



# Irreconcilable Differences

Analysing the Deteriorating Russian-US relations

Märta Carlsson and Mike Winnerstig

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## Preface

This study focuses on a central issue of contemporary international security: the deteriorating relationship between Russia and the United States. For many years, during the Cold War era, the relationship between the two superpowers – the then Soviet Union and the United States - was the defining feature of global politics. In today's both more multipolar and more globalised world, the Russian-US relationship can hardly be said to be as central to international security as it was before 1991, but if – which this study suggest – it is deteriorating and will continue to be bad for years to come, it will be significant for global security. In particular, the relationship will most likely dominate the security policy considerations of smaller states that geographically and/or politically relate to Russia and the United States.

The study is written as a cooperative venture within the FOI Russia Programme (primarily the RUFS project) and the FOI Programme on Nordic and Transatlantic Security (NOTS). The RUFS project studies Russia's military capability and developments in Russian politics, economy and society, including Russian domestic and foreign policy.

The NOTS project studies security and military-strategic developments within three main areas: the Nordic, Baltic and Arctic regions, the European major military powers, and the foreign, defence and security policy of the United States. Analyses of exercise patterns, different countries and relevant multilateral security organisations (NATO and EU) means of action of relevance to security in the Northern European region also form part of the studies.

Stockholm in May 2016,

Carolina Vendil Pallin

Project Manager, RUFS

Niklas Granholm

Project Manager, NOTS

## Sammanfattning

Direkt efter det kalla krigets slut påbörjade Ryssland och USA en process som skulle leda till ett ömsesidigt partnerskap och överlag vänskapliga relationer. År 2015 hade relationerna mellan dem försämrats så mycket att bägge staterna i praktiken såg varandra som motståndare - eller till och med fiender – för första gången på 25 år. Den här studiens syfte är att analysera orsakerna till denna förändring.

För att uppnå detta syfte fokuserar studien på tre typer av faktorer som driver den bilaterala relationen mellan Ryssland och USA: geopolitiska faktorer, värderings- och identitetsbaserade faktorer och inrikespolitiska faktorer. Studiens resultat indikerar att alla dessa faktorer tydligt och djupt påverkar relationen mellan länderna, men på olika sätt i respektive land.

Ur ett geopolitiskt perspektiv står det klart att rysk säkerhets- och utrikespolitik försöker främja en utveckling där USA förlorar en del av sitt internationella inflytande medan Ryssland ökar sitt inflytande i motsvarande grad. Ryssland försöker begränsa amerikanskt inflytande, och försöker också förändra de internationella regelverken, vilka i det ryska perspektivet idag domineras av och är skapade för att gynna USA. På grund av denna hållning är rysk politik och ryska målsättningar på många sätt inkompatibla med en vänskaplig rysk-amerikansk relation.

Uttalade geopolitiska motiv syftande till att motverka Ryssland är svårare att hitta i officiell amerikansk policy. Emellertid har alla de amerikanska presidenter som studeras här initialt velat skapa ett vänskapligt inriktat rysk-amerikanskt partnerskap, för att mot slutet av sin tid vid makten hamna i en mer eller mindre direkt geopolitisk konfrontation med Ryssland. Just nu är den amerikanska relationen med Ryssland sämre och mer fientlig än vad den varit någon gång sedan 1991. Detta tar sig också uttryck i de praktiska åtgärder som vidtagits av bägge länderna. Som svar främst på Rysslands agerande i Ukraina har USA ökat mängden förhandslagrad militär utrustning i Europa och antalet soldater stationerade eller roterande i Europa. Detta görs för att stärka den amerikanska militära förmågan i Europa, och för att försäkra de amerikanska allierade om att USA tar sina försvarsförpliktelser emot dem på allvar.

Därutöver förefaller det uppenbart att det finns ett antal klyftor mellan de två staterna, i termer av förståelse, förväntningar och värderingar. Ryssland förväntar sig att USA ska visa förståelse för alla de ryska känsligheterna rörande den ryska, självdefinierade "intressesfären" och den ryska uppfattningen att man är inringad av NATO och det amerikanska missilförsvaret i Europa. USA förväntar sig å sin sida att Ryssland ska förstå att dessa ryska synpunkter eller känsligheter är illiberala och illegitima och att de därför inte kommer att tillåtas att påverka amerikansk policy.

Identitetsbaserade faktorer spelar också en viktig roll. Olikhet i termer av identiteter och perceptioner är en av de största orsakerna till varför relationen mellan länderna är så komplex. Rysk utrikespolitik är starkt fokuserad på relationen till USA och understryker den ryska stormaktsidentiteten, vilken i ryska ögon gör Ryssland till en jämlike med USA. USA lägger inte alls samma vikt vid Ryssland i sin egen utrikespolitik och har dessutom en tydlig supermaktsidentitet, vilken baseras på landets överlägset stora militära och andra resurser.

Bägge länderna har dock uppfattningen att det andra landet är svagt. I det ryska fallet baseras detta på episodiska belägg, t ex Rysslands förmåga att hindra ett amerikanskt angrepp på Syrien 2013 och frånvaron av starka amerikanska militära reaktioner på ryskt militärt agerande i både Syrien och Ukraina. USA ser å sin sida Ryssland som ett mycket svagt land, både på grund av den ryska ekonomiska situationen och på de demokratiska bristerna i det ryska inrikespolitiska systemet.

Samtidigt ser Ryssland USA som tillräckligt starkt för att initiera och implementera ”regimförändring” i Ryssland, på samma sätt som USA – enligt Ryssland – legat bakom ”färgrevolutioner” i länder som Georgien och Ukraina. Dessutom ser det nuvarande ryska ledarskapet USA som en moralisk och värderingsmässig fiende, och utmålar landet som ledaren för det ”degenererade Väst”.

