleo, "Unipolar Illusions," *Survival*, vol. 49, no. 3 (Autumn 2007), pp. 73-78; Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008); Robert J. Lieber, "Falling Upwards: Declinism: The Box Set," *World Affairs*, vol. 171, no. 1 (Summer 2008), pp. 48-56; Robert Singh, "The Exceptional Empire: Why the United States Will Not Decline – Again," *International Politics*, vol. 45, no. 5 (September 2008), pp. 571-59; David P. Calleo, "The Tyranny of False Vision: America's Unipolar Fantasy," *Survival*, vol. 50, no. 5 (October-November 2008), pp. 61-78; Edward Luttwak, "The Declinists, Wrong Again: The Atlantic Future of the 21st Century," *The American Interest*, vol. 4, no. 2 (November/December 2008), pp. 6-13; Robert A. Pape, "Empire Falls," *The National Interest*, no. 99 (January/February 2009), pp. 21-34; Robert J. Lieber, "Persistent primacy and the future of the American era," *International Politics*, vol. 46, nos. 2-3 (March 2009), pp. 119-139; Christopher Layne, "The Waning of U.S. Hegemony – Myth or Reality?" *International Security*, vol. 34, no. 1 (Summer 2009), pp. 147-172; Josef Joffe, "The Default Power: The False Prophecy of America's Decline," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 88, no. 5 (September/October 2009), pp. 21-35; Barry R. Posen, "Emerging Multipolarity: Why Should We Care?" *Current History*, vol. 108, no. 721 (November 2009), pp. 347-352; Aaron L. Friedberg, "Same Old Songs: What the Declinists (and Triumphalists) Miss," *The American Interest*, vol. 5, no. 2 (November/December 2009), pp. 28-35; Christopher Layne, "US Hegemony in a Unipolar World: Here to Stay or Sic Transit Gloria?" *International Studies Review*, vol. 11, no. 4 (December 2009), pp. 787-784; Joseph Nye, *Is America in Decline?* Chatham House Transcript (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 19 May 2010); David P. Calleo, "American Decline Revisited," *Survival*, vol. 52, no. 4 (August-September 2010), pp. 215-227; Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "The Future of American Power: Dominance and Decline in Perspective," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 6 (November/December 2010), pp. 2-12; Robert J. Lieber, "Staying Power and the American Future: Problems of Primacy, Policy, and Grand Strategy," *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 34, no. 4 (August 2011), pp. 509-530; Christopher Layne, "This Time It's Real: The End of Unipolarity and the Pax Americana," *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 56, no. 1 (March 2012), pp. 203-213; Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "The Twenty-first Century Will Not Be a 'Post-American' World," *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 56, no. 1 (March 2012), pp. 215-217; Stuart S. Brown, *The Future of US Global Power: Delusions of Decline* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Josef Joffe, *The Myth of America's Decline: Politics, Economics, and a Half Century of False Prophecies* (New York and London: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013).

<sup>279</sup> William Wohlforth, "Unipolar Stability: The Rules of Power Analysis," *Harvard International Review*, vol. 29, no. 1 (Spring 2007), p. 46.

conceded, will remain the single most powerful country in the world by 2025.<sup>280</sup> Given this acknowledged continuity and stability in the global distribution of power, the report's confident prediction of a multipolar world seemed puzzling and unconvincing. A multipolar world can only result from the appearance of at least two peer competitors capable of challenging American primacy across the board, but the report did not credit any competitor with capabilities to change the international system during the coming two decades. Interestingly, it identified Russia as a would-be challenger. "Russia has a more immediate interest in directly challenging what it sees as a US-dominated international system than do other rising powers," the report stated.<sup>281</sup> However, Russia obviously does not have the capabilities necessary to become a serious rival of the United States. In short, the report failed to project changes in the main material factors sufficient enough to suggest that a shift in the basic structure of the international system is nigh. As a matter of fact, it presented no supporting argument and no evidence whatsoever of a decisive movement towards the establishment of multipolarity, which would require that the power of several world actors should be roughly equal. Moreover, the credibility of the report was further undermined by its internal contradictions. First, the report depicted, by 2025, a world in which multipolarity is the defining characteristic. "By 2025, the international system will be a global multipolar one," it was declared.<sup>282</sup> Curiously, the report then asserted that the system will still be in transition by 2025.<sup>283</sup> In that sense, the reasoning of the forecasting unit of the U.S. intelligence community approached the Russian view that the systemic transformation will be protracted.

Despite its glaring faults, the report of the National Intelligence Council had an impact on the polarity debate in the United States. It was widely noted and received praise from the declinists. Predictably, it was also greeted with enthusiasm in Moscow. On March 18, 2009, the Institute of the USA and Canada of the Russian Academy of Sciences held an international conference titled "Russian-American dialogue about the future." At the conference, attended by officials from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Russian Security Council, the U.S. intelligence report was discussed. Opening the discussion, Sergey Rogov, the institute's director, noted gleefully that talk about the coming multipolarity for the first time was heard from the United States. He and other participants in the conference attached great significance to the report's conclusion that the world will be multipolar. According to Rogov, such a

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<sup>280</sup> *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World*, NIC 2008-003 (Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, November 2008), pp. iv, vi, 28-29.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vi.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 81.

turnabout in Washington's conception of the world had "extremely important political implications."<sup>284</sup>

Judging from Hillary Clinton's memoirs, the National Intelligence Council report, with its bleak forecast of declining relative U.S. strength and influence, was not well received by the Obama national security team.<sup>285</sup> Its findings, which were briefed to members of the incoming administration, certainly did not square with the appropriately optimistic message on America's future from candidate Obama to the American voters. During the presidential election campaign, Obama had sought to push back against the faddish declinism. In striking contrast to the fashionable idea of U.S. decline, he provided a startlingly different narrative. He had an unbending response to the declinists: "I reject the notion that the American moment has passed."<sup>286</sup> While campaigning, Obama also stated his confidence in America's continued ability to lead the world. "We must lead the world, by deed and by example," he wrote in *Foreign Affairs*. The idea that the United States should abandon its leadership in world affairs was dismissed by Obama as a "mistake we must not make." Instead of reorienting U.S. grand strategy to cede the role as world leader, he pledged to "renew American leadership in the world..."<sup>287</sup>

Even though Obama had vigorously rebutted the declinists and refused to give up America's global leadership ambitions, he was deemed by many to have a multipolar worldview embracing the prevalent fad about the emergence of multipolarity. In the prevailing climate of declinism, it was widely assumed that he welcomed a multipolar world order and was ready to adjust to it.<sup>288</sup> The administration's own unnecessarily ambiguous rhetoric added to this misunderstanding. It came as no surprise that the new administration, like its predecessors, avoided any description of its grand strategic principles in terms of unipolarity or primacy. What was really surprising was that it actually used the word "multipolar" to describe the existing international system. Hillary Clinton did just that in May 2009 in response to a

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<sup>284</sup> Vladimir Ivanov, "Vzglyad v 2025 god: gryadushchie problemy i protivoborstva" [A look at the year 2025: coming problems and counteraction], *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, no. 11 (27 March 2009), available at [http://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2009-03-27/6\\_2025.html](http://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2009-03-27/6_2025.html).

<sup>285</sup> Clinton, *Hard Choices*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>286</sup> "The American Moment: Remarks to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs."

<sup>287</sup> Obama, "Renewing American Leadership," p. 4.

<sup>288</sup> Elizabeth Dickinson, "New Order: The Multipolar World," *Foreign Policy*, no. 175 (November 2009), p. 29; Zaki Laïdi, "Why Obama does not want a multipolar world order," *Financial Times*, December 3, 2009, available at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/fdee214c-e044-11de-8494-00144fcab49a.html>.



question.<sup>289</sup> When questioned later about ongoing geopolitical shifts, she replied: “We see shifting of power to a more multipolar world as opposed to the Cold War model of a bipolar world.”<sup>290</sup> These spontaneous remarks suggested that Clinton had an inadequate understanding of the structural aspect of international relations and was unfamiliar with the theoretical construct labelled multipolarity by academics. Why she made them remains an absolute mystery. They evoked the image of a secretary of state totally out of sync with the academic discourse in the United States. Not even the most inveterate declinist scholars proclaimed that the unipolar era was already over by 2009 and that the world had suddenly turned multipolar. There was absolutely no objective reason for U.S. officials to perceive such a reconfiguration of the international system when standard measures of power continued to indicate that the United States remained the unipolar power, possessing overwhelmingly more strength along every relevant dimension than its putative rivals.

What the Obama administration has said about U.S. superior power is more consistent with a unipolar outlook and with the actual state of sustained global unipolarity. “We remain the most prosperous, powerful nation on Earth,” Obama noted in his first inaugural address.<sup>291</sup> Likewise, Secretary Clinton said: “I think that the United States remains a dominant power in the world today, the dominant power on many measures.”<sup>292</sup> Clinton and the rest of the administration appeared confident that America’s comprehensive and multifaceted preeminence will long endure. “We believe that the United States will remain for the far foreseeable future the largest economy, the largest military, the only country with a true global reach,” she remarked in 2010.<sup>293</sup> In December 2009, Obama called the United States “the world’s sole military superpower.”<sup>294</sup> The implicit contention that America’s superpower status is most clearly on display in the military sphere was underpinned by the earlier observation of

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<sup>289</sup> “Town Hall Celebrating Foreign Affairs Day at the Department of State: Remarks, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State,” May 1, 2009, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2009a/05/122534.htm>.

<sup>290</sup> “Remarks at Christchurch Town Hall Meeting with Students and Civil Leaders: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State,” November 5, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/11/150450.htm>.

<sup>291</sup> “President Barack Obama’s Inaugural Address,” January 21, 2009, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/president-barack-obamas-inaugural-address>.

<sup>292</sup> “‘Conversations on Diplomacy’ Moderated by Charlie Rose: Remarks, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State...,” April 20, 2011, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/04/161435.htm>.

<sup>293</sup> “Remarks at Christchurch Town Hall Meeting with Students and Civil Leaders: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State,” November 5, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/11/150450.htm>.

<sup>294</sup> “Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize,” December 10, 2009, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize>.



Secretary Gates that the United States continued to account for roughly half of the world's total defence spending. According to Gates, "our defense budget is about the same as the defense budgets or military budgets of every other country in the world put together."<sup>295</sup> To call the United States the only superpower in the world is tantamount to saying that it is the unipolar power.<sup>296</sup> Wohlforth has pointed out that a unipolar international system by definition is a one-superpower world. In contrast, multipolarity means that there are either no superpowers at all, only great powers, or several superpowers.<sup>297</sup>

In a speech to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2009, Obama made a vague statement on the high-falutin subject of world order. He said: "No world order that elevates one nation or group of people over another will succeed."<sup>298</sup> This sentence is difficult to decode. Taken out of context, it could be interpreted as a sign that Obama was turning away from the traditional embrace of primacy in U.S. strategic thinking. It is, however, obvious that he referred to political relationships and the use of power rather than to the unipolar distribution of material capabilities. Equally obvious is the conclusion that he did not mean to renounce the hegemonic global aspirations of the United States. What he apparently meant was that all nations should be treated as sovereign and juridically equal, that no nation should subjugate other nations, and that powerful nations like the United States in exercising their great power should abide by international law and other generally accepted standards.

In terms of strategic intentions, the Obama administration's vision of the world is unambiguously primacist. The world order that it wishes to uphold presumes a massive imbalance of power in favour of the United States. "We see a world in which great power is exercised by primarily one nation," Secretary Clinton stated.<sup>299</sup> The maintenance of a condition of supreme U.S. global power is a strategic core principle on which the Obama administration has staunchly insisted. The administration seeks to ensure that the United States stays the world's predominant number one power. As Obama has exclaimed: "The United States of

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<sup>295</sup> "Secretary Robert Gates: Interview with CNN," April 29, 2009, available at <http://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=4411>.

<sup>296</sup> Mowle and Sacko, *The Unipolar World*, p. 16.

<sup>297</sup> William C. Wohlforth, "Shifting from a Unipolar to a Multipolar World?" 2009-2010 Rethinking Seminar Series: Rethinking US Grand Strategy and Foreign Policy, The Johns Hopkins University, Applied Physics Laboratory, Laurel, Maryland, January 21, 2010, available at <http://outerdnn.outer.jhuapl.edu/rethinking/VideoArchives/WohlforthVideo.aspx>.

<sup>298</sup> "Remarks by the President to the United Nations General Assembly," September 23, 2009, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-united-nations-general-assembly>.

<sup>299</sup> "Remarks On the Obama Administration's National Security Strategy: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State," May 27, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/05/142312.htm>.

America does not play for second place.”<sup>300</sup> Considering that the preeminent global position of the United States rests predominantly on overwhelming superiority in military power, the Obama administration holds that America must preserve its military supremacy. Very early on Obama made it abundantly clear that his administration is unequivocally committed to maintaining U.S. predominance in the military domain. “Now make no mistake,” he said in March 2009. “This nation will maintain our military dominance. We will have the strongest armed forces in the history of the world.”<sup>301</sup> Clinton renewed this unequivocal commitment in 2010. “Of course, this administration is also committed to maintaining the greatest military in the history of the world,” she said.<sup>302</sup> The administration’s eagerly anticipated first National Security Strategy report, issued in May 2010, vigorously affirmed the intention to keep superior U.S. armed forces. “We must maintain our military’s conventional superiority,” the report proclaimed.<sup>303</sup> Superiority in nuclear forces was not mentioned in the document, but in 2012 Obama stated: “We will maintain our military superiority in all areas...”<sup>304</sup>

Central to the Obama variant of U.S. grand strategy is the core principle that the U.S. role in world affairs is one of leadership. During her confirmation hearing, Secretary of State-designate Clinton said the incoming administration’s “overriding duty” is to “strengthen America’s position of global leadership.”<sup>305</sup> The leadership theme permeated the National Security Strategy report of 2010. The authors of the report and senior administration officials who commented on it went so far as to suggest that the strategy outlined in the document was a strategy for global leadership. “In a nutshell, this strategy is about strengthening and applying American leadership to advance our national interests,” Clinton explained. She called the strategy “a strong endorsement of American leadership and America’s defining role in the 21st century.”<sup>306</sup> The report itself emphasized that the focus of the administration’s national security

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<sup>300</sup> “Remarks by the President at a DNC Finance Event in Chicago, Illinois,” August 5, 2010, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/08/05/remarks-president-a-dnc-finance-event-chicago-illinois>.

<sup>301</sup> “Remarks by the President at the Dedication on Abraham Lincoln Hall, National Defense University, Fort Lesley J. McNair,” March 12, 2009, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-dedication-abraham-lincoln-hall>.

<sup>302</sup> “Remarks on United States Foreign Policy: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State,” September 8, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/09/146917.htm>.

<sup>303</sup> *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: The White House, May 2010), p. 5.

<sup>304</sup> “Remarks by the President at the Air Force Academy Commencement,” May 23, 2012, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/23/remarks-president-air-force-academy-commencement>.

<sup>305</sup> *Nomination of Hillary R. Clinton to be Secretary of State: Hearing*, p. 16.

<sup>306</sup> “Remarks On the Obama Administration’s National Security Strategy: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State,” May 27, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/05/142312.htm>.

strategy was on renewing U.S. leadership for the long term.<sup>307</sup> Even the administration's efforts to rebuild the strength of the U.S. economy after the recent global financial crisis and economic recession were justified as a means to the broader end of laying the foundation for lasting American global leadership. The report explicitly recognized that America's ability to lead the world depends on a strong national economy. From this basic insight emanated the report's repetitive preoccupation with Obama's domestic political agenda. The report repeatedly noted that the administration was working at home to revitalize the nation's economic strength so that it will serve as a source of American influence abroad.<sup>308</sup> "The foundation of American leadership must be a prosperous American economy," it insisted.<sup>309</sup> At the same time, the report also recognized that economic recovery, while obviously important, will have to be accompanied by other steps to renew U.S. leadership. It stressed the need to adapt to a changing world where power is increasingly diffuse and more actors exert greater influence.<sup>310</sup> An enduring national interest of the United States in this dynamic environment is to shape an "international order advanced by U.S. leadership," according to the report.<sup>311</sup>

Under the Obama presidency, the firm U.S. rejection of the notion of a Russian sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space has been elevated to the rank of strategic core principle by the president himself.<sup>312</sup> From the outset, administration officials were unambiguous in challenging Russia's claim to such a sphere. They made it crystal clear that the United States categorically rejected the Russian claim. "We do not recognize any sphere of influence on the part of Russia and their having some kind of veto power over who can join the EU or who can join NATO," Secretary Clinton declared.<sup>313</sup> In line with long-standing U.S. policy, the administration affirmed that the United States, while seeking to build a cooperative relationship with Russia, would continue to support the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Russia's neighbours. It remained the U.S. view that former Soviet states have the sovereign right to make their own decisions about security policy, including choices of alliance

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<sup>307</sup> *National Security Strategy* (2010), pp. 1, 4, 51.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 4, 9-10.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 7-8, 43.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 17.

<sup>312</sup> "Interview of the President by Sergey Brilev of Channel Rossiya, Russian Television," May 8, 2010, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/interview-president-sergey-brilev-channel-rossiya-russian-television>.

<sup>313</sup> "Interview With Mark Mardell of BBC: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State," March 6, 2009, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2009a/03/120108.htm>.

affiliation.<sup>314</sup> Washington's unequivocal refusal to concede a Russian sphere of influence, its support for the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of the states in Russia's neighbourhood, and its commitment to NATO's further eastward expansion together have a clear counter-Russian edge. Russian leaders cannot have been pleased when it turned out that Obama's reset policy did not involve a shift away from these positions. However, the Obama administration trod carefully in explaining the American interest. While pursuing neo-containment policies designed to counter Russian influence in Eurasia, the administration apparently sought to avoid gratuitously provoking Russia. It did not publicly explain their larger strategic purpose. America's vital interest in the freedom of Russia's neighbours is derivative of its ultimate geopolitical goal of preventing Russia from becoming a Soviet-scale threat in the post-Soviet space.

A thorough review of the open documentary sources yields the inescapable conclusion that continuity, not change, remains the defining feature of U.S. grand strategy. What is striking about the Obama administration's approach to grand strategy is how little change there has been in the central precepts and objectives. Obama did not introduce a radically new course in U.S. strategic thinking, but merely extended that of its predecessors. Although Obama criticized Bush's foreign policy during the presidential election campaign, his criticism did not turn on the question of the principal goals of the United States. Hence, the Obama strategic orientation is defined by an essential continuity with the Bush as well as the earlier Clinton orientations. The most striking continuity in U.S. grand strategy can be seen in the fundamental premise that America "can, must, and will" lead the world and in order to fulfil that duty seeks to maintain its geopolitical preeminence.<sup>315</sup> It is therefore fair to conclude that Obama has continued America's traditional leadership-oriented grand strategy of U.S. primacy in a unipolar world.

Critics of the Obama administration would have a hard time contesting this overall appraisal. They may certainly find ambiguous official statements that seem to point in a direction opposite to the one suggested here. Moreover, they can claim, admittedly with some reason, that there is in some instances a gap or mismatch between words and deeds in

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<sup>314</sup> *Strengthening the Transatlantic Alliance: An Overview of the Obama Administration's Policies in Europe: Hearing*, p. 19; *The Reset Button Has Been Pushed: Kicking Off a New Era in U.S.-Russian Relations: Hearing*, pp. 17-18; *National Security Strategy* (2010), p. 44.

<sup>315</sup> "Remarks on United States Foreign Policy: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State," September 8, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/09/146917.htm>.

Obama's foreign and defence policies.<sup>316</sup> But the powerful evidence still supporting a traditional interpretation cannot be ignored. One respectable critic, Colin Dueck, has argued that Obama's grand strategy is one of U.S. retrenchment and accommodation. According to Dueck, the preferred strategy under Obama is to gradually retrench America's military presence abroad and accommodate international rivals. Dueck, however, qualifies his main argument by conceding that Obama's strategic approach contains elements of engagement, assertion and containment, thus granting considerable merit to the crucial facts that serve to cast doubt upon the worth of his critical analysis.<sup>317</sup> Other renowned scholars have produced a strikingly different analysis in keeping with the conclusion reached in this paper. They reject the notion that the United States is in strategic retreat from global engagement and argue instead that Obama follows an essentially hegemonic grand strategy of deep engagement in a unipolar setting.<sup>318</sup>

If the Obama administration is clearly committed to a primacist form of grand strategy, its attitude towards the concept of multipolarity is somewhat more complicated. The most substantial statements of the administration's thinking in this regard were given by Secretary Clinton in speeches and interviews. Clinton failed to backtrack on her ill-considered remarks about the emergence of a multipolar world. She did not come around to an admission that the world is still unipolar after all. After a while, however, it transpired that Clinton, although she seemed to believe that a multipolar world had become or was in the process of becoming a reality, in fact opposed multipolarity. Like its predecessors, the Obama administration does not view multipolarity as a desirable state of affairs because a polarity shift inevitably means an encroachment on America's unique global power position. It also fears that the transition to a world of multiple poles would engender a more competitive global environment beset with rivalry among the poles. The United States, the administration reasoned, has an important interest in preventing the return of traditional patterns of great-power competition. The administration's desire to discourage the development of a future world order based on competitive interactions is directly linked to America's global leadership ambitions. Global competition would be detrimental to the administration's hegemonic scheme. The approach to

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<sup>316</sup> As a result of a defence policy reducing military spending, the United States in 2015 accounted for some 38 percent of global defence expenditure, according to *The Military Balance 2016* prepared by the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London (p. 19).

<sup>317</sup> Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 2.

<sup>318</sup> Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry and William C. Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment," *International Security*, vol. 37, no. 3 (Winter 2012/13), pp. 14, 20, 22, 24, 32.

renewed U.S. world leadership taken by Obama and his foreign policy team is distinctly cooperative. It involves leading through multilateral diplomacy. By vowing to act multilaterally, the administration likely aimed to make U.S. hegemony more acceptable to other countries and to ward off challenges to the leading role of the United States. Hence, the very obvious underlying aim of the administration's cooperative approach was to better preserve U.S. hegemony under the modern guise of revitalized multilateralism. In adopting the approach, the administration deliberately challenged Russia's efforts to create a multipolar world order. Moreover, one of the political instruments available to the Russians was turned against themselves. Russian leaders had consistently emphasized multilateral action as a means to facilitate progress towards multipolarity, although they actually proved reluctant to engage seriously in multilateral institutions and processes.<sup>319</sup> Now the new U.S. leadership boldly proposed to act in a multilateral manner within a rule-based system in order to move international politics in the opposite direction.

It was left to Clinton to articulate these thoughts. She did it in a landmark foreign policy speech in July 2009. In her speech, she again made clear the U.S. determination to remain world leader. The question, she maintained, is not whether the United States can or should lead, but how it will lead. Clinton recognized that America, in an era of emerging centres of influence, must lead in new and more sophisticated ways. Repudiating unilateralism, she declared that the United States "will lead by inducing greater cooperation among a greater number of actors..." That meant relying on alliances and coalitions, building networks of partnership with emerging powers, and working through multilateral institutions. Clinton called for creating an "architecture of global cooperation" and "reducing competition, tilting the balance away from a multi-polar world and toward a multi-partner world."<sup>320</sup> Biden was supposed to sound the same theme in speeches during a July 2009 trip to Ukraine and Georgia, in particular the promise to resist multipolarity, but in actuality he said: "We are trying to build a multi-polar world."<sup>321</sup> It was an embarrassing misstatement that forced Clinton to issue a retraction of some kind on the administration's behalf.<sup>322</sup> Speaking after Biden's trip, she

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<sup>319</sup> Saltzman, "Russian Grand Strategy and the United States in the 21st Century," p. 561; Smith, "Russia and multipolarity since the end of the Cold War," pp. 42-44, 49.

<sup>320</sup> "Foreign Policy Address at the Council on Foreign Relations: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State," July 15, 2009, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2009a/july/126071.htm>.

<sup>321</sup> "Remarks by Vice President Biden in Ukraine," July 22, 2009, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-vice-president-biden-ukraine>.

<sup>322</sup> Unfortunately, Biden's gaffe has been mistaken for a true statement of U.S. policy. See Thomas Wright, "The Rise and Fall of the Unipolar Concert," *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 4 (Winter 2015), p. 16.

reemphasized the vision of “creating not a multi-polar world, but a multi-partner world.”<sup>323</sup>

Later, she insisted that “we’re trying to get the world to be not a multi-polar world so much as a multi-partner world.”<sup>324</sup> This truly was a vision that presupposed the dominance and leadership of the United States in international affairs.

## **The Reset and the Russians**

A fatal weakness of the reset was conflicting American and Russian understandings of how it came about and what it should be about in order to successfully repair the strained bilateral relationship. From the outset, the Russians insisted that the reset was a purely American initiative rather than a joint project. Emphasizing that the term was American, they never used it when referring to their own policy towards the United States. “We do not talk about ‘reset’,” Putin said. “It is representatives of the American administration that has proposed a ‘reset’.”<sup>325</sup> Moreover, the Russians soon got bored with the Obama administration’s frequent use of the term “reset” in describing its Russia policy. In late 2010, Medvedev complained that “this term has already become a bit tedious.”<sup>326</sup> From the early Russian perspective, Obama’s introduction of a reset with Russia was a necessary unilateral American course correction and an indirect admission of previous American policy errors. The initial Russian view, informed by a heavy dose of conceit and wishful strategic thinking about U.S.-Russian relations, was that it was the United States that needed to drastically change its ways in correcting the mistakes of the Clinton and Bush years and that Obama actually reset U.S. policy towards Russia.<sup>327</sup> According to Lavrov, the Russian leadership viewed the reset policy as “a realization of the Obama administration that the previous policy, pursued by its predecessors, must be ended. In this sense, we notice that the administration’s leadership has precisely ‘reset itself’.”<sup>328</sup> The Russian

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<sup>323</sup> “Remarks at International Development Cooperation Business Event: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State,” August 7, 2009, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2009a/08/127004.htm>.

<sup>324</sup> “Interview With Tom Brokaw of NBC: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State,” November 9, 2009, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2009a/11/131699.htm>.

<sup>325</sup> “Interv’yu Predsedatelya Pravitel’sstva Rossiyskoy Federatsii V.V. Putina yaponskomu informatsionnomu agentstvu ‘Kiodo Tsusin’, teleradiokorporatsii ‘En-Eych-Key’ i gazete ‘Nikhon Keydzay’ (‘Nikkei’)” [Interview of Chairman of the Government of the Russian Federation V.V. Putin for the Japanese news agency “Kyodo Tsushin”, the NHK broadcasting corporation, and the newspaper “Nihon Keizai” (‘Nikkei’)], 10 May 2009, available at <http://archive.premier.gov.ru/events/news/4094>.

<sup>326</sup> “Interv’yu pol’skim sredstvam massovoy informatsii” [Interview for Polish mass media], 6 December 2010, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/9707>.

<sup>327</sup> “Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova amerikanskomu televedushchemu Charli Rouzu” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov by American anchorman Charlie Rose], 22 September 2010, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2010](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2010).

<sup>328</sup> “Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova ‘Nel’zya skazat’, chto NATO predstavlyaet dlya nas ugrozu’, ‘Kommersant’” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov “One cannot say



leaders offered no drastic changes in their own policy. Instead, they argued that improved U.S.-Russian relations “required no special efforts” from the Russian side. They approached the relations believing there was no need to rectify Russian policy.<sup>329</sup> Thus, Russia’s leaders assumed that the entire burden for improving the relationship between the United States and Russia was on the United States, so only unilateral U.S. action could heal the rift. For them, the reset was based on the premise that the relationship had deteriorated because of U.S. policies. Putin was unequivocal in blaming the United States. In the wake of the Russian-Georgian war, he had contended that the relationship’s decline was America’s fault. America spoiled the relationship, Putin argued, and therefore it was up to America, not Russia, to improve it.<sup>330</sup>

Russian rhetoric during Obama’s first years in office reflected Moscow’s antipathy towards the Clinton and Bush administrations. The Bush policies in particular were subjected to vehement Russian criticism. Russian officials repeatedly articulated grievances against the Bush administration. In speeches and articles, they vented their intense dissatisfaction with the general thrust of Bush’s grand strategic orientation and with concrete actions taken by this administration. “The plans of the previous administration of the USA inflicted serious harm upon Russian security interests,” Lavrov stated.<sup>331</sup> In practice as well, he argued, “work was done against Russian interests.” Lavrov indiscriminately charged that “under G. Bush everything took on forms that caused great disappointment...”<sup>332</sup> He summarized Bush’s record as “the dreary legacy of the previous administration of the United States of America.”<sup>333</sup>

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that NATO presents a threat to us,” “Kommersant”], 11 June 2010, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2010](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2010).

<sup>329</sup> “Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova RIA ‘Novosti’, telekanalu ‘Russia Today’ i radiostantsii ‘Golos Rossii’” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for RIA “Novosti”, the television channel “Russia Today” and the radio station “Voice of Russia”], 1570-20-10-2009, 16 October 2009, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2009](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2009); “Stenogramma interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova telekanalu ‘Vesti’” [Transcript of interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the television channel “Vesti”], 11 November 2009, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2009](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2009).

<sup>330</sup> “Predsedatel’ Pravitel’sтва Rossiyskoy Federatsii V.V. Putin dal interv’yu frantsuzskoy gazete ‘Figaro’” [Chairman of the Government of the Russian Federation V.V. Putin gave an interview to the French newspaper “Le Figaro”], 13 September 2008, available at <http://archive.premier.gov.ru/events/news/1903>.

<sup>331</sup> “Vystupitel’noe slovo Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v Fonde Karnegi” [Opening remarks by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov at the Carnegie Foundation], 737-09-05-2009, 7 May 2009, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2009](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2009).

<sup>332</sup> “Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova Pervomu zameshitel’yu General’nogo direktora ITAR-TASS M.S. Gusmanu dlya ITAR-TASS, ‘Rossiyskoy gazety’ i telekanala ‘Rossiya-24’” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for First deputy General director of ITAR-TASS M.S. Gusman for ITAR-TASS, “Rossiyskaya gazeta” and the television channel “Rossiya-24”], 1740-10-11-2011, 10 November 2011, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2011](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2011).

<sup>333</sup> “Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v Gosudarstvennoy Dume Federal’nogo Sobraniya Rossiyskoy Federatsii v ramkakh ‘Pravitel’stvennogo chasa’” [Remarks by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov in the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation within the framework of



At the top of the list of U.S. behaviour stoking Russian grievance were the efforts to ensure American primacy and global leadership. Lavrov pointed out that the Bush administration “oriented itself towards the building of a unipolar world led by the USA and acted accordingly...”<sup>334</sup> Defence Minister Anatoly Serdyukov highlighted the U.S. leadership aspirations. “The military-political situation has been characterized by the striving of the leadership of the USA to attain global leadership,” he told the Defence Ministry’s collegium. He also complained about U.S. policies in the post-Soviet space, which Russia regarded as its zone of influence: “Processes aimed at forcing Russia out of the space of its traditional interests were actively supported.”<sup>335</sup> Lavrov grumbled that precisely the measures of the Bush administration asserting U.S. primacy had “caused the accumulation of a negative potential in global and regional politics.” He implied that the United States had an obligation to stop such unipolar actions if it wanted better relations with the world’s rising revisionist powers: “Abandonment of this line, including the course towards containment of all potential competitors on a global scale, would influence the international situation positively.”<sup>336</sup> Only after this, in terms of gravity, did the Russian officials mention specific contentious issues like the placement of U.S. missile defence components in Eastern Europe, the further eastward expansion of NATO, and the U.S. and NATO military presence near Russia’s borders.

Obama’s call for an improvement in U.S.-Russian relations was met with guarded approval from Russian leaders, although they never thought about any need for Russia to change its foreign policy in order to make it happen. Shortly after the first meeting between Obama and Medvedev in London, the permanent members of the Russian Security Council agreed on the final draft of a National Security Strategy to replace the National Security Strategy Concept of 2000. Medvedev approved the text by decree on May 12, 2009. The strategy document intimated that U.S.-Russian relations now had good prospects. In setting out Russia’s foreign policy aims, it claimed: “Russia will strive to build an equal and full-fledged

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“Government hour”], 511-14-03-2012, 14 March 2012, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2012](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2012).

<sup>334</sup> ”Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova grechskoy gazete ‘Kathimerini’” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the Greek newspaper “Kathimerini”], 1837-02-12-2009, 2 December 2009, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2009](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2009).

<sup>335</sup> ”Doklad Ministra oborony Rossiyskoy Federatsii na rasshirennom zasedanii kollegii Ministerstva oborony Rossiyskoy Federatsii” [Report of the Minister of defence of the Russian Federation at an extended meeting of the collegium of the Ministry of the Russian Federation], 17 March 2009, available at <http://www.mil.ru/847/851/1291/12671/index.shtml?pid=60047>.