Rysk inrikespolitik spelar en betydande roll för skapandet av rysk USA-policy. För att säkra regimens överlevnad efter de stora inhemska protesterna under 2011-12, blev den ryska utrikespolitiken allt mer öppet anti-västlig ju mer det ryska ledarskapet anpassade sig för att säkra en ny maktbas bland det ryska folket. Politiken som nu förs har en stark anti-amerikansk inriktning och betonar starkt idén om Ryssland som en stormakt. USA definieras öppet som fienden i offentlig rysk politisk diskurs, och spelar därmed en central roll som den externa fiende mot vilken Ryssland kan enas. Denna hotbildsperception används också för att legitimera ryskt agerande både in- och utrikespolitiskt.

I kontrast till detta har Ryssland inte stått i den amerikanska politiska debattens centrum. Detta beror delvis på att amerikansk inrikespolitik inte i någon större utsträckning vare sig påverkar eller påverkas av den rysk-amerikanska bilaterala relationen; det finns ingen mäktig rysk etnisk lobby i USA, det rysk-amerikanska ekonomiska utbytet är högst begränsat, och det finns ingen ideologisk konflikt mellan de två länderna som är jämförbar med det kalla krigets situation. Rysk inrikespolitik spelar däremot en substantiell roll i den amerikanska politiken gentemot Ryssland: amerikanska beslutsfattare gör regelmässigt en stark koppling mellan de demokratiska bristerna i det ryska inrikespolitiska systemet och den geopolitiskt alltmer aggressiva ryska utrikespolitiken.

Både geopolitiska, icke-materiella och inrikespolitiska faktorer på bägge sidor spelar alltså betydande, och i allt väsentligt negativa, roller för den nuvarande rysk-amerikanska relationen. Av dessa skäl är det sannolikt att denna relation inte kommer att förbättras under de närmaste åren. De flesta faktorer som denna studie identifierat är dessutom ömsesidigt förstärkande: geopolitiskt agerande – t. ex. den

illegala ryska annekteringen av Krim och den påföljande förstärkningen av den amerikanska militära närvaron i Europa – förstärker hot- och fiendeperceptioner hos bägge aktörer.

Totalt innebär detta att det mesta ger vid handen att den försämrade relationen mellan Ryssland och USA inte kommer att förändras till det bättre på länge. För de mindre staterna i Europa, inte minst i Norden och Östersjöområdet, innebär detta att ökade spänningar och ökade krav på ländernas försvarsmakter och försvarsförmåga kommer att bli det nya normalläget för många år framöver.

Nyckelord:

Ryssland, USA, geopolitik, stormaktsidentitet, supermaktsidentitet, NATO, missilförsvar, intressesfär, det kalla kriget, Vladimir Putin, George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, Syrien, Edward Snowden, Barack Obama, eftergiftspolitik, inrikespolitik, försvarsmakter, kärnvapen, nedrustning, upprustning, regimförändring, färgrevolution.



## Summary

Just after the end of the Cold War, Russia and the United States embarked upon a road that, in the minds of leaders in both countries, would lead to partnership and generally friendly relations. In 2015 Russia and the United States essentially and in effect agreed that they were each other's adversaries for the first time in over 25 years. The aim of this study is to analyse the causes behind this shift.

To do this we focus on three sets of underlying or driving factors of the relationship: geopolitical, values- and identity-related factors, and domestic political factors. Our analysis suggest that all these sets of factors deeply affect the bilateral relationship, but in different ways in each country, respectively.

Geopolitically, Russian policy tries to promote a world in which the United States has lost some of its international leverage while Russia has gained some. Russia aims to constrain US influence and change international rules, which in the Russian perspective at present are dominated by, and designed to benefit, the United States. Hence, Russia's foreign policy goals and their fulfilment are in many ways not possible to reconcile with a friendly relationship with the United States.

Explicit geopolitical motives aimed at countering Russia are harder to find in the official US policy. However, the US administrations covered in this study have started out underlining their desire to create a partnership while eventually ending up in a geopolitical confrontation with Russia. Currently, the US relationship with Russia is actually more adversarial than it has been at any time since 1991. This is also obvious in the practical measures taken by both countries: in response to Russia's actions in Ukraine the United States has increased the amount of pre-positioned military materiel and the number of soldiers in Europe to bolster its military posture in Europe, and to reassure the European NATO members of its commitments regarding the defence of its allies.

Furthermore, it seems obvious that there are a number of gaps, in terms of understanding, expectations and values, between the two actors. Russia expects the United States to understand the sensitivities it has regarding its self-identified "sphere of influence" and its perception of being cornered by NATO and the US ballistic missile defence systems being deployed in eastern Europe. The United States, on the other hand, expects Russia to understand that these Russian views are illiberal and illegitimate and will thus not be allowed to affect US foreign policy.

Factors based on identities also play an important role. The difference in terms of identities and perceptions is one of the major foundations of the complex relationship. Russian foreign policy revolves around the relationship with the United States and emphasises Russia's identity as a great power and as such an equal to the United States. The United States does not attach the same priority to

Russia and has taken on a clear superpower identity, based on its superior material powers in terms of military resources etc.

Both countries hold the view that the other is weak. In the case of Russia this is based on episodes in the bilateral relationship, such as Russia's ability to prevent a US intervention in Syria in 2013 and the absence of strong US military reactions to Russian actions in Ukraine and Syria. The United States considers Russia to be weak both economically and as a result of the deficiencies in its domestic political system.

At the same time Russia sees the United States as being strong enough to initiate and implement regime change in Russia, in line with the "colour revolutions" in e.g. Georgia and Ukraine, which in the Russian view were instigated by the United States. Moreover, the current Russian leadership sees the United States as a moral opponent as well, depicting it as the leader of the "degenerate" West.

Russian domestic factors play a considerable role for the formation of Russian policy toward the United States. To ensure regime survival after the protests in 2011–12, the policies acquired a more outspoken anti-Western element as the leadership adapted to existing sentiments in order to reinforce its power base among the Russian population. The policy has a strong anti-American feature and stresses the idea of Russia as a great power. The United States, identified as the enemy in the Russian political discourse, plays a crucial role as an external threat against which Russia can be united. This threat perception is also used to legitimise actions internally and externally.

In some contrast, Russia has not been the centre of attention in the US political discourse. Related to this, US domestic policy does not affect the bilateral relationship very much: there is no strong ethnic Russian lobby as such - with the ability to influence US foreign policy substantially - in the United States, US-Russian economic exchanges are very marginal, and there is no ideological confrontation comparable to the Cold War Era. Russian domestic political factors play a substantial role in US policy towards Russia: US policymakers apparently want to make a strong link between the Russian deficient, in terms of non-democratic, domestic system and the geopolitically aggressive Russian foreign policy.

Thus, both geopolitical, non-material and domestic political factors seem to play major, and essentially negative, roles in the current Russian-US relationship – on both sides. For these reasons, the Russia-US relationship is not likely to improve in the coming years. Most of the factors and issues analysed in this report are also mutually reinforcing: geopolitical moves – such as the Russian illegal annexation of Crimea and the subsequent US military build-up in Eastern Europe – are leading to increased adversarial perceptions between the actors.

In sum, most perspectives and most factors indicate that the deteriorating relationship between Russia and the United States will not take a turn for the positive for a long time. For the smaller countries of Europe, not least in the Nordic

and Baltic Sea region, the deteriorating relations between Russia and the United States mean that increased tensions and higher demands on the defence forces of all the countries involved most likely will be the pattern for years to come.

Keywords:

Russia, United States of America, geopolitics, great power identity, superpower identity, NATO, missile defence, spheres of influence, Cold War, Vladimir Putin, George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, Syria, Edward Snowden, Barack Obama, appeasement, domestic politics, armed forces, nuclear weapons, disarmament, rearmament, regime change, colour revolutions



# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>The Russian View of the United States</b>	<b>15</b>
2.1	Factors Driving Russian Foreign Policy .....	16
2.2	Great-Power Identity Challenged .....	17
2.2.1	NATO .....	18
2.2.2	Missile Defence .....	19
2.2.3	The Sphere of Influence .....	19
2.3	Russia and the United States in Times of Transition .....	21
2.4	The Domestic Context.....	24
2.5	Isolation .....	25
2.6	Russian Policy Toward the United States: Conclusions .....	27
<b>3</b>	<b>US Policy Towards Russia</b>	<b>29</b>
3.1	Factors Driving US Foreign Policy .....	29
3.2	The Historical Post-Cold War Background: the Clinton and Bush administrations .....	31
3.2.1	The Clinton Years: “Russia First” and NATO Enlargement .....	31
3.2.2	George W. Bush (2001–2008): From Respectful Partnership to Military Concern.....	32
3.3	The Obama Administration – The Rise and Fall of the Reset Policy .....	34
3.3.1	The introduction of the Reset Policy .....	34
3.3.2	The Reset and Nuclear Arms Reductions.....	36
3.3.3	Putin, Syria, Snowden, and the End of the Reset.....	38
3.3.4	Ukraine and Crimea .....	39
3.3.5	The Future of US Policy Toward Russia.....	42
3.4	A Concluding Analysis of the Obama Policy: From “Appeasement from Strength” to Military Countermeasures.....	43
<b>4</b>	<b>Analysis and Conclusions</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>References</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>List of Institutional Visits</b>	<b>58</b>



# 1 Introduction

August 2015 marked the end of an era: for the first time since the Cold War, the United States defined Russia as its adversary. At a press conference, US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, said that Russia “is a very, very significant threat, [and] poses [an] existential threat to the United States ... Vladimir Putin’s Russia behaves, in many respects, as -- in some respects and in very important respects, as an antagonist”.<sup>1</sup> Less than half a year later, the United States introduced an increase in its military spending in Europe for 2017 in order to deter Russia.<sup>2</sup> This indicated a major policy reversal from the situation in 2012, when the administration of President Barack Obama decided to withdraw the last heavy US Army brigades from Europe.

Russia, on the other hand, has seen the United States as a competitor and an opponent for a number of years. Since 2012 Russia has pursued a foreign policy with strong anti-American features. With the ambition to regain its great-power status, Russia regards the United States and the international system it constructed after the end of the Cold War as obstacles to these aspirations, and sees the values the United States represents as a potential source of conflict.

Since 2000 the Russian-US relationship has followed a negative trend, with a few exceptions. The Russian decision to join the United States in its fight against international terrorism after 11 September 2001 and the so-called reset policy launched by President Obama in 2009 led to temporary thaws. Since 2012 the ties have, however, gradually worsened and with the Russian aggression against Ukraine they were at the lowest levels they had been at since before the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev. Russian-US relations have again become an issue of the highest priority for countries in Europe. The purpose of this study is to analyse the main causes behind Russian and US policy shifts and the deteriorating relationship. The research questions of the study are the following:

- 1) Are the differences due to different material interests – such as geopolitical interests – or to different values and identities?
- 2) What role do domestic political factors play?
- 3) What kind of events seem to affect the relationship the most?
- 4) What is the likely future development of the relationship?

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<sup>1</sup> Carter 2015.

<sup>2</sup> See Landler and Cooper 2016.

The study gives an overview of Russian-US relations since the early 2000s, but the primary focus is from 2009 until the end of 2015.<sup>3</sup>

The outline of the study is straightforward: after this introductory chapter, the next chapter deals with Russia's views of and policies towards the United States. In the third chapter, US views of and policies towards Russia are dealt with in a similar fashion. The last chapter consists of an analytical comparison of the results of the two empirical chapters, and the conclusions that can be drawn from this. It presents an analysis and some predictions for the future development of Russian-US relations. Methodologically, the report is based on an analysis of official documents such as foreign policy concepts, doctrines and speeches by the political leaderships of the two countries, as well as academic books and articles. In addition, two study trips were made to Washington, DC and Moscow, respectively, in the autumn of 2015. The interviews conducted during these trips will be used in the empirical chapters below, but as the interviewees were promised anonymity the interviews are referred to only by a number and by date and place.

The materials have been organised thematically, in slightly different forms as the Russian and American political settings are not very similar. The themes are identified in the materials and the narratives of the empirical chapters are then organised around these themes.