<sup>336</sup> ”Stat’ya Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova ‘Kak okonchatel’no zavershit’ kholodnuyu voynu?’ Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn’, May 2009” [Article by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov “How to conclusively end the cold war?” *Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn’*, May 2009], 21 May 2009, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2009](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2009).

strategic partnership with the United States of America on the basis of coinciding interests and taking into account the key influence of Russian-American relations on the international situation as a whole.”<sup>337</sup> The strategy then reiterated the areas of common interest and cooperation listed in the London joint statement, including strategic arms control, non-proliferation, and counter-terrorism. What was notable was the absence of references to mutual interests in other areas or to a desire to build a partnership based on shared societal values. As the U.S.-Russian rapprochement proceeded in 2010, Russian officials acknowledged that the atmosphere in their dialogue with the Americans had improved considerably.<sup>338</sup> Lavrov noted that the Obama administration had “created favourable conditions for the arrangement of Russia’s cooperation with the United States on a pragmatic and equal basis.”<sup>339</sup>

Nevertheless, Russian foreign policy retained a virulently anti-American agenda deeply hostile to vital U.S. interests. The Russians entered the reset with the understanding that the United States should accommodate Russia's strategic interests and shift positions on those serious matters that really agitated them. This understanding was diametrically opposed to Obama’s positive idea of selective cooperation producing what he likes to call win-win outcomes. Russia’s main demand was entirely negative and one-sided: that the United States give up its strategic vision of global unipolar dominance. It is, however, inconceivable that any political leadership in Washington would act against America’s own national interests and turn away from the embrace of primacy. The Russians obviously underestimated the essential continuity between Bush and his successor. Certainly, Obama was not willing to make concessions or compromises that might erode America’s superpower status. Above all, the U.S. position did not move an inch on the post-Soviet space. The Russians eventually realized that the Obama administration had no intention to address their continued grievances with respect to the United States. None of the things that they were truly upset about had been put on the negotiating table. This prompted Putin to ask publicly: “So, where is this reset?” The United States was still regarded by Putin as the dangerous nation. In an interview given in August 2010, he said his Munich speech of 2007 stating Russia’s conceptual opposition to

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<sup>337</sup> “Strategiya natsional’noy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii do 2020 goda” [National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation to 2020], 12 May 2009, available at <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/1/99.html>.

<sup>338</sup> “Stat’ya Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova ‘V odnoy lodke’, ‘Itogi’” [Article by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov “In the same boat,” “Itogi”], 15 November 2010, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2010](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2010).

<sup>339</sup> “Stenogramma vystupleniya i otvetov Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na voprosy SMI na press-konferentsii, posvyashchennoy vneshnepoliticheskim itogam 2009 goda” [Transcript of remarks and responses to mass media questions by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov at press conference devoted to foreign policy results of 2009], 22 January 2010, [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2010](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2010).

U.S.-dominated unipolarity remained relevant: “In this sense, what I spoke about in Munich is topical even today.”<sup>340</sup>

Amid the atmospheric change in U.S.-Russian relations, Russia continued to define its strategic interests in opposition to the United States. Still present was the Putinist advocacy of a multipolar world. As before, multipolarity lay at the heart of Russia’s vision of a new world order. Of course, that vision is in fundamental contradiction with the U.S. unipolar vision. Russia’s continuing search for a great-power identity in the context of building global multipolarity was clearly reflected in the National Security Strategy issued in May 2009. The document came as confirmation that Russia aspired to reassert itself as a major pole of power in a multipolar international system. It stated: “The national interests of the Russian Federation in the long term lie ... in the transformation of the Russian Federation into a world power ... under the conditions of a multipolar world.” Aligned to this basic view was the deeply entrenched belief that Russia has resurged and possesses sufficient strength and authority to count upon being considered among the leading global actors. “Russia,” the strategy asserted, “has rebuilt the capacity to increase its competitiveness and uphold the national interests as a key subject of the emerging multipolar international relations.”<sup>341</sup> In November 2009, Medvedev reported to Russia’s Federal Assembly that “the foreign policy priorities remain the same. And we are still for a strengthening of multipolarity, which I believe is more clearly becoming stronger in the world.”<sup>342</sup> Previously, Russian rhetoric had described two mutually exclusive tendencies, one towards multipolarity and the other towards unipolarity, in fierce competition.<sup>343</sup> Now the rhetoric more explicitly projected confidence that multipolarity is in the ascendant. Lavrov argued that “a multipolar reality is strengthened at all levels.” According to him, “the establishment of multipolarity, the formation of a polycentric world system, is the dominant tendency in contemporary international relations.”<sup>344</sup> Russia’s assertive verbiage about multipolarity added up to a picture of a Russian great power poised to challenge the United States. From Russia’s point of view, U.S.-Russian relations, while possibly involving

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<sup>340</sup> “Vladimir Putin: dayu vam chestnoe partiynoe slovo” [Vladimir Putin: I give you an honest party-spirited statement], *Kommersant*, no. 150, 3 August 2010, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=1495411>.

<sup>341</sup> “Strategiya natsional’noy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii do 2020 goda.”

<sup>342</sup> “Poslanie Federal’nomu Sobraniyu Rossiyskoy Federatsii” [Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation], 12 November 2009, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/5979>.

<sup>343</sup> Karlsson, *Grand Strategies in Collision*, pp. 26, 54.

<sup>344</sup> “Stenogramma vystupleniya i otvetov Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na voprosy SMI na press-konferentsii, posvyashchennoy vneshnepoliticheskim itogam 2009 goda” [Transcript of remarks and responses to mass media questions by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov at press conference devoted to foreign policy results of 2009], 22 January 2010, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2010](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2010).

cooperative elements, are essentially competitive. The Russians clearly believe that Russia and the United States are more competitors than partners. Overall, the peculiar Russian foreign policy philosophy, expounded mostly by Lavrov, characterizes world politics as endless rivalry. Grounded in the realist school, it considers competition between major powers a “normal thing” that “will never end.”<sup>345</sup> Furthermore, it suggests that the world is becoming increasingly competitive. “This is exactly what we call multipolarity in progress,” Lavrov explained. But at the same time, he strove to emphasize that the perpetual and intensified international competition he envisaged should not lead to confrontation. “Competition is not necessarily equivalent to confrontation,” he averred.<sup>346</sup> There is still a realization in Moscow that Russia cannot afford an outright confrontation with the United States. Accordingly, the National Security Strategy depicted Russian foreign policy as not confrontational. “Russia,” it promised, “will pursue a rational and pragmatic foreign policy, ruling out exhausting confrontation, including a new arms race.”<sup>347</sup>

## **The Real Reset: Few Results**

The Obama administration wisely avoided describing the fragile reset of U.S. relations with Russia as a major diplomatic success. It did, however, claim its reset policy as a series of great accomplishments. Administration officials argued that they had something substantial to show for their cooperative, deal-making efforts. According to Gordon, the reset “produced considerable results” and “paid significant dividends.”<sup>348</sup> There is no denying the fact that the administration’s engagement on Russia paid off in notable benefits for U.S. national security, but the gains of the reset in this area were limited in accordance with the stated aims, which were quite modest. The list of significant concrete security achievements cited by the administration is pretty short: the New START Treaty, a bilateral military transit agreement to allow air transportation of U.S. troops and arms to Afghanistan through Russian airspace, and

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<sup>345</sup> ”Interv’yu: Sergey Lavrov, ministr inostrannykh del RF” [Interview: Sergey Lavrov, minister of foreign affairs of the Russian Federation], Radiostantsiya ”Ekho Moskv,” 2 March 2011, available at <http://www.echo.msk.ru/programs/beseda/753688-echo>.

<sup>346</sup> ”Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova amerikanskomu televedushchemu Charli Rouzu” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov by American anchorman Charlie Rose], 22 September 2010, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2010](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2010).

<sup>347</sup> ”Strategiya natsional’noy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii do 2020 goda.”

<sup>348</sup> ”U.S.-Russia Relations Under the Obama Administration: Philip H. Gordon, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs,” June 16, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2010/143275.htm>; *Overview of U.S. Relations with Europe and Eurasia: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Europe and Eurasia of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 112th Congress, 1st Session*, Serial No. 112-20 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011), p. 23.

Russian support for more comprehensive sanctions against Iran.<sup>349</sup> These three negotiated outcomes came to constitute the main content of the reset.

Although the atmospherics of U.S.-Russian relations improved, the fundamental character of the bilateral relationship was not transformed. The relationship continued to be a complex mix of competition and limited cooperation. To the extent that the vaunted reset was expected to provide the basis for a sustainable partnership between the United States, it fell short of the expectations. Initial unrealistic hopes for a long game of wider cooperation were dashed. Despite the early tangible accomplishments, the state of less tense and more constructive U.S.-Russian relations did not last long. “For those who expected the reset to open a new era of goodwill between Russia and the United States, it proved to be a bitter disappointment,” Hillary Clinton notes in her memoirs.<sup>350</sup> Clinton was somewhat less disappointed. Unlike some others, she never had any illusions that the reset could develop into something grand in the long term. In a large measure, the reset’s long-term failure was inherent in the transactional approach deliberately chosen by the Obama administration. The administration initially focused on the relatively easy deliverables, or the “low-hanging fruit” as they were often called, and moved U.S. Russia policy away from the more problematic areas of the U.S.-Russian relationship. Agreements on important issues of common interest failed to create conditions for making progress on long-standing disagreements. Hence, the momentum behind the rapprochement did not continue to build, and the major reset deliverables did not function as catalysts.<sup>351</sup>

When judged against the aims stated for the reset policy, the agreement with Russia allowing U.S. military cargo aircraft to transport military personnel and equipment over Russian territory in support of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan was an important achievement for the Obama administration. Greater U.S.-Russian cooperation on Afghanistan had been a key objective of the administration’s policy, and the air transit agreement, signed at the July 2009 Moscow summit, proved that the Russians truly wanted to help the U.S. effort in Afghanistan. The overflight arrangement facilitated the Afghanistan operation by providing a safe transportation corridor to Afghanistan. However, the benefits it conferred were ephemeral in nature. As America’s military involvement in Afghanistan began to decline in 2011, with

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<sup>349</sup> ”U.S.-Russia Relations: ‘Reset’ Fact Sheet,” June 24, 2010, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/us-russia-relations-reset-fact-sheet>.

<sup>350</sup> Clinton, *Hard Choices*, p. 236.

<sup>351</sup> Charap, “Beyond the Russian Reset,” pp. 43-45; Deyermond, “Assessing the Reset,” pp. 513-514, 518.

2014 announced as the year of withdrawal of all U.S. combat troops, so too did the positive effects of the Moscow agreement.

Gaining Russian support for measures to curb the nuclear proliferation threat from Iran had been the other central goal of Obama's reset policy. On Iran's nuclear programme, the policy did not deliver the results desired by the United States. The Russians were forthcoming but less than the U.S. leadership would like. Before the reset, Russia had proved strikingly unhelpful as the United States tried to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. For years, the Russians conducted a subtle diplomacy of foiling U.S. multilateral attempts to pressure the Iranians to give up their alleged nuclear weapons ambitions. Russia's stance in fact amounted to sheltering Iran from international pressure. Russian negotiators in 2006-2008 supported several United Nations Security Council resolutions imposing sanctions against Iran that were weaker than those that the United States originally advocated, and they consistently opposed crippling economic sanctions.<sup>352</sup>

The Obama administration, like its predecessors, invested much time and effort in breaking Russia's resistance to stronger pressure against Iran. Throughout the spring of 2010, it engaged the Russians in intense negotiations to get them to accept another round of sanctions. Finally, in June 2010, Russia voted for United Nations Security Council Resolution 1929, which imposed unprecedentedly comprehensive and strict sanctions on Iran, including new financial restrictions and an expanded international arms embargo. The resolution was hailed by the Obama administration as one of its most important foreign policy achievements, but from Washington's point of view it was still insufficient. Few believed it would deter Iran. In the wake of the introduction of the United Nations sanctions, the United States and its EU partners therefore imposed their own further economic sanctions against Iran beyond what had been agreed in the United Nations.

An intriguing question remains with respect to the U.S.-Russian cooperation on Iran in 2010. Why did Russia become more forthcoming in the negotiations in the United Nations Security Council? It appears that Russia's support for tougher sanctions was related to the prospects for ratification of the New START Treaty. The Russians were very keen to get the treaty ratified, in part because they saw it as a vitally important means to ensure that the United States would reduce its strategic nuclear forces corresponding to previous unilateral reductions by Russia. When New START was signed in 2010, the number of Russian strategic missile launchers was already below the treaty's limit. Thus, only the United States would have to

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<sup>352</sup> Stent, *The Limits of Partnership*, pp. 152-153, 288.

make reductions under the treaty. Concern about the treaty apparently goes a long way towards explaining Russia's greater willingness to accept additional measures to constrain Iran's nuclear developments. The Russians realized that the treaty had generated strong political opposition in the United States. They knew it would be difficult for the Obama administration to obtain the two-thirds majority in the Senate required for ratification, and they were eager for a discernable improvement in the U.S.-Russian relationship that might help to facilitate the contentious ratification process. In December 2010, the New START Treaty was approved by the Senate by a vote of 71-26, barely surpassing the 67-vote threshold. The Senate vote marked the smallest margin ever for a U.S.-Russian arms control treaty.<sup>353</sup>

The New START Treaty entered into force in February 2011, after Secretary Clinton and Foreign Minister Lavrov exchanged the instruments of ratification. Once the treaty was ratified, the substantial U.S.-Russian cooperation on the Iranian proliferation problem disintegrated. U.S. and Russian interests were not shared in a real sense, since each side defined the problem differently and had different ideas on how to address it. In June 2011, Lavrov unambiguously signaled that Russia would not agree to further sanctions in the United Nations context. He said "we do not consider it possible to introduce any additional, international, universal sanctions concerning Iran."<sup>354</sup> Russia denounced what it termed "unilateral" and "illegal" added sanctions imposed by the United States and the EU. Sanctions against the Iranian oil industry were never accepted by the Russians. In fact, they rejected the very idea of sanctions. Lavrov regarded the end of Russia's support for sanctions against Iran as a manifestation of "continuing philosophical differences" between Russia and the United States over how to manage world affairs. "These differences in philosophy, in the perception of the modern world, are manifested in a range of questions," he said. In particular, he cited different approaches to achieving diplomatic solutions. "In situations of crises and conflicts, our partners in Washington in most cases consider it correct to act by methods of sanctions," Lavrov claimed. "We are convinced that this is not the right path."<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> Amy F. Woolf, *The New START Treaty: Central Limits and Key Provisions*, CRS Report R41219 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, April 21, 2011).

<sup>354</sup> "Interv'yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova informatsionnomu agentsvu 'Blumberg'" [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the news agency "Bloomberg"], 831-02-06-2011, 1 June 2011, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2011](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2011).

<sup>355</sup> "Interv'yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova Pervomu zamestitel'yu General'nogo direktora ITAR-TASS M.S. Gusmanu dlya ITAR-TASS, 'Rossiyskoy gazety' i telekanala 'Rossiya 24'" [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for First deputy General director of ITAR-TASS M.S. Gusman for ITAR-TASS, "Rossiyskaya gazeta" and the television channel "Rossiya 24"], 1740-10-11-2011, 10 November 2011, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2011](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2011).



Russia's refusal to put more pressure on Iran in the form of sanctions might be described as the final death blow to the reset. It was an enormous setback for Obama's reset policy. The policy had rested on the assumption that the United States could expect genuinely serious cooperation from Russia to stop Iranian nuclear proliferation. This assumption was unjustified. The Obama administration failed to achieve the expected level of Russian cooperation on one of its most prominent aims. "We do have a disagreement about additional sanctions," McFaul admitted in 2012.<sup>356</sup> In seeking to arrest Iranian attempts to develop nuclear weapons, the United States could not count on Russian assistance but had to rely on support from the EU.

## **Striking Back**

By the end of 2011, the reset had already run its course. It had exhausted its drive and appeared to be reaching the boundaries of accommodation and substantial cooperation in the security field that could not be overstepped. The short and limited rapprochement in U.S.-Russian relations came to an end when the common ground shrunk. After three years of reset, the United States and Russia now had fewer shared objectives compelling their cooperation. In other words, they were running out of mutual interests. As the trickle of deliverables slowed to a near halt, U.S.-Russian relations began to deteriorate again, with both sides paying more attention to the critical areas of dispute where their core interests conflict. Specific contentious issues resurfaced and rose to the top of the bilateral political agenda.

Again, missile defence seemed to be the main contentious issue looming in the relationship. In September 2009, Obama abandoned the controversial plans of the Bush administration for a European-based site of the U.S. strategic missile defence system and announced a "phased adaptive" approach to missile defence in Europe initially focusing on regional protection against the immediate Iranian short- and medium-range ballistic missile threat but also involving final deployment phases that would be responsive to a possible longer-range threat. Before long, Russia fiercely criticized the new U.S. missile defence plans, particularly their strategic dimension of a future capability to destroy intercontinental ballistic missiles, arguing that they could threaten the Russian strategic nuclear forces. Meanwhile, the negotiations between NATO and Russia over missile defence stalled after the Russians presented a proposal for sectoral NATO-Russian missile defence unacceptable to NATO and

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<sup>356</sup> "What's Behind the Rising Tensions in US-Russia Relations," *PRI's The World*, March 12, 2012, available at <http://www.theworld.org/2012/03/russia-ambassador-michael-mcfaul>.



insisted upon equally unacceptable legal guarantees from NATO that the planned U.S. missile defence system in Europe would not be directed at Russia.<sup>357</sup>

The most telling indication of the persistent fundamental rift between the United States and Russia still involved contrasting visions of the world. Obama's reset policy was never indifferent to the larger world order considerations, but in his first years in office he avoided engaging directly with the more profound particular sources of U.S.-Russian rivalry. They were briefly pushed out of the limelight by the material manifestations of bilateral cooperation. Nonetheless, such underlying strategic matters, including the U.S. global hegemonic ambitions and Russia's revisionist desire to thwart these ambitions, formed the durable basis for a continuously adversarial relationship. As Professor Daniel W. Drezner has observed, the Obama administration by 2011 had pivoted towards a more assertive grand strategy focused on exerting U.S. influence around the world, reassuring traditional allies and partners, and signaling resolve to adversaries among the aspiring great powers.<sup>358</sup> An early sign of this strategic adjustment, intended to bring home to friends and foes alike that the United States is firmly positioned as the centre of decision making in the international system, came in Obama's January 2011 State of the Union address. The tone of the speech was not one of American retreat from a grand strategy of global engagement and active world leadership in a unipolar systemic setting. On the contrary, the president spoke confidently about America's leading role in the world. He told Congress: "American leadership has been renewed and America's standing has been restored."<sup>359</sup> Undeniably, America's situation in the world has improved under Obama, and U.S. leadership is more acceptable for many foreign governments.<sup>360</sup> "The renewal of American leadership can be felt across the globe," Obama

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<sup>357</sup> On the issue of missile defence in U.S.-Russian relations during the Obama administration, see Richard Weitz, "Illusive Visions and Practical Realities: Russia, NATO and Missile Defence," *Survival*, vol. 52, no. 4 (August-September 2010), pp. 99-120; Dean A. Wilkening, "Does Missile Defence in Europe Threaten Russia?" *Survival*, vol. 54, no. 1 (February-March 2012), pp. 31-52; Jeffrey Mankoff, "The politics of US missile defence cooperation with Europe and Russia," *International Affairs*, vol. 88, no. 2 (March 2012), pp. 329-347; Stephen J. Cimbala, "Missile Mayhem and Antimissile Angst: From Reset to Retro in U.S.-Russian Security Relations," *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 32, no. 2 (April-June 2013), pp. 133-145; Richard Weitz, "US Missile Defense: Closing the Gap," *World Affairs*, vol. 176, no. 2 (July/August 2013), pp. 80-87; Keir Giles and Andrew Monaghan, *European Missile Defense and Russia* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, July 2014); Roberto Zadra, "NATO, Russia and Missile Defence," *Survival*, vol. 56, no. 4 (August-September 2014), pp. 51-61.

<sup>358</sup> Daniel W. Drezner, "Does Obama Have a Grand Strategy? Why We Need Doctrines in Uncertain Times," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 90, no. 4 (July/August 2011), pp. 58, 65.

<sup>359</sup> "Remarks by the President in State of Union Address," January 25, 2011, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/25/remarks-president-state-union-address>.

<sup>360</sup> G. John Ikenberry, "America Self-Contained?" *The American Interest*, vol. 9, no. 5 (May/June 2014), p. 12; Gideon Rose, "What Obama Gets Right: Keep Calm and Carry the Liberal Order On," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 94, no. 5 (September/October 2015), p. 10.

asserted in his next State of the Union address. Then he departed from official politeness by dismissing the notion of American decline as nonsense. Against the declinists, he shot back that “anyone who tells you that America is in decline or that our influence has waned, doesn’t know what they’re talking about.” Having pushed declinism aside, Obama in the same speech returned to a famous 1990s trope of the Clinton administration. “America remains the one indispensable nation in world affairs,” he said, drawing applause.<sup>361</sup>

The presumption that the United States is indispensable to the management of world affairs quickly became one of Obama’s favourite staples of campaign rhetoric in the election year 2012. It reappeared in his May speech at the U.S. Air Force Academy.<sup>362</sup> In July, he remarked to the Veterans of Foreign Wars: “The United States has been, and will remain, the one indispensable nation in world affairs.”<sup>363</sup> Obama repeated the phrase even during the televised presidential debate on foreign policy.<sup>364</sup> What began as campaign bluster eventually ended up in the major grand strategy document of the Obama administration. The administration’s second National Security Strategy, issued in February 2015, affirmed the “power and centrality of America’s indispensable leadership in the world.”<sup>365</sup> Its last sentence proclaimed the “certainty that American leadership in this century, like the last, remains indispensable.”<sup>366</sup> Secretary Clinton gladly employed this kind of primacist language. It was undoubtedly to her satisfaction to reuse her husband’s exact words from 1996 that the United States is “truly the indispensable nation” when she spoke at the Council on Foreign Relations in January 2013.<sup>367</sup> Earlier, in the same venue, she declared a “new American moment” in world history, “a moment when our global leadership is essential...”<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> “Remarks by the President in State of the Union Address,” January 24, 2012, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/01/24/remarks-president-state-union-address>.

<sup>362</sup> “Remarks by the President at the Air Force Academy Commencement,” May 23, 2012, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/23/remarks-president-air-force-academy-commencement>.

<sup>363</sup> “Remarks by the President to the 113th National Convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars,” July 23, 2012, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/07/23/remarks-president-113th-national-convention-veterans-foreign-wars>.

<sup>364</sup> “Remarks by the President and Governor Romney in the Third Presidential Debate,” October 23, 2012, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/10/23/remarks-president-and-governor-romney-third-presidential-debate>.

<sup>365</sup> *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: The White House, February 2015), p. 2.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>367</sup> “Remarks on American Leadership at the Council on Foreign Relations: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State,” January 2013, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2013/01/203608.htm>.

<sup>368</sup> “Remarks on United States Foreign Policy: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State,” September 8, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010709/146917.htm>.

Obama's and Clinton's fundamentally optimistic belief that the United States will continue to be the leading world power, a belief they shared with their Republican main opponents, was to a surprisingly great extent supported by a new report of the U.S. National Intelligence Council issued in December 2012. The new report represented an interesting departure from the 2008 report, which predicted that the world will be multipolar by 2025. That ill-advised prediction was retracted by the authors of the 2012 report. According to their revised assessment, the transition to a multipolar world, in which several great powers exist in rough parity, will be incomplete even in 2030. Moreover, they actually appeared doubtful about the inevitability of multipolarity, stating that "the world's ultimate shape is far from being predetermined."<sup>369</sup> The report further indicated that the United States, despite the diffusion of power among states, will continue to dominate the international system by 2030.<sup>370</sup> It projected that China's relative share of global power in 2030 will still be significantly smaller than the share held by the United States, while Russia's share will diminish.<sup>371</sup> The comprehensive nature of U.S. power was emphasized in the report. Such comprehensiveness meant continued "preeminence across a range of power dimensions," it was noted.<sup>372</sup> Logically, this recognition of preeminent U.S. power would imply that unipolar structural conditions remain in the international system and will last at least until 2030, but the report nevertheless concluded that the "unipolar moment" of the United States was over.<sup>373</sup> The conclusion was both startling and utterly unconvincing and also seemed strange in view of the prediction made in November 2008. Dr. Thomas Fingar, the chairman of the National Intelligence Council, at that time stated that unipolarity "will be over by 2025."<sup>374</sup> How could it then be considered over in 2012? The relatively optimistic reasoning in the 2012 report was entirely consistent with a starkly different conclusion. The report suggested that "erection of a new international order seems the least likely outcome of this time period." It recognized that U.S. preponderance exceeds the reach of any competitor: "No other power would be likely to achieve the same panoply of

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<sup>369</sup> *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds*, NIC 2012-001 (Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, December 2012), p. 98.

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. x, 99, 101.

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>374</sup> "Press Briefing: Dr. Thomas Fingar, Deputy Director of National Intelligence for Analysis & Chairman, National Intelligence Council & Dr. Mathew Burrows, Counselor, National Intelligence Council," November 20, 2008, available at [http://www.dni.gov/interviews/20081120\\_interview.pdf](http://www.dni.gov/interviews/20081120_interview.pdf).

power in this time frame under any plausible scenario.”<sup>375</sup> This appraisal constitutes a legitimate ground for arguing that global unipolarity remains fundamentally intact.

Even before the reset began to unravel, conflict in U.S.-Russian relations became more pronounced. The Obama administration’s approach to dealing with Russia grew notably more assertive. While administration officials continued to praise the reset, they were taking an increasingly harsh stance towards Russia. What Drezner has termed a “counterpunching strategy” entailed standing up against Russian strategic revisionism.<sup>376</sup> Beginning in 2007 with Putin’s Munich speech, the call for a revision of the existing political architecture of global security and governance became one of the main themes of Russian foreign policy. When Russian officials called for revising the entire international security architecture, they meant a reform of European structures in the first place. They voiced strong opposition against the Euro-Atlantic security arrangements dominated by the United States and NATO. Their long-term ambition was to reshape the European security environment by replacing NATO-centrism with an institutional framework more congenial to Russia’s national interests. Putin’s speech marked the first step towards what was obviously intended to be a grand Russian initiative on European security. A key point in this process was Medvedev’s June 2008 speech in which he proposed negotiation of a new European security treaty. Russian diplomats made concerted efforts to promote the proposal, referring to it many times in public, but it was cold-shouldered by the United States and other NATO members. Although the content of Medvedev’s proposal was vague, it was widely seen as aimed at undermining NATO’s central position in the Euro-Atlantic security system. After all, Russia, in the aftermath of the war in Georgia, proclaimed the failure of the current NATO-dominated architecture.<sup>377</sup>

Realizing that their campaign for the development of a new European security treaty was losing momentum, the Russians changed their tack and presented an official draft treaty in November 2009. The document was not explicitly geared to sideline NATO, but its unmistakable primary aim was to prevent the alliance from acting in ways that Russia could perceive as inimical to its security interests. It focused on the principle of “indivisible security”

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<sup>375</sup> *Global Trends 2030*, p. 105.

<sup>376</sup> Drezner, “Does Obama Have a Grand Strategy?” pp. 66-68.

<sup>377</sup> Andrew Monaghan, *Russia’s “Big Idea”: “Helsinki 2” and the reform of Euro-Atlantic security* (Rome: NATO Defense College, Research Division, December 2008), pp. 1-3; Andrew Monaghan, *At the table or on the menu? Moscow’s proposals for strategic reform* (Rome: NATO Defense College, Research Division, June 2009), pp. 2, 5-6; Bobo Lo, *Medvedev and the new European security architecture*, Policy brief (London: Centre for European Reform, July 2009), pp. 2-5; Marcel de Haas, “Medvedev’s alternative European security architecture,” *Security and Human Rights*, vol. 21, no. 1 (March 2010), pp. 45-46; Jeffrey Mankoff, “Reforming the Euro-Atlantic Security Architecture: An Opportunity for U.S. Leadership,” *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 2 (April 2010), pp. 65, 67.

according to which no state or international organization is entitled to strengthen its own security at the expense of other states or organizations. In offering the draft treaty, Russia suggested making this declaratory principle legally binding. The draft text stipulated that a party to the proposed treaty would not take “actions or measures significantly affecting the security” of any other party.<sup>378</sup> If included in international law as proposed, this obligation would provide Russia with a legal basis for objecting to such Western military-political steps as further NATO enlargement, missile defence deployments on the territory of NATO countries or NATO engagement beyond that territory.

As part of the reset of U.S.-Russian relations, the Obama administration at first expressed its willingness to consider the Russian ideas about structural security reform in Europe. In the joint U.S.-Russian statement issued in April 2009, Obama agreed to enter into a “comprehensive dialogue” on Medvedev’s initial treaty proposal. However, the United States and NATO declined to discuss the proposal in the NATO-Russia Council. Despite Russian objections, the discussion was instead relegated to be conducted in the so-called Corfu process, a dialogue on European security within the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) launched in June 2009 at a ministerial meeting in Corfu, Greece.<sup>379</sup>

Ultimately, the position of the Obama administration on Russia’s initiative for a new European security treaty developed towards outright rejection. When the Russians put forth their self-serving draft treaty, the administration promised to study it carefully. After contemplating the strategic implications of the document, administration officials rejected the Russian reform suggestions out of hand by asserting that the existing Euro-Atlantic security architecture was adequate and should be preserved essentially unchanged. In her speech on the future of European security in January 2010, Secretary Clinton argued that common goals regarding Europe’s security could be best pursued in the context of existing institutions rather than by negotiating another security treaty as Russia had suggested.<sup>380</sup> At a NATO seminar in February, she was more blunt, stating that “the United States does not see the need for new

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<sup>378</sup> “Proekt Dogovora o evropeyskoy bezopasnosti” [Draft Treaty on European security], 29 November 2009, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/6152>.

<sup>379</sup> David J. Kramer and Daniel P. Fata, “The Wrong Answer: Why the Medvedev Proposal is a Non-Starter,” in *A New European Order?* Brussels Forum Paper Series (Washington, DC: The German Marshall Fund of the United States, March 2010), p. 23; Isabelle François, *Whither the Medvedev Initiative on European Security?* Transatlantic Current No. 3 (Washington, DC: National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies, Center for Transatlantic Security Studies, December 2011), pp. 5-6; Stent, *The Limits of Partnership*, p. 239.

<sup>380</sup> “Remarks on the Future of European Security: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State,” January 29, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/01/136273.htm>.

treaties” regulating security matters in Europe.<sup>381</sup> Assistant Secretary Gordon restated the dismissive U.S. position in September 2010. He said the United States did not think it was “necessary or useful” to conclude new treaties.<sup>382</sup> In December 2010, at the OSCE summit in Astana, Kazakhstan, U.S. officials again firmly rejected Russia’s call for a treaty.

The Obama administration’s resolute stance effectively killed the Russian treaty initiative. After the superpower had spoken, debate on the subject died out.<sup>383</sup> Russian officials dutifully continued to push the draft treaty, but they certainly sensed that campaigning for it was a lost cause. In 2013, Lavrov complained that the European security architecture centred on NATO had withstood Russia’s revisionist challenge. He ruefully observed that “we are still far away from a truly collective Euro-Atlantic architecture, which would be based on a solid international-legal foundation. A striving persists to build relations on military-political issues in Europe ... by advancing a NATO-centric security construction as the only alternative.”<sup>384</sup> Finally, Lavrov had to acknowledge that the Russian proposal for a new treaty on European security was rejected.<sup>385</sup> According to him, the Western powers absolutely ignored the proposal. “They would not listen to us, stating that an additional treaty is of no use,” he noted.<sup>386</sup>

The greater assertiveness in Obama’s Russia policy was also evident when it came to handling the unsettled conflict over Georgia. Georgia remained a major point of difference between the United States and Russia, one that could not be ignored by the Obama administration. Russian military forces continued to occupy the Georgian provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in blatant violation of the cease-fire agreement that ended the August 2008 war. The Obama administration never in the course of resetting U.S.-Russian relations

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<sup>381</sup> “Remarks at the NATO Strategic Concept Seminar: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State,” February 22, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/02/137118.htm>.

<sup>382</sup> “Briefing on Transatlantic Meetings and NATO-Russia Council Meeting: Philip H. Gordon, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs,” September 22, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2010/147600.htm>.

<sup>383</sup> Richard Weitz, *The Rise and Fall of Medvedev’s European Security Treaty* (Washington, DC: The German Marshall Fund of the United States, Foreign Policy and Civil Society Program, May 2012), pp. 1, 5.

<sup>384</sup> “Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na 49-y Myunkhenskoy konferentsii po voprosam bezopasnosti” [Remarks by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov at the 49th Munich conference on security issues], 184-02-02-2013, 2 February 2013, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2013](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2013).

<sup>385</sup> “Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii S.V. Lavrova na 69-y sessiy General’noy Assamblei OON” [Remarks by Minister of foreign affairs of the Russian Federation S.V. Lavrov at the 69th session of the UN General Assembly], 2290-27-09-2014, 27 September 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>386</sup> “Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova agentstvu ITAR-TASS” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the agency ITAR-TASS], 2099-11-09-2014, 10 September 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).



concealed its serious disagreements with Russia on Georgia, and it never diminished its commitment to Georgia's territorial integrity and eventual NATO membership. If there had been a reduction in attention to Georgia in 2009, the administration made up for it 2010, when administration officials began to sound a sharper tone in criticizing Russia's failure to abide by the cease-fire agreement, which demanded withdrawal of forces to the positions held prior to the war. In a speech in June 2010, McFaul made the strongest statement heard from a U.S. official since 2008 about the situation in Georgia. He officially introduced the term "occupation" to describe Russia's conquest of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and defined the administration's policy as seeking to get Russia to withdraw its troops from the occupied territories: "Is it a foreign policy objective of the Obama administration to help end Russia's occupation of Georgia in a peaceful manner and restore Georgia's territorial integrity? Absolutely yes. That's an objective we have."<sup>387</sup> As McFaul candidly noted, there was no progress in advancing the objective of ending the Russian occupation, so the terminology he put on the official record became entrenched in U.S. diplomatic usage. Secretary Clinton made repeated use of the word "occupation" during her visit to Georgia in July 2010. In Tbilisi, she spoke out against Russia's "invasion and occupation of Georgia" and called on Russia to fully comply with the cease-fire agreement by removing its occupation troops. She insisted that the United States remained "steadfast in its commitment to Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity." Clinton also reaffirmed the familiar U.S. position flatly rejecting Russia's claims to a sphere of influence while voicing support for Georgia's NATO membership aspirations.<sup>388</sup> Even Senator McCain, who criticized the administration for not doing enough to support Georgia, found these statements encouraging.<sup>389</sup>

In October 2010, Clinton offered Georgia new declarations of support. "The United States will not waver in its support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity," she declared.<sup>390</sup> Meanwhile, however, U.S. military assistance to Georgia did not involve lethal equipment for territorial defence. Georgia remained under a de facto arms embargo from the

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<sup>387</sup> "Russia after the Global Economic Crisis" [keynote address by Michael A. McFaul], June 10, 2010 (Washington, DC: The Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2010), available at [http://www.iie.com/events/event\\_detail.cfm?EventID=154&Media](http://www.iie.com/events/event_detail.cfm?EventID=154&Media).