Generally speaking, the study is an analysis of official policy. This means that we have not studied "actions" of the two states in a systematic way, such as military exercises or other forms of non-verbal signalling. Rather, the focus of the report is policy as presented by the highest-level actors of the two states.

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<sup>3</sup> An early version of the chapter on Russia was presented at the ICCEES IX World Congress in Makuhari, Japan, in August 2015.



## 2 The Russian View of the United States

As a legacy of the bipolar world the relationship with the United States<sup>4</sup> is the most central in Russian foreign policy. Russia has measured itself against the United States since the beginning of the Cold War and has continued to do so despite the end of the two-bloc confrontation.<sup>5</sup> In the Russian perspective, the extent to which it succeeds in matching the United States is a measurement of its international standing.<sup>6</sup>

The Russian attitude towards the United States and the West has changed dramatically since 2000. At that point in time Russian foreign policy was set on integration with Europe and cooperation with the United States.<sup>7</sup> There was an honest wish to be an influential partner on equal terms. This wish was for example manifested in Russia's siding with the United States in the fight against international terrorism after the attacks of 11 September 2001. Although there were a number of issues where Russia did not see eye to eye with the United States, they were not allowed to dominate or challenge the relationship.

From 2004 the Russian approach to the United States started to change to a more confrontational stance. This was displayed in an often referred to speech by President Vladimir Putin at the security conference in Munich in 2007. Russia had become less dependent on the West and Western institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as a result of the improving economy and the leadership was confident that it would continue to grow. The idea of Russia as a great power was now predominant in its foreign policy.<sup>8</sup> The war with Georgia in 2008 was, in the Russian perspective, a demonstration of Russia's perceived great-power status and a message to the United States to stay out of its sphere of influence.

The reset policy launched by the Obama administration in 2009 meant temporarily a more positive Russian attitude towards the United States. However, it had faded away by the end of 2011 because of the lack of an agenda once the main issues<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> From a Russian perspective the interaction with the United States takes place not only on the bilateral level but also through NATO and the concept "the West". Both, according to the Russian view, are dominated by the United States and bring issues such as enlargement of the alliance and the missile defence system into the relationship. These aspects will therefore be included in the chapter.

<sup>5</sup> Nixey 2015:38.

<sup>6</sup> Mankoff 2012:94.

<sup>7</sup> Putin 2001; 2002; 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Donaldson and Nogee 2009:361.

<sup>9</sup> Some of the more important results were the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) in 2009, which enabled the transport of US supplies to and from Afghanistan through Russia, as well as new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) and tougher sanctions on Iran in 2010. Stent 2012: 225–233.

had been resolved and the parties' incompatible views on decisive matters such as missile defence and Syria.<sup>10</sup> With the return of Putin as president in 2012 Russia's foreign policy acquired an anti-American element. The Russian aggression towards Ukraine resulted in relations with the United States being brought to their lowest point since the Cold War. With its actions Russia had shown that a partnership with the West was off the agenda.<sup>11</sup>

## 2.1 Factors Driving Russian Foreign Policy

This report identifies the Russian great-power identity and Russian domestic political developments as the main factors driving the foreign policy that Russia conducts today, which also has contributed to the deteriorating relationship with the United States since 2012.

Russian foreign policy is set on regaining the country's international position which was lost with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The Russian leadership considers that Russia is a great power and that this is the natural state of affairs.<sup>12</sup> It entails not only traditional characteristics such as permanent membership of the United Nations (UN) Security Council and the possession of nuclear weapons, but also political stability, a thriving economy and a technologically developed society.<sup>13</sup> In recent years, however, Russia has put more emphasis on the classical great power prerequisites as its economic performance and technological modernisation have lagged behind. The reform of the Armed Forces, launched in 2008, and the priority given to it in the federal budget should be seen in this context.

With the great-power identity comes the notion of having a sphere of influence, which in the Russian case consists of the countries which once were a part of the Soviet Union except for the Baltic states. Here, Russia exerts a certain degree of control and prefers the absence of other major powers. These countries are not equally important to Russia: Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan are the first priority among them. Second come Georgia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and third Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Armenia.<sup>14</sup> The priority given to a specific country might vary depending on how useful Russia finds it, the importance that outside powers attach to it and its own behaviour.

Furthermore, due to this great-power identity, Russia considers itself indispensable in international problem solving. Consequently, there cannot be a lasting solution to a major international security problem without Russia's participation. Russia,

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<sup>10</sup> Lo 2015:172–173.

<sup>11</sup> Putin 2014c.

<sup>12</sup> Lo 2015:47–48.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid:41.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid:102, 106.

moreover, sees itself as an “independent” actor on the international arena, which denotes the ability to act independently and to resist the influence of other countries. This has internal and external connotations – to limit liberal influences domestically, but also to prevent the West acting in a certain way in international affairs.

Russia expects other countries to acknowledge its great-power status, to treat it accordingly, and to respect its interests and sphere of influence, its self-evident position in international decision-making and its right to manage its internal affairs without outside interference.<sup>15</sup> According to Richard Sakwa, however, this constant Russian desire for other countries, primarily the United States, to acknowledge its great-power status does reveal a lack of self-confidence and a questioning of whether it is really worthy of such a position.<sup>16</sup>

According to Bobo Lo it is “[c]onventional wisdom ... that Russian attitudes and policies towards the West are an extension of Russian domestic politics”.<sup>17</sup> The preconditions for Russian domestic politics have changed since the anti-regime demonstrations in connection with the flawed parliamentary and presidential elections in 2011–12. The protests severely shocked the leadership, which in response has created an increasingly authoritarian society to ensure regime stability. It also adapted its policies to sentiments already existing among the conservative majority of the people, and abandoned the urban, well-educated middle class, which had participated in the protests. Patriotism, the Armed Forces and the Orthodox Church became strong features in the Kremlin’s new policy.<sup>18</sup> In the foreign policy realm, the introduction of the policy of “strategic solitude” meant a focus on national interests and a strong anti-Western, especially an anti-American, sentiment. The long-standing Russian foreign policy goals, to be a great power and work towards integration with the countries in its sphere of influence, became more accentuated.<sup>19</sup>

## 2.2 Great-Power Identity Challenged

Essential for the Russian great-power identity are the possession of nuclear weapons and permanent membership in the UN Security Council (UNSC). These, together with Russia’s energy resources, constitute the power base of the foreign policy.<sup>20</sup> They are furthermore very important for the relationship with the United States, as the two countries are on a relatively equal footing here.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid:48–50.

<sup>16</sup> Sakwa 2013:205.

<sup>17</sup> Lo 2015:168.

<sup>18</sup> Persson 2014; Persson and Vendil Pallin 2014:26; Stent 2014:253.

<sup>19</sup> Persson 2013:80.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid:78.

The appeal of the Security Council lies in the fact that it offers the most efficient way to limit US power. A further appeal is that with its exclusive membership it resembles the Russian idea of a multipolar world order. The possibility of using its veto also assures Russia of a central place in global decision-making.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, Russia has been opposed to the United States circumventing the Security Council, as in the case of Iraq in 2003. In the Russian perspective, the United States' actions against Iraq weakened the authority of the Security Council, thereby reducing Russian influence over international affairs.<sup>22</sup>

The Russian leadership often stresses cooperation with regard to nuclear weapons as it highlights its position as a leading power and the unique relationship with the United States.<sup>23</sup> When the United States unilaterally pursues policies in the nuclear and related fields, Russian leaders often see this as attempts to prevent it from being a great power. Examples of such actions include the George W. Bush administration's withdrawal from the 1972 Treaty on the Limitation of Anti-Ballistic Missile Systems (the ABM Treaty) and its plans for missile defence in Europe.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, in the Russian perspective, the United States has over the years challenged Russia's great-power status by the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the involvement in Russia's sphere of influence that this entails.

## 2.2.1 NATO

In the 2010 and 2014 Military Doctrines, NATO, its possible enlargement and its global function as well as its placing military infrastructure – i.e. the storage and deployment of offensive and defensive weapons systems as well as the permanent or temporary basing of troops – close to Russia's borders are defined as a military danger that could turn into a military threat.<sup>25</sup> In the 2015 National Security Strategy this is described as a threat to national security.<sup>26</sup> The purpose of NATO in the Russian view is questionable as the bipolar world ceased to exist with the end of the Cold War. According to the present Russian leadership, US Secretary of State James Baker made a promise that the alliance would not expand further east than the unified Germany.<sup>27</sup> Russia considers that the United States has used NATO as a tool to expand its "geopolitical control" in Europe since the end of the Cold War in order to encircle Russia.<sup>28</sup> Russian objections to the enlargement of the alliance lie in the fact that it renders it more difficult for Russia to become a

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<sup>21</sup> Lo 2015:75.

<sup>22</sup> Mankoff 2012:107–108.

<sup>23</sup> Foreign Policy Concept 2000, 2008 and 2013:§32b, §70; Stent 2014:222.

<sup>24</sup> Mankoff 2012:95–96.

<sup>25</sup> Military Doctrine 2010:§8a; 2014:§12a.

<sup>26</sup> National Security Strategy 2015:§15.

<sup>27</sup> Lavrov 2014c; Putin 2007.

<sup>28</sup> Lavrov 2014a; 2014c; Monaghan 2008:723; Putin 2014a; 2014c.

great power and the dominant player in its sphere of influence. Moreover it creates obstacles to the Russian goal of a multipolar world,<sup>29</sup> as NATO reinforces the position of the United States.

### 2.2.2 Missile Defence

Russia has been firmly against the plans for a NATO missile defence system in Europe since they were made official in 2002. They contradict the Russian perception of itself as a great power, as Russia sees itself excluded from a major decision concerning European security.<sup>30</sup> Missile defence, in the Russian view, undermines the existing balance of strength in the nuclear-missile sphere,<sup>31</sup> and can affect its nuclear deterrent,<sup>32</sup> which jeopardises the Russian great-power status. In fact, Russia sees itself as the actual target of NATO's missile defence.<sup>33</sup> In the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept, Russia demands legal guarantees from the United States that Russia is not the target.<sup>34</sup> The fact that the missile defence plans were not cancelled after the nuclear deal was reached with Iran in July 2015 was seen by the Russian leadership as a vindication of its suspicions.<sup>35</sup> According to Mikhail Tsypkin, the regime fears that the United States will use missile defence to gain political concessions, which could undermine Russian power. It reminds the leadership of the 1990s, when Russia was politically and economically weak and vulnerable to external pressure, a position that it does not want to end up in again. Russia has, moreover, concluded that an effective US missile defence system could limit Russian freedom of manoeuvre in its sphere of influence. Russia bases this assessment on the US reluctance to support Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 militarily, which would have meant coming into direct conflict with another nuclear power. The United States has not displayed the same hesitance to engage in military operations in non-nuclear countries.<sup>36</sup>

### 2.2.3 The Sphere of Influence

Russia considers the sphere of influence as a buffer zone against the West, in the form of European Union (EU) and NATO expansion. This buffer zone limits the exposure to Western liberal values and safeguards Russia's political and social stability. The latter has become increasingly important for the Russian leadership after the popular Moscow protests in 2011–12 and the Ukrainian Euromaidan

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<sup>29</sup> Finnish Ministry of Defence 2013:19.

<sup>30</sup> Larson and Shevchenko 2014:273.

<sup>31</sup> Military Doctrine 2010:§8g; 2014:§12g.

<sup>32</sup> Lavrov 2015a.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid; Medvedev 2008.

<sup>34</sup> Foreign Policy Concept 2013:§70.

<sup>35</sup> Putin 2015b.

<sup>36</sup> Tsypkin 2009:795–796.

protests in 2013-14. Russia's primary objective is not to create strong ties with the countries in its sphere of influence, but rather to control the strategic space that they constitute.<sup>37</sup> The Eurasian Economic Union<sup>38</sup> as a tool for power projection plays an important role here.