<sup>388</sup> "Remarks at a Town Hall With Georgian Women Leaders: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State," July 5, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/07/143972.htm>; "Joint Press Availability With Georgian President Saakashvili: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State," July 5, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/07/143973.htm>.

<sup>389</sup> "Georgia Needs U.S. Help in Rebuilding, Standing up To Russia: Senator McCain, Washington Post, August 8, 2010," available at <http://mccain.senate.gov>.

<sup>390</sup> "Remarks at the U.S.-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership Omnibus Meeting: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State," October 6, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/10/149080.htm>.

United States, since the U.S. government continuously withheld the transfer of weapons to Georgia. In practical terms, the policy took the form of simply rejecting Georgia's specific requests for weapons. The Obama administration has repeatedly denied that the United States maintains an arms embargo on Georgia.<sup>391</sup> Briefing the press on Clinton's 2010 trip to Georgia, Gordon reiterated this position. When pressed on the actual policy of non-approval with respect to Georgia's arms requests, he replied that "we don't think that arms sales and military equipment is the path to the situation in Georgia that we're trying to get to."<sup>392</sup> Gates later acknowledged that U.S. military assistance was confined to equipping and training Georgian troops for participation in the Afghanistan operation. He made clear that the Obama administration was primarily "interested in providing Georgia with the means by which they can help us in Afghanistan."<sup>393</sup>

When Obama and Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili met in the White House in January 2012, their discussions included enhanced bilateral defence cooperation. Obama pledged to help improve Georgia's self-defence capabilities. He also assured Saakashvili that "the United States will continue to support Georgia's aspirations to ultimately become a member of NATO."<sup>394</sup> During her second visit to Georgia, Secretary Clinton in June 2012 announced what military assistance the United States was willing to provide for Georgia's defence of its territory. She said that the United States would upgrade Georgia's fleet of transport helicopters and equip and train the Georgian defence forces to better monitor the country's coast and airspace. "With these efforts," Clinton asserted, "Georgia will be a stronger international partner with an improved capacity for self-defence."<sup>395</sup> Equipping Georgia with weapons for homeland defence was not mentioned. Strengthening Georgia's self-defence capabilities obviously did not mean supply of arms. Thus, Obama still refused to relax the U.S. ban on selling weapons to Georgia.

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<sup>391</sup> *Georgia: One Year After the August War: Hearing before the Subcommittee on European Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 111th Congress, 1st Session*, S. Hrg. 111-221 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010), p. 22.

<sup>392</sup> "Special Briefing on the Secretary's Upcoming Travel: Philip H. Gordon, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs...", June 29, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2010/143769.htm>.

<sup>393</sup> "Interfax News Agency Interview with Secretary Gates," September 13, 2010, available at <http://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=4687>.

<sup>394</sup> "Remarks by President Obama and President Saakashvili of Georgia After Bilateral Meeting," January 30, 2012, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/01/30/remarks-president-obama-and-president-saakashvili-georgia-after-bilatera>.

<sup>395</sup> "Remarks With Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State," June 5, 2012, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/06/191818.htm>.



All this does not mean that the suspension of weapons sales to Georgia was just of Obama's own making. It represents no departure from previous U.S. policy. Obama's policy does not diverge from the policy pursued by Bush. In fact, there is a large amount of continuity in America's Georgia policy. U.S. military assistance to Georgia before the 2008 war focused essentially on counterinsurgency in expeditionary operations, not on the defence of Georgia itself. After the war, the United States did not rearm Georgia. No weapons were provided by the United States after the cease-fire. In other words, the undeclared arms embargo on Georgia was imposed in 2008 by the Bush administration. Since Obama did not alter the U.S. policy concerning arms sales to Georgia, the refusal to sell Georgia arms, whatever its merits, should not be regarded as a unilateral concession to Russia by his administration.

Another sign of the Obama administration's more assertive approach to U.S.-Russian relations was the belated U.S. reaction to the suspension in December 2007 of Russia's compliance with the CFE Treaty. Since then, Russia had not notified other signatories of the movements of its troops and not permitted observers from other signatories to carry out verification inspections. Four years later, in November 2011, the United States finally retaliated. U.S. State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland announced that the United States would cease to carry out its obligations under the treaty with regard to Russia. She expressly stated that this move was in direct response to Russia's unilateral cessation of treaty implementation. According to Nuland, the Obama administration had decided that after four years of Russian non-compliance, it was "important to take some countermeasures vis-à-vis Russia."<sup>396</sup> In a separate statement issued by Nuland, it was declared that the United States would resume full implementation of the treaty only if Russia agreed to resubmit to the treaty regime.<sup>397</sup> The administration's decision betrayed the growing disconnect between the United States and Russia. It meant that the United States no longer would provide any notification to Russia of troop movements or accept Russian on-site inspections. The NATO allies of the United States quickly followed suit and announced that they would cease performing their CFE Treaty obligations regarding Russia.

Obama initiated his reset policy towards Russia without registering any democratic progress in Russian domestic politics. At the start of his administration in 2009, Russia could

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<sup>396</sup> "Victoria Nuland, Spokesperson: Daily Press Briefing," November 22, 2011, available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2011/11/177684.htm>.

<sup>397</sup> "Implementation of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe: Press Statement, Victoria Nuland, Department Spokesperson, Office of the Spokesperson," November 22, 2011, available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/2011/11/177630.htm>.

not be considered a democracy. The Russian regime had become fully authoritarian. Since the 2008 presidential election campaign, Obama was committed to the promotion of democracy in Russia. As president, he never abandoned or downgraded the democratization agenda as an element of U.S. Russia policy. However, the official public rhetoric was considerably toned down in the early phase of his presidency.<sup>398</sup> The Obama administration articulated America's interest in Russia's democratic development, while couching it in less strident language. In their open remarks about Russia, Obama and other administration officials pushed for democracy in abstract terms, stressing the virtues of truly democratic government institutions, a viable political opposition, fair and competitive elections, and a free press, but generally refrained from criticizing the egregious flaws of Russia's domestic political system and the country's human rights failings. This tactful rhetorical approach was still prevailing in Biden's speech in Moscow in March 2011.<sup>399</sup> Privately, however, senior administration figures were very critical of Russia's democratic backsliding. Classified U.S. diplomatic cables leaked to the web site WikiLeaks showed that they had a harsh assessment of the consolidated authoritarian Russian regime and placed little hope in Russia as a more democratic state.<sup>400</sup> For example, a February 2010 secret official cable from the U.S. embassy in Paris cleared by Gates quoted him as having said to the French defence minister that "Russian democracy has disappeared..."<sup>401</sup>

The disclosures about the Obama administration's dim view of the domestic situation in Putin's Russia came in the face of criticism that the administration had downplayed the theme of democracy promotion in its Russia policy and turned a blind eye towards the oppressive policies of the Russian regime. As the leaked cables indicated, this criticism signified a mistaken reading of the administration's position. The candid comments revealed by WikiLeaks went far beyond what members of the administration had previously said in public about the Russian governmental record on democracy and inadvertently strengthened the emerging image of a tough-talking administration.

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<sup>398</sup> Nicolas Bouchet, "The democracy tradition in US foreign policy and the Obama presidency," *International Affairs*, vol. 81, no. 1 (January 2013), pp. 31-32.

<sup>399</sup> "Vice President Biden's Remarks at Moscow State University," March 10, 2011, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/10/vice-president-bidens-remarks-moscow-state-university>.

<sup>400</sup> C.J. Chivers, "Below Surface, U.S. Has Dim View of Putin and Russia," *The New York Times*, December 1, 2010, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/02/world/europe/02wikileaks-russia.html>.

<sup>401</sup> Josh Rogin, "WikiLeaked cable from Bob Gates: 'Russian democracy has disappeared,'" *Foreign Policy*, November 28, 2010, available at [http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/11/28/wikileaks\\_cable\\_from\\_bob\\_gates\\_russian\\_democracy\\_has\\_disappeared](http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/11/28/wikileaks_cable_from_bob_gates_russian_democracy_has_disappeared).

By late 2011, the restrained public approach of the Obama administration to the issue of democracy and human rights in Russia could not be sustained any longer. Explicit public criticism became necessary. Domestic pressure, events in Russia, and the fact that the unvarnished truth about the administration's view had been exposed, increased the bearing of Russia's domestic affairs on U.S.-Russian relations and compelled Obama and his foreign policy team to adopt a more openly critical line. That policy redesign was underscored by Secretary Clinton's sharp public criticism of the fraudulent December 2011 Russian State Duma elections, which she characterized as "neither free nor fair."<sup>402</sup> The Russian regime sought to maintain the formal appearance of democracy by conducting parliamentary and presidential elections, but these elections were flawed. The outcome of the Duma elections was clearly manipulated as widespread vote fraud was reported by independent international observers. Nevertheless, Clinton's tough criticism was described by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs as an unacceptable hostile attack on Russia's electoral process.<sup>403</sup> Official U.S. comments on the Russian presidential election in March 2012 were more carefully worded but in effect sufficiently forceful. Nuland stated that the United States endorsed the critical preliminary report of the OSCE election observation mission.<sup>404</sup> According to this report, the election campaign was marked by unequal conditions clearly skewed in favour of one candidate: Vladimir Putin.<sup>405</sup>

To a significant degree, the Obama administration's Russia policy also hardened in reaction to Russia's stance on the civil war in Syria, which began in March 2011. U.S.-Russian relations became increasingly strained as a result of serious differences between the United States and Russia over the conflict. The United States wanted to put international pressure on the Syrian regime to end the violence and negotiate with the opposition, whereas Russia steadfastly refused to support any measures that might weaken the regime. Russia shielded the brutal regime at the United Nations Security Council by consistently blocking U.S. initiatives

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<sup>402</sup> "Remarks at the OSCE First Plenary Session: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State," December 6, 2011, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/12/178315.htm>.

<sup>403</sup> "Kommentariy ofitsial'nogo predstavatelya MID Rossii v svyazi s zayavleniyami predstaviteley Administratsii SShA o vyborakh v Gosudarstvennuyu Dumu 4 dekabrya s.g." [Commentary of the official representative of the Ministry of foreign affairs of Russia in connection with statements of representatives of the Administration of the USA on the elections to the State Duma on December 4 this year], 1943-06-12-2011, 6 December 2011, available at [http://www.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/179130](http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/179130).

<sup>404</sup> "Presidential Elections in Russia: Press Statement, Victoria Nuland, Department Spokesperson, Office of the Spokesperson," March 5, 2012, available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/03/185210.htm>.

<sup>405</sup> *International Election Observation: Russian Federation, Presidential Election – 4 March 2012: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions* (Moscow: OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission, 2012), available at <http://www.osce.org/odihr/88667>.

on Syria. As Hillary Clinton vividly recalls in her memoirs, U.S. diplomats “ran into the Russian-made brick wall at the UN...”<sup>406</sup> Russia used its veto power as a permanent member of the Security Council in October 2011 to prevent the council from passing a modest U.S.-sponsored resolution that would have condemned the grave and systematic human rights abuses by the regime in Syria. As the Syrian conflict deepened, the United States and Russia continued to clash over it in the United Nations. In February 2012, Russia vetoed a new, more strongly worded draft Security Council resolution again condemning the gross violations of human rights and calling for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down. Russia’s refusal to agree to any international action against the Syrian regime produced mounting criticism from the Obama administration, with Secretary Clinton reacting strongly to the Russian intransigence. Clinton was sharply critical of Russia in public statements after the February 2012 Russian veto. She denounced the diplomatic shield Russia held for the Syrian regime, arguing that it was “distressing” to see the Russians behaving so callously. “It is just despicable,” she said.<sup>407</sup> These unusually strong statements were her most stinging denunciation of Russia as secretary of state. They provided a demonstration of the stark difference in guiding values that divided the United States and Russia and rendered Russia’s foreign policy philosophy incompatible with that of the United States.

The Obama administration remained sharply critical of Russia’s role in Syria in its public statements. The agreement between the United States and Russia to eliminate Syria’s arsenal of chemical weapons, reached in September 2013 after a strange and confusing course of political and diplomatic events, did not mean that the U.S.-Russian tensions over the Syrian conflict diminished. It was clear that the two sides viewed the situation in Syria and the political prerequisites of peaceful conflict resolution there very differently. Their fundamental differences regarding the Assad regime in particular persisted as they both became more directly involved in the conflict.

## **Attacks on the Reset**

Despite the public hardening of the Obama administration’s approach to Russia, the policy of resetting U.S.-Russian relations in order to achieve cooperation on specific issues and thereby advance U.S. interests was the subject of strong and sustained criticism from congressional

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<sup>406</sup> Clinton, *Hard Choices*, p. 459.

<sup>407</sup> “Press Availability on the Meeting of the Friends of the Syrian People: Remarks, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State,” February 24, 2012, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/02/184635.htm>.

Republicans.<sup>408</sup> Their leading critic was Senator McCain, whose strongly negative view of Russia had become the consensus Republican position. As always, McCain called for a greater sense of realism about the fundamental divergence between U.S. and Russian strategic interests. “Realism about Russia,” he said in December 2010, “demands a recognition that Russia’s interests, as defined by its present government, differ from ours in some rather considerable ways.” McCain did not claim that the reset policy had been completely vain, but he thought it had borne only modest results, and he suspected correctly that it was reaching its practical limits. Questioning the premise of the policy that the United States and Russia shared many interests, he warned that the U.S. government was setting itself up for “another disappointment” in its relationship with the Russians.<sup>409</sup> Another influential Republican critic of the reset policy was Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee since January 2011. Her committee in July 2011 held a hearing on whether it was time to pause the reset. In her opening statement, she contended that the reset’s concrete results were “meager at best” and that the United States had “paid a high price for them.”<sup>410</sup> With the 2012 U.S. elections approaching, Ros-Lehtinen intensified her opposition to the administration’s reset policy. At another hearing on Russian political issues in March 2012, she argued that relations with Russia were reset almost exclusively at America’s expense and urged the Obama administration to “stop giving Moscow one concession after another and getting virtually nothing in return.”<sup>411</sup> For an objective analyst, it was difficult to take Ros-Lehtinen’s attacks seriously. Of course, the view that the substantial benefits for U.S. security of the reset in U.S.-Russian relations were few had some merit, but the notion that they had been bought for a series of major unilateral U.S. concessions was wildly overblown. In fact, the reset had meant very limited diplomatic sacrifices for the United States.

The anti-Russian Republicans in Congress were largely in sync with most of the contenders for the Republican presidential nomination in 2012. Almost all Republican presidential candidates had a negative view of Russia and criticized the Democratic administration as being too accommodating to the Russians. The Republican frontrunner,

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<sup>408</sup> Ruth Deyermond, “The Republican Challenge to Obama’s Russia Policy,” *Survival*, vol. 54, no. 5 (October-November 2012), pp. 67-92.

<sup>409</sup> “Remarks by Senator McCain at the Johns Hopkins’ Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies,” December 10, 2010, available at <http://mccain.senate.gov>.

<sup>410</sup> *Time to Pause the Reset? Defending U.S. Interests in the Face of Russian Aggression: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 112th Congress, 1st Session*, Serial No. 112-47 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011), pp. 2-3.

<sup>411</sup> *Russia 2012: Increased Repression, Rampant Corruption, Assisting Rogue Regimes: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 112th Congress, 2nd Session*, Serial No. 112-141 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2012), p. 3.

Governor Mitt Romney, took a particularly hard line against Russia, regarding it as a potential major threat to the United States. In his foreign policy speech, he included a resurgent Russia on a list of “determined, powerful forces” that vie with America and may threaten its national interests.<sup>412</sup> His campaign’s white paper on foreign policy stated that “Russia is a destabilizing force on the world stage.”<sup>413</sup> The reset, in Romney’s assessment, was a failure and itself needed to be reset. He concluded that Obama’s attempt to forge a cooperative relationship with Russia had not worked out at all. “President Obama’s reset policy toward Russia has clearly failed,” he frankly contended in a written statement.<sup>414</sup> Accordingly, Romney promised to repeal the Obama approach if elected president. The white paper issued by his campaign organization declared that Romney, upon taking office, would “reset the reset” and pursue a policy seeking to “discourage aggressive or expansionist behavior” by Russia.<sup>415</sup> Romney accepted the Republican party’s nomination for president vowing to toughen U.S. Russia policy. In his acceptance speech at the Republican national convention, he said that Putin under his administration would see “more backbone.”<sup>416</sup> However, his most memorable statement on Russia came earlier in the presidential election campaign.

In an interview for Cable News Network (CNN) in March 2012, Romney at first observed that “Russia is not a friendly character” in its dealings with the United States. Then he made a stunning remark. “Russia,” he said, “is without question our number one geopolitical foe...”<sup>417</sup> Interviewed again by CNN in July, Romney clarified his assertion by stressing that Russia was America’s “number one adversary” in terms of geopolitics but not an existential enemy out to destroy America.<sup>418</sup> He had yet another opportunity to explain what he

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<sup>412</sup> “Mitt Romney Delivers Remarks on U.S. Foreign Policy,” October 7, 2011, available at <http://www.mittromney.com/news/press/2011/10/mitt-romney-delivers-remarks-us-foreign-policy>; Mitt Romney, “Remarks on U.S. Foreign Policy at The Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina,” October 7, 2011, available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=97897>.

<sup>413</sup> *An American Century: A Strategy to Secure America’s Enduring Interests and Ideals* (Boston, Massachusetts: Romney for President, October 7, 2011), p. 34.

<sup>414</sup> “Mitt Romney: ‘President Obama’s Reset Policy Toward Russia Has Clearly Failed,’” June 13, 2012, available at <http://www.mittromney.com/news/press/2012/06/mitt-romney-president-obamas-reset-policy-toward-russia-has-clearly-failed-0>; “Statement by Mitt Romney on President Obama’s Russia Policy,” June 13, 2012, available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=101181>.

<sup>415</sup> *An American Century*, p. 35.

<sup>416</sup> “Mitt Romney Delivers Remarks to the Republican National Convention,” August 30, 2012, available at <http://www.mittromney.com/news/press/2012/08/mitt-romney-delivers-remarks-republican-national-convention>; Mitt Romney, “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Tampa, Florida,” August 30, 2012, available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=101966>.

<sup>417</sup> “The Situation Room: ... Interview With Mitt Romney...,” Cable News Network, March 26, 2012, available at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1203/26/sitroom.01.html>.

<sup>418</sup> “The Situation Room: Interview With Mitt Romney...,” Cable News Network, July 30, 2012, available at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1207/30/sitroom.03.html>.



meant during a radio interview in September. He told the interviewer that “Russia is a geopolitical adversary, meaning that almost everything we try and do globally, they try and oppose.”<sup>419</sup> Thus, Romney believed that Russia was America’s foremost geopolitical opponent in the sense of being a state often obstructing U.S. efforts on a range of foreign policy issues and taking intransigent positions against U.S. initiatives in world affairs. Despite the later clarifications, Romney’s original phrase stirred considerable debate. It was portrayed as overheated and provocative.<sup>420</sup> Oblivious of his own tough talk on Russia during the previous presidential election campaign, Biden charged that Romney’s characterization of Russia as America’s top geopolitical foe revealed an anachronistic nostalgia for the Cold War. “Governor Romney is mired in a Cold War mindset,” the vice president proclaimed.<sup>421</sup> Obama agreed that his Republican challenger was “stuck in a Cold War mind warp.”<sup>422</sup> But Romney did not soften his campaign rhetoric. During the foreign policy debate with the president in October 2012, he reiterated his belief that Russia was a geopolitical foe, adding for the sake of clarity that Iran was the greatest security threat facing the United States.<sup>423</sup>

There were those who expressed support for Romney’s assessment of Russia. For many conservative Republicans, his analysis was spot-on. At least some independent experts defended the candidate’s controversial March statement. Professor John Arquilla, for example, acknowledged that Romney was on to something really important when he termed Russia America’s primary geopolitical foe. According to Arquilla, Romney was “right about Russia,” for in geopolitical terms “it is quite clear that Russia is the major counterweight to American power and influence.”<sup>424</sup>

Ironically, the Republican challenge to Obama’s Russia policy culminated after the exhaustion of the reset. The U.S. presidential election campaign coincided with a pronounced

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<sup>419</sup> “Mitt Romney,” The Hugh Hewitt Show, September 11, 2012, available at <http://www.hughhewitt.com/transcripts.aspx?id=e0571fe2-4c3c-4e66-9ec9-9b7e2287e575>.

<sup>420</sup> Peter Baker, “Precise Foreign Policy Intentions Can Be Tough to Gauge,” *The New York Times*, August 29, 2012, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/30/us/politics/romneys-foreign-policy-intentions-hard-to-gauge>; Mark Simeone, “U.S.-Russian Relations and the 2012 U.S. Presidential Elections: ‘Reset’ or ‘Overcharge,’” *rep’s blog*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, October 26, 2012, available at <http://csis.org/blog/us-russia-relations-and-2012-us-presidential-elections-reset-or-overcharge>.

<sup>421</sup> “Remarks by Vice President Joe Biden on Foreign Policy at a Campaign Event,” April 26, 2012, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/04/26/remarks-vice-president-joe-biden-foreign-policy-campaign-event>.

<sup>422</sup> “Remarks by the President at the Democratic National Convention,” September 6, 2012, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/09/07/remarks-president-democratic-national-convention>.

<sup>423</sup> “Remarks by the President and Governor Romney in the Third Presidential Debate,” October 23, 2012, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/10/23/remarks-president-and-governor-romney-third-presidential-debate>.

<sup>424</sup> John Arquilla, “Yes, Russia Is Our Top Geopolitical Foe,” *Foreign Policy*, September 17, 2012, available at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/09/17/yes\\_russia\\_is\\_our\\_top\\_geopolitical\\_foe](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/09/17/yes_russia_is_our_top_geopolitical_foe).

downturn in U.S.-Russian relations. By the time of the first primaries of the two main U.S. political parties, the relations had already reached a plateau and then began to fray again. The paradox was that it was Obama who actually took a more assertive, even confrontational, approach to Russia as the relationship became increasingly strained. On the other hand, Putin's reelection to a third term as Russia's president and the accompanying escalation of anti-Americanism in Russian foreign policy making reinforced Republican criticism of the reset, providing new arguments that the Democratic administration's Russia policy was misguided and needed a serious reassessment.

## **Back to the Future**

In 2011, hostility towards the United States and advocacy of a multipolar world order virtually disappeared from Russian policy statements. Senior Russian officials did not even mention multipolarity. By the end of the year, however, Russia's declaratory policy began to shift. After the September announcement that Putin would run for a third presidential term, official rhetoric emanating from Russian officials became increasingly anti-American, and a renewed emphasis on multipolarity took place. It began in October, when Putin dramatically announced a new regional integration project to form a Eurasia Union within the boundaries of the former Soviet Union. The proposal was an ambitious strategic initiative aimed at establishing an institutionalized Russian sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space and reasserting Russian political control over the region's material resources. Putin indicated that he regarded political and economic integration of former Soviet republics as a force multiplier for Russia in world politics. The big idea behind the proposed Eurasian Union was that several post-Soviet states should pool their resources under Russian leadership in pursuit of global power. Such pooling of resources would enable the grouping to balance against the United States and thus promote multipolarity. Putin openly declared that his long-term vision was the creation of a mighty power centre in a multipolar international system. "We suggest the model of a powerful supranational association capable of becoming one of the poles of the modern world," he wrote in a lengthy newspaper article about his integration plans.<sup>425</sup> After his return to the presidency, Putin reaffirmed his goal of reintegrating the post-Soviet space around Russia. In a speech at the Foreign Ministry in July 2012, he said that deepening the integration processes in

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<sup>425</sup> "V gazete 'Izvestiya' opublikovana stat'ya Predsedatelya Pravitel'stva Rossii V.V. Putina, posvyashchennaya voprosam integratsii i vzaimovыygodnogo sotrudnichestva na postsovetskom prostranstve" [In the newspaper "Izvestiya" an article by Chairman of the Government of Russia V.V. Putin was published, devoted to the questions of integration and mutually advantageous cooperation in the post-Soviet space], 4 October 2011, available at <http://archive.premier.gov.ru/events/news/16622>.



Eurasia was the core of Russia's foreign policy.<sup>426</sup> While denying that Russia intended to reconstitute some kind of empire, Putin emphasized that it wanted to enhance its competitiveness through economic integration within a Eurasian Union.<sup>427</sup>

Anti-Americanism was a central theme of Putin's reelection campaign. His strident rhetoric during the campaign appeared largely a throwback to the confrontational Munich spirit of 2007. The overriding leitmotif of his statements was intense hostility towards the United States, which he portrayed as a sinister force in world affairs. In a newspaper article, very much in the vein of his resentful Munich rant, Putin accused the United States of disregarding international law, especially in the sphere of international security. "We observe how the basic principles of international law have been devalued and impaired," he wrote.<sup>428</sup> Speaking to military commanders, he claimed that one could "very often" see the erosion of international law. Putin's remarks before the officers resonated with his 2007 critical indictment of U.S. unipolar policies. He condemned the Americans for thinking that their country is "an exclusive centre of power that can dictate everything to everyone." At the meeting with the officers, Putin also resumed his rhetorical push for multipolarity, repeating the notion of it as inevitable. He told them that "the world cannot be unipolar, it can only be multipolar."<sup>429</sup> In another newspaper article published during the election campaign, Putin further developed his antagonism towards the United States. He attacked the "regular attempts by the USA to engage in 'political engineering', including in regions traditionally important to us..." As part of his assessment of the international situation, he noted that the brief cooperative period in U.S.-Russian relations had not transformed the relationship in a fundamental way. The United States and Russia had "so far not managed to settle the question of a fundamental change of the matrix of these relations."<sup>430</sup> Putin's hostile campaign rhetoric

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<sup>426</sup> "Soveshchanie poslov i postoyannykh predstaviteley Rossii" [Conference of ambassadors and permanent representatives of Russia], 9 July 2012, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/15902>.

<sup>427</sup> "Interv'yu Vladimira Putina radio 'Evropa-1' i Telekanalu TF1" [Interview of Vladimir Putin for radio "Europe 1" and the television channel TF1], 4 June 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/45832>.

<sup>428</sup> "Stat'ya Predsedatelya Pravitel'stva Rossii V.V. Putina v 'Rossiyskoy gazete'" [Article by Chairman of the Government of Russia V.V. Putin in "Rossiyskaya gazeta"], 20 February 2012, available at <http://archive.premier.gov.ru/events/news/18185>.

<sup>429</sup> "V khode poseshcheniya Tamanskoy brigady V.V. Putin provel vstrechu s komandirami soedineniy Vooruzhennykh sil Rossiyskoy Federatsii" [During a visit to the Taman' brigade V.V. Putin met with commanders of units of the Armed forces of the Russian Federation], 22 February 2012, available at <http://archive.premier.gov.ru/events/news/18228>.

<sup>430</sup> "Stat'ya Predsedatelya Pravitel'stva Rossii V.V. Putina v gazete 'Moskovskie novosti'" [Article by Chairman of the Government of Russia V.V. Putin in the newspaper "Moskovskie novosti"], 27 February 2012, available at <http://archive.premier.gov.ru/events/news/18252>.

did not pass unnoticed in Washington. It received Secretary Clinton's substantial attention. In June 2012, she sent a memorandum to Obama, observing that Putin was "deeply resentful of the U.S." and arguing that the Obama administration would have to be ready to take a harder line towards Russia.<sup>431</sup>

In light of the remaining chasm between the United States and Russia and the recent failure to solve specific bilateral problems, Putin and Lavrov signaled that Russia was retreating from the framework of cooperation with the United States. They sent a chilling message that Russia was instead ready for returning to open conflict. In an interview, Putin was asked if the reset in U.S.-Russian relations had been vindicated. Putin asked in return: "Has it yielded anything or not?" He responded caustically: "With respect to such contentious issues as missile defence, it has yielded practically nothing."<sup>432</sup> Putin's negative assessment was based on reports by Russian diplomats and defence officials that the negotiations on missile defence had reached an impasse. While speaking about the reset in general, Lavrov stated coldly that "it cannot last forever."<sup>433</sup>

By the time Putin was reelected, it was pretty clear that he had brought a much tougher tone to Russia's relations with the United States. After his third presidential term began in May 2012, the official Russian anti-Americanism continued to increase. It was demonstrated by Putin's reluctance to visit the United States and meet Obama there. Putin declined to attend either the NATO summit in Chicago or the G-8 meeting in Camp David, both held in late May. When Obama and Putin did meet at the G-20 summit in Los Cabos, Mexico, in June 2012, their personal relationship seemed tense and chilly. The public outcome of their difficult meeting was a joint statement containing a perfunctory discussion of cooperation but presenting no new departures on sensitive international issues such as nuclear non-proliferation, the situation in Afghanistan, the Syrian civil war, or terrorism.<sup>434</sup>

To the Russians, Obama was first considered a welcome change from Bush, but Putin did not hesitate to castigate the Obama administration. He even accused it of employing

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<sup>431</sup> Clinton, *Hard Choices*, p. 236.

<sup>432</sup> "Predsedatel' Pravitel'stva Rossii V.V. Putin vstretil'sya s glavnymi redaktorami vedushchikh inostrannykh izdaniy" [Chairman of the Government of Russia V.V. Putin met with editors-in-chief of leading foreign editions], 2 March 2012, available at <http://archive.premier.gov.ru/events/news/18323>.

<sup>433</sup> "Interv'yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova gazete 'Kommersant', opublikovannoe 3 oktyabrya 2012 goda" [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the newspaper "Kommersant", published on 3 October 2012], 1856-03-10-2012, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2012](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2012).

<sup>434</sup> "Joint Statement by the President of the United States of America Barack Obama and the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin," June 18, 2012, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/06/18/jointstatement-president-united-states-america-barack-obama-and-preside>.

unilateralism and imperialism in its foreign policy. From Putin's perspective, it was a vexing problem that the United States under Obama attempted to maintain its global influence, in the course of which it, in Putin's view, "often" resorted to unilateral actions in contravention of international law.<sup>435</sup> He further argued that "the current leadership of the United States," as he put it, "very much" wanted to decide the world's basic problems on its own and "cannot act through anything but imperial methods."<sup>436</sup>

Lavrov's statements on the United States and Russia in global affairs were less strident but not less assertive and anti-American. He talked about waning U.S. dominance and growing multipolarity in the world, highlighting Russia's unique balancing role in the ongoing transformation of the international system. At the Munich security conference in February 2012, he called attention to the "radical character" of the global transformation. "The process of redistribution on a global scale of power and influence, the strengthening of new poles of the emerging polycentric international system, has advanced with great strides," he contended. "Against this background, there is a relative decrease in the influence and capabilities of the countries generally associated with the historic West, a weakening of their role as the 'engine' of global development."<sup>437</sup> In the Russian Duma, Lavrov stated: "We are witnessing a sharp turn in history that can lead to radical changes of the geopolitical landscape. Before our eyes and, I emphasize, with our active participation, a new polycentric system of international relations is emerging in which Russia must consolidate its position as one of the leading states of the world."<sup>438</sup> Russia's position and role in the emerging multipolar international system was described more fully in a later speech by Lavrov. He said: "We consider ourselves, and in fact are, one of the centres of the new polycentric world. Such a status of Russia is founded on its military, geographic, economic capabilities, its cultural and human potential." The various power resources mentioned in Lavrov's speech underpins the idea of Russia acting as a global balancer. "This makes it possible for Russia to play a balancing, stabilizing role," Lavrov

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<sup>435</sup> "Soveshchanie poslov i postoyannykh predstaviteley Rossii" [Conference of ambassadors and permanent representatives of Russia], 9 July 2012, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/15902>.

<sup>436</sup> "Poseshchenie telekanala Russia Today" [Visit to the television channel Russia Today], 11 June 2013, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/18319>.

<sup>437</sup> "Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na 48-y myunkhenskoy konferentsii po voprosam bezopasnosti" [Remarks by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov at the 48th Munich conference on security issues], 205-04-02-2012, 4 February 2012, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2012](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2012).

<sup>438</sup> "Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v Gosudarstvennoy Dume Federal'nogo Sobraniya Rossiyskoy Federatsii v ramkakh 'Pravitel'stvennogo chasa'" [Remarks by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov in the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation within the framework of "Government hour"], 511-14-03-2012, 14 March 2012, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2012](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2012).

declared.<sup>439</sup> Although Russian leaders deny that the existing international system is unipolar, they curiously enough acknowledge that there is no equilibrium in the system. They accept the notion that the system is unbalanced. Russia, however, aspires to restore the balance. As Lavrov pointed out in an article: “The focus of our efforts is ensuring the unconditional upholding of the sovereignty and independent role of Russia as an important factor of global equilibrium, geopolitical stability and restored balance in world politics, one of the influential centres of the modern world.”<sup>440</sup>

For Putin, making Russia a great power and an influential centre in a multipolar world remained the basic, all-important strategic goal of Russian foreign policy. On the day of taking office in the Kremlin again, he signed a presidential decree on “measures for the implementation of the foreign policy course of the Russian Federation.” The preamble of the document noted that the instructions given by the president aimed to consistently realize a foreign policy course of Russia that would “ensure its national interests ... under the conditions of forming a new, polycentric system of international relations...”<sup>441</sup> Like Lavrov, Putin believed that the formation of a multipolar international system was an obvious phenomenon that no longer had to be proved. Addressing the Federal Assembly in December 2012, Putin said: “It is absolutely obvious to everyone that precisely the multipolarity of the world has become stronger.”<sup>442</sup> Not very remarkable in itself, this statement acquired special significance from its context. Putin had never before used the language of multipolarity in his addresses to the Federal Assembly, arguably the most widely read but not necessarily the most important speeches made by the Russian president. While believing in the inexorable development of multipolarity, Putin thought Russia should actively promote this supposedly objective historical process. “We must contribute to the strengthening of multipolarity in the

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<sup>439</sup> “Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na yubileynoy mezhdunarodnoy konferentsii ‘Rossiya v mire sily XXI veka,’ priurochennoy k 20-letiyu Soveta po vneshney i oboronnoy politike i 10-letiyu zhurnala ‘Rossiya v global’noy politike” [Remarks by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov at the jubilee international conference “Russia in the world of force of the XXI century,” coinciding with the 20th anniversary of the Council on foreign and defence policy and the 10th anniversary of the journal “Russia in global affairs”], 2256-01-12-2012, 1 December 2012, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2012](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2012).