Russia considers that the United States over the years has shown a constant disregard for its sphere of influence. In the Russian view the colour revolutions in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine, in 2003–2005, and the Euromaidan were results of the United States' support for opposition movements in these countries.<sup>39</sup> The Orange revolution in Ukraine was especially unpleasant for the Russian leadership, which was rattled by the fact that a core part of the sphere of influence could choose a direction away from Russia. Along with the United States' ambition to offer Ukraine and Georgia membership action plan (MAP)<sup>40</sup> status with NATO in 2008, these events were seen as attempts by the United States to expand its influence at the expense of Russia and to prevent it from being a great power.<sup>41</sup> The Russian response with military force to secure its sphere of influence in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 was made with the knowledge that frozen conflicts and disputed borders were effective tools to preclude NATO and EU membership.<sup>42</sup> Russia's decision to take action was also prompted by the impression that the US administration was losing leverage at these points in time. The US inability to convince other NATO members to give Georgia and Ukraine MAP status in 2008, as well as Putin saving President Barack Obama's face regarding the chemical weapons in Syria and thereby preventing regime change in 2012, contributed to this view.<sup>43</sup>

The Russian leadership's perception of US policies towards the countries in the sphere of influence as well as in the Middle East and North Africa has led it to conclude that the United States is set on regime change in Russia as well. The stipulation in the 2014 Military Doctrine that the overthrow of governments in neighbouring countries and the establishment of regimes whose policies threaten Russian interests is a military danger with the potential of becoming a military threat should be seen in this context.<sup>44</sup> This idea somewhat contradicts the assessment that the United States is weak and losing international influence, but, as Keir Giles notes, "the fear that the West is considering bringing about regime

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<sup>37</sup> Lo 2015:103–104.

<sup>38</sup> The treaty of the Eurasian Economic Union was signed on 29 May 2014. Members of the Eurasian Economic Union were Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia in September 2015.

<sup>39</sup> Lavrov 2014c; Monaghan 2008:727; National Security Concept 2015:§17; Putin 2014b; Sakwa 2008:283.

<sup>40</sup> A road map to becoming a NATO member.

<sup>41</sup> Monaghan 2008:719; Lavrov 2014a.

<sup>42</sup> Nixey 2015:34.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid:38.

<sup>44</sup> Military Doctrine 2014:§12n

change in Russia does not stand up to objective scrutiny, but it appears deep-rooted among a broad sector of the Russian security elite”.<sup>45</sup>

## 2.3 Russia and the United States in Times of Transition

Since the mid-2000s the Russian leadership has claimed that the world is in a transition phase from a unipolar to a multipolar world order.<sup>46</sup> In their view the dominance of the United States on the international arena is in decline and has to be replaced by an arrangement whereby a number of strong countries – poles – govern international politics and settle the issues that might occur.<sup>47</sup> Among them are the United States, China, Russia, Brazil and India. The poles are not equal in strength and the United States remains the most powerful among them. The benefit of a multipolar world order, from the Russian perspective, is the opportunity of the other poles to unite against the United States to reduce its influence.<sup>48</sup> Simultaneously as a multipolar world order is taking shape, there is a shift in power going on from the West to the East, which further reduces the international leverage of the United States. These changes are accompanied by instabilities and tensions, as well as an increased rivalry between different “sets of values and development models”, such as forms of government and economic system.<sup>49</sup>

In the Russian narrative the United States opposes these developments and acts in order to reinforce its position.<sup>50</sup> This includes a policy of containment towards Russia, which as an independent actor provokes the United States.<sup>51</sup> Along with this Russian view the United States is also experiencing setbacks in its relations with its allies, which have been damaged by the operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The rise of China is a growing concern. According to the Russian assessment, the United States is, as a result, experiencing a loss in self-confidence. The United States, finally, is weakened not only by the changes in international affairs but also by internal economic and political difficulties.<sup>52</sup>

Several episodes during Obama’s presidencies have contributed to the Russian impression of a weak United States. To start with, Russia interpreted the “reset” policy as an American policy of weakness. In 2009, NATO enlargement was off the agenda and the United States had severe economic problems. Thus, Russia perceived the US “reset” initiative as an indirect US acceptance of Russia’s sphere

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<sup>45</sup> Giles 2015:6.

<sup>46</sup> Kaczmarek 2009:56–60.

<sup>47</sup> Foreign Policy Concept 2013:§5

<sup>48</sup> Lo 2015:43–44.

<sup>49</sup> Foreign Policy Concept 2013:§6,13; Military Doctrine 2014:§9.

<sup>50</sup> Lavrov 2014b; 2015b.

<sup>51</sup> Egorov 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Lo 2015:45; National Security Concept 2015:§12.

of influence and great-power status.<sup>53</sup> The Russian success in preventing a US intervention in Syria after the use of chemical weapons in 2013 further contributed to this Russian perception of US weakness. It led Russia to conclude that it could exert a certain influence on the United States' behaviour and helped give it the confidence to annex Crimea in 2014.<sup>54</sup> The absence of a stronger reaction from Obama to Russia's involvement in Ukraine and in the Syrian civil war was also seen as a sign of weakness. Furthermore, the US preoccupation with the presidential elections in November 2016 made any major initiative regarding Russia unlikely until a new president was in office, which gave Russia the impression of a United States absent from the international arena.<sup>55</sup>

Russia considers not only that the West is losing international leverage, but also that it has become morally weak – an element of the anti-Western policy pursued since 2012.<sup>56</sup> In line with this view the West has distanced itself from traditional values and its true national, cultural and religious identity. Moreover, it attempts to force its degenerate lifestyle on other parts of the world. Russia portrays itself as the defender of true moral and traditional values. These different sets of values are described as a possible area of confrontation.<sup>57</sup> The audience for this message is mainly the Russian population but it also has a foreign policy connotation as it appeals to the European far right.<sup>58</sup>

To Russia the changes in international affairs provide it with the opportunity to improve its position.<sup>59</sup> According to the 2015 National Security Concept Russia has increased its role in solving international problems and military conflicts.<sup>60</sup> This among other things refers to the nuclear deal with Iran and Russia's improved position at the negotiating table due to its engagement in the Syrian civil war. Although international affairs are seemingly developing to its benefit, Russia sees the surrounding world as hostile. Since the return of Putin as president an image has been developed of a Russia under an immediate threat. The enemy is the West, headed by the United States. In line with this view Russia possesses the necessary military means to defend itself.<sup>61</sup> The United States is, hence, depicted not only as weak but also as strong and set on destroying Russia. In the Russian narrative the West prefers a weak Russia to exploit, rather than a strong Russia to compete with.<sup>62</sup> According to the leadership the United States uses the strategy of weak points towards Russia. The strategy was invented during the Cold War to identify

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<sup>53</sup> Lo 2015:171–175.

<sup>54</sup> Giles 2015:7.

<sup>55</sup> Interviews Moscow 2015.

<sup>56</sup> Persson and Vendil Pallin 2014:29.

<sup>57</sup> Putin 2013a; 2013b.

<sup>58</sup> Laruelle 2013.

<sup>59</sup> Monaghan 2008:728.

<sup>60</sup> National Security Concept 2015:§8.

<sup>61</sup> Giles 2015:6.

<sup>62</sup> Trenin 2006.



the weak points of the Soviet Union and to exploit them, which eventually contributed to its dissolution.<sup>63</sup> Today, the strategy is implemented in the support for events such as the Euromaidan, thereby forcing Russia to act.<sup>64</sup>

It is of fundamental importance to Russia to be regarded as an equal to the United States and for that to be acknowledged. Russia, however, often conceives the US approach as condescending and the returns from cooperation as disappointing, for example regarding international terrorism.<sup>65</sup> Despite the fact that Russia sees the United States as its main contender and a threat to its great-power ambitions,<sup>66</sup> it also aspires to be a partner in international problem solving. In the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept, the two countries have a “special responsibility ... for international security in general”.<sup>67</sup> In April 2015 when relations with the United States were chilly Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov stated: “We do not have the intention to force anyone [the United States] to cooperation. It should however be clear that a weakened partnership between the leading states means that we lose time to counteract the serious ... threats first and foremost in the Middle East and North Africa.”<sup>68</sup> The statement is also a way to blame the United States for the outcome if it does not engage with Russia.

Russian criticism of the United States has long revolved around its leading position on the international arena and, as a result of that, the deteriorating state of international affairs.<sup>69</sup> The Russian critique, moreover, centres on the United States’ lack of adherence to international law, primarily the UN Charter.<sup>70</sup> This is a behaviour which reduces the role of the UN and thereby Russia’s influence in international politics. The anti-Western policy has made the Russian tone towards the United States much sharper. Russia disapproves of the United States’ interference in the domestic affairs of other countries and its imposition of ideas regarding politics and economics on them.<sup>71</sup> This refers not least to the countries in Russia’s self-proclaimed sphere of influence where regime change has taken place, but also to Iraq and the countries of the Arab spring of 2011. In his address to the UN General Assembly in September 2015 Putin blamed the United States for the situation in parts of the Middle East and North Africa. “I’m urged to ask

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<sup>63</sup> During the Cold War the United States concluded that the economy of the Soviet Union was its biggest weak point. Hence, the United States facilitated a decrease in the world market price of hydrocarbons at the same time as actions were taken to increase state expenditures, by for example a protracted Soviet engagement in Afghanistan, a problematic situation in the Warsaw Pact countries, such as Poland, and an intensified arms race with the Strategic Defence Initiative. Egorov 2014.

<sup>64</sup> Egorov 2014.

<sup>65</sup> See for example Donaldson and Noguee 2009:348 and Egorov 2014.

<sup>66</sup> Monaghan 2008:728; Persson and Vendil Pallin 2014:29; Petersson and Sommers 2015:5.

<sup>67</sup> Foreign Policy Concept 2013:§67, see also Foreign Policy Concepts 2000 and 2008.

<sup>68</sup> Lavrov 2015a.

<sup>69</sup> Putin 2007; 2014b.

<sup>70</sup> Foreign Policy Concept 2000; 2008; 2013:§71.

<sup>71</sup> Foreign Policy Concept 2013:§71; Lavrov 2014a; 2014b; Putin 2007; 2014b.

those [the United States] who created this situation: do you at least realize now what you've done? But I'm afraid that this question will remain unanswered, because they have never abandoned their policy, which is based on arrogance, exceptionalism and impunity."<sup>72</sup> In the same speech Putin held the United States responsible for the emergence of the Islamic State (IS) and for using it as a tool to overthrow unwanted regimes, something which was repeated in the 2015 National Security Concept.<sup>73</sup> Russia projects the image of itself as a champion of international law and national sovereignty.<sup>74</sup> This has not been reflected in its actions with regard to Ukraine.

## 2.4 The Domestic Context

The anti-Western policy has an important domestic political function. It is a tool to divert the attention of the population from internal problems, such as an increasingly repressive society and a stagnating economy, and to unite it against an alleged external threat in order for the leadership to remain in power. With Ukraine, not only the United States, but also the EU, were identified as the enemy by the Kremlin. The annexation of Crimea has been described as a legitimate response to the West's mistreatment of Russia since the end of the Cold War. Along with this view, the West has long aimed to contain Russia because of its "independent" position. In 2013 the West had set the target on Ukraine, Russia and Eurasian integration, the primary Russian foreign policy project. According to Putin Russia "found itself in a position it could not retreat from ... with Ukraine, our western partners have crossed the line".<sup>75</sup>

The demand for the Kremlin to provide the people with a feeling of satisfaction regarding the country's international standing also prompted Putin to act. This is a part of a new social contract, which came into being after the protests in 2011–12. The old social contract contained economic growth and stability in the return for limitations on civil liberties. The new one entails Russian great-power status in exchange for regime stability.<sup>76</sup> To keep the contract alive Putin has to deliver international successes which display Russia's prominent status and serve as a distraction from the domestic situation. According to Russian scholars the annexation of Crimea can partly be seen in this light.<sup>77</sup> Dmitri Trenin has noted the following:

Unlike in 2008 in the South Caucasus, the current conflict will not be a bump in the road that soon will lead to a new reset. Russian President Vladimir Putin has

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<sup>72</sup> Putin 2015a.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid; National Security Concept 2015: §18.