<sup>440</sup> “Stat’ya Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova dlya ‘Diplomaticheskogo ezhegodnika 2012’ ‘Mir v epokhu peremen: priorityety vneshnepoliticheskoy deyatel’nosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii’” [Article by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for “Diplomatic yearbook 2012” “The world in an epoch of changes: priorities of the foreign policy activity of the Russian Federation”], 159-30-01-2013, 30 January 2013, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2013](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2013).

<sup>441</sup> “Podpisan Ukaz o merakh po realizatsii vneshnepoliticheskogo kursa” [Decree on measures for the implementation of the foreign policy course signed], 7 May 2012, available at <http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/15256>.

<sup>442</sup> “Poslanie Prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniyu” [Address by the President to the Federal Assembly], 12 December 2012, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/17118>.

world,” he told top Defence Ministry officials at a meeting of the ministry’s extended collegium. He demanded action to help develop a multipolar world through greater integration in Eurasia, including moving towards establishing a Eurasian Union and strengthening the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a Russian-dominated regional military-political alliance structure established in 2003 by Russia and five other post-Soviet states (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) on the basis of the 1992 Collective Security Treaty at least in part for the purpose of counterbalancing NATO.<sup>443</sup>

In accordance with an instruction in Putin’s May 2012 decree, the Russian Foreign Ministry prepared a new version of Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept. Putin approved the document on February 12, 2013 before presenting it at a meeting with members of the Russian Security Council prior to publication. Not surprisingly, there was a strong continuity between the new Foreign Policy Concept and the version that Putin approved in 2000. Like the 2000 version, the 2013 concept presented Russia as a champion of multipolarity. Arguing that the international system is shifting to a “polycentric” configuration as the result of a diffusion of world power, it also stated that Russia promotes the formation of a “positive, more balanced” international environment.<sup>444</sup> Lavrov punctuated this commitment in an article on Russia’s foreign policy philosophy. “Russia, according to its tradition, continues to play the role of a balancing factor in international affairs,” he wrote.<sup>445</sup> Russian leaders usually do not say explicitly against whom Russia is attempting to balance. No particular state was mentioned in the Foreign Policy Concept or in Lavrov’s follow-up article. Yet, there is no doubt that the United States is the principal target of Russian competitive counterbalancing.

There were other, more practical dimensions to Putin’s deep anti-Americanism. One disturbing facet of actual policy was the crude harassment of the new ambassador of the United States to Russia. When, in May 2011, Obama decided to send McFaul, his top White House adviser on Russia, to Moscow as U.S. ambassador, he apparently did it to keep the reset alive. However, the appointment of McFaul (he was nominated in September 2011, assumed

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<sup>443</sup> “Rasshirenoe zasedanie kollegii Ministerstva oborony” [Expanded meeting of the Ministry of defence collegium], 27 February 2013, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/17588>.

<sup>444</sup> “Kontseptsiya vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii (utverzhdena Prezidentom Rossiyskoy Federatsii V.V. Putiny 12 fevralya 2013 g.)” [Foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation (approved by President of the Russian Federation V.V. Putin on 12 February 2013)], 303-18-02-2013, published 18 February 2013, available at [http://www.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/122186](http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/122186).

<sup>445</sup> “Stat’ya Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova ‘Vneshnepoliticheskaya filosofiya Rossii,’ opublikovannaya v zhurnale ‘Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn’ (no. 3, 2013)” [Article by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov “Russia’s foreign policy philosophy,” published in the journal “Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn” (no. 3, 2013)], 592-28-03-2013, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2013](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2013).

the post in January 2012, and left it in February 2014) actually increased hostility in U.S.-Russian relations. He became the subject of a highly unusual systematic campaign of public harassment unleashed virtually upon his arrival in Moscow. The campaign included demonstrations outside the American embassy and relentless personal attacks by the Russian Foreign Ministry and hostile state-controlled news media. It did not matter much to the Russian government that McFaul had helped engineer the reset. He was known in Moscow as an outspoken critic of Russian policies prior to joining the Obama administration. The Putin regime remembered what he had written about it and paid back in primitive ways. Another practical element of Putin's anti-American policy was the expulsion of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the foreign aid arm of the U.S. Department of State, from Russia in September 2012. Russia's Foreign Ministry expelled the USAID office after two decades and billions of U.S. dollars spent on supporting civil society, judicial reform, and human rights in Russia as well as providing medical assistance to the Russian people. In October 2012, Russia also announced its withdrawal from the 20-year-old Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, under which the United States had spent billions of dollars to help Russia secure and dismantle old weapons of mass destruction.<sup>446</sup> Clearly, Putin's return to the presidency had a negative impact on U.S.-Russian relations. The series of deliberate provocations and snubs was an indication of even harder times to come. Storm clouds were gathering over the bilateral relationship. Hillary Clinton, in her memoirs, remembers the more frosty atmosphere: "A cool wind was blowing from the east."<sup>447</sup>

## **Waving Goodbye to the Reset**

By the time of the 2012 U.S. elections, the U.S.-Russian reset was definitely over. Symptomatically, Secretary Clinton had begun to talk about "complex relations" with Russia, as senior U.S. officials did when the relationship deteriorated during the Bush presidency. Clinton was highly sceptical about the outlook for renewed U.S.-Russian security cooperation. She had basically written off Russia as a potential partner in constructive diplomatic interaction for the foreseeable future. What she saw ahead was the United States and Russia drifting apart. After Obama's reelection, she publicly acknowledged that sharp disagreements had developed in the relationship. "We have made some progress with Moscow," she said. "And we continue to seek new issues where we can cooperate together. But the reality is we have serious and

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<sup>446</sup> Stent, *The Limits of Partnership*, pp. 246, 253.

<sup>447</sup> Clinton, *Hard Choices*, p. 236.

continuing differences with Russia – on Syria, missile defense, NATO enlargement, human rights, and other issues.”<sup>448</sup> To the extent that Clinton remained preoccupied with Russia, she viewed it mostly as a potential strategic problem. In strategic terms, the broader question that really captured her attention was Putin’s Eurasian Union project. She viewed the project as a Soviet-style plan to increase Russian global power by dominating former Soviet republics. Putin’s striving for regional integration in Eurasia, in her view, expressed his intention to “re-Sovietize” Russia’s periphery. In her June 2012 memo to the president, Clinton warned that Putin was intent on reclaiming Russia’s influence in its neighbourhood and that the ultimate goal of his regional integration project was to rebuild the lost Soviet empire.<sup>449</sup> Speaking to a group of human rights activists at an event on the sidelines of the meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council in Dublin on December 6, 2012, Clinton made these concerns public. She signalled that the Obama administration was aware of Russia’s strategic move to establish hegemony in the post-Soviet space via greater regional integration under the label of a Eurasian Union and also understood that the move was really an effort to reassert Soviet-era control over the region. “There is a move to re-Sovietize the region,” she said. Her remarks also revealed that the administration had begun working to counter what it perceived as Putin’s imperial project: “We know what the goal is and we are trying to figure out effective ways to slow down or prevent it.”<sup>450</sup>

Clinton’s curtain-raising comments, obviously reflecting discussions within the Obama administration, indicated that the United States has no tolerance for Russia’s integrationist plans. U.S. officials rarely describe the policy of the United States towards the former Soviet Union so candidly in public, but what Clinton said in December 2012 about preventing the proposed Eurasian Union was just another statement of traditional primacist U.S. grand strategy. It was a logical extension of the unchanging U.S. strategic objective of denying Russia a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. America’s primary concern in regard to preventing the rise of a global competitor in this part of the world has not changed.

In January 2013, Clinton wrote Obama a final memo on what to do about Russia. As summarized in her memoirs, the document warned about the long-term danger that Putin’s

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<sup>448</sup> “Remarks at the Foreign Policy Group’s ‘Transformational Trends 2013’ Forum: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State,” November 29, 2012, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/11/201235.htm>.

<sup>449</sup> Clinton, *Hard Choices*, pp. 227, 236, 239, 245.

<sup>450</sup> For some reason, no transcript of Secretary Clinton’s remarks while talking to the human rights activists in Dublin was published by the U.S. Department of State. The quotes, as reported by the Associated Press, are from Bradley Klapper, “Clinton fears efforts to ‘re-Sovietize’ in Europe,” *The Big Story*, The Associated Press, New York, December 6, 2012, available at <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/clinton-fears-efforts-re-sovietize-europe>.



revisionist strategic intentions posed to the U.S.-dominated world order and ascertained that Putin “viewed the United States primarily as a competitor.” It advised the president in “stark terms” that U.S.-Russian relations probably would become worse. With this “harsh analysis” in mind, Clinton in the memo suggested the administration “set a new course” and call off the pursuit of new openings for bilateral cooperation.<sup>451</sup> Senator John F. Kerry, a champion of Obama’s reset policy nominated to be Clinton’s successor as secretary of state, was unlikely to express himself in such terms, but he agreed with her public acknowledgement that the United States had real and continuing differences with Russia. During his confirmation hearing, he admitted that the relationship with Russia had “slid backward” in 2011-2012.<sup>452</sup> His immediate ambition was to keep it from sliding much further. In a written response to a question submitted by a senator, he intimated that he believed the post-reset difficulties were temporary and could be overcome: “At this moment, the United States is clearly going through a more difficult phase in our relations with Moscow.”<sup>453</sup>

Before leaving the State Department, Clinton quietly planned to implement the course correction she urged the president to adopt. The new approach to Russia devised by her involved a U.S. diplomatic pullback in reaction to Russian behaviour seen in Washington as anti-American. It envisaged a period of disengagement during which the relationship with Russia would be far less of a priority.<sup>454</sup> Obama, however, saw things differently and had his own plans. He was reluctant to give up on U.S.-Russian cooperation even if some of those around him after more than a year of deteriorating relations no longer saw the opportunity for another reset with Russia under Putin. Against Clinton’s advice, he had already, in June 2012, decided to visit Moscow again in September 2013, and he was still determined to do that.

Obama would not be dissuaded by the downward trajectory of the U.S.-Russian relationship. Attempting to get the relationship back on track in his second term, he returned to the question of nuclear arms reductions. He thought the New START Treaty should be only one step in a more comprehensive denuclearization process. Accordingly, he declared in his February 2013 State of the Union address that the United States would seek to negotiate with

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<sup>451</sup> Clinton, *Hard Choices*, p. 244.

<sup>452</sup> *Nomination of John F. Kerry to be Secretary of State: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 113th Congress, 1st Session*, S. Hrg. 113-163 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2014), p. 26.

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>454</sup> David M. Herszenhorn and Andrew E. Kramer, “Another Reset With Russia in Obama’s Second Term,” *The New York Times*, February 1, 2013, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/02/world/europe/another-reset-of-relations-with-russia-in-obamas-second-term.html>.

Russia to bring about further reductions in U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear weapons.<sup>455</sup> In April 2013, he sent his national security adviser Thomas Donilon to Moscow with a set of suggestions for reengagement on a range of specific issues. Donilon gave Putin a letter from Obama outlining possible areas of new cooperation, including deeper nuclear arms cuts.<sup>456</sup> When Obama and Putin met again in June at a G-8 summit in Lough Erne, Northern Ireland, Obama hoped for some real understanding, but Putin was unresponsive to his outreach. Putin ignored Obama's substantive proposal to restart negotiations for nuclear disarmament and did not respond to most of the other suggestions.<sup>457</sup> The joint statement on the meeting merely confirmed the establishment of an agenda for the planned Moscow summit and pronounced a general readiness to cooperate.<sup>458</sup> Determined to proceed nonetheless, Obama informed Putin that he planned to reannounce his nuclear disarmament initiative in a speech in Berlin later in the month. Obama went ahead with the speech, publicly proposing negotiated reductions in U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear weapons below the New START levels.<sup>459</sup> Again the Russians showed no interest. They were entirely satisfied with the New START Treaty and lacked strong incentives to engage the United States to negotiate another bilateral disarmament deal on strategic nuclear weapons. But there had to be an official Russian reaction to Obama's public plea for negotiations. Russia did not expressly reject his proposal, but its response was extremely evasive. Russian Foreign Ministry officials stipulated a number of preconditions to resumed talks: other nuclear powers should agree to cut their nuclear forces, the New START Treaty should be fully implemented, and the United States should agree to limit its missile defence system. These demands were sufficient to make new U.S.-Russian arms control negotiations an unrealistic prospect in the short term.

By all accounts, the negative Russian response to Obama's nuclear disarmament initiative came as a tremendous disappointment to him. It would be wrong to call it an eye-opener, for Obama was not naive about the Russians, but it changed his posture towards Russia. To Obama, it was the last straw betraying the Russian retreat from bilateral cooperation. He had finally had enough and was now ready to adopt the harder line advocated by Hillary Clinton.

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<sup>455</sup> "Remarks by the President in the State of the Union Address," February 12, 2013, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/02/12/remarks-president-state-union-address>.

<sup>456</sup> Baker, "U.S.-Russian Ties Still Fall Short of 'Reset' Goal"; Stent, *The Limits of Partnership*, pp. 250, 291.

<sup>457</sup> Baker, "U.S.-Russian Ties Still Fall Short of 'Reset' Goal."

<sup>458</sup> "Joint Statement by the Presidents of the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Enhanced Bilateral Engagement," June 17, 2013, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/17/joint-statement-presidents-united-states-america-and-russian-federation-1>.

<sup>459</sup> "Remarks by President Obama at the Brandenburger Gate – Berlin, Germany," June 19, 2013, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/19/remarks-president-obama-brandenburger-gate-berlin-germany>.

Following a careful policy review by his administration begun in July 2013, he cancelled the visit to Moscow for a summit meeting with Putin scheduled for early September. In early August, the White House announced that the president had decided to “postpone” the summit because of inadequate movement forward in the summit agenda. The summit was to deal with four main issues: arms control, missile defence, Syria, and trade. The White House referred to “lack of progress” on these issues. It stated that “there is not enough recent progress in our bilateral agenda with Russia to hold a U.S.-Russia summit in early September.”<sup>460</sup> According to administration research, it was the first time a Russian-American summit had been cancelled in more than 50 years. The previous summit cancellation happened in 1960, when Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev refused to meet with U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower in Paris.<sup>461</sup>

After the dramatic White House announcement, Obama further explained his radical decision to cancel the summit. At a press conference, he noted that Russia had not moved on a whole range of issues. Given the mounting deadlock in U.S.-Russian relations, he had reached the conclusion that it was appropriate for the United States to “take a pause” and recalibrate its Russia policy.<sup>462</sup> Later, during a visit to Sweden, he conceded that the relationship with Russia was in trouble. Observing that “we have some very profound differences,” he said “we’ve kind of hit a wall in terms of additional progress.”<sup>463</sup> Thus, Obama’s last attempt to launch a new reset policy came to a sudden and wrenching stop. His aides indicated that the basis for another reset was absent and that the administration consequently had misjudged the extent to which Putin’s Russia wanted to cooperate with the United States. “We probably overestimated the shared-interest angle,” one official confessed.<sup>464</sup> At Hillary Clinton’s recommendation, the Obama administration distanced itself from the Putin regime. It made a point of not giving Putin high-level attention. Obama briefly met with Putin at the September 2013 G-20 summit in St. Petersburg, but neither Obama nor any other senior member of the administration attended the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympic Winter Games in Sochi, Russia, in February 2014. The administration’s new “shrug and snub” approach of pulling back from Putin’s Russia was certainly in evidence in the public remarks of U.S. officials. In a major

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<sup>460</sup> “Statement by the Press Secretary on the President’s Travel to Russia,” August 7, 2013, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/07/statement-press-secretary-s-travel-russia>; Stent, *The Limits of Partnership*, pp. 268-269.

<sup>461</sup> Baker, “U.S.-Russian Ties Still Fall Short of ‘Reset’ Goal.”

<sup>462</sup> “Remarks by the President in a Press Conference,” August 9, 2013, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/09/remarks-president-press-conference>.

<sup>463</sup> “Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Reinfeldt of Sweden in Joint Press Conference,” September 4, 2013, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/04/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-reinfeldt-sweden-joint-press->.

<sup>464</sup> Baker, “U.S.-Russian Ties Still Fall Short of ‘Reset’ Goal.”

foreign policy speech in January 2014 enumerating the U.S. engagements around the world, Secretary Kerry ignored Russia completely.<sup>465</sup>

The summit breakdown hardly surprised the Russian leaders. They were ready for problems with the United States. A confluence of circumstances had acted as a reality check on the Russian leadership. These circumstances conspired to encourage the formation of a more realistic image of the United States and its status as by far the most powerful country in the world. At the personal level, the Russian perspective on the United States changed because of a gradual reassessment of the incumbent president. Russian leaders initially considered Obama to be quite different from Clinton and Bush. When Obama declared his desire to reset U.S.-Russian relations, they took it as a sober understanding of the radical changes under way in the international system and of the need to adapt U.S. policy to the political facts of a declining America and a resurgent Russia. Gradually, however, the Russian leaders began to understand what Obama was really like: an unregenerate primacist. They realized that they had misjudged how much he would change U.S. foreign policy. Despite campaign rhetoric suggesting major change, Obama as president has maintained the central elements of the Clinton and Bush strategic legacy and continued the grand strategy of primacy laid out by his predecessors. The reset policy never amounted to explicit or implicit recognition of Russia's revisionist strategic interests and objectives. It emphatically did not mean that the Obama administration was jettisoning the aspects of U.S. policy that were most objectionable to Russia. Obama did not provide any of the geopolitical essentials demanded by Russia for a fundamental transformation of U.S.-Russian relations. He saw Russia instrumentally, not as an equal, and effectively opposed Russia's efforts to be a great power dominating its periphery. Before Medvedev left office as president, he acknowledged the considerable continuity in Obama's foreign policy with key positions of the Clinton and Bush eras. "President Obama is a typical president of the United States of America," Medvedev noted. "He takes an absolutely pro-American stand, and nothing else."<sup>466</sup> Putin stressed the political-structural constraints that largely defined Obama's strategic latitude in crafting policy towards Russia. "President Obama was not elected by the American people to be pleasant to Russia," Putin reasoned (correctly).<sup>467</sup>

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<sup>465</sup> "Remarks at the World Economic Forum: John Kerry, Secretary of State," January 24, 2014, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/01/220605.htm>.

<sup>466</sup> "Press-konferentsiya po itogam sammita po yadernoy bezopasnosti" [Press conference on the results of the summit on nuclear security], 27 March 2012, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/14859>.

<sup>467</sup> "Interv'yu Pervomu kanalu i agentstvu Assoshieyted press" [Interview for Channel One and the agency Associated Press], 4 September 2013, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/19143>.

At the state level, Russian perceptions of the relative power of the United States and of the U.S. role in the world were profoundly affected by the devastating impact of the global economic crisis on Russia's economy, which contracted by nearly eight percent in 2009, and by the revised, more assertive, U.S. grand strategy pursued by the Obama administration. To be sure, the fundamentals of Russia's worldview remained unchanged. Russian foreign policy retained its hostility towards the United States. It remained decidedly revisionist and overtly anti-American. Russia still refused to acknowledge U.S. global leadership. Moreover, the Russians continued to argue that the United States was becoming weaker. The relative decline of the United States was viewed as inevitable and proceeding. In the Russian view, a multipolar world is emerging. As the Foreign Policy Concept of 2013 stated: "International relations are passing through a transitional period, the essence of which constitutes the formation of a polycentric international system."<sup>468</sup> The hackneyed Russian prediction of a multipolar world came with a number of caveats, however. By 2013, the leading strategists of the Russian government understood that Russia's previous strategic narrative of the rapid decline of the United States and the steady resurgence of Russia was exaggerated. Previously, Russian leaders had been confident of the accelerated pace of the global systemic transformation process, but reality indicated otherwise, as the most recent report of the U.S. Intelligence Council proved. "This process advances with difficulty," the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept lamented.<sup>469</sup> The steady strengthening of Russian expectations for impending multipolarity was broken under the influence of grim economic considerations and U.S. assertiveness. Russian perceptions changed as it became more obvious that the United States still has the ability and resolve to thwart a less resurgent Russia's revisionist foreign policy ambitions. In Russian official parlance, this meant that international relations were seen to become increasingly complicated, competitive, and unstable in so far as the United States, with its enormous economic and military strengths and advantages, resists the transition to a multipolar international system in order to maintain its dominant position. The convoluted language of Russian foreign policy described the situation as follows: "The appearance of new players on the stage of world economy and politics against the backdrop of the efforts of Western states to preserve their habitual positions is associated with stiffening global competition, which is manifested in growing instability in international relations."<sup>470</sup> In a speech after Obama declared a "pause" in U.S. dealings with Russia, Lavrov discussed the "complicated" evolution of world affairs.

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<sup>468</sup> "Kontseptsiya vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii" (2013).

<sup>469</sup> Ibid.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid.

“Serious resistance” against the creation of a new world order was made by “those who do not want to lose the dominant positions,” he asserted.<sup>471</sup> “The world development has acquired a more contradictory and dynamic nature,” he said in December 2013. “The process of forming a new polycentric system of world order has been accompanied by the complication of international relations, stiffening global competition, rivalry in value guidelines and development models.”<sup>472</sup> There was little question that he alluded mainly to the manifestations of conflict in U.S.-Russian relations.

### **Ukraine in U.S.-Russian Relations, 2009-2013**

As has been noted above, the former Soviet region has become the geographical location of a severe struggle for predominant influence between the United States and Russia. U.S.-Russian geopolitical competition in this area is the inevitable result of a fundamental clash of incompatible strategic interests. The post-Soviet space has evolved into a contested zone where U.S. neo-containment of Russia meets Russia’s neo-imperialist quest for control over its neighbourhood. Clearly, the Russian long-term policy to recover influence in the region is driven primarily by Russia’s ambition to regain great power status. Attempts to rebuild the Russian empire in Eurasia by dominating neighbours through new kinds of integration structures represent a stepping-stone in Russia’s effort to become a world power. The paramount strategic goal of U.S. long-term policy towards post-Soviet Eurasia is precisely to prevent the emergence of a new Eurasian Russian empire. The rise of such an empire would threaten U.S. primacy in world affairs, so the United States is engaged in the pursuit of a renewed containment policy designed to counter Russian imperial expansionism. Thus, the United States and Russia have clearly conflicting interests regarding Russia’s near abroad. The profound geopolitical conflict in Eurasia is the single most sensitive and troubling dimension of the complex U.S.-Russian relationship. No other aspect of the relationship is so divisive and dangerous. This basic conflict will remain the key source of persistent disagreement and tension between the United States and Russia.

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<sup>471</sup> “Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii S.V. Lavrova pered studentami i professorsko-prepodavatel’skim sostavom MGIMO(U) MID Rossii i otvety na voprosy v khode posledovavshey diskussii” [Remarks by Minister of foreign affairs of the Russian Federation S.V. Lavrov before the students and the professorial-teaching staff of the Moscow state institute of international relations(university) of the Ministry of foreign affairs of Russia and answers to questions during the following discussion], 1659-02-09-2013, 2 September 2013, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2013](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2013).

<sup>472</sup> “Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova informatsionnomu agentstvu ‘Interfaks’” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the news agency “Interfax”], 2591-21-12-2013, 21 December 2013, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2013](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2013).

As a large borderland that lies squarely between NATO-Europe and Russia, Ukraine is the main battleground in the U.S.-Russian geopolitical battle for the former Soviet space. It stands out in importance to both the United States and Russia. More than any other non-Russian former Soviet republic, Ukraine constitutes a vital object for their strategic rivalry. Nevertheless, the country receded as a bone of contention during the reset period in U.S.-Russian relations. Critics of the Obama administration have suggested that tensions over Ukraine subsided because the administration somehow downgraded or even neglected its relations with the Ukrainian political leadership. The criticism that Obama's stance was characterized by disinterest has been advanced repeatedly despite the visible lack of evidence to support it.<sup>473</sup>

The U.S. interest in Ukraine as an independent, democratic state did not diminish under Obama. In his administration's first year, Ukraine's strategic significance was recognized in clear terms during several high-level visits to Kyiv. These visits also reaffirmed the U.S. commitments to Ukraine. During Biden's July 2009 visit, a Strategic Partnership Commission was established to implement the United States-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership, signed in December 2008 (the commission's first meeting took place in December 2009 in Washington).<sup>474</sup> Biden made clear that the United States remained strongly committed to supporting Ukraine's independence and eventual NATO membership and would not cede to Russia a sphere of influence along its borders.<sup>475</sup>

That Ukraine largely ceased to be a major cause of strategic friction between the United States and Russia had more to do with circumstances independent of U.S. policy than with any inattention in Washington. There was a significant lessening of U.S.-Russian tensions over Ukraine, but that was in large part produced by political developments within the country. In February 2010, the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych was elected president of Ukraine in an election process judged by international observers to be free and fair. The presidential election

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<sup>473</sup> David J. Kramer, "U.S. abandoning Russia's neighbors," *The Washington Post*, May 15, 2010, available at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/14/AR2010051404496\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/14/AR2010051404496_pf.html); James Sherr, *The Mortgaging of Ukraine's Independence*, Chatham House briefing paper REP BP 2010/01 (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, Russia and Eurasia Programme, August 2010), p. 17; Ariel Cohen and Stephen J. Blank, "Reset" Regret: Russian "Sphere of Privileged Interests" in Eurasia Undermines U.S. Foreign Policy, WebMemo No. 3321 (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, July 21, 2011), p. 1; Taras Kuzio, "Ukraine's relations with the West since the Orange Revolution," *European Security*, vol. 21, no. 3 (September 2012), pp. 396-397, 410; Stephen Blank and Younkyoo Kim, "Ukraine Fatigue' and a New U.S. Agenda for Europe and Eurasia," *Orbis*, vol. 57, no. 4 (Fall 2013), p. 599.

<sup>474</sup> Gary D. Espinas, "Ukraine's Defense Engagement with the United States," *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 63, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2010), pp. 55, 60.

<sup>475</sup> "Statement by Vice President Biden After Meeting with President Viktor Yushchenko of Ukraine," July 21, 2009, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/statement-vice-president-biden-after-meeting-with-president-viktor-yushchenko-ukrai>.



led to a drastic revision of Ukraine's pro-Western foreign policy orientation. After coming into office, Yanukovich moved swiftly to accommodate Russia. It took only two months before he agreed to extend the lease of Sevastopol in Crimea as the main base for the Russian Black Sea fleet by 25 years from 2017 until 2042. The so-called Kharkiv agreement between Ukraine and Russia on prolongation of the Russian naval basing rights was quickly pushed through the Verkhovna Rada (the Ukrainian parliament) in April 2010 without substantial debate.<sup>476</sup> Having acceded to Russia's demands regarding its continued military presence on the territory of Ukraine, Yanukovich proceeded to declare that Ukraine would no longer seek NATO membership. He even submitted to the Rada a bill barring Ukraine from joining NATO. The bill provided for the country's status as a "European non-bloc power" and committed it to "a policy of non-alignment, which means non-participation of Ukraine in military-political alliances..."<sup>477</sup> In July 2010, the Rada approved the bill, whereupon Yanukovich signed it into law. After the parliamentary vote, the contentious NATO membership issue was in reality removed from the political agenda. Since Russia vehemently opposed Ukraine's membership in NATO, Russian leaders for the time being accepted the "non-bloc" status of the country proclaimed by Yanukovich. Medvedev declared that if Ukraine saw its place in Europe as a "fully neutral, independent state, that suits us completely," but he also raised the prospect of another shift in Ukrainian foreign policy. If Ukraine decided to join the CSTO in the future, Russia, Medvedev said, would be happy to welcome it into the ranks of that organization.<sup>478</sup>

The regime change in Kyiv and the resultant pro-Russian tilt of Ukraine's foreign policy were widely perceived as a major setback for the long-standing U.S. policy of preventing a Russian sphere of influence by bringing Russia's neighbours closer to the West. On the other hand, it can be argued that the pause in U.S.-Russian strategic competition for Ukraine provided the Obama administration with a window of opportunity to realize its reset policy towards Russia. Anyway, the political realities left the administration no choice but to formally adopt a careful approach of restraint in its Ukraine policy. With a democratically elected Ukrainian president who legally ruled out NATO membership for his country, further enlargement of NATO incorporating Ukraine into the alliance had to be put on hold.

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<sup>476</sup> Alexander J. Motyl, "Ukrainian Blues: Yanukovich's Rise, Democracy's Fall," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 4 (July/August 2010), p. 130.

<sup>477</sup> "Zakon Ukrainy pro zasady vnutrishnoyi i zovnishnoyi polityky" [Law of Ukraine on the fundamentals of domestic and foreign policy], No. 2411-VI, 1 July 2010, article 11, paragraphs 1 and 2, available at <http://zakon.rada.gov.ua/cgi-bin/laws/main.cgi?nreg=2411-17>.

<sup>478</sup> "Vstrecha so studentami Kievskogo natsional'nogo universiteta" [Meeting with students of the Kiev national university], 18 May 2010, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/7785>.

Although the Obama administration remained committed to eventual membership for Ukraine, it deemphasized NATO expansion as a practical matter. McFaul goes so far as to contend that the issue in 2010 “faded completely.”<sup>479</sup> Yanukovych’s rejection of NATO membership and his moves to improve relations with Russia did not provoke official expressions of U.S. concern. U.S. officials instead reacted calmly to the new Ukrainian foreign policy direction, insisting that the United States respected Ukraine’s decision to drop its NATO aspirations. Secretary Clinton, during a visit to Kyiv in July 2010, took comfort from Yanukovych’s refusal to bring Ukraine into the CSTO and expected him to strike a balance between Russia and the West. At the same time, in a subtle jab at the Russian leaders, she reminded the Ukrainians that NATO maintained an open-door policy for potential members. “NATO’s door remains open,” she said.<sup>480</sup>

By 2012, the political situation in Ukraine had evolved into a crushing disappointment for the United States. Ukraine’s relations with the West deteriorated as the Yanukovych regime turned to authoritarianism and curtailed cooperation with NATO. The authoritarian tendencies in Ukrainian politics were bound to generate U.S. concerns. Sensing that Ukraine’s fragile democracy was threatened, the Obama administration became increasingly critical of Yanukovych’s anti-democratic practices. Secretary Clinton expressed heightened worries about Ukraine’s regression away from democracy in a newspaper article published in connection with the 2012 Ukrainian parliamentary elections.<sup>481</sup> As anticipated, these elections were flagrantly rigged. What the United States most feared was that an authoritarian regime supported by Russia would roll back democracy in Ukraine and remain in power indefinitely. If that happened, there would be grave doubts about the ability of the regime to assume a balanced stance in its foreign relations and maintain Ukraine’s political independence from Russia. The absorption of the country into a Russian sphere of influence would be practically a given. Russia orchestrated unrelenting pressure to subordinate Ukraine to Russian hegemony. The United States, however, had an important strategic interest in keeping Ukraine from becoming subservient to Russia. “We don’t want to see Ukraine lose its independence and we don’t want to see Ukraine totally in the Russian orbit,” Assistant Secretary Gordon stated in February

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<sup>479</sup> Kathryn Stoner and Michael McFaul, “Who Lost Russia (This Time)? Vladimir Putin,” *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 2 (Summer 2015), p. 172.

<sup>480</sup> “Remarks At the Closing of the Strategic Partnership Commission: Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State,” July 2, 2010, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/07/143934.htm>.

<sup>481</sup> “Ukraine’s Troubling Trends: Op-Ed, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State, Catherine Ashton, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, The New York Times, October 24, 2012,” available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/10/199719.htm>.

2012.<sup>482</sup> He also indignantly rejected the notion that the Obama administration was not interested in Ukraine. “I think there’s an enormous amount of interest in Ukraine,” he declared.<sup>483</sup>

While formally renouncing any Ukrainian aspirations to join NATO in favour of a unilaterally declared non-aligned policy orientation, Yanukovych pursued Ukraine’s movement towards integration with the EU. The EU and Ukraine strove to establish a closer relationship within the framework of the EU’s Eastern Partnership, established in 2009 to deepen the political and economic ties between the EU and several former Soviet republics in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, and had been negotiating an association agreement since 2008. Yanukovych favoured completion of the agreement and eventual EU membership for Ukraine. All of this allowed U.S. strategic planners to believe that Ukraine’s incorporation into a Russian sphere of influence might after all be precluded. The United States could still hope to deny Ukraine to Russian-led Eurasian integration by promoting its integration into European structures. Washington was happy to leave much of the difficult task of strategic denial to its EU associates. The Obama administration strongly supported the EU’s Eastern Partnership project, since it served the U.S. wider strategic agenda, particularly in Ukraine. Victoria Nuland, who succeeded Gordon as assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, was passionate about bringing Ukraine closer to the West. Intellectually, she also understood the exceedingly high geopolitical stakes of the European integration process, advancing the “vision of a more integrated economic and political space stretching from Lisbon to Donetsk...”<sup>484</sup> The strategic merit of this vision was that it embraced Ukraine in its entirety while excluding Russia.

Russian leaders in 2013 expressed increasing concern about the Ukrainian preparations for an association agreement with the EU. At one point, Putin had said that he would view the prospect of Ukraine joining the EU “positively.”<sup>485</sup> However, that was before he launched his grand geopolitical project for the creation of a Eurasian Union in order to recover key power resources of the former Soviet Union. Ukraine’s drive to orient itself towards the EU

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<sup>482</sup> “Interview With Vitaly Haidukevich of Tvi Television: Philip H. Gordon, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs,” February 6, 2012, available at <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/183485.htm>.

<sup>483</sup> “Press Roundtable on U.S.-Ukraine Issues: Philip H. Gordon, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs,” February 6, 2012, available at <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2012/183484.htm>.

<sup>484</sup> *A Pivotal Moment for the Eastern Partnership: Outlook for Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Belarus, Armenia, and Azerbaijan: Hearing before the Subcommittee on European Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 113th Congress, 1st Session*, S. Hrg. 113-154 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2014), p. 5.

<sup>485</sup> “Interv’yu zhurnalistam pechatnykh sredstv massovoy informatsii iz stran-chlenov ‘Gruppy Vos’mi’” [Interview with journalists of print mass media from “Group of Eight” member countries], 4 June 2007, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24313>.

challenged Putin's Eurasian integration project in a fundamental way. For Putin, it was of vital importance to draw Ukraine into the Eurasian Union, for without Ukraine the union would amount to little in helping Russia restore its great power status, but Ukraine's proposed association with the EU would be incompatible with membership of the Eurasian Union. Thus, a major conflict developed. As Stefan Lehne has observed, "the EU was slipping into a geopolitical competition with Russia..."<sup>486</sup> When Putin realized that Yanukovich was in fact considering signing the EU-Ukraine association agreement at the EU's Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius in November 2013, he applied intense pressure on the Ukrainian president not to sign it. Russian sanctions, threats and promises compelled Yanukovich to turn away from the EU. He abruptly declined to sign the association agreement and instead signed an economic agreement with Russia. This about-face under heavy pressure from Russia represented a sudden reversal of Ukraine's long-standing pro-European development and a profound pro-Russian tilt. It triggered anti-government mass demonstrations evolving into a revolutionary uprising that led to the collapse of the Yanukovich regime.

### **Russian Seizure of Crimea and the Initial U.S. Response**

After three months of popular protests and unrest, the political crisis in Ukraine reached a critical point in February 2014. Having failed to quell the opposition by force, Yanukovich entered into a compromise agreement with the opposition leaders. The deal, which called for constitutional reform and an early presidential election, was brokered by the foreign ministers of France, Germany and Poland and had the backing of the United States, the EU and Russia, but it was rendered obsolete and invalid when Yanukovich abandoned his office and fled to Russia. Declaring Yanukovich unable to fulfill his duties, the Ukrainian parliament deposed him as president by an overwhelming majority, appointed an acting president and then approved an interim government.

The United States and the EU welcomed the regime change in Kyiv because it decisively shifted Ukraine's foreign policy orientation and held out hopes of a democratic revival in the country. The new, transitional Ukrainian leadership was unabashedly Western-oriented (it quickly signed the political part of the association agreement with the EU) and clearly committed to new elections. Hence, the United States and the EU endorsed it, promising political and economic support. Russia, however, reacted with intense hostility to the ouster of

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<sup>486</sup> Stefan Lehne, *Time to Reset the European Neighborhood Policy* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2014), p. 8.

Yanukovych and the emergence of a pro-Western leadership. Whereas the West thought the new regime had been formed through a legitimate process, arguing that Yanukovych had forfeited his domestic legitimacy, Russia deemed it illegitimate and refused to recognize it. The Russian view was that the political upheaval in Kyiv was a Western-orchestrated “anti-constitutional” armed coup and that Yanukovych remained the legitimate president of Ukraine.

The Russian leaders had every reason to be upset about the turn of events in Ukraine. Russia had gone all out supporting its client Yanukovych, but the policy of granting generous support to him failed completely. Clearly, the sudden fall of Yanukovych came as a surprise and a shock to the Russians. Moreover, it represented a gigantic strategic defeat for Russia. Russia’s entire Ukraine strategy collapsed when Yanukovych’s regime was replaced by a pro-Western successor. Without Yanukovych, Russia’s sway of Ukrainian politics declined instantly and apparently irrevocably. The Russian response to the regime change was rapid and surprising. Russia seized Crimea from Ukraine by military force and formally annexed it. Beginning on February 27, 2014, Russian troops wearing uniforms without any identifying national insignia invaded and occupied Crimea in clear violation of international law. Under the protection of these troops, pro-Russian separatists took over the local government, requested Crimea’s accession to Russia and held an illegal referendum, the result of which purportedly indicated popular support for the request. On that basis, Putin and the separatist leadership on March 18 signed an accession treaty incorporating Crimea into Russia, and on March 21 Putin signed a constitutional amendment to complete the annexation.

Russia initially denied any presence of Russian troops in Crimea outside the naval base in Sevastopol. Putin falsely claimed that the unidentified armed men who occupied government buildings, military bases and airports throughout the peninsula were not Russian soldiers but only “local self-defence forces.”<sup>487</sup> After Crimea’s formal incorporation into Russia, the initial official denial of a Russian military invasion was retracted, however. Putin acknowledged publicly that Russian military units did in fact invade Crimea to back the separatists. “Behind Crimea’s self-defence forces, of course, stood our military servicemen,” he said. Russia, according to Putin, “created conditions” for Crimea’s reunification with Russia by inserting special formations of its armed forces.<sup>488</sup> Putin also stated that the Russian military role in Crimea included ensuring the holding of the secessionist referendum: “Russian troops indeed

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<sup>487</sup> “Vladimir Putin otvetil na voprosy zhurnalistov o situatsii na Ukraine” [Vladimir Putin answered journalists’ questions on the situation in Ukraine], 4 March 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/20366>.

<sup>488</sup> “Pryamaya liniya s Vladimirom Putiny” [Direct line with Vladimir Putin], 17 April 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/20796>.

helped the residents of Crimea hold a referendum on their independence and desire to join the Russian Federation.”<sup>489</sup> Finally, Putin related that Russian troops were used to “block the Ukrainian military units stationed in Crimea.”<sup>490</sup> He even admitted that Russia’s actions in Crimea were of a “forcible character.”<sup>491</sup> There was no fighting, however, since the Ukrainian government refrained from using force in self-defence to resist the Russian military actions and instead withdrew its defence personnel from Crimea. The authorities in Kyiv acted with remarkable restraint in the face of Russian aggression.

After annexing Crimea, Russia directed its efforts against the rest of Ukraine. Its intervention developed into a new phase as the Russian leadership promoted and supported an armed insurgency in the eastern region of the country. With the help of Russian special forces and intelligence agents, pro-Russian separatists who refused to recognize the authority of the interim government in Kyiv seized administrative buildings and formed new local governments. Russia flatly denied its clear and unmistakable involvement in the insurrection. “There are no Russian units in eastern Ukraine, no special services, no instructors,” Putin said.<sup>492</sup> Lavrov said the same thing. “None of our military servicemen or our agents are there,” he insisted.<sup>493</sup> Russia badly miscalculated the extent of separatism in eastern Ukraine, but the Kyiv government did lose control over the provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk. In April 2014, the secessionist Donetsk People’s Republic and the Luhansk People’s Republic were proclaimed to be sovereign states.

The United States was unprepared for Russia’s rapid seizure and annexation of Crimea. Recovering from initial surprise, the Obama administration strongly condemned the Russian military intervention in Ukraine and made very clear that it was considered to be an unacceptable “brazen act of aggression,” as Kerry put it.<sup>494</sup> The first official U.S. response was

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<sup>489</sup> ”Interv’yu Vladimira Putina radio ’Evropa-1’ i telekanalu TF1” [Interview of Vladimir Putin for radio “Europe 1” and television channel TF1], 4 June 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/45832>.

<sup>490</sup> ”Zasedanie Mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba ’Valday’” [Meeting of the International discussion club “Valdai”], 24 October 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/46860>.

<sup>491</sup> ”Interv’yu ital’yanskoy gazete Il Corriere della Sera” [Interview for the Italian newspaper Il Corriere della Sera], 6 June 2015, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/49629>.

<sup>492</sup> ”Pryamaya liniya s Vladimiron Putiny” [Direct line with Vladimir Putin], 17 April 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/20796>.

<sup>493</sup> ”Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v spetsial’nom vypuske programmy ’Voskresny vecher s Vladimirom Solov’evym’ na teleanale ’Rossiya 1’” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov in a special edition of the programme “Sunday evening with Vladimir Solov’ev” on the television channel “Rossiya 1”], 846-11-04-2014, 11 April 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>494</sup> ”Readout of President Obama’s Call with President Putin,” March 1, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/01/readout-president-obama-s-call-president-putin>; ”Situation in Ukraine: Press Statement, John Kerry, Secretary of State,” March 1, 2014, available at

to claim that Russia's actions in Ukraine violated international law. Russia, Kerry declared, was "in direct, overt violation of international law..."<sup>495</sup> Specifically, the Russian moves were denounced as a flagrant violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine.<sup>496</sup> Russia, in its general foreign policy, had traditionally been a staunch defender of the sovereignty of states. It was ironic, Samantha Power, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, pointed out, that Russia regularly went out of its way to emphasize state sovereignty but clearly violated the sovereignty of its neighbour Ukraine.<sup>497</sup>

Russia's annexation of Crimea had to be met with U.S. condemnation in strong terms. Obama charged that it was an illegal and illegitimate move by the Russians.<sup>498</sup> The U.S. leadership minced no words in characterizing the Russian territorial acquisition as a blatant affront to the basic principles of international law. Obama called it a "theft of a neighbor's land" and Biden talked about Russia's "land grab."<sup>499</sup> The Obama administration maintained that there was no legality in Crimea's incorporation into Russia and accordingly vowed not to recognize it as legal.<sup>500</sup> As U.S. officials indicated repeatedly, Russia violated above all the United Nations Charter as well as commitments in a whole series of international agreements, namely the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (the Helsinki Final Act), the Charter of Paris for a New Europe (the Paris Charter), the Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine's Accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (the Budapest Memorandum), the Founding Act on Mutual

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<http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/03/222720.htm>; "Interview With George Stephanopoulos of ABC's This Week: John Kerry, Secretary of State, March 2, 2014, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/03/222722.htm>.

<sup>495</sup> "Interview With David Gregory of NBC's Meet the Press: John Kerry, Secretary of State," March 2, 2014, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/03/222721.htm>.

<sup>496</sup> "Remarks by President Obama and Ukraine Prime Minister Yatsenyuk after Bilateral Meeting," March 12, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/12/remarks-president-obama-and-ukraine-prime-minister-yatsenyuk-after-bilat>.

<sup>497</sup> "Remarks by Ambassador Samantha Power, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, at a UN Security Council Meeting on Ukraine," March 1, 2014, available at <http://usun.state.gov/remarks/5960>.

<sup>498</sup> "Statement by the President on Ukraine," March 20, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/20/statement-president-ukraine>; "Press Conference with President Obama and Prime Minister Rutte of the Netherlands," March 25, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/25/press-conference-president-obama-and-prime-minister-rutte-netherlands>.

<sup>499</sup> "Remarks by President Obama at 25th Anniversary of Freedom Day," June 4, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/04/remarks-president-obama-25th-anniversary-freedom-day>; "Remarks to the Press by Vice President Joe Biden with Prime Minister Donald Tusk of Poland," March 18, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/18/remarks-press-vice-president-joe-biden-prime-minister-donald-tusk-poland>.

<sup>500</sup> "Press Availability at NATO: John Kerry, Secretary of State," April 1, 2014, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/04/224282.htm>; "Remarks by President Obama to the People of Estonia," September 3, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/03/remarks-president-obama-people-estonia>.



Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation (the NATO-Russia Founding Act), and the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership between the Russian Federation and Ukraine (the Russia-Ukraine Friendship Treaty).

The United Nations Charter, which has formed the foundation of the entire system of international law since 1945, embodies the fundamental legal principle that prohibits the acquisition of foreign territory through the use of force. Article 2, clause 4 of chapter I of the charter stipulates that all members of the United Nations “shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state...” The other documents essentially reaffirm this basic obligation. In the Helsinki Final Act, adopted in 1975, the signatories in conformity with the United Nations Charter set forth a number of core principles guiding their relations. The third principle obligates them to “regard as inviolable all of one another’s frontiers...” They will accordingly “refrain from any ... act of seizure ... of part or all of the territory of any participating state.” According to the fourth principle, they “will respect the territorial integrity of each of the participating states” and “will likewise refrain from making each other’s territory the object of military occupation ... or the object of acquisition...” In addition, the signatories proclaim by the sixth principle that they “will refrain from any intervention, direct or indirect, individual or collective, in the internal ... affairs ... of another participating state...” The signatories to the Paris Charter of 1990 pledge their full commitment to the principles of the Helsinki Final Act and specifically restate their obligation to “refrain from the threat of use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state...” In the Budapest Memorandum, signed in 1994, Russia, the United States and the United Kingdom promise to “respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine” in exchange for Ukraine’s giving up nuclear weapons on its territory. Furthermore, they vow to “refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine.” The NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997 contains the provision that NATO and Russia will base their relations on a shared commitment to principles including “refraining from the threat or use of force against each other as well as against any other state, its sovereignty, territorial integrity or political independence” and “respect for sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all states and their inherent right to choose the means to ensure their own security [and] the inviolability of borders...” Under article 2 of the 1997 Russia-Ukraine Friendship Treaty, the two neighbours “respect each other’s territorial integrity and confirm the inviolability of the borders existing between them.” They also, under article 3,

“build relations with each other on the basis of the principles of ... territorial integrity, inviolability of borders [and] non-intervention in internal affairs...”

Russia did not care for consistency and credibility in defending its geopolitical actions in Ukraine. It claimed from the outset of its intervention that it had not violated international law. This disingenuous denial of any breach of legal rules continued even after the official admission that Russian military forces in fact were used to pave the way for the annexation of Crimea, which Russia still characterized as absolutely legal. “I am deeply convinced that Russia has not committed any violations of international law,” Putin stated in November 2014.<sup>501</sup> In subsequent statements, he has been more specific, referring explicitly to Crimea’s incorporation into Russia. “In the case of Crimea, international law was not violated,” he said in January 2016.<sup>502</sup> “Crimea’s reunification with Russia occurred,” he later claimed, “in full conformity with international law.”<sup>503</sup> As if the aggression in Crimea never happened, Russian leaders have maintained that Russia always acts in compliance with international law. “We, on our part, strictly comply with the norms of international law,” Putin said.<sup>504</sup> Lavrov praised Russia’s devotion to these international norms: “At the centre of our position in the international arena is respect for international law.”<sup>505</sup> Putin actually asserted that Russia could even assume international legal leadership in upholding international law.<sup>506</sup> However, Russia’s behaviour in Ukraine contradicted previous high-blown Russian statements on the legality and illegality of the use of military force in international relations. Condemning U.S. military interventions, Putin had in September 2013 articulated a narrow interpretation of international law: “Current international law permits the use of force only in two instances – either in self-defence or by a decision of the Security Council. Everything else is unlawful under the UN

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<sup>501</sup> “Interv’yu nemetskogo telekanalu ARD” [Interview for the German television channel ARD], 17 November 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/47029>.

<sup>502</sup> “Interv’yu nemetskomu izdaniyu Bild, chast’ 1” [Interview for the German edition Bild, part 1], 5 January 2016, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/51154>.

<sup>503</sup> “Zayavleniya dlya pressy i otvety na voprosy zhurnalistov po itogam rossiysko-finlyandskikh peregovorov” [Statements for the press and answers to journalists’ questions on the results of Russian-Finnish negotiations], 1 July 2016, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/52312>.

<sup>504</sup> “Zasedanie Soveta Bezopasnosti” [Meeting of the Security Council], 22 July 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/46305>.

<sup>505</sup> “Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v ramkakh ‘pravitel’svennogo chasa’ v Gosudarstvennoy Dume Federal’nogo Sobraniya Rossiyskoy Federatsii” [Remarks and answers to questions by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov within the framework of “government hour” in the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation], 1955-14-10-2015, 14 October 2015, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2015](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2015).

<sup>506</sup> “Zasedanie Mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba ‘Valday’” [Meeting of the International discussion club “Valdai”], 24 October 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/46860>.

Charter and qualifies as aggression.”<sup>507</sup> According to this interpretation, Russia’s officially acknowledged use of force against Ukraine in Crimea must be considered illegal. It grossly violated the key legal principles of preservation of state sovereignty and non-intervention in the internal affairs of states. Russia’s own application of these principles is selective, however. Russia does not believe in or respect the full sovereignty of former Soviet republics and therefore feels that it has the legal-political right to intervene in their domestic affairs. The arrogant Russian belief that the states of the former Soviet Union are not fully sovereign entities explains why Russia feels entitled to oppose U.S. interventions and accuse the United States of violating the sovereignty of various states while insisting that Russian interventions in the post-Soviet space are not breaking international law. If near neighbours invaded by Russian forces are not fully sovereign, this, it can be argued, releases Russia from legal constraints. With respect to the intervention in Ukraine, Russia has also attempted to circumvent the legal issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity, which in this case put Russia in an awkward position, by appealing to the principle of self-determination of peoples mentioned in article 1, clause 2 of chapter I of the United Nations Charter.<sup>508</sup>

Russia’s actions in Ukraine marked an unprecedented and unexpected departure from previous Russian practices. With the annexation of Crimea, Russia for the first time since the Second World War annexed territory from another country. However, the forcible Russian seizure of Crimea did not represent a sudden radical shift in Russia’s foreign policy. What had not changed in Russian policy towards post-Soviet states was the long-term grand strategic ambition. Russia’s main strategic goal in its neighbourhood remained the same, to reestablish regional dominance. The main strategic concern was preventing NATO from further expansion into the east. In Putin’s early accounts of the Russian military operation in Crimea, the perceived threat of NATO expansion engulfing Ukraine loomed large. Putin asserted that the fear of Ukrainian entry into NATO partially prompted the decision to seize Crimea.

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<sup>507</sup> ”Siriyskaya al’ternativa” [A Syrian alternative], 12 September 2013, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/19205>.

<sup>508</sup> On the legal matters pertaining to the Ukraine crisis, see Ireneusz C. Kamiński, “International Law Aspects of the Situation in Ukraine,” in Klaus Bachman and Igor Lyubashenko (eds.), *The Maidan Uprising, Separatism and Foreign Intervention: Ukraine’s complex transition*, Studies in Political Transition, vol. 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Edition, 2014), pp. 379-404; Carina Lamont, “Some Legal Aspects of the Illegal Annexation of Crimea,” in Niklas Granholm, Johannes Malminen and Gudrun Persson (eds.), *A Rude Awakening: Ramifications of Russian Aggression Towards Ukraine*, FOI-R-3892-SE (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, FOI, June 2014), pp. 65-79; William W. Burke-White, “Crimea and the International Legal Order,” *Survival*, vol. 56, no. 4 (August-September 2014), pp. 65-80; Roy Allison, “Russian ‘deniable’ intervention in Ukraine: how and why Russia broke the rules,” *International Affairs*, vol. 90, no. 6 (November 2014), pp. 1255-1297; Thomas D. Grant, *Aggression Against Ukraine: Territory, Responsibility, and International Law* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); and David S. Yost, “The Budapest Memorandum and Russia’s intervention in Ukraine,” *International Affairs*, vol. 91, no. 3 (May 2015), pp. 505-538.

Insisting that Russia in the face of Western power politics in Ukraine had followed a geopolitical logic, he reasoned that Ukraine's integration into European institutions could ultimately culminate in the country joining NATO unless Russia acted forcefully to stop such a drift out of Russia's geopolitical orbit. If Russia did nothing, then the Western powers would at some time in the not too distant future "draw Ukraine into NATO," Putin argued. "And that would really oust Russia from this region that is very important to us."<sup>509</sup> Speaking at a gathering of Russian ambassadors, Putin highlighted the importance of Russia's naval base in Crimea and conceded that the prospect of NATO taking over that base was a motive behind the Crimean operation. Because Ukraine might soon enough join NATO, Russia, in Putin's view, had to effectively secure its important military assets on the peninsula. Russia "could not allow NATO forces to eventually, and I think fairly soon, move into the land of Crimea," he said.<sup>510</sup>

Although the new regime in Kyiv pledged to honour Ukraine's bilateral agreements with Russia, it is conceivable that the Russians really believed that had they not acted to incorporate Crimea into Russia, the Ukrainians, while moving closer to NATO membership, would have revoked the 2010 Kharkiv agreement that allowed Russia to keep its Black Sea fleet in Sevastopol until 2042. The regime change in Kyiv admittedly raised the possibility of Ukraine's reneging on the extension agreement and evicting the Russian fleet from Sevastopol. Before the ouster of Yanukovych, the Western-oriented Ukrainian opposition leaders had long promised to annul the agreement, so the Russian concern was not wholly without reason.<sup>511</sup> In actuality, it was the Russians who unilaterally terminated all Russian-Ukrainian agreements on the Black Sea fleet after their annexation of Crimea, arguing that the agreements had "lost their validity."<sup>512</sup>

## The NATO Issue and Russia's Further Aggression

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<sup>509</sup> "Pryamaya liniya s Vladimirom Putinym" [Direct line with Vladimir Putin], 17 April 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/20796>.

<sup>510</sup> "Soveshchanie poslov i postoyannykh predstaviteley Rossii" [Conference of ambassadors and permanent representatives of Russia], 1 July 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/46131>.

<sup>511</sup> Russia's fear of losing the Sevastopol base as a factor explaining the seizure of Crimea is emphasized in Daniel Treisman, "Why Putin Took Crimea: The Gambler in the Kremlin," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 95, no. 3 (May/June 2016), pp. 47-54.

<sup>512</sup> "V Gosdumu vneseno predlozhenie o prekrashchenii deystviya ryada rossiysko-ukrainskikh soglasheniy" [Proposal to terminate a number of Russian-Ukrainian agreements submitted to the State Duma], 28 March 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/acts/20654>.

Russia, of course, achieved only limited gains by seizing Crimea. The seizure was a desperate attempt by a frustrated Russian leadership to rebound from a humiliating political failure. Acquiring Crimea was a way to soften the huge blow to Russia from the Ukrainian revolution. But securing Russian interests in Crimea while losing the rest of Ukraine was not an acceptable outcome for the Russian leaders. Russian interests in the area extended far beyond the presence of the Black Sea fleet on the Crimean peninsula. Preventing Ukraine from ever joining NATO remained a vital strategic interest in Russia's long-term policy. Lavrov was quite explicit about the Russian position on Ukraine's potential accession to NATO. Russia, he said, "will come out categorically against it."<sup>513</sup> Lavrov further indicated that Russia was determined to force the West and Ukraine to renounce the notion of Ukrainian NATO membership. "For us this is a matter of principle," he declared.<sup>514</sup> Lavrov even warned that a drive to make Ukraine a member of NATO would threaten peace and stability in Europe: "The very idea of striving for Ukraine in NATO is dangerous ... for European security."<sup>515</sup>

The Russian demands were stated with utmost clarity: at the least Ukraine should be a neutral state. Russia sincerely demanded a solid guarantee of Ukraine's non-accession to NATO. "We would like to hear a 100-percent guarantee that no one would think about Ukraine's joining NATO," Putin's press secretary Dmitry Peskov announced.<sup>516</sup> Lavrov insisted that Ukraine had to remain neutral in a military-political sense. In order to maintain stability in Europe, he warned, "it is essential that Kiev preserves the out-of-bloc status."<sup>517</sup>

Essentially, the Russian tactic to keep Ukraine out of NATO was two-pronged. Russia in essence employed two main tools to try to bar its Ukrainian neighbor from the Atlantic alliance. The first instrument in Russia's toolbox was the creation of another unresolved or

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<sup>513</sup> "Interv'yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova telekanalu 'Blumberg'" [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the television channel "Bloomberg"], 1169-14-05-2014, 14 May 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>514</sup> "Otvety Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na voprosy v khode televizionnoy programmy 'Pravo znat!' na kanale "TV Tsentr" [Answers by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov to questions during the television programme "Right to know!" on the channel "TV Centre"], 2125-13-09-2014, 13 September 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>515</sup> "Interv'yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova programme 'Vecher s Vladimirom Solov'evym' na telekanale 'Rossiya 1'" [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the programme "Evening with Vladimir Solov'ev" on the television channel "Rossiya 1"], 2973-25-12-2014, 25 December 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>516</sup> "Ukraine crisis: Russia demands guarantees from Nato," BBC News, London, 18 November 2014, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30104532>.

<sup>517</sup> "Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy studentov i slushateley Diplomaticheskoy akademii MID Rossii Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova" [Remarks and answers to questions from students and listeners of the Diplomatic academy of the Ministry of foreign affairs by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov], 347-27-02-2015, 27 February 2015, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2015](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2015).

“frozen” conflict with territorial and ethnic disputes in its neighbourhood. Creating a frozen conflict in Ukraine followed the script acted out successfully by Russia in Georgia. Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the support it provided to the separatist movement in eastern Ukraine conformed to the same coercive pattern, although in the Ukrainian case the model was used in an even more flagrant manner. By saddling Ukraine with a frozen conflict, Russia could again exploit the lack of consensus within NATO on the question of granting membership to a country with such an unresolved conflict. This lack of consensus had previously worked to Russia’s advantage. Although the North Atlantic Treaty of 1949 (article 10) states that any European state may be invited to accede to the treaty, certain European NATO states have argued that states subject to sustained territorial and ethnic disputes are disqualified from accession. Russia could therefore expect Ukraine to have any bid for NATO membership blocked by these states as long as Crimea remains occupied and eastern Ukraine remains the scene of a pro-Russian uprising. As Svante Cornell observed soon after the Russian annexation of Crimea, Russia had reason to believe that dismembering Ukraine would kill any possibility of the country’s future membership in NATO. Russia apparently viewed the ensuing border dispute as an “excellent insurance policy” against NATO expansion. It would, according to Russian geopolitical logic, ensure that NATO would never invite Ukraine to join the alliance.<sup>518</sup>

The second instrument that Russia used in its attempts to achieve the objective of preventing Ukraine’s accession to NATO was a political campaign to reform the Ukrainian constitution. Rudely intruding into the internal governmental affairs of a foreign country, Russia made strident demands on the subject of constitutional changes in Ukraine. It demanded that the Ukrainian government prepare a new constitution providing for federalization and neutrality. In March 2014, Russia officially presented a proposal outlining a constitutional order, according to which a federal political system and a “neutral military-political status” for Ukraine would be ensured.<sup>519</sup> Lavrov emphasized that Ukraine’s required neutrality was a “main point” in the Russian proposal. “We are convinced that a new

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<sup>518</sup> Svante E. Cornell, “Crimea and the Lessons of Frozen Conflicts,” *The American Interest*, March 20, 2014, available at <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2014/03/20/crimea-and-the-lessons-of-frozen-conflicts>. See also Stephen Holmes and Ivan Krastev, “Russia’s Aggressive Isolationism,” *The American Interest*, vol. 10, no. 3 (January/February 2015), pp. 14, 15 and Kimberly Marten, “Putin’s Choices: Explaining Russian Foreign Policy and Intervention in Ukraine,” *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 2 (Summer 2015), pp. 190, 197.

<sup>519</sup> “Zayavlenie MID Rossii o Gruppe podderzhki dlya Ukrainy” [Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia on the Support group for Ukraine], 570-17-03-2014, 17 March 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/spokesman/official\\_statement/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/spokesman/official_statement/-/archive/year/2014).



constitution must unambiguously confirm the out-of-bloc status of Ukraine,” he declared.<sup>520</sup> Constitutional reform, Lavrov made clear, “absolutely implies” declaring Ukraine neutral.<sup>521</sup> Russian diplomats ruthlessly flaunted the political leverage provided by the conflict in eastern Ukraine in which the separatists had achieved some independence and received support from Russia. According to Lavrov, they stated firmly during U.S.-Russian discussions that a change of Ukraine’s self-imposed non-bloc status would undermine all efforts to arrange a peaceful settlement of the conflict.<sup>522</sup> Lavrov explained that a stabilization of the situation in eastern Ukraine must come through a constitutional reform providing “firm guarantees for Ukraine’s out-of-bloc status confirmed in legislation.”<sup>523</sup> He fully agreed with those in the West who advocated a formal non-alignment pledge for Ukraine as the way out of the crisis. Such Western advocacy was a peculiar but not particularly uncommon phenomenon.<sup>524</sup>

In April 2014, Ukraine’s acting president Oleksandr Turchynov announced the start of an “anti-terrorist operation” against the Russian-supported separatists in the eastern provinces to regain control over the rebel-held portions of the region. The new pro-Western president Petro Poroshenko, elected in May, decided to continue the operation, and the Ukrainian government forces began to retake territory from the rebels. In the summer, they made substantial progress, ousting separatist forces from several cities in the east. These successes came shortly after the expiration of a unilateral Ukrainian cease-fire. In a statement ending the

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<sup>520</sup> “Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova programme ‘Vesti v subboty s Sergeem Brilevym’ [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the programme “News on Saturday with Sergey Brilev”], 693-29-03-2014, 29 March 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>521</sup> “Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii S.V. Lavrova na 69-y sessii General’noy Assamblei OON” [Remarks by Minister of foreign affairs of the Russian Federation S.V. Lavrov at the 69th session of the United Nations General Assembly], 2290-27-09-2014, 27 September 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>522</sup> “Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy SMI Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova po itogam vstrechi predstaviteley ES, Rossii, SShA i Ukrainy” [Remarks and answers to questions from mass media by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov on the results of a meeting of representatives of the EU, Russia, USA and Ukraine], 912-17-04-2014, 17 April 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>523</sup> “Stat’ya Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova ‘Vykhod iz ukrainskogo krizisa,’ opublikovannaya v gazete ‘The Guardian’” [Article by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov “The way out of the Ukrainian crisis,” published in the newspaper “The Guardian”], 791-08-04-2014, 7 April 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>524</sup> See, for example, Dimitri K. Simes, “Reawakening an Empire,” *The National Interest*, no. 132 (July/August 2014), p. 15; John J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 93, no. 5 (September/October 2014), pp. 87-88; Leslie H. Gelb, “Obama’s Last Chance,” *The National Interest*, no. 134 (November/December 2014), p. 16; John J. Mearsheimer, “Don’t Arm Ukraine,” *The New York Times*, February 8, 2015, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/09/opinion/dont-arm-ukraine.html>; and Andrew T. Wolff, “The future of NATO enlargement after the Ukraine crisis,” *International Affairs*, vol. 91, no. 5 (September 2015), p. 1118.



cease-fire, Poroshenko promised to press on with the offensive and crush the rebellion. “We will attack and we will liberate our land,” he declared.<sup>525</sup>

In July 2014, the U.S. Department of Defence made the assessment that Ukraine was close to defeating the pro-Russian separatists. Assistant Secretary of Defence for International Security Affairs Derek Chollet testified before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations that the tide had turned. At the same time, however, he recognized that it was a “very dangerous situation.” A ferocious Russian reaction was anticipated. “I think we have to really expect the worst, in terms of Russian response,” Chollet cautioned.<sup>526</sup> There were fears that the successful Ukrainian offensive could trigger a Russian invasion in support of the separatists. Secretary Kerry underlined that a Russian invasion of eastern Ukraine would be taken as “not just a violation of all notions of international law, but an exceedingly dangerous action...”<sup>527</sup> Large Russian forces were deployed along the Ukrainian eastern border, but Russia had more than once since its occupation of Crimea affirmed that it did not intend to become directly involved in the fighting. “The Russian Federation has no and can have no plans to invade the south-east region of Ukraine,” Lavrov stated in March.<sup>528</sup> “We have absolutely no intention and no interest to cross the border of Ukraine,” he said two weeks later.<sup>529</sup> “We have no wish to introduce troops into Ukraine,” he said in April.<sup>530</sup> Finally, in May, he said: “We have not intended and do not intend to invade.”<sup>531</sup>

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<sup>525</sup> “English-language translation of Poroshenko’s message to Ukraine ending ceasefire against Kremlin-backed separatists,” *Kyiv Post*, July 1, 2014, available at <http://www.kyivpost.com/content/ukraine/english-language-translation-of-poroshenkos-message-to-ukraine-ending-ceasefire-against-kremlin-backed-separatists-354065.html>.

<sup>526</sup> *Russia and Developments in Ukraine: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 113th Congress, 2nd Session*, S. Hrg. 113-549 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2015), pp. 20-21.

<sup>527</sup> “Remarks With Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin After Their Meeting: John Kerry, Secretary of State,” July 29, 2014, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/07/229905.htm>.

<sup>528</sup> “Vystupitel’noe slovo i otvety Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na voprosy SMI v khode press-konferentsii po itogam peregovorov s Gossekretarem SShA Dzh. Kerri” [Opening remarks and answers by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov to questions from mass media during a press conference on the results of negotiations with Secretary of State of the USA J. Kerry], 563-14-03-2014, 14 March 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>529</sup> “Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova programme “Vesti v subbotu s Sergeem Brilevym” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the programme “News on Saturday with Sergey Brilev”], 693-29-03-2014, 29 March 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>530</sup> “Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy SMI Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova po itogam vstrechi predstaviteley ES, Rossii, SShA i Ukrainy” [Remarks and answers to questions from mass media by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov on the results of a meeting of representatives of the EU, Russia, USA and Ukraine], 912-17-04-2014, 17 April 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>531</sup> “Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova telekanalu “Blumberg” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the television channel “Bloomberg”], 1169-14-05-2014, 14 May 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

When the Ukrainian forces started to make gains against the separatists in June 2014, Russia responded by demanding a cease-fire. It was necessary to declare a cease-fire and stop Ukraine's "punitive operation," Putin insisted.<sup>532</sup> After the Ukrainian offensive resumed in July, Putin pressed for an immediate cease-fire to salvage the separatists from defeat, complaining that the United States was pushing Ukraine towards continuing the war.<sup>533</sup> The Russians seemed very keen to have a cease-fire. "We have called repeatedly on all contending parties to stop the bloodshed immediately," Putin said.<sup>534</sup> In late July, the Russians were convinced that the Ukrainian government, encouraged by the United States, actually tried to defeat the separatists militarily and thus resolve the conflict by force. The Kyiv authorities sought to "achieve a military victory," Lavrov noted.<sup>535</sup>

By late August 2014, the rebellion in eastern Ukraine was on the verge of a military collapse. Ukrainian forces surrounded the major rebel strongholds Donetsk and Luhansk. At that point, several thousand Russian troops suddenly invaded Ukraine and attacked the Ukrainian forces. A total defeat of the separatists was not seen in Moscow as an acceptable outcome of the war, so the Russian leadership decided to send several regular army units across the border to fight alongside the separatist forces. As a result, the Ukrainian civil war was transformed into an inter-state war between Russia and Ukraine. The short but devastating Russian counter-offensive, a direct and massive military intervention blatantly violating international law, began on August 24. Within days the superior Russian forces defeated Ukraine's army and forced it to retreat. The Ukrainian encirclement of Donetsk and Luhansk was broken, and the Russian-backed rebels reclaimed territory that the Ukrainians had liberated in June and July. In September, a cease-fire was reached by representatives of Russia, Ukraine, the OSCE and the secessionist "people's republics." In its wake, Russia withdrew most of its combat forces from Ukrainian territory, but the troops remaining there continued to operate despite the cease-fire. On January 15, 2015, Russian and rebel forces mounted another major offensive, seizing the Donetsk airport. The offensive was followed in February by a second cease-fire, which Russia and the rebels immediately broke in order to capture the town of

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<sup>532</sup> "Otvety na voprosy zhurnalistov" [Answers to journalists' questions], 6 June 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/45869>.

<sup>533</sup> "Otvety na voprosy zhurnalistov" [Answers to journalists' questions], 17 July 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/46236>.

<sup>534</sup> "Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossii Vladimira Putina" [Appeal by President of Russia Vladimir Putin], 21 July 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/46262>.

<sup>535</sup> "Brifing Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova dlya predstaviteley inostrannykh i rossiyskikh SMI" [Briefing by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for representatives of foreign and Russian mass media], 1789-28-07-2014, 28 July 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

Debaltseve. Four weeks earlier, when the Donetsk airport had just been taken, Lavrov hypocritically suggested: “It is necessary to stop trying to capture one town or another.”<sup>536</sup> After the fall of Debaltseve, the defeated Ukrainian military finally managed to hold the Russian and rebel forces to a stalemate, confirmed by a new truce in September 2015.

Although Russia had become militarily involved in the Ukrainian conflict in a much more direct way, Russian leaders continued to strenuously deny any direct Russian military involvement. They characterized the conflict as internal to Ukraine, claiming that Russia was not a party to it. Russia had armed, trained and supplied the separatists in eastern Ukraine since the beginning of their rebellion. In late August 2014, Russia’s armed forces invaded Ukraine to prevent a military defeat of the rebels. Even then Russia refused to acknowledge its obvious use of military force.<sup>537</sup> “There will be no military intervention,” Lavrov stated in early September as the Russian forces massively intervened and pushed back the Ukrainian military.<sup>538</sup> Lavrov claimed that the rebels, or the “militia” as he called them, turned the tide of

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<sup>536</sup> “Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy SMI Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v khode ezhegodnoy press-konferentsii po itogam deyatelnosti rossiyskoy diplomatii v 2014 godu” [Remarks and answers to questions from mass media by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov during annual press conference on the results of the activity of Russian diplomacy in 2014], 78-21-01-2015, 21 January 2015, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2015](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2015).

<sup>537</sup> On the information aspects of the Ukrainian conflict, see Lawrence Freedman, “Ukraine and the Art of Limited War,” *Survival*, vol. 56, no. 6 (December 2014-January 2015), pp. 7-38; Maksymilian Czuperski, John Herbst, Eliot Higgins, Alina Polyakova and Damon Wilson, *Hiding in Plain Sight: Putin’s War in Ukraine* (Washi<sup>537</sup> “Otvety na voprosy zhurnalistov” [Answers to journalists’ questions], 6 June 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/45869>.

<sup>537</sup> “Otvety na voprosy zhurnalistov” [Answers to journalists’ questions], 17 July 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/46236>.

<sup>537</sup> “Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossii Vladimira Putina” [Appeal by President of Russia Vladimir Putin], 21 July 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/46262>.

<sup>537</sup> “Briefing Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova dlya predstaviteley inostrannykh i rossiyskikh SMI” [Briefing by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for representatives of foreign and Russian mass media], 1789-28-07-2014, 28 July 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>537</sup> “Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy SMI Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v khode ezhegodnoy press-konferentsii po itogam deyatelnosti rossiyskoy diplomatii v 2014 godu” [Remarks and answers to questions from mass media by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov during annual press conference on the results of the activity of Russian diplomacy in 2014], 78-21-01-2015, 21 January 2015, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2015](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2015).

<sup>537</sup> On the information aspects of the Ukrainian conflict, see Lawrence Freedman, “Ukraine and the Art of Limited War,” *Survival*, vol. 56, no. 6 (December 2014-January 2015), pp. 7-38; Maksymilian Czuperski, John ngton, DC: The Atlantic Council of the United States, May 2015); Mark Urban, “How many Russians are fighting in Ukraine?” BBC News, London, 10 March 2015, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31794523>; and James Sherr, “A War of Narratives and Arms,” in *The Russian Challenge*, Chatham House Report (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, June 2015), pp. 23-32.

<sup>538</sup> “Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy Ministra inostrannykh del S.V. Lavrova v khode vstrechi so studentami i professorsko-prepodavatel’skim sostavom MGIMO(U)” [Remarks and answers to questions by Minister of foreign affairs S.V. Lavrov during a meeting with the students and the professorial-teaching staff of the Moscow state institute of international relations (university)], 2013-01-09-2014, 1 September 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

the war on their own without any Russian support. Knowing full well that this claim was incredible, he nevertheless denied that Russian troops were fighting in eastern Ukraine. Moreover, he insisted that no evidence of a Russian invasion had been presented. “There is not a single fact that would confirm the allegation of an invasion by Russia,” he maintained even though the facts were out in the open.<sup>539</sup> The false official pretence that no Russian troops were involved in the fighting in eastern Ukraine was inculcated by Putin. “I tell you straight out and distinctly: there are no Russian troops in Ukraine,” he assured his own people.<sup>540</sup>

Rhetorically, the United States responded with forceful declarations to Russia’s new invasion of Ukraine. The Obama administration waited until four days into the large-scale Russian offensive to make its first statements in public on the situation on the ground, evidently in order to get definitive intelligence reports that Russian forces had in fact crossed the Ukrainian border and committed acts of war. Obama addressed the grave challenge in a statement on August 28, 2014, confirming the “ongoing Russian incursion into Ukraine...”<sup>541</sup> At a press conference in early September, he talked about “Russia’s aggression against Ukraine.”<sup>542</sup> Again, the initial public reaction of the United States was to strongly rebuke Russia for being in clear violation of international law. The Russian invasion, Obama unambiguously stressed, was another “brazen assault on the territorial integrity of Ukraine...”<sup>543</sup> The United States also took it upon itself to expose the Russian falsehoods by emphasizing that the forces altering the course of hostilities in eastern Ukraine so rapidly and dramatically were indeed Russian combat forces. “Now, these are the facts,” Obama said in reply to the blanket Russian denials of a military intervention. “They are provable. They are not subject to dispute.”<sup>544</sup> Biden was perfectly clear about the circumstances: “Russian combat forces with Russian

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<sup>539</sup> ”Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy SMI Ministra inostrannykh del S.V. Lavrova v khode sovmestnoy press-konferentsii po itogam peregovorov s Ministrom inostrannykh del Islamskoy Respubliki Iran M.Dzh. Zarifom” [Remarks and answers to questions from mass media by Minister of foreign affairs S.V. Lavrov during a joint press conference on the results of negotiations with Minister of foreign affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran M.J. Zarif], 2003-29-08-2014, 29 August 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>540</sup> ”Pryamaya liniya s Vladimirom Putiny” [Direct line with Vladimir Putin], 16 April 2015, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/49261>.

<sup>541</sup> ”Statement by the President,” August 28, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/28/statement-president>.

<sup>542</sup> ”Remarks by President Obama and President Ilves of Estonia in Joint Press Conference,” September 3, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/03/remarks-president-obama-and-president-ilves-estonia-joint-press-confer-0>.

<sup>543</sup> ”Remarks by President Obama to the People of Estonia,” September 3, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/03/remarks-president-obama-people-estonia>.

<sup>544</sup> Ibid.

weapons and Russian tanks crossed the border into Ukraine and have directly assisted separatists fighting Ukrainian forces.”<sup>545</sup>

According to the United States, satellite imagery on August 26, 2014 showed the Russian combat units with their tanks, artillery and air defence equipment in eastern Ukraine. Besides, U.S. officials contended that Russia’s military role in the region had become overt and undeniable. “The mask is coming off,” Ambassador Power stated amid mounting evidence of the Russian military presence.<sup>546</sup> The Obama administration understood Russia’s open but unacknowledged warfare as a reaction to the significant progress made by the Ukrainian forces. “When Ukraine started to reassert control over its territory, Russia gave up the pretense of merely supporting the separatists, and moved troops across the border,” Obama concluded.<sup>547</sup> After Russia in January 2015 reintroduced several tactical units and launched a new offensive against Ukrainian forces, U.S. official criticism of its behaviour became more pronounced. “Russia’s aggression against Ukraine is a heinous and deadly affront to long-standing international law and norms,” Obama’s national security adviser Susan E. Rice declared in a public speech at the Brookings Institution.<sup>548</sup> U.S. officials again reported that Russian troops were crossing the border and moving into Ukraine to seize more territory. “We have been tracing and we have seen exactly what they’re bringing over,” Kerry remarked.<sup>549</sup> U.S. intelligence estimated that thousands of Russian troops with an elaborate command structure were present in eastern Ukraine after the conclusion of the second armistice agreement. “I don’t think there’s any doubt in any minds anywhere in the transatlantic community or in Kyiv that there are Russian weapons, Russian fighters, Russian command and control in the east of Ukraine,” an anonymous senior administration official told the press.<sup>550</sup>

Yanukovych’s fall in February 2014 did not reopen the issue of resuming Ukraine’s drive to join NATO. The new government in Kyiv said the question was not on its agenda. Even

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<sup>545</sup> “Interview with Vice President Joe Biden by Den’s Mykola Siruk,” November 20, 2014, available at <http://ukraine.usembassy.gov/statements/biden-interview-11202014.html>.

<sup>546</sup> “Remarks at a Security Council Session on Ukraine: Ambassador Samantha Power, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations,” August 28, 2014, available at <http://usun.state.gov/remarks/6138>.

<sup>547</sup> “Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly,” September 24, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly>.

<sup>548</sup> “Remarks by National Security Advisor Susan Rice on the 2015 National Security Strategy,” February 6, 2015, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/06/remarks-national-security-advisor-susan-rice-2015-national-security-strategy>.

<sup>549</sup> “Press Availability With Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk After Their Meeting: John Kerry, Secretary of State,” February 5, 2015, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/02/237212.htm>.

<sup>550</sup> “Background Briefing on Ukraine: Senior Administration Officials,” February 12, 2015, available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/02/237462.htm>.

after the loss of Crimea, Ukrainian leaders avoided pressing for membership in NATO because they knew that the idea of Ukraine's candidacy for NATO membership had only weak domestic support. They also had to consider the fact that NATO itself had put the matter of eastward expansion aside despite the Bucharest summit declaration that Ukraine and Georgia would at some point become members of the alliance. Ukraine's apparent lack of NATO membership aspirations and NATO's reluctance to offer membership to Ukraine and Georgia prompted Obama to say that "neither Ukraine or Georgia are currently on a path to NATO membership and there has not been any immediate plans for expansion of NATO's membership."<sup>551</sup> As late as July 2014, Nuland told Congress that the Ukrainian leadership still considered NATO integration for Ukraine to be off the table. "So, it has not been a demand of the Ukrainian side," she testified at a congressional hearing.<sup>552</sup>

Russia's military intervention on a large scale in eastern Ukraine served to revive the Ukrainian interest in NATO membership. Instead of halting Ukraine's westward shift towards closer engagement with the United States and NATO, Russia's further aggression accelerated it. Following the catastrophic defeat for the Ukrainian military at the end of August 2014, the Ukrainian government declared its intention to return to the course of integration into Euro-Atlantic security institutions with the purpose of gaining membership. Its first step on the road to security in NATO was to abandon Ukraine's unilaterally proclaimed policy of non-alignment. In November 2014, President Poroshenko to Russia's fury asked the Ukrainian parliament to amend the 2010 law that barred Ukraine from joining NATO or any other alliance. By then, public attitudes towards NATO membership had changed, with a majority of Ukrainians supporting it.<sup>553</sup> The parliament in December voted overwhelmingly, 303 to 8, to approve the proposed legislative amendments, which removed the paragraphs imposing a non-bloc status on Ukraine from the law on the "fundamentals of domestic and foreign policy" and replaced them with new paragraphs requiring the country to conduct an "open foreign policy" primarily geared to ensure its security, sovereignty and territorial integrity and to deepen its cooperation with NATO in order to meet the criteria for membership.<sup>554</sup> The new legislation

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<sup>551</sup> "Press Conference by President Obama, European Council President Van Rompuy, and European Commission President Barroso," March 26, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/26/press-conference-president-obama-european-council-president-van-rompuy-a>.

<sup>552</sup> *Russia and Developments in Ukraine: Hearing*, p. 30.

<sup>553</sup> Pavel Felgenhauer, "Ukrainian Donbas Becomes a Russian Protectorate," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 11, no. 208 (November 20, 2014), available at <http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/archives/2014>.

<sup>554</sup> "Zakon Ukrayiny pro vneseniya zmin do deyakikh zakoniv Ukrayiny shchodo vidmovy Ukrayiny vid zdiysnennya polityky pozablokovosti" [Law of Ukraine on entering alterations in some laws of Ukraine



allowed Ukraine to seek NATO membership and codified its firm determination to do so once it meets NATO's standards for accession. When signing the document into law, Poroshenko emphasized that Ukraine must comply with these standards.<sup>555</sup> While Ukrainian accession to NATO remained a distant prospect, it was a prospect that Russian leaders defined as absolutely unacceptable. The vote in the Ukrainian parliament was sure to antagonize Russia and predictably drew an angry response from Moscow. Lavrov sharply criticized the move, threatening that it was counter-productive and would only cause confrontation.<sup>556</sup> Russia's longstanding efforts to roll back Ukraine's sovereignty and force it back into the fold were not to be stopped. "I do not think we have lost Ukraine," Lavrov stated ominously.<sup>557</sup>

## **U.S. Policy Response to Russia's Aggression**

Russia's aggression in Ukraine posed the gravest challenge to the United States in decades. The United States and its European allies faced the most serious and dangerous international crisis of the post-Cold War era. "The Ukrainian crisis is the most important event in Russo-American relations since the end of the Cold War and dramatically alters America's relationship with Russia," it was stated in a semi-official report of the U.S. State Department's International Security Advisory Board.<sup>558</sup> Another report, prepared by former U.S. officials, stated that "the Kremlin's aggression presents the transatlantic community with its most serious security threat in more than 30 years."<sup>559</sup> For Obama, the crisis represented the biggest challenge he had faced since becoming president of the United States. Figuring out how to counter Russia's aggressive actions was arguably the most difficult foreign-policy test of his presidency. True to his character, he approached the Ukraine crisis warily. His practical policy in response to the challenge was marked by caution and consciousness of U.S. limitations. The

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concerning Ukraine's renunciation of the conduct of a policy of non-alignment], No. 35-VIII, 23 December 2014, available at <http://zakon4.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/35-19>.

<sup>555</sup> "President has signed the Law on the abolition of the non-aligned status of Ukraine," Press office of the president of Ukraine, 29 December 2014, available at <http://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/32000.html>.

<sup>556</sup> "Otvét Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na vopros SMI po Ukraine" [Answer by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov to a mass media question about Ukraine], 2958-23-12-2014, 23 December 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>557</sup> "Interv'yú Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova programme 'Večer s Vladimirom Solov'evym' na telekanale 'Rossiya 1'" [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the programme "Evening with Vladimir Solov'ev on the television channel "Rossiya 1"], 2973-25-12-2014, 25 December 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>558</sup> *Report on U.S.-Russia Relations* (Washington, DC: International Security Advisory Board, U.S. Department of State, December 9, 2014), p. 1.

<sup>559</sup> Ivo Daalder, Michele Flournoy, John Herbst, Jan Lodal, Steven Pifer, James Stavridis, Strobe Talbott and Charles Wald, *Preserving Ukraine's Independence, Resisting Russian Aggression: What the United States and NATO Must Do* (Washington, DC: The Atlantic Council of the United States, February 2015), p. 6.



Obama administration's handling of the crisis reflected its broad global policy of circumspect restraint in the use of American power, minimizing U.S. active involvement in civil wars and other conflicts around the world.<sup>560</sup>

As the popular protests in Kyiv evolved into a revolution removing Yanukovych from power, the United States became more actively involved in Ukraine and reassumed transatlantic Western leadership, which it had temporarily left to the EU. The U.S. level of engagement increased dramatically, as evidenced in visits of senior officials to Ukraine.<sup>561</sup> The Obama administration reaffirmed the "deep and abiding" commitment of the United States to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>562</sup> U.S. leaders, it was stated, "strongly support Ukraine's territorial integrity and its unity."<sup>563</sup> Assuring Ukraine of America's "strong support," Obama at a meeting with the Ukrainian prime minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk in the White House said that "we will stand with Ukraine and the Ukrainian people that that territorial integrity and sovereignty is maintained."<sup>564</sup> However, Obama made it clear that he ruled out the use of U.S. military force to assist Ukraine in restoring its territorial integrity. Furthermore, a U.S. military intervention in Ukraine to prevent Russia from more aggression was not an option he was considering. Interviewed by an NBC affiliate, Obama said: "We are not going to be getting into a military excursion in Ukraine."<sup>565</sup> In another television interview, he used even more drastic language to stress that there was no need for the United States to plunge into a U.S.-Russian

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<sup>560</sup> Adam Quinn, "The art of declining politely: Obama's prudent presidency and the waning of American power," *International Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 4 (July 2011), pp. 803-824; Owen Harries and Tom Switzer, "Leading from Behind: Third Time a Charm?" *The American Interest*, vol. 8, no. 5 (May/June 2013), pp. 6-15; Robert G. Kaufman, "Prudence and the Obama Doctrine," *Orbis*, vol. 58, no. 3 (Summer 2014), pp. 441-459; Fred Kaplan, "Obama's Way: The President in Practice," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 95, no. 1 (January/February 2016), pp. 46-63.

<sup>561</sup> Vice President Biden visited Ukraine in April and November 2014, Secretary Kerry made a trip to the country in March 2014, Deputy Secretary of State William J. Burns went there in February 2014 and Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Wendy R. Sherman in March 2014. Assistant Secretary Nuland travelled to Ukraine five times between November 2013 and March 2014 and returned again in October and November 2014 (in December 2013, she caught the attention of the media while handing out food to pro-EU activists in Kyiv). Assistant Secretary Chollet of the U.S. Department of Defence came to Ukraine in June 2014. In addition, it has been officially confirmed that John O. Brennan, the director of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, was there in April 2014.

<sup>562</sup> "Remarks at a Solo Press Availability: John Kerry, Secretary of State," March 4, 2014, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/03/222882.htm>; *Syria Spillover: The Growing Threat of Terrorism and Sectarianism in the Middle East and Ukraine Update: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 113th Congress, 2nd Session*, S. Hrg. 113-603 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2015), p. 4.

<sup>563</sup> "Statement and Q&A at U.S. Embassy Kyiv, Ukraine: William J. Burns, Deputy Secretary of State," February 26, 2014, available at <http://www.state.gov/s/d/2014/222569.htm>.

<sup>564</sup> "Remarks by President Obama and Ukraine Prime Minister Yatsenyuk after Bilateral Meeting," March 12, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/12/remarks-president-obama-and-ukraine-prime-minister-yatsenyuk-after-bilat>.

<sup>565</sup> "President Obama: No U.S. Military Action in Ukraine: NBC 7 Exclusive Interview with the President [by Mark Mullen]," NBC 7 (KNSD-TV), San Diego, March 19, 2014, available at <http://www.nbcsandiegog.com/news/local/Obama-Military-Action-Russia-Ukraine-Crimea-Tensions-Troops-251067481.html>.

military conflict: “We do not need to trigger an actual war with Russia.”<sup>566</sup> Obama saw the Ukraine crisis as an international security problem to be managed peacefully without using armed force. His unwillingness to intervene militarily to come to Ukraine’s aid did not mean that he did not consider Ukraine to be a vital strategic interest. Russia’s renewed military action in Ukraine in August 2014 clearly did not lead him to reassess his self-restraint. “We are not taking military action to solve the Ukrainian problem,” he emphasized in a statement.<sup>567</sup> Leading members of Congress supported this measured stance. Even Republicans who otherwise were critical of Obama’s cautious approach and pushed for more assertive action did not criticize him for ruling out military force. Senator McCain agreed that the United States had no military option in Ukraine.<sup>568</sup> He certainly did not advocate sending U.S. troops to the country.<sup>569</sup>

While the United States obviously would not take military action against Russia to end the occupation of Crimea, a main element of U.S. policy to address the Russian challenge was economic and military support for Ukraine. As Obama said: “Ukraine needs more than words.”<sup>570</sup> Increased U.S. military assistance to Ukraine did not include the provision of arms, however. Administration officials kept saying that the United States was providing Ukraine with non-lethal equipment and that the question of providing weapons remained under interagency review, which meant that the president did not make a decision.<sup>571</sup>

Among those who criticized the wary policy of withholding arms deliveries was McCain. He advocated sending defensive weapons to the Ukrainians so they could better defend themselves.<sup>572</sup> By early 2015, in the light of Russian escalation of violence in eastern Ukraine, the tone of the debate in the United States had largely shifted in favour of providing Ukraine with such weapons, including anti-tank missiles. The previously mentioned report of former

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<sup>566</sup> “Mike Bush Meets with President Obama,” KSDK News Channel 5, St. Louis, March 19, 2014, available at <http://www.ksdk.com/story/news/politics/2014/03/19/mike-bush-meets-with-barack-obama/6627721>.

<sup>567</sup> “Statement by the President,” August 28, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/28/statement-president>.

<sup>568</sup> *Congressional Record*, vol. 160, no. 36 (March 4, 2014), p. S1261.

<sup>569</sup> “The Situation Room: ...Interview with Sen. John McCain,” Cable News Network, February 28, 2014, available at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1402/28/sitroom.01.html>.

<sup>570</sup> “Remarks by President Obama to the People of Estonia,” September 3, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/03/remarks-president-obama-people-estonia>.

<sup>571</sup> *Russia’s Destabilization of Ukraine: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 113th Congress, 2nd Session*, Serial No. 113-176 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2014), p. 8; *Ukraine Under Siege: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 114th Congress, 1st Session*, Serial No. 114-21 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2015), p. 13.

<sup>572</sup> “State of the Union with Candy Crowley: Interview with John McCain...,” Cable News Network, March 16, 2014, available at <http://transcript.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1403/16/sotu.01.html>.

U.S. officials recommended exactly that.<sup>573</sup> Obama came under increasing pressure from advisers inside his own administration and from members of Congress to arm Ukraine, but he resisted the pressure and remained reluctant to send any weapons.<sup>574</sup> To the disappointment of many lawmakers, he refused to carry out a congressional mandate to provide defensive weapons to Ukraine. The Ukraine Freedom Support Act of 2014 authorized, but did not require, the president to support Ukraine with defensive weapons.<sup>575</sup> Obama signed the legislation but did not change U.S. policy. When the Ukrainian defence minister visited the United States in September 2015, the issue of providing weapons was not even discussed.<sup>576</sup>

In explaining the denial of weapons assistance to Ukraine, U.S. officials argued that the principal leverage of the United States in a conflict involving a nuclear-armed state was economic and diplomatic. Accordingly, the Obama administration focused on economic and diplomatic instruments, imposing increasingly severe economic sanctions on Russia and pursuing an intensive campaign of diplomatic isolation of the country.<sup>577</sup> The administration had a second line of argument. It was concerned that sending U.S. weapons to Ukraine would lead to an escalation of violence and give Russia a pretext for further military involvement. As Deputy Secretary of State Anthony J. Blinken indicated, arms transfers would play to Russia's strength. Anything the United States did to enhance the ability of Ukraine to counter Russian weapons was likely to be matched or outdone by Russia. More broadly, the administration subscribed to the estimate that Russia would always maintain escalation dominance in the area and thus be able to overpower the Ukrainians should they attempt to intensify the conflict.<sup>578</sup>

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<sup>573</sup> Daalder, Flournoy, Herbst, Lodal, Pifer, Stavridis, Talbott and Wald, *Preserving Ukraine's Independence, Resisting Russian Aggression*, pp. 1, 5, 8.

<sup>574</sup> Peter Baker, "Obama Said to Resist Growing Pressure from All Sides to Arm Ukraine," *The New York Times*, March 10, 2015, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/11/us/politics/obama-said-to-resist-growing-pressure-from-all-sides-to-arm-ukraine.html>; Jennifer Steinhauer and David M. Herszenhorn, "Defying Obama, Many in Congress Press to Arm Ukraine," *The New York Times*, June 11, 2015, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/12/world/europe/defying-obama-many-in-congress-press-to-arm-ukraine.html>.

<sup>575</sup> *Ukraine Freedom Support Act of 2014*, Public Law 113-272, December 18, 2014 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2014).

<sup>576</sup> "Joint Press Briefing by Secretary Carter and Ukrainian Defense Minister Colonel-General Poltorak in the Pentagon Briefing Room," September 24, 2015, available at <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/620453/joint-press-briefing-by-secretary-carter-and-ukrainian-defense-minister-colonel>.

<sup>577</sup> "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, National Security Advisor Susan Rice, and Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes," March 21, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/21/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-national-security-advisor-susa>.

<sup>578</sup> "Remarks on Transatlantic Cooperation and the Crisis in Ukraine: Anthony J. Blinken, Deputy Secretary of State," March 5, 2015, available at <http://www.state.gov/s/d/2015/238644.htm>.

From the start of Russia's military intervention in Ukraine, the Obama administration made absolutely clear that there would be costs to Russia for violating Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and that the costs would increase significantly if the Russian aggression continued. The administration's sanctions policy towards Russia started cautiously on a small scale in March 2014 with sanctions against Russian individuals. In the spring and summer of 2014, the possibility of moving from largely symbolic individual sanctions to broad sectoral sanctions targeting key sectors of the Russian economy was examined in Washington. A shift to sanctioning entire Russian economic sectors was described by administration officials as a very significant and stringent step. "Now that is serious business," Kerry noted.<sup>579</sup> The purpose of the shift under discussion, of course, was to increase the pressure on Russia and thereby persuade the Russian leadership to cease its aggression. "Our goal is to get Putin to change course," Nuland explained.<sup>580</sup>

On July 16, 2014, Obama finally announced targeted sanctions against the Russian economy's financial, energy and defence sectors.<sup>581</sup> The United States introduced these sanctions unilaterally. Obama at first hesitated to act in a unilateral fashion, insisting that economic sanctions should be imposed on Russia jointly by the United States and the EU. He had a basic multilateralist world outlook and sought to secure worldwide U.S. hegemony through multilateral action rather than unilateral initiative. But the serious Ukraine crisis required assertion of strong American leadership. To his credit, Obama rose to the challenge. Evidently realizing that unilateralism sometimes really is effective assertive leadership that compels others to follow, he decided to move ahead with unilateral sanctions. Kerry stressed that Obama "took the lead" by unilaterally ratcheting up Western sanctions to hit the Russian economy.<sup>582</sup>

On July 29, 2014, Obama announced more extensive U.S. sectoral sanctions.<sup>583</sup> The same day, the EU followed the U.S. lead and agreed to impose sectoral economic sanctions on

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<sup>579</sup> *National Security and Foreign Policy Priorities in the Fiscal Year 2015 International Affairs Budget: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 113th Congress, 2nd Session*, S. Hrg. 113-585 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2015), p. 21.

<sup>580</sup> *Russia's Destabilization of Ukraine: Hearing*, p. 35.

<sup>581</sup> "Remarks by the President on Foreign Policy," July 16, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/07/16/remarks-president-foreign-policy>.

<sup>582</sup> "Interview With George Stephanopoulos of ABC's This Week: John Kerry, Secretary of State," July 20, 2014, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/07/229506.htm>.

<sup>583</sup> "Statement by the President on Ukraine," July 29, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/07/29/statement-president-ukraine>.

Russia in close coordination with the United States. On September 12, 2014, the United States and the EU acted together to apply major additional sanctions.<sup>584</sup>

## **Russia Officially Declares an Adversary**

In the early phase of the Ukrainian crisis, the Obama administration tried unconvincingly to establish that the United States was not and should not be in a geopolitical competition with Russia over Ukraine, even though the media perceived the crisis as a spiraling East-West confrontation. “I don’t think there’s a competition between the United States and Russia,” Obama said in his first public remarks on the crisis. He maintained that his administration did not view Ukraine as “some Cold War chessboard,” by which he meant an arena of traditional U.S.-Russian rivalry.<sup>585</sup> “What we need now to do is not get into an old Cold War confrontation,” Kerry cautioned the day before Russia’s invasion of Crimea.<sup>586</sup> After the invasion, he said: “This does not have to be and should not be an East/West struggle. This is not about Russia and the U.S.”<sup>587</sup> He also denied that the situation in Ukraine had to be a zero-sum game.<sup>588</sup> There was, however, a distinct ambivalence in how administration officials viewed the complicated U.S. relationship with Russia. Deputy Secretary of State William J. Burns acknowledged the element of competition in U.S.-Russian relations.<sup>589</sup> Lower-level officials talked about Ukraine in terms of a battleground between the United States and Russia. “While Russia is not an adversary, its actions in Ukraine are deeply adversarial,” Nuland’s deputy Eric Rubin asserted.<sup>590</sup>

Obama’s and Kerry’s initial statements downplaying the competitive aspect of the Ukraine crisis should be read as rhetorical attempts to keep tensions down and avoid escalation of the crisis. Both the United States and Russia, though for different reasons and pursuing opposite strategic objectives, initially preferred to portray the crisis as an internal Ukrainian

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<sup>584</sup> “Statement by the President on New Sanctions Related to Russia,” September 11, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/11/statement-president-new-sanctions-related-russia>.

<sup>585</sup> “Press Conference by President Obama, President Peña Nieto, and Prime Minister Harper,” February 19, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/02/19/press-conference-president-obama-president-pe-nieto-and-prime-minister-h>.

<sup>586</sup> “Interview With Andrea Mitchell of MSNBC: John Kerry, Secretary of State,” February 26, 2014, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/02/222588.htm>.

<sup>587</sup> “Interview With David Gregory of NBC’s Meet the Press: John Kerry, Secretary of State,” March 2, 2014, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/03/222721.htm>.

<sup>588</sup> “Interview With Bob Schieffer of CBS’s Face the Nation: John Kerry, Secretary of State,” March 2, 2014, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/03/222783.htm>.

<sup>589</sup> *Syria Spillover: The Growing Threat of Terrorism and Sectarianism in the Middle East and Ukraine Update: Hearing*, p. 29.

<sup>590</sup> *U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Ukraine: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 113th Congress, 2nd Session*, Serial No. 113-129 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2014), p. 10.

affair. The United States sought to assuage Russian suspicions and fears about its geopolitical motives and dissuade Russia from intervening in Ukraine, while Russia, after its intervention, did not admit to being a party to the Ukrainian conflict and tried to conceal its projections of military power.

Former presidential candidate Romney found it appropriate in connection with the Ukraine crisis to restate his 2012 campaign description of Russia as a geopolitical adversary. Russia, he pointed out in an interview on CBS's "Face the Nation," had very different strategic interests and ambitions than those of the United States.<sup>591</sup> Obama responded testily that he did not consider the Russians a primary threat. "They don't pose the number-one national security threat to the United States," he said.<sup>592</sup> Notwithstanding this remark and later public declarations of a desire not to seek conflict or confrontation with Russia, the United States actually pursued a more antagonistic and confrontational Russia policy. After the Russian occupation of Crimea, Obama's national security team did a "complete review of U.S. relations with Russia," as Nuland put it.<sup>593</sup> As a result of that fundamental reassessment, the administration suspended most bilateral cooperation with Russia and forged a new long-term approach to Russia that entailed containment and isolation and only strictly limited engagement. Obama's personal dislike of Putin had intensified. He concluded that he would never have a constructive relationship with the Russian leader, aides said.<sup>594</sup> In U.S. policy, Russia acquired the status of a true outlaw pariah state living in disgrace. "Russia has found itself isolated, disinvented and diminished," Nuland observed.<sup>595</sup> Finally, confirming the obvious, Secretary of Defence Charles Hagel conceded on ABC's "This Week" that Russia was "an adversary in Ukraine, sure."<sup>596</sup>

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<sup>591</sup> "Face The Nation Transcripts, March 23, 2014: Romney, Durbin, Ayotte," CBS News, March 23, 2014, available at <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/face-the-nation-transcripts-march-23-2014-romney-durbin-ayotte>.

<sup>592</sup> "Press Conference with President Obama and Prime Minister Rutte of the Netherlands," March 25, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/25/press-conference-president-obama-and-prime-minister-rutte-netherlands>.

<sup>593</sup> *Ukraine: Confronting Internal Challenges and External: Hearing before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 113th Congress, 2nd Session* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2015), p. 18.

<sup>594</sup> Peter Baker, "If Not a Cold War, a Return to a Chilly Rivalry," *The New York Times*, March 18, 2014, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/03/19/world/europe/if-not-a-new-cold-war-a-distinct-chill-in-the-air.html>; Peter Baker, "In Cold War Echo, Obama Strategy Writes Off Putin," *The New York Times*, April 19, 2014, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/20/world/europe/in-cold-war-echo-obama-strategy-writes-off-putin.html>

<sup>595</sup> *Ukraine: Confronting Internal Challenges and External: Hearing*, p. 8.

<sup>596</sup> "'This Week' Transcript: Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, Sen. Marco Rubio," ABC News, May 11, 2014, available at <http://abcnews.go.com/ThisWeek/week-transcript-defense-secretary-chuck-hagel-sen-marco/story?id=23667691>.



As the Ukraine crisis escalated, it became more difficult to pretend that the United States and Russia were not locked in a classic geopolitical struggle in Ukraine. In fact, the official rhetoric implying that no such struggle was occurring disappeared after Russia's open acts of war. Threat perceptions came to the fore instead. Obama called Russia's aggression against Ukraine "a threat to the world..."<sup>597</sup> When Obama in a speech to the United Nations General Assembly listed dangers and problems in the world, he mentioned "Russian aggression in Europe" second after the Ebola virus but before Islamist terrorism in Iraq and Syria.<sup>598</sup> It was a venomous rhetorical sting that greatly angered the Russian leaders and fuelled the antagonism between the United States and Russia.

Despite his careful policy of restraint, Obama clearly found himself increasingly bogged down in exactly the kind of great-power rivalry he had hoped to transcend. In Moscow, the new signals from Washington were duly noticed. "The USA regards Ukraine as the scene for a geopolitical struggle," Lavrov observed.<sup>599</sup> Meanwhile, the Ukrainian leadership sought to demonstrate that the United States, like Russia, was in fact a party in Ukraine's war. Addressing both houses of the U.S. Congress before meeting with Obama in the White House, Poroshenko stressed that "it is America's war too," since Ukraine was fighting for the same basic societal values that the United States stands for and believes in: freedom and democracy.<sup>600</sup>

In December 2014, the International Security Advisory Board, in its report to Kerry, took note of the intensifying U.S.-Russian competition. It described the relationship between the United States and Russia as "adversarial and confrontational" with "very strong elements of conflicting interests..."<sup>601</sup> The Obama administration's own 2015 National Security Strategy report noted that a threat to the security of the United States arose from the Russian intervention in Ukraine.<sup>602</sup>

By July 2015, it was clear that the national security bureaucracy in the United States was deeply concerned by Russia's aggressive behaviour. At a Senate Armed Services Committee

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<sup>597</sup> "Remarks by President Obama at the University of Queensland," November 15, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/15/remarks-president-obama-university-queensland>.

<sup>598</sup> "Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly," September 24, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly>.

<sup>599</sup> "Interv'yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossi S.V. Lavrova agentstvu ITAR-TASS" [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the agency ITAR-TASS], 2099-11-09-2014, 10 September 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>600</sup> *Congressional Record*, vol. 160, no. 134 (September 18, 2014), pp. H7680-H7683.

<sup>601</sup> *Report on U.S.-Russia Relations*, p. 2.

<sup>602</sup> *National Security Strategy* (2015), p. 19.



hearing on his nomination as the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph F. Dunford Jr. made a surprising remark that stirred up the audience. Under questioning from Senator Joseph Manchin III, the man Obama had chosen to be his next top military adviser testified that he believed Russia was the chief national security threat faced by the United States. Manchin asked: "What would you consider the greatest threat to our national security?" Dunford replied: "My assessment today, Senator, is that Russia presents the greatest threat to our national security. And if you look at their behavior, it's nothing short of alarming."<sup>603</sup> The White House press secretary immediately commented that although the Obama administration was "mindful of the threat from Russia," the general's testimony did not necessarily reflect a consensus view of the president's national security team.<sup>604</sup> When asked at a Pentagon press briefing if he agreed with Dunford's assessment, Secretary of Defence Ashton B. Carter came close to actually doing so. Carter stated that Russia posed a "very, very significant threat" and then added: "Vladimir Putin's Russia behaves, ... in very important respects, as an antagonist."<sup>605</sup>

## **In Defence of World Order**

The atmosphere of increasing apprehension, hostility and confrontation was accompanied by triumphalist rhetoric of the Obama administration that implicitly acknowledged the hard reality of U.S.-Russian geopolitical competition. Obama took offence at the portrayal of Putin by some in the West as a strongman and master strategist. He disputed the notion that Putin had demonstrated superior strategic skills and outmaneuvered the president of the United States and other Western leaders by seizing Ukrainian territory.<sup>606</sup> According to Obama, Russia's armed intervention in Ukraine was not a masterful display of strength. He argued, not without reason, that the opposite was actually true. "I think it's a mistake to think that somehow Mr. Putin reflected strength in this situation," he said. In Obama's view, Putin acted from a position of weakness. Putin's resort to force, Obama reasoned, was a scrambling reaction to

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<sup>603</sup> Phil Stewart and David Alexander, "Russia is top U.S. national security threat: Gen. Dunford," Reuters, London, July 9, 2015, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-defense-general-dunsmore-idUSKCN0PJ28S20150709>.

<sup>604</sup> "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest," July 9, 2015, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/07/09/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-792015>.

<sup>605</sup> "Department of Defense Press Briefing with Secretary Carter in the Pentagon Press Briefing Room," August 20, 2015, available at <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/614330/departments-of-defense-press-briefing-with-secretary-carter-in-the-pentagon-pres>.

<sup>606</sup> "State of the Union With Candy Crowley: Interview With President Barack Obama...", Cable News Network, December 21, 2014, available at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1412/21/sotu.01.html>; "Transcript: President Obama's Full NPR Interview," National Public Radio, December 29, 2014, available at <http://www.npr.org/2014/12/29/372485968/transcript-president-obamas-full-npr-interview>.

Ukraine liberating itself from Russia's geopolitical grip.<sup>607</sup> It was Obama's belief that Putin saw Ukraine escaping his control and acted accordingly: "Putin acted in Ukraine in response to a client state that was about to slip out of his grasp."<sup>608</sup> Obama thought the Ukrainian revolution and the emergence of a pro-Western regime in Kyiv caught Putin by surprise, and he regarded Putin's decision to invade Ukraine as an improvisation sparked by Russia's sudden loss of influence, which meant a serious weakening of Russia's overall strategic position in the post-Soviet space.<sup>609</sup>

Obama's analysis was backed up by other administration officials. "Russia is not playing with the strongest hand," Kerry noted.<sup>610</sup> Speaking in zero-sum terms, an anonymous senior official called attention to the fact that the Russians were in the position of "having lost the government that they backed in Kyiv" and now having to face a pro-Western, democratic government there.<sup>611</sup> Deputy Secretary Blinken characterized the regime change in Ukraine as a "profound strategic loss for Russia that will become more and more clear over time." Russia, he argued, "has in effect lost 93 percent of Ukraine." That part of the country, his argument went, "is now more united and more Western-oriented than ever before."<sup>612</sup>

Interestingly, both experts in Russian affairs and former Bush administration officials supported the argumentation of the Obama administration.<sup>613</sup> David J. Kramer, who previously served as an assistant secretary of state, agreed with Obama that Putin acted out of

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<sup>607</sup> "Transcript and Audio: President Obama's Full NPR Interview," National Public Radio, May 29, 2014, available at <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/05/29/316475458/transcript-and-audio-president-obamas-full-npr-interview>.

<sup>608</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine: The president explains his hardest decisions about America's role in the world," *The Atlantic*, vol. 173, no. 3 (April 2016), p. 87.

<sup>609</sup> "Press Conference with President Obama and Prime Minister Rutte of the Netherlands," March 25, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/25/press-conference-president-obama-and-prime-minister-rutte-netherlands>; "Statement by the President," August 28, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/28/statement-president>; "Fareed Zakaria GPS: Interview with President Barack Obama," Cable News Network, February 1, 2015, available at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1502/01/fzgps.01.html>.

<sup>610</sup> "Interview With Chris Cuomo of CNN New Day: John Kerry, Secretary of State," May 28, 2014, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/05/226587.htm>.

<sup>611</sup> "Briefing on the Situation in Ukraine: ... Senior Administration Officials," March 2, 2014, available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/03/222727.htm>.

<sup>612</sup> "Remarks on Transatlantic Cooperation and the Crisis in Ukraine: Anthony J. Blinken, Deputy Secretary of State," March 5, 2015, available at <http://www.state.gov/s/d/2015/238644.htm>.

<sup>613</sup> Jeffrey Mankoff, "Russia's Latest Land Grab: How Putin Won Crimea and Lost Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 93, no. 3 (May/June 2014), pp. 60-68; Michael McFaul, "Moscow's Choice," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 93, no. 6 (November/December 2014), pp. 167-171; Stephen Sestanovich, "How the West Has Won," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 93, no. 6 (November/December 2013), pp. 171-175.

weakness, not out of strength.<sup>614</sup> “Putin is playing a weak hand,” Bush’s national security adviser Stephen Hadley claimed. “He’s actually in, quite objectively, a weak situation.”<sup>615</sup>

Following the logic of the zero-sum game, the Obama administration coupled the idea that Russia had lost Ukraine to a triumphalist conception of the United States as the victor of a geopolitical battle over Ukraine. Actually, the administration implied that the United States had in effect already won the greater struggle for eastern Europe. It was administration policy to stand up to Russian attempts to establish a sphere of influence there. In a stirring speech in Warsaw, Poland, Obama proudly proclaimed that Russia’s strategic ambitions in the region had been thwarted. On a triumphal note, he declared: “The days of empire and spheres of influence are over.”<sup>616</sup> In view of the continuing Russian machinations against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states in the space of the former Soviet Union, this judgement was perhaps overly optimistic.

The triumphalist theme in the Obama administration’s rhetoric became more pronounced as the harsh sanctions regime put in place by the United States in cooperation with the EU and several other international partners began to have a significant impact on the Russian economy. Administration officials insisted that the economic sanctions were effective. According to Nuland, they were “biting deeply,” and Obama himself stated that they had “a devastating effect on the Russian economy.”<sup>617</sup> There is no denying that the successive rounds of Western sanctions were hitting hard, particularly as world oil prices declined dramatically. The sharp decline in oil prices magnified the impact of sanctions against Russia’s oil export business. As Nuland pointed out, falling oil prices and sanctions were a powerful combination, which she called “a really toxic cocktail...”<sup>618</sup>

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<sup>614</sup> *Ukraine – Countering Russian Intervention and Supporting a Democratic State: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 113th Congress, 2nd Session*, S. Hrg. 113-602 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2015), pp. 70-71.

<sup>615</sup> “Transcript: The Struggle for Europe,” The Atlantic Council, Washington, DC, April 30, 2014, available at <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/news/transcripts/transcript-the-struggle-for-europe>.

<sup>616</sup> “Remarks by President Obama at 25th Anniversary of Freedom Day,” June 4, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/04/remarks-president-obama-25th-anniversary-freedom-day>.

<sup>617</sup> “Interview With Latvian Television (LTV): Victoria Nuland, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs,” November 20, 2014, available at <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2014/nov/234333.htm>; “Remarks by President Obama at G20 Press Conference,” November 16, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/16/remarks-president-obama-g20-press-conference-november-16-2014>.

<sup>618</sup> “Remarks at the American Enterprise Institute: Victoria Nuland, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs,” December 17, 2014, available at <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2014/dec/235495.htm>.

Even critics of the Obama administration have had to admit that the sanctions had a real, widespread effect on Russia.<sup>619</sup> Kramer, the former State Department official, conceded that the administration had reacted to Russia's invasion of Ukraine "more strongly than anticipated..."<sup>620</sup> The U.S. reaction was much stronger than the Russian leaders expected. Russia's readiness to intervene in Ukraine was based on the delusional assumption that the response from the United States and its allies would be limited to political and diplomatic protests and only symbolic practical measures. "I do not think that economic sanctions can be considered seriously," Lavrov stated sanguinely in May 2014.<sup>621</sup> Given the results of the economic sanctions, the Obama administration disagreed with the talk about an expansion of Russian power and the events in Ukraine being an example of a resurgent Russia.<sup>622</sup> In his State of the Union address before Congress in January 2015, Obama reported that Russia's economy was "in tatters."<sup>623</sup> The Russian gross domestic product increased by less than one percent in 2014 and declined by almost four percent in 2015. It is projected to decline in 2016 as well. A triumphant United States has thus severely punished Russia by weakening its economy, but the sanctions have not worked in the sense of producing Russian policy change. Russia has not backed down in Ukraine and changed course. In February 2015, Nuland told the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations that the sanctions regime "has not resulted in changing Russian policy."<sup>624</sup> Obama himself admitted: "Mr. Putin has not been stopped so far."<sup>625</sup>

The triumphalist theme about a weakened Russia was coupled with a repeat of primacist rhetoric on U.S. hegemony, superior strength, indispensability and exceptionality. It was asserted in speeches and other remarks by U.S. officials that the United States since the beginning of Russia's intervention in Ukraine had mobilized and led the West in isolating Russia diplomatically and in imposing economic costs for its illegal actions. The United States,

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<sup>619</sup> Emma Ashford, "Not-So-Smart Sanctions: The Failure of Western Restrictions Against Russia," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 95, no. 1 (January/February 2016), p. 116.

<sup>620</sup> David J. Kramer, "The Ukraine Invasion: One Year Later," *World Affairs*, vol. 177, no. 6 (March/April 2015), p. 14.

<sup>621</sup> "Interv'yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova telekanalu 'Blumberg'" [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the television channel "Bloomberg"], 1169-14-05-2014, 14 May 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>622</sup> "Remarks by President Obama to the United Nations General Assembly," September 28, 2015, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/28/remarks-president-obama-united-nations-general-assembly>.

<sup>623</sup> "Remarks by the President in State of the Union Address," January 20, 2015, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/20/remarks-president-state-union-address-january-20-2015>.

<sup>624</sup> *Ukraine Under Siege: Hearing*, p. 41.

<sup>625</sup> "Fareed ZakariaGPS: Interview with President Barack Obama," Cable News Network, February 1, 2015, available at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1502/01/fzgps.01.html>.

it was said, had built a broad international coalition of allies and partners to oppose Russian aggression against Ukraine and support Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>626</sup> The persistent efforts to rally many countries against Russia were hailed as a successful example of U.S. global leadership, indicating how the United States with steady resolve leads the international community through coalition building and multilateral cooperation. The building of the anti-Russian coalition was "an application of American leadership," Obama declared.<sup>627</sup> Obama emphasized that strong U.S. leadership had been "critical throughout that process."<sup>628</sup> The United States led the drive for economic sanctions, and the EU followed suit. According to the U.S. narrative, Western Europe was pushed into agreeing to adopt a tougher sanctions policy. With undiplomatic bluntness, Biden publicly claimed that the European countries would not have imposed economic sanctions on Russia inflicting "real costs" on the Russian economy but for the vigorous leadership of the United States. "It is true they did not want to do that," he said. He strongly implied that the United States had applied considerable pressure to the EU and actually forced the union's hand. The reluctant Europeans finally joined the sanctions against Russia because of "America's leadership and the President of the United States insisting, oft times almost having to embarrass Europe to stand up and take economic hits to impose costs."<sup>629</sup>

For Obama, his administration's management of the Ukraine crisis proved beyond all doubt that "the United States is and will remain the one indispensable nation in the world."<sup>630</sup> Another way of characterizing America's unique global leadership position was to talk about the nation in terms of exceptionality. "I believe America is exceptional," Obama had told the

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<sup>626</sup> "Statement by the President on Ukraine," March 17, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/17/statement-president-ukraine>; "Statement by the President on Ukraine," July 29, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/07/29/statement-president-ukraine>; "Remarks by President Obama at the University of Queensland," November 15, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/15/remarks-president-obama-university-queensland>.

<sup>627</sup> "Transcript and Audio: President Obama's Full NPR Interview," National Public Radio, May 29, 2014, available at <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/05/29/316475458/transcript-and-audio-president-obamas-full-npr-interview>.

<sup>628</sup> "Remarks by President Obama at NATO Summit Press Conference," September 5, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/05/remarks-president-obama-nato-summit-press-conference>.

<sup>629</sup> "Remarks by the Vice President at the John F. Kennedy Forum," October 3, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-vice-president-john-f-kennedy-forum>.

<sup>630</sup> "Remarks by the President to the American Legion National Convention," August 26, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/26/remarks-president-american-legion-national-convention>.

United Nations General Assembly in September 2103.<sup>631</sup> In May 2014, he went further, saying “I believe in American exceptionalism with every fiber of my being.”<sup>632</sup> Obama believed that the United States was better positioned to lead the international community than it had been in a long time. In contrast to Russia’s weakened state, “America has rarely been stronger relative to the rest of the world,” he claimed.<sup>633</sup> Accordingly, the United States was going to continue to lead, not only in support of Ukraine but on other matters as well. “America must always lead on the world stage,” Obama maintained.<sup>634</sup> Rice, his national security adviser, stated: “Across a range of issues, with an array of partners, the United States is proudly shouldering the responsibilities of global leadership.”<sup>635</sup>

“American leadership is a global force for good,” the Obama administration’s 2015 National Security Strategy report stated frankly.<sup>636</sup> Russian leaders strongly disagree with that judgement. While the historical record indicates that the United States is, on balance, a benevolent superpower and hegemon, they beg to differ.<sup>637</sup> They conceive of the United States as a predatory power that does not play a positive role in world politics. In their view, American exceptionality and leadership are not beneficial, as Putin pointed out to the Valdai international discussion club in Moscow.<sup>638</sup> On the contrary, U.S. hegemonic ambitions are perceived as a threat. “This is the most serious threat to world order, the attempts – presently led by the USA – to maintain the dominant positions of the historical West in the world system,” Lavrov contended in an interview.<sup>639</sup> “Unfortunately, the USA continues to follow the line of ensuring American ‘leadership,’ as they say repeatedly, and exclusivity in the international arena as actually the only method of conducting affairs,” he lamented before the

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<sup>631</sup> “Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly,” September 24, 2013, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-United-nations-general-assembly>.

<sup>632</sup> “Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony,” May 28, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-united-states-military-academy-commencement-ceremony>.

<sup>633</sup> Ibid.

<sup>634</sup> Ibid.

<sup>635</sup> “Remarks by National Security Advisor Susan Rice on the 2015 National Security Strategy,” February 6, 2015, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/06/remarks-national-security-advisor-susan-rice-2015-national-security-strategy>.

<sup>636</sup> *National Security Strategy* (2015), p. 2.

<sup>637</sup> Stephen G. Brooks, “Can we identify a benevolent hegemon?” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 25, no. 1 (March 2012), pp. 27-38.

<sup>638</sup> “Zasedanie Mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba ‘Valdai’” [Meeting of the International discussion club “Valdai”], 24 October 2014, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/46860>.

<sup>639</sup> “Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova gazete ‘Kommersant,’ opublikovannoe 25 dekabrya 2014 goda” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs S.V. Lavrov for the newspaper “Kommersant,” published on 25 December 2014], 2969-25-12-2014, 25 December 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).



State Duma.<sup>640</sup> Referring to American leadership as “notorious,” Lavrov said: “I will stress again that the line pursued by Washington of constantly emphasizing its exclusivity is harmful.”<sup>641</sup>

In Washington, it is well known that Russia intensely dislikes America’s leadership role and seeks to undermine it worldwide. The Obama administration has progressively interpreted Russia’s actions in Ukraine as a revisionist challenge to the entire U.S.-led international order. Grand strategic interpretations of the Ukrainian crisis are rare in U.S. public statements. There are few open speculations by U.S. officials about Russia’s long-term geopolitical motives and intentions, although the subject surely has been discussed extensively in internal government meetings. The available statements do, however, form a distinct thematic pattern concerning the Russian challenge. In March 2014, Nuland indicated that Russia’s power play in Ukraine likely aimed at replacing the pro-Western regime in Kyiv with a pro-Russian one. “I think this is our concern, that the goal here is to destabilize all of Ukraine, to have political and economic control over the country,” she said.<sup>642</sup> At the same time, U.S. officials realized that a successful Russian attempt to regain control of Ukrainian policy-making would resonate well beyond Ukraine. “A great deal is at stake in Ukraine today,” Burns noted soon after Russia’s invasion of Crimea.<sup>643</sup> Kerry said the Russian moves in Ukraine were a “wake-up call.” He depicted Russia’s destabilization policy against the Kyiv regime as an element of a massive revisionist agenda. What that policy showed was the extent of Russia’s revisionist ambitions. “Russia seeks to change the security landscape of Eastern and Central Europe,” Kerry said, not specifying what changes Russia wanted to achieve.<sup>644</sup> Nuland indicated that Putin wanted

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<sup>640</sup> “Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v ramkakh ‘pravitel’svennogo chasa’ v Gosudarstvennoy Dume Federal’nogo Sobraniya Rossiyskoy Federatsii” [Remarks and answers to questions by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov within the framework of “government hour” in the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation], 1955-14-10-2015, 14 October 2015, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2015](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2015).

<sup>641</sup> “Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy studentov i slushateley Diplomaticheskoy akademii MID Rossii Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova” [Remarks and answers to questions from students and listeners of the Diplomatic academy of the Ministry of foreign affairs of Russia by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov], 347-27-02-2015, 27 February 2015, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2015](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2015).

<sup>642</sup> “Interview With Television Espanola (TVE): Victoria Nuland, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs,” April 29, 2014, available at <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2014/apr/225394>.

<sup>643</sup> *Syria Spillover: The Growing Threat of Terrorism and Sectarianism in the Middle East and Ukraine Update: Hearing*, p. 4.

<sup>644</sup> “Remarks at the Atlantic Council’s ‘Toward a Europe Whole and Free’ Conference: John Kerry, Secretary of State,” April 29, 2014, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/04/225380>.



control over the countries in the former Soviet space.<sup>645</sup> Former U.S. officials were more blunt. Madeleine Albright explained that Putin “wants to reestablish some sense of a Russian empire.”<sup>646</sup> The International Security Board reported to Kerry that Russia was seeking to dominate its neighbours and impose “strict bounds” on their policies.<sup>647</sup> Even before the board’s report was submitted, the Obama administration made clear that the U.S.-Russian geopolitical struggle in Ukraine in broad terms was about the rules-based global order that the United States strives to uphold. In April 2014, Assistant Secretary Chollet told the House Armed Services Committee that Russia’s aggression against Ukraine challenged the international order.<sup>648</sup> Obama repeated that pronouncement in his September 2014 address to the United Nations General Assembly.<sup>649</sup> Celeste Wallander, Obama’s senior Russia adviser, argued that Russia’s actions “revealed the true scope of the Russian leadership’s rejection of the rules that constitute the fundamentals of global and European order.”<sup>650</sup>

The broad objective of the United States, in dealing with the Ukraine crisis, was to defend the existing hegemonic world order and its governing principles, which Russia had disregarded. Speaking at the Munich security conference in February 2015, Biden reminded his audience of his reset speech in February 2009. He noted that the world situation six years later was very different from what it was when he spoke about resetting U.S.-Russian relations. The reset now seemed a very distant phenomenon. The United States, Biden announced, had moved from resetting the relationship with Russia to reasserting and protecting the fundamental principles of the world order that borders are inviolate, that there be no spheres of influence and that every nation has the sovereign right to choose its security orientation and affiliation.<sup>651</sup>

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<sup>645</sup> *U.S. Policy in Ukraine: Countering Russia and Driving Reform: Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 114th Congress, 1st Session*, S. Hrg. 114-77 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2015), p. 34.

<sup>646</sup> “Transcript: The Struggle for Europe,” The Atlantic Council, Washington, DC, April 30, 2014, available at <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/news/transcripts/transcript-the-struggle-for-europe>.

<sup>647</sup> *Report on U.S.-Russia Relations*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>648</sup> *Russian Military Developments and Strategic Implications: [Hearing], Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives, 113th Congress, 2nd Session*, H.A.S.C. No. 113-105 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2015), p. 4.

<sup>649</sup> “Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly,” September 24, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly>.

<sup>650</sup> “Remarks by Celeste Wallander, Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Russia and Central Asia on U.S. Policy on Russia,” June 26, 2015, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/26/remarks-celeste-wallander-special-assistant-president-and-senior>.

<sup>651</sup> “Remarks by the Vice President at the Munich Security Conference,” February 7, 2015, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/07/remarks-vice-president-munich-security-conference>.

## Russia's Darkened World View

The Russian leaders had been thrown off balance by the Ukrainian political developments and the U.S. reaction to their moves in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Not only had they lost a compliant regime in Kyiv, but they had obviously underestimated the readiness of the United States to inflict punishment on Russia. From the Russian perspective, the international political scene had changed for the worse. Russian official pronouncements confirmed a darkened worldview in Moscow. To be sure, Russian officials continued to preach that the international system is going through a transition to multipolarity. "The world is becoming truly multipolar," Lavrov stated. "This process," he continued, "is objective, it cannot be stopped."<sup>652</sup> At the same time, however, Russian leaders complained that the transitional process proved difficult. A unipolar world order had not been realized, they insisted, but attempts made by the United States to promote a unipolar model of world domination had led to imbalance and instability in international relations.<sup>653</sup> As a result, the situation in the world was described as complicated and contradictory, characterized by growing turbulence and sharpened competition.<sup>654</sup> Russia, Lavrov asserted, "plays an extremely important role in ensuring a balanced development of international relations."<sup>655</sup> However, changing the balance of power in the international system or, more specifically, balancing against the United States, was seen as "a matter of long and

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<sup>652</sup> "Interv'yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova programme 'Glavnoe' na 'Pyatom kanale'" [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the programme "The main thing" on "Channel five"], 2291-28-09-2014, 28 September 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>653</sup> "Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy Ministra inostrannykh del S.V. Lavrova v khode vstrechi so studentami i professorsko-prepodavatel'skim sostavom MGIMO (U)" [Remarks and answers to questions by Minister of foreign affairs S.V. Lavrov during a meeting with the students and the professorial-teaching staff of the Moscow state institute of international relations (university)], 2013-01-09-2014, 1 September 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014); "Vystuplenie Prezidenta Rossii na parade, posvyashchennom 70-letiyu Pobedy v Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyne" [Remarks by the President of Russia at the parade dedicated to the 70th anniversary of the Victory in the Great Patriotic war], 9 May 2015, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/49438>; "Zasedanie Mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba 'Valday'" [Meeting of the International discussion club "Valдай"], 22 October 2015, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/50548>.

<sup>654</sup> "Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy Ministra inostrannykh del S.V. Lavrova v khode Pervogo foruma molodykh diplomatov stran SNG" [Remarks and answers to questions by Minister of foreign affairs S.V. Lavrov during the First forum of young diplomats of the countries of the Commonwealth of independent states], 1005-25-04-2014, 25 April 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014); "Interv'yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova norvezhskey gazete 'Verdens gang'" [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the Norwegian newspaper "Verdens gang"], 2470-25-2014, 25 October 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>655</sup> "Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v ramkakh 'pravitel'stvennogo chasa' v Gosudarstvennoy Dume Federal'nogo Sobraniya Rossiyskoy Federatsii" [Remarks and answers to questions by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov within the framework of "government hour" in the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation], 1955-14-10-2015, 14 October 2015, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2015](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2015).

hard work,” in Putin’s words. “The task of reaching a global equilibrium is turning into a fairly difficult puzzle,” Putin lamented.<sup>656</sup>

Although the continued formation of a multipolar world to the Russians remains the “essence of the current stage of international relations,” as Lavrov put it, Russian leaders have long discovered that the process does not progress easily.<sup>657</sup> “The process of forming a new polycentric system of international relations is proceeding with difficulty, accompanied by increased global instability,” Putin reminded the Russian military in a message to the annual Moscow international security conference of the Ministry of defence.<sup>658</sup> Russia’s leaders are no strangers to international competition either. Russian strategic thinking assumes that competition among great powers is inevitable and, as Putin has said, “absolutely natural.”<sup>659</sup> Lavrov ventured to identify the great powers competing with the U.S. superpower. Its competitors, he claimed, were China in economics and Russia in foreign and military affairs.<sup>660</sup> In the wake of the Ukrainian crisis, Russian officials warned of an increase in global competition. “Competition increases in all spheres,” Lavrov reported to the State Duma.<sup>661</sup>

The Russian leadership emphasized the systemic nature of the conflict over Ukraine. There were, in the Russian view, “deep systemic problems” in world affairs that had accumulated since the end of the Cold War, and the Ukrainian crisis was a “logical consequence” and “clear manifestation” of these serious problems.<sup>662</sup> More precisely, the

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<sup>656</sup> “Zasedanie Mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba ‘Valday’” [Meeting of the International discussion club “Valdai”], 24 October 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/46860>.

<sup>657</sup> “Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v khode diskussii v ramkakh Molodezhnogo obrazovatel’nogo foruma Seliger” [Remarks and answers to questions by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov during discussion within the framework of the Youth educational forum Seliger], 1988-27-08-2014, 27 August 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>658</sup> “Global’naya bezopasnost’ i regional’naya stabil’nost’ – tezisy vystupleniya Ministra oborony Rossiyskoy Federatsii generala armii S.K. Shoygu na plenarnom zasedanii konferentsii po mezhdunarodnoy bezopasnosti” [Global security and regional stability – main points of remarks by Minister of defence of the Russian Federation S.K. Shoygu at plenary session of the conference on international security], 23 May 2014, available at <http://mil.ru/mcis-2014/appearance.htm>.

<sup>659</sup> “Zasedanie Mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba ‘Valday’” [Meeting of the International discussion club “Valdai”], 22 October 2015, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/50548>.

<sup>660</sup> “Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova telekanalu ‘Zvezda’” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the television channel “Zvezda”], 2563-30-12-2015, 30 December 2015, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2015](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2015).

<sup>661</sup> “Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v ramkakh ‘pravitel’svennogo chasa’ v Gosudarstvennoy Dume Federal’nogo Sobraniya Rossiyskoy Federatsii” [Remarks and answers to questions by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov within the framework of “government hour” in the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation], 2648-19-11-2014, 19 November 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>662</sup> “Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova programme ‘Glavnoe’ na ‘Pyatom kanale’” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the programme “The main thing” on “Channel

systemic problems acting as the “main cause” of the crisis involved “negative tendencies” produced by the U.S. unipolar policies aimed at retaining global domination and leadership. The Ukrainian crisis became the “culmination” of these negative tendencies, which conflicted with the allegedly objective tendency of world development towards multipolarity.<sup>663</sup> “Lately, the contradiction between the objectively strengthened multipolarity and the striving of the USA and the historical West to maintain their habitual dominant positions has appeared more clearly,” Lavrov said, obviously referring to the situation in Ukraine.<sup>664</sup>

As the Russians saw it, the transition to a multipolar world was hampered precisely by the “stubborn striving” of the United States to preserve its dominant position “at any cost” and to “artificially delay” the formation of a new international system.<sup>665</sup> The United States and its closest allies, Lavrov contended, were trying to “slow down, if not to reverse, this objective

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five”], 2291-28-09-2014, 28 September 2014, available at

[http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014); “Otvety ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na voprosy agentstva ‘Interfaks’” [Answers by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov to questions from the agency “Interfax”], 2984-29-12-2014, 29 December 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014); “Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v khode diskussii na 51-y Myunkhenskoy konferentsii po voprosam politiki bezopasnosti” [Remarks and answers to questions by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov during discussion at the 51st Munich conference on security policy issues], 218-07-02-2015, 7 February 2015, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>663</sup> “Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy SMI Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v khode ezhegodnoy press-konferentsii po itogam deyatelnosti rossiyskoy diplomatii v 2014 godu” [Remarks and answers to questions from mass media by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov during annual press conference on the results of the activity of Russian diplomacy in 2014], 78-21-01-2015, 21 January 2015, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2015](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2015); “Stat’ya Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova ‘Priority Rossii v Evrope i mire,’ opublikovannaya v yanvarskom nomere serbskogo zhurnala ‘Gorizonty’” [Article by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov “Russia’s priorities in Europe and the world,” published in the January issue of the Serbian journal “Horizonti”], 129-28-01-2015, 28 January 2015, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2015](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2015); “Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na IV Moskovskoy konferentsii po mezhdunarodnoy bezopasnosti” [Remarks by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov at the IV Moscow conference on international security], 729-16-04-2015, 16 April 2015, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2015](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2015); “Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova programme ‘Mezhdunarodnoe obozrenie’ na telekanale ‘Rossiya 24’” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the programme “International review” on the television channel “Rossiya 24”], 1064-30-05-2015, 29 May 2015, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2015](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2015).

<sup>664</sup> “Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na vstreche s chlenami Rossiyskogo soveta po mezhdunarodnym delam” [Remarks by Minister of foreign affairs S.V. Lavrov at a meeting with members of the Russian council on international affairs], 1349-04-06-20, 4 June 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>665</sup> “Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v khode diskussii v ramkakh Molodezhnogo obrazovatel’nogo foruma Seliger” [Remarks and answers to questions by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov during discussion within the framework of the Youth educational forum Seliger], 1988-27-08-2014, 27 August 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014); “Otvety Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na voprosy agentstva ‘Interfaks’” [Answers by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia to questions from the agency “Interfax”], 2984-29-12-2014, 29 December 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

tendency.”<sup>666</sup> The Russians saw that line clearly reflected in Ukraine, where the United States, in prompting an “anti-governmental upheaval” and supporting an “anti-constitutional takeover,” enacted a “project directed towards capturing the Ukrainian geopolitical space” in order to arrest the process of forming a multipolar world and to maintain its dominance in world affairs.<sup>667</sup> According to Lavrov, the capture of Ukraine was for the Americans “important from the perspective of strengthening their leadership positions in the world.”<sup>668</sup> The Americans, he suggested, were not prepared to admit that they cannot reverse the multipolarity trend and keep world politics under their control. Their course in Ukraine towards “creeping conquest of geopolitical space” he viewed as a destabilizing symptom of their ultimately futile resistance.<sup>669</sup> “Ukraine is just one example of the unwillingness of the USA to yield in the geopolitical struggle,” Lavrov observed.<sup>670</sup>

Russian official statements in connection with the Ukrainian crisis revisited several themes of Putin’s 2007 Munich speech accusing the United States of unilateralism, disregard for international law and unrestrained use of force. In language eerily similar to the contents of that speech, Putin again voiced the common refrain of railing against U.S. attempts to create a unipolar world. “Actually, a unipolar world is an apology for dictatorship over people and countries,” he ranted. Putin claimed that unilateral actions “are used constantly in current

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<sup>666</sup> “Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy Ministra inostrannykh del S.V. Lavrova v khode vstrechi so studentami i professorsko-prepodavatel’skim sostavom MGIMO(U)” [Remarks and answers to questions by Minister of foreign affairs S.V. Lavrov during a meeting with the students and the professorial-teaching staff of the Moscow state institute of international relations (university)], 2013-01-09-2014, 1 September 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>667</sup> “Vladimir Putin otvetil na voprosy zhurnalistov o situatsii na Ukraine” [Vladimir Putin answered journalists’ questions on the situation in Ukraine], 4 March 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/20366>; “Vstrecha s rukovoditelyami mirovykh informagentstv” [Meeting with heads of world news agencies], 24 May 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21090>; “Brifing Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova dlya predstaviteley inostrannykh i rossiyskikh SMI” [Briefing by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for representatives of foreign and Russian mass media], 1789-28-07-2014, 28 July 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014); “Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v khode diskussii na 51-y Myunkhenskoy konferentsii po voprosam politiki bezopasnosti” [Remarks and answers to questions by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov during discussion at the 51st Munich conference on security policy issues], 218-07-02-2015, 7 February 2015, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2015](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2015).

<sup>668</sup> “Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova programme ‘Vecher s Vladimirom Solov’evym’ na telekanale ‘Rossiya 1’” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the programme “Evening with Vladimir Solov’ev” on the television channel “Rossiya 1”], 2973-25-12-2014, 25 December 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>669</sup> “Otvety Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na voprosy agentstva ‘Interfaks’” [Answers by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov to questions from the agency “Interfaks”], 2984-29-12-2014, 29 December 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>670</sup> “Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova telekanalu ‘Russia Today’” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the television channel “Russia Today”], 975-23-04-2014, 23 April 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).



policy of the United States, and lead to crises.” The U.S. approach to international law was characterized by Putin as “legal nihilism.”<sup>671</sup> The United States, he said, preferred to be guided in its foreign policy “not by international law, but by the law of the strong.” Accordingly, it usually acted as it pleased, unilaterally using force against various sovereign states.<sup>672</sup> Putin also employed his usual rhetoric of asserting that the United States acted on the basis of imperial ambitions. “An imperialist policy has been pursued for a long time past,” he said.<sup>673</sup>

Echoing Putin’s criticism of U.S. policy, Lavrov charged that the United States and its allies “have systematically disregarded key norms of international law and attempted to impose their will all over the world.”<sup>674</sup> He assailed the United States for interfering in the internal affairs of sovereign states and for attempting to force its ready-made prescriptions and formulas on others.<sup>675</sup> “All of this,” he summed up, “is a consequence of attempts to ensure domination in world affairs, lead everyone everywhere and unilaterally use military force to promote selfish interests.” In pursuit of global dominion, the United States, according to Lavrov, used “a wide set of repugnant methods,” such as “the technology for inspiring domestic disorder and performing operations for regime change.”<sup>676</sup> Lavrov cited examples of victims to the U.S. policy of “direct interference” in sovereign countries, including with the use of force, in order to dominate the world: Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya, Syria and lately Ukraine. “The anti-constitutional coup and armed seizure of power in Ukraine” for Lavrov represented

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<sup>671</sup> “Zasednie Mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba ‘Valday’” [Meeting of the International discussion club “Valdai”], 24 October 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/46860>.

<sup>672</sup> “Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii” [Appeal by the President of the Russian Federation], 18 March 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/20603>.

<sup>673</sup> “Interv’yu shveysarskim SMI” [Interview for Swiss mass media], 27 July 2015, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/50066>.

<sup>674</sup> “Stat’ya Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova ‘Priority Rossii v Evrope i mire,’ opublikovannaya v yanvarskom nomere serbskogo zhurnala ‘Gorizonty’” [Article by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov “Russia’s priorities in Europe and the world,” published in the January issue of the Serbian journal “Horizonti”], 129-28-01-2015, 28 January 2015, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2015](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2015).

<sup>675</sup> “Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova norvezhskey gazete ‘Verdens gang’” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the Norwegian newspaper “Verdens gang”], 2470-25-10-2014, 25 October 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014); “Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy studentov i slushateley Diplomaticheskoy akademii MID Rossii Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova” [Remarks and answers to questions from students and listeners of the Diplomatic academy of the Ministry of foreign affairs of Russia by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov], 347-27-02-2015, 27 February 2015, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2015](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2015).

<sup>676</sup> “Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na otkrytom zasedanii Soveta Bezopasnosti OON po voprosu ‘Podderzhanie mezhdunarodnogo mira i bezopasnosti: uroki istorii, podtverzhdenie priverzhennosti printsipam i tselyam Ustava OON’” [Remarks by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov at an open session of the UN Security Council on the issue “Preservation of international peace and security: lessons of history, affirmation of the commitment to the principles and purposes of the UN Charter”], 311-23-02-2015, 23 February 2015, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2015](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2015).

“the culmination of such a policy.”<sup>677</sup> While stressing that the negative tendencies in world politics caused by the “assiduous attempts” by the United States to retard the process of shaping a multipolar world order and retain leadership in the world culminated in the Ukrainian crisis, Russian leaders submitted that the U.S. attempts to preserve and enforce its dominance inevitably encountered growing resistance and provoked counteraction.<sup>678</sup> For Russia, Ukraine constituted the limit. Putin declared that the United States in the case of Ukraine had “crossed the line” to the detriment of Russian national security.<sup>679</sup> He conceived of Russia’s countervailing moves as a principled rejection of unipolar domination. As Andrei Tsygankov has deduced, Putin acted as if thwarting U.S. geopolitical ambitions in Ukraine was “his last stand against global American hegemony.”<sup>680</sup> The U.S. “striving to conquer new geopolitical spaces” in the east, in Putin’s view, put the United States and Russia on a collision course: “Sooner or later, such a confrontational logic had to translate into a serious geopolitical crisis. And this is what has happened in Ukraine...”<sup>681</sup>

A salient element of Moscow’s darker worldview was its perception that Russia is under siege from the West. According to Putin, the U.S. course realized in the post-Soviet space was a manifestation of a traditional policy of containing Russia. He indicated that Russia had

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<sup>677</sup> “Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy studentov i slushateley Diplomaticheskoy akademii MID Rossii Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova” [Remarks and answers to questions from students and listeners of the Diplomatic academy of the Ministry of foreign affairs by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov], 347-27-02-2015, 27 February 2015, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2015](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2015).

<sup>678</sup> “Soveshchanie poslov i postoyannykh predstaviteley Rossii” [Conference of ambassadors and permanent representatives of Russia], 1 July 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/46131>; “Zasedanie Mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba ‘Valday’” [Meeting of the International discussion club “Valdai”], 24 October 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/46860>; “Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na XXII assamblee Soveta po vneshney i oboronnoy politike” [Remarks by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov at the XXII assembly of the Council on foreign and defence policy], 2686-22-11-2014, 22 November 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014); “Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy SMI Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v khode ezhegodnoy press-konferentsii po itogam deyatelnosti rossiyskoy diplomatii v 2014 godu” [Remarks and answers to questions from mass media by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov during annual press conference on the results of the activity of Russian diplomacy in 2014], 78-21-01-2015, 21 January 2015, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2015](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2015); “Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v ramkakh ‘pravitel’svennogo chasa’ v Gosudarstvennoy Dume Federal’nogo Sobraniya Rossiyskoy Federatsii” [Remarks and answers to questions by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov within the framework of “government hour” in the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation], 1955-14-10-2015, 14 October 2015, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2015](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2015).

<sup>679</sup> “Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii” [Appeal by the President of the Russian Federation], 18 March 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/20603>.

<sup>680</sup> Andrei Tsygankov, “Vladimir Putin’s last stand: the sources of Russia’s Ukraine policy,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 31, no. 4 (2015), p. 292.

<sup>681</sup> “70-ya sessiya General’noy Assamblei OON” [70th session of the UN General Assembly], 28 September 2015, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/50385>.



become the target of such a policy long ago. “The policy of containment was not devised yesterday,” he said. “It has been carried out with regard to our country for many years...”<sup>682</sup> Putin concluded that “the infamous policy of containment of Russia ... continues even today.”<sup>683</sup> In fact, he argued that the policy was continued in Ukraine: “We must understand clearly that the events provoked in Ukraine have become the concentrated expression of the notorious policy of containment.”<sup>684</sup> Lavrov supported Putin’s conclusions, arguing that U.S. policy makers were endeavouring to “contain Russia, attempt to isolate us, thereby shoring up their slipping dominance in the international system.”<sup>685</sup> In the same vein, Nikolay Patrushev, the secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, told an interviewer: “The activity of the administration of the USA in the Ukrainian direction is carried out within the framework of a renewed foreign policy course of the White House directed towards preserving American leadership in the world by means of strategic containment of the growing influence of the Russian Federation and other centres of power.” Patrushev further claimed that “this activity has been directed towards a complete separation of Ukraine and other republics of the former USSR from Russia, a total reformatting of the post-Soviet space subordinate to American interests.”<sup>686</sup> Similarly, Lavrov warned that the United States wished to tear Ukraine from Russia so as to irrevocably draw it into the Western orbit.<sup>687</sup> With regard to Russia itself, Putin and Lavrov viewed U.S. policy as a deliberate strike against core Russian security interests. The goal set by the United States, according to Lavrov, was “to unbalance Russia at

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<sup>682</sup> “Poslanie Prezidenta Federal’nomu Sobraniyu” [Address by the President to the Federal Assembly], 4 December 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/47173>.

<sup>683</sup> “Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii” [Appeal by the President of the Russian Federation], 18 March 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/20603>.

<sup>684</sup> “Soveshchanie poslov i postoyannykh predstaviteley Rossii” [Conference of ambassadors and permanent representatives of Russia], 1 July 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/46131>.

<sup>685</sup> “Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova agentstvu ITAR-TASS” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the agency ITAR-TASS], 2099-11-09-2014, 10 September 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>686</sup> “Vtoraya ‘kholodnaya’: Nikolay Patrushev: ‘Otrezvlennie’ ukraintsev budet zhestkim i boleznennym” [A second “cold”: Nikolay Patrushev: The “sobering up” of the Ukrainians will be harsh and painful], *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 15 October 2014, available at <http://www.rg.ru/2014/10/15/patrushev.html>.

<sup>687</sup> “Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova programme ‘Voskresnoe vremya’” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the programme “Sunday time”], 697-30-03-2014, 30 March 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

any price.”<sup>688</sup> Putin, in a faintly humorous remark, argued that the United States will always strive to chain the Russian bear.<sup>689</sup> “They want to subdue us,” he said.<sup>690</sup>

Some language used in speeches and other statements by Russian leaders to describe the anti-Russian policy of the United States was reflected in Russia’s new National Security Strategy, approved by Putin on December 31, 2015. The strategy document noted that the United States and its allies, “striving to preserve their dominance in world affairs,” work against the “independent” Russian foreign policy and that their “policy of containment of Russia envisages exerting political, economic, military and information pressure on it.”<sup>691</sup> One element of the U.S. containment policy highlighted by Putin was the effort to counter Russia’s grand Eurasian integration project. Putin, in March 2014, accused the United States of performing actions aimed against integration in the Eurasian space.<sup>692</sup> This accusation reappeared in the National Security Strategy. It was stated in the document that the West’s policy, “directed towards resisting integration processes” in Eurasia, “exerts a negative influence on the realization of Russian national interests.”<sup>693</sup>

## Conclusion:

The Ukraine crisis represents a post-Cold War nadir for the relationship between the United States and Russia. It has brought U.S.-Russian relations to their lowest point since the end of the Cold War. The deterioration of relations is so severe that analysts have called it a breakdown. “Russian-American relations are in ruins,” Stephen Sestanovich has concluded.<sup>694</sup> The open confrontation between the United States and Russia over Ukraine has ushered in a new, more dangerous era resuscitating speculation about the emergence of another cold war.

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<sup>688</sup> ”Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova agentstvu ITAR-TASS” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the agency ITAR-TASS], 2009-11-09-2014, 10 September 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>689</sup> ”Bol’shaya press-konferentsiya Vladimira Putina” [Big press conference of Vladimir Putin], 18 December 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/47250>.

<sup>690</sup> ”Forum deystviy Obshcherossiyskogo narodnogo fronta” [Action forum of the All-Russian popular front], 18 November 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/47036>.

<sup>691</sup> ”Strategiya natsional’noy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii” [National security strategy of the Russian Federation], 31 December 2015, available at <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/l8iXkR8XLAtxeilX7JK3XXy6YoAsHD5v.pdf>.

<sup>692</sup> ”Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii” [Appeal by the President of the Russian Federation], 18 March 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/20603>.

<sup>693</sup> ”Strategiya natsional’noy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii.”

<sup>694</sup> Stephen Sestanovich, “Could It Have Been Otherwise?” *The American Interest*, vol. 10, no. 5 (May/June 2015), p. 7.

“We are in a new Cold War,” Stephen F. Cohen told the CNN.<sup>695</sup> Robert Legvold wrote that “the collapse in relations between Russia and the West does indeed deserve to be called a new Cold War.”<sup>696</sup> In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee in April 2015, Sestanovich held that the long-term U.S.-Russian conflict should be regarded as a “real Cold War.”<sup>697</sup> Michael Rywkin felt that a serious line had been crossed: “We do not have to talk about avoiding cold war. It is here already – at Moscow’s initiation.”<sup>698</sup> Dmitri Trenin in Moscow warned that the Ukraine crisis was opening up an era of intense U.S.-Russian rivalry and hostility: “This will be the dawn of a new period, reminiscent in some ways of the Cold War from the 1940s to 1980s.”<sup>699</sup>

Although analysts believe that the new Cold War will be different from its predecessor, they have noted certain similarities. “I think we are getting toward a Cold War that meets a lot of the definitions that we used to have of the old one,” Sestanovich said on CNN.<sup>700</sup> One early defining feature of the new Cold War that seems sadly familiar is the phenomenon of mutual accusations and fixation of blame. U.S. and Russian officials have framed the conflict in Ukraine in accusatory and unforgiving terms. Each side blames the other without considering whether its own behaviour contributed to the ensuing crisis. Understandably, the U.S. side views the conflict as instigated by Russia. The official practice of pinning fault on Russia first appeared in April 2014 in a statement of Chollet to the House Armed Services Committee: “This crisis is not one generated by the West or the United States. It is a crisis of choice, pursued by Russia to further its interests...”<sup>701</sup> Testifying before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Nuland used what was to become a standard administration formulation characterizing what happened in Ukraine. “This is a manufactured conflict – controlled by the Kremlin,” she told the committee.<sup>702</sup> Biden, in an interview, declared that “this conflict was

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<sup>695</sup> “Fareed Zakaria GPS: ... New Cold War with Russia? Understanding Putin,” Cable News Network, February 8, 2015, available at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1502/08/fzgps.01.html>.

<sup>696</sup> Robert Legvold, “Managing the New Cold War: What Moscow and Washington Can Learn from the Last One,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 93, no. 4 (July/August 2014), p. 74. For more about this comparative perspective, see Robert Legvold, *Return to Cold War* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

<sup>697</sup> *United States Security Policy in Europe: Hearing before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, 114th Congress, 1st Session*, S. Hrg. 114-218 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2016), p. 24.

<sup>698</sup> Michael Rywkin, “Russia: An Adventure to Restore the Empire,” *American Foreign Policy Interests*, vol. 37, no. 2 (May 2015), p. 98.

<sup>699</sup> Dmitri Trenin, “Welcome to Cold War II,” *Foreign Policy*, March 4, 2014, available at <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/03/04/welcome-to-cold-war-ii>.

<sup>700</sup> “Fareed Zakaria GPS: ... New Cold War with Russia?”

<sup>701</sup> *Russian Military Developments and Strategic Implications: [Hearing]*, p. 49.

<sup>702</sup> *Ukraine Under Siege: Hearing*, p. 10.

directly caused by Russian aggression, pure and simple.”<sup>703</sup> Little official attention has been paid to the question of what, if anything, in the policy of the United States might have led to the great clash. On the other hand, there are academics in the United States and Western Europe who find fault with U.S. policy. Professor John J. Mearsheimer, for example, argues that most of the responsibility for the Ukraine crisis lies with the United States and the EU. The West, according to Mearsheimer, precipitated the crisis by ignoring Russia’s legitimate security concerns.<sup>704</sup> Another indictment of the West and an analysis broadly sympathetic to Russia and its policy in Ukraine is provided by Professor Richard Sakwa.<sup>705</sup>

As always, the Russians are totally self-righteous. They see the conflict in Ukraine as a result solely of the actions of the United States and its allies and are absolutely uncritical of their own policy. Stephen Blank has observed that neither the representatives of state power in Russia nor the supposedly independent analysts associated with non-governmental organizations accept any Russian responsibility for the severe worsening of U.S.-Russian relations: “Virtually no Russian analysis, whether by government officials or by Russian pundits, can admit that Russia committed aggression against Ukraine and continues to do so.”<sup>706</sup> Lavrov acknowledged that relations between the United States and Russia “have become seriously aggravated,” but he put all the blame on the United States, arguing that “the Americans have set course towards confrontation...”<sup>707</sup> U.S. officials, of course, deny pursuing a confrontational policy. “We do not seek out confrontation with Russia,” Obama stated in September 2014.<sup>708</sup> Putin blamed the United States for having initiated the Ukrainian conflict by encouraging and supporting an unconstitutional coup in Kyiv. He harshly condemned U.S. meddling in Ukrainian domestic affairs, ignoring Russia’s own vastly more substantial efforts

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<sup>703</sup> “Interview with Vice President Joe Biden by Den’s Mykola Siruk,” November 20, 2014, available at <http://ukraine.usembassy.gov/statements/biden-interview-11202014.html>.

<sup>704</sup> Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault.”

<sup>705</sup> Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015). The mainstream transatlantic perspective is presented in Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2014); Marvin Kalb, *Imperial Gamble: Putin, Ukraine, and the New Cold War* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2015); and Rajan Menon and Eugene Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine: The Unwinding of the Post-Cold War Order* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2015).

<sup>706</sup> Stephen Blank, “Dialogue With Russia or Dialogue of the Deaf?” *The American Interest*, April 6, 2016, available at <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/04/06/dialogue-with-russia-or-dialogue-of-the-deaf/>.

<sup>707</sup> “Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy SMI Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v khode ezhegodnoy press-konferentsii po itogam deyatel’nosti rossiyskoy diplomatii v 2014 godu” [Remarks and answers to questions from mass media by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov during annual press conference on the results of the activity of Russian diplomacy in 2014], 78-21-01-2015, 21 January 2015, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2015](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2015).

<sup>708</sup> “Remarks by President Obama to the People of Estonia,” September 3, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/03/remarks-president-obama-people-estonia>.

to influence and control Ukraine. The distorted Russian conception of the origins of the Ukraine crisis appears even in the new Russian National Security Strategy document, which says that the “anti-constitutional” coup supported by the United States and the EU “has led to a deep split in Ukrainian society and the outbreak of an armed conflict.”<sup>709</sup> Russia’s insistence on externalizing the causal relations and absolving itself from responsibility has been very similar to the attitude it exhibited after its 2008 war against Georgia. “We did not spoil them,” Putin said about the sharply deteriorating U.S.-Russian relations.<sup>710</sup> He accused the United States of conducting a “fairly aggressive foreign policy” with respect to Russia and portrayed Russia’s own policy as purely defensive.<sup>711</sup> “Everything we do is just a response to threats emerging against us,” he said.<sup>712</sup>

Russia’s aggression in Ukraine has effectively ended the Obama administration’s last hopes for a renewed substantive engagement with Russia on the basis of shared interests. To the extent that there were any illusions left in the Washington, they were finally shattered by Russia’s takeover of Crimea and armed intervention in eastern Ukraine. Another reset in U.S.-Russian relations is extremely unlikely, at least as long as Putin remains in power. The very idea of a new rapprochement appears far-fetched. “No more reset buttons,” Senator McCain demanded after Russia’s occupation of Crimea.<sup>713</sup> While no one in Washington has suggested initiating a new reset, the policy of isolating Russia diplomatically was abandoned by the Obama administration even though the conflict in Ukraine remained unresolved. Russia’s international isolation was largely a fiction trumpeted by the United States. Eventually, it became impossible for the administration in Washington to claim that Russia was isolated. Kerry visited Russia twice in 2015. During the second visit, he stated that “there is no policy of the United States per se to isolate Russia.”<sup>714</sup> When Kerry visited Russia again in March 2016, he emphasized how important it is for the United States and Russia, despite their serious differences, to engage with each other and have a dialogue on specific issues.<sup>715</sup>

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<sup>709</sup> “Strategiya natsional’noy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii.”

<sup>710</sup> “Pryamaya liniya s Vladimirom Putinym” [Direct line with Vladimir Putin], 16 April 2015, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/49261>.

<sup>711</sup> “Otvety na voprosy zhurnalistov” [Answers to journalists’ questions], 17 July 2014, available at <http://kremlin.ru/evens/president/transcripts/46236>.

<sup>712</sup> “Interv’yu ital’yanskoy gazete Il Corriere della Sera” [Interview for the Italian newspaper Il Corriere della Sera], 6 June 2015, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/49629>.

<sup>713</sup> “State of the Union with Candy Crowley: Interview with John McCain...,” Cable News Network, March 16, 2014, available at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/140316/sotu.01.html>.

<sup>714</sup> “Press Availability With Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov: John Kerry, Secretary of State,” December 15, 2015, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/12/250680>.

<sup>715</sup> “Interview With Mikhail Gusman of Rossiya 24: John Kerry, Secretary of State,” March 23, 2016, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/03/255143.htm>.

The Obama administration purports to take a “strong but balanced strategic approach” to dealing with Russia. The “balanced” part of the approach leaves open the possibility that Russia may change course and put its relations with the United States on a more cooperative path.<sup>716</sup> The administration’s 2015 National Security Strategy report stated that the United States “will keep the door open to greater collaboration with Russia in areas of common interests, should it choose a different path – a path of peaceful cooperation that respects the sovereignty and democratic development of neighboring states.”<sup>717</sup> As the apparatus of Russia’s Security Council pointed out in an analysis of the U.S. strategy paper, the firm “anti-Russian” language in it made the prospect of renewed U.S.-Russian cooperation contingent on a change in Russia’s foreign policy course.<sup>718</sup> No such change is within sight, however. It is therefore highly unlikely that there will be any broad-based U.S.-Russian cooperation in the foreseeable future. The United States and Russia may still find common ground on a few critical international security issues (the war in Syria, for example, on which the “Russia can help” mentality has taken hold again), but there can be no significant improvement in their relations so long as the Ukrainian conflict remains essentially unresolved. The relationship will only improve significantly when real progress is made in achieving a peaceful resolution of the conflict. At present, the prospects for a political settlement on eastern Ukraine do not look promising. Russia is not inclined to push for a settlement, reinforcing the conclusion that it is creating a frozen conflict. Most of the provisions of the plan to end the conflict outlined in the cease-fire agreements have yet to be implemented. Russia so far has failed to meet the cease-fire commitments it made. A small part of Ukraine’s territory (seven percent) is still under control of Russia and pro-Russian separatists. Ukraine’s control over its border with Russia has not been restored, and Russia maintains military forces in Ukraine’s east in violation of the provision concerning the withdrawal of all foreign armed groups and weapons from Ukrainian territory.<sup>719</sup>

It is clear that the United States is settling in for the long haul to handle a lasting adversarial relationship with Russia. The International Security Advisory Board of the U.S.

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<sup>716</sup> “Remarks at Atlantic Brücke: ‘U.S., Germany & NATO Are Moving Forward Together’: As delivered by Secretary of Defense Ash Carter,” June 22, 2015, available at <http://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/606684/remarks-at-atlantic-brcke-us-germany-nato-are-moving-forward-together>.

<sup>717</sup> *National Security Strategy* (2015), p. 25.

<sup>718</sup> “O strategii natsional’noy bezopasnosti SShA” [On the National security strategy of the USA], 25 March 2015, available at <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/news/865.html>.

<sup>719</sup> On Russia’s failure to implement the cease-fire agreements, see Andrew Foxall, *The Ceasefire Illusion: An Assessment of the Minsk II Agreement Between Ukraine and Russia*, Policy Paper No. 8 (London: The Henry Jackson Society, Russia Studies Centre, December 2015).



Department of State reported that “the United States must now focus for an indeterminate time on managing a relationship that threatens to become increasingly adversarial and confrontational.”<sup>720</sup> The United States, according to the board’s report, has to face “the reality of a significant anti-American component in the current Russian approach to the U.S.-Russian relationship.”<sup>721</sup> U.S. defence planning is currently reoriented in anticipation that Russia will not change course. In other words, the United States is preparing militarily for sustained tension. Plans and investments in military capability are adjusted to meet a revived Russian conventional military threat in Europe. The United States is investing in capability that is specifically intended to deter Russian forces. “That’s not something we’ve had to do for 25 years,” Secretary Carter noted, “but we’re doing it now.”<sup>722</sup>

Russian leaders evidently believe that the break in Russia’s relations with the United States will be deep and lasting and hard to overcome. “Relations are complicated and now not only just frozen, but are in a whole range of directions at a dead end, which developed long before the Ukrainian crisis,” Lavrov has stated.<sup>723</sup> The last part of this sentence is quite revealing because it indicates that Russia was very dissatisfied with the Obama administration’s Russia policy even before the tussle over Ukraine and the sanctions pressure on Russia exerted by the West. Signalling Russia’s deep dissatisfaction, Patrushev opined that although Russia initially welcomed Obama’s cooperative approach as a positive change in U.S. policy towards Russia, “it soon turned out that Washington was not inclined for real cooperation.” According to Patrushev, Russia did not benefit much from the reset in U.S.-Russian relations. Moreover, in his view, “the attitude of the USA towards our country began once again to be reminiscent of ‘cold’ war times.”<sup>724</sup>

Like the Obama administration, the Russian leadership has professed itself interested in improving U.S.-Russian relations, but their one-sided approach does not inspire any real hope. Lavrov has articulated a clear, unyielding Russian position: “The main problem is that we are

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<sup>720</sup> *Report on U.S.-Russia Relations*, p. 2.

<sup>721</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>722</sup> “The Scholar as Secretary: A Conversation With Ashton Carter,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 94, no. 5 (September/October 2015), p. 76.

<sup>723</sup> “Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova itogovoy programme ‘Segodnya’ na telekanale NTV” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs S.V. Lavrov for the summarizing programme “Today” on the television channel NTV], 2426-19-10-2014, 19 October 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>724</sup> “Vtoraya ‘kholodnaya’: Nikolay Patrushev: ‘Otrezvlennie’ ukraintsev budet zhestkim i bolezennym” [A second “cold”: Nikolay Patrushev: The “sobering up” of the Ukrainians will be harsh and painful], *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 15 October 2014, available at <http://www.rg.ru/2014/10/15/patrushev.html>.



absolutely interested in normalizing these relations, but it was not us that destroyed them.”<sup>725</sup> Russia’s stand is that the Ukrainian crisis irrevocably changed the relationship with the United States. Lavrov has made clear that there will be no return to the previous model of relations. In public speeches, he set forth the general Russian terms and conditions for normalization with rude candour. First, he insisted that an improved relationship “must be built on the basis of an acknowledgement of the objective reality – the formation of a new, democratic, polycentric system of international relations...”<sup>726</sup> Second, he declared that it is possible to return to a path of pragmatic and constructive cooperation “only and exclusively” on the basis of equality between the United States and Russia.<sup>727</sup> Thus, Russia’s leaders demand that the world’s sole superpower give up its international status as a unipole, accept the ideological myth of global multipolarity and treat Russia as an equal. The Russians obviously understand that these demands will not be met by Obama, who has superciliously characterized their country not as a global power but merely a “regional power,” or by his successors.<sup>728</sup> The Russian Security Council apparatus realistically concluded that implementation of the U.S. National Security Strategy, which it said was “prepared on the basis of the principle of American exceptionalism,” would mean that “the course towards preservation of world dominance of the USA will continue,” that “the USA along with its allies will continue the course towards political and economic isolation of Russia” and that the West “will direct considerable efforts towards reducing Russian influence in the post-Soviet space.”<sup>729</sup>

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<sup>725</sup> “Interv’yu Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova programme ‘Glavnoe’ na ‘Pyatom kanale’” [Interview of Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov for the programme “The main thing” on “Channel five”], 2291-28-09-2014, 28 September 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>726</sup> “Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na vstreche s chlenami Rossiyskogo soveta po mezhdunarodnym delam” [Remarks by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov at a meeting with members of the Russian council on international affairs], 1349-04-06-2014, 4 June 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014).

<sup>727</sup> “Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy Ministra inostrannykh del S.V. Lavrova v khode vstrechi so studentami i professorsko-prepodavatel’skim sostavom MGIMO(U)” [Remarks and answers to questions from the students and the professorial-teaching staff of the Moscow state institute of international relations (university)], 2013-01-09-2014, 1 September 2014, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2014](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2014); “Vystuplenie i otvety na voprosy SMI Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v khode press-konferentsii po itogam deyatelnosti Rossiyskoy diplomatii v 2015 godu” [Remarks and answers to questions from mass media by Minister of foreign affairs of Russia S.V. Lavrov during press conference on the results of the activity of Russian diplomacy in 2015], 116-26-01-2016, 26 January 2016, available at [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/archive/year/2016](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/archive/year/2016).

<sup>728</sup> “Press Conference with President Obama and Prime Minister Rutte of the Netherlands,” March 25, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/25/press-conference-president-obama-and-prime-minister-rutte-netherlands>.

<sup>729</sup> “O Strategii natsional’noy bezopasnosti SShA” [On the National security strategy of the USA], 25 March 2015, available at <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/news/865.html>.

To sum it all up, the new era of tension and antagonism in the U.S.-Russian relationship is bound to endure. Rather than being replaced soon by some new reset, the state of adversarial relations is likely to last long and may even become permanent. “Relations between Russia and the United States will be bad for the foreseeable future,” Sestanovich has written.<sup>730</sup> If a new Cold War is emerging, it needs to be understood in light of the profound differences in grand strategy between the United States and Russia. These differences have been expounded in this paper. The most fundamental difference is about the international system and the world order. The primary goal of the U.S. grand strategy of primacy is to preserve the status of the United States as the sole superpower. This means that the strategy aims at maintaining the currently unipolar international system. It also strives for U.S. global hegemony. A central element of the grand strategy of primacy is prevention of the emergence of a global peer competitor in the vein of the Soviet Union. In pursuit of this objective, the United States focuses on maintaining military dominance and seeking to contain potential rivals. As shown in this paper, these basic components of U.S. grand strategy have remained fairly constant since the end of the Cold War. The U.S. strategic objectives have not changed significantly, certainly not under Obama’s presidency. Obama has not turned away from the embrace of primacy. He is as clearly committed to the maintenance of unipolarity and the exercise of U.S. global leadership as the previous post-Cold War presidents. His policies do not represent a radical change when compared to the policies of his predecessors, but his approach to U.S. hegemony does include increased reliance on multilateralism.

While the United States is set on retaining its superpower status, Russia is resolutely opposed to unipolarity and the U.S. hegemonic ambitions. A unipolar world, where the United States dominates international politics is unacceptable to Russia. Russian grand strategy is aimed at promoting a multipolar configuration of the international system in which there is no superpowers but rather a conglomerate of great powers. In working towards the development of a multipolar world, Russia challenges U.S. power and attempts to restrain it. Russia’s opposition to unipolarity and advocacy of multipolarity is inseparably connected to its principal strategic goal to become a great power. The abiding great-power aspirations preclude Russia from adjusting itself to a U.S.-led unipolar world order. Russia’s basic objective is to gain status as a great power and a leading pole in a multipolar world and in this process attain equality between itself and the United States. At the same time that Russia rejects the notion of global hegemony with the United States as the hegemon, it seeks to restore its own regional

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<sup>730</sup> Sestanovich, “Could It Have Been Otherwise?” p. 15.

hegemony in the territory of the former Soviet Union. In order to achieve great-power status, Russia is intent on reintegrating the post-Soviet space under its own leadership. Dominating the neighbourhood and recovering the geopolitical assets there are central to Russia's recovery as a great power. Russia therefore attempts to establish a sphere of influence in neighbouring countries. This, however, is precisely what the United States works to forestall. Preventing Russia from dominating the region and attaining control over its resources is a vital geopolitical interest of the United States that extends the strategic imperative of precluding the rise of a new global competitor. The United States wants to make certain that Russia does not become a Soviet-scale threat and therefore opposes the Russian efforts to create a sphere of influence in Eurasia. In practice, that means consistently supporting the political independence and territorial integrity of former Soviet states. The Ukraine crisis should be seen in this wider strategic context. What the crisis has highlighted is the competitive U.S.-Russian relationship that is an unavoidable result of a huge divide in world views. The crisis has conclusively shown that the United States and Russia are fundamentally at odds with each other in world affairs. Their differences regarding the existing international system and the global order are fundamental and irreconcilable. Vital U.S. and Russian strategic interests are in fundamental conflict. The main inherent problem in U.S.-Russian relations is grounded in vastly different views of the world and in fiercely contending visions of its future. Cooperation on specific issues has not changed the basically adversarial nature of the overall relationship.