<sup>74</sup> Putin 2013b.

<sup>75</sup> Putin 2014c.

<sup>76</sup> Interviews Moscow 2015; Persson 2015.

<sup>77</sup> Interviews Moscow 2015.

scored a huge success domestically by returning Crimea to Russia, simultaneously creating a major obstacle to future accommodation not only with Ukraine but primarily with the United States and Europe.<sup>78</sup>

After a while it became clear that the protracted Ukrainian campaign might not work out to the benefit of Putin and in order to deliver another international success he turned his attention to Syria in September 2015. The Russian involvement in the Syrian civil war has other motives as well, such as strengthening President Bashar al-Assad, who had experienced military setbacks, and improving the Russian position on the international arena, especially in relation to the West and the United States.<sup>79</sup> The new social contract makes a continued active foreign policy and involvement abroad likely as Putin is obliged to keep his part of the deal.

Opinion polls from the Levada Center in July 2015 reflect the success of the current policies, facilitated by the absence of free media. Disapproval of the United States increased among the population as the Russian aggression towards Ukraine commenced in 2014. There are previous periods of resentment towards the United States, but the degree and long duration of that resentment in 2014–15 are unparalleled. A negative attitude also existed around the time of the first NATO enlargement to include Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, as well as the Kosovo crisis in 1999. Serbia is a long-time ally, due to historical and religious ties, and Russia therefore disagreed with the United States regarding the secession of Kosovo and NATO's bombing of Belgrade to force Serbia to withdraw its forces from Kosovo. Furthermore the launch of the US operation in Iraq in 2003, which Russia was firmly against, and of the Russian war with Georgia in 2008, a response to what Russia perceived as US intrusion in its sphere of influence, are reflected in the opinion polls. A new, negative attitude towards the EU occurs as the events in Ukraine unfold. A previous peak in 2008 is directly after the war with Georgia, which put Russia at odds with the West.<sup>80</sup>

## 2.5 Isolation

It is a concern for Russia that it has few friends and is being isolated in international affairs. A great power has allies, and here Russia experiences certain difficulties. Russia has put great effort into creating tighter cooperation among the BRICS countries<sup>81</sup> with the ambition that it will become an equivalent to the Group of Seven developed countries (G7) and other Western-dominated institutions. Russia's incentives are largely based on its limited ability to exert substantial

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<sup>78</sup> Trenin 2014:24.

<sup>79</sup> Interviews Moscow 2015.

<sup>80</sup> Levada Center 2015.

<sup>81</sup> Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

influence in any major international institution apart from the UN Security Council. Moreover, its position as one of the BRICS countries puts emphasis on Russia's identity as a member of a global elite and as an emerging dynamic power, which corresponds to the idea of a multipolar world order and how Russia would like to be perceived. A further advantage in Russia's eyes is that no Western country is a member. Cooperation within the BRICS has not, however, developed in line with Russia's wishes, mainly because the countries have little in common but also due to the other members' aspiration to cultivate constructive ties with the United States, rather than act in concert with Russia to limit US power.<sup>82</sup>

Russia considers that the dominance of the United States on the international arena has resulted in the sidelining of those who disagree with the United States and do not share its values, for example concerning democracy.<sup>83</sup> Russia believes that the current rules of the game were created after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, when Russia was weak, and are therefore not to its benefit. With the Munich speech in 2007, Putin signalled that Russia no longer accepted these rules.<sup>84</sup> Russia considers that international institutions are unable to address the challenges that the world faces after the end of the Cold War, as they are based on the premises of unipolarity.<sup>85</sup> In addition, what Russia sees as Western hypocrisy – on the one hand commitment to universal values and human rights, on the other hand a preference for removing undesirable leaders such as Hussein, Gaddafi and al-Assad to support Western geopolitical and commercial interests – has led to the loss of the West's credibility in international problem solving.<sup>86</sup> According to Fedor Lukyanov the Russian leadership sees a need to reshape the international system, as Russia will not be able to take its rightful place in the current one. Either the West must be forced to make room for Russia or there will continue to be confrontations around countries like Ukraine.<sup>87</sup>

The 2010 and 2014 Military Doctrines as well as the 2015 National Security Strategy establish that the existing international security architecture does not provide “all countries” with “equal security”,<sup>88</sup> that is, Russia lacks influence in this area. Russia has, therefore, several times suggested a revision of the European security arrangement. These initiatives are often made in times when ties with the West are at a low point. In 2008 President Medvedev proposed an agreement on European security that would tie the security of Europe, Russia and the United States together.<sup>89</sup> This idea of an “equal and indivisible security in the Euro-

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<sup>82</sup> Lo 2015:77–79.

<sup>83</sup> Lavrov 2014b; Monaghan 2008:723.

<sup>84</sup> Trenin 2009.

<sup>85</sup> Lavrov 2008; Monaghan 2008:729; Putin 2014b.

<sup>86</sup> Lo 2015:94, 97.

<sup>87</sup> Lukyanov 2014.

<sup>88</sup> Military Doctrine 2010:§7; 2014:§10; National Security Strategy 2015:§15.

<sup>89</sup> Medvedev 2008.

Atlantic” was brought up again by the Russian leadership in 2014.<sup>90</sup> Another Russian initiative is a “common economic and humanitarian space from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean”. In 2014 Russia proposed that the Eurasian Economic Union, which also is a Russian response to its perceived isolation on the international arena, and the EU together with Ukraine and Turkey would form such as space. This would, according to Lavrov, “mitigate the current imbalances in European security”.<sup>91</sup> Although the Russian leadership has not been very specific about the details of these proposals, both arrangements would most probably result in an increased Russian influence in European security affairs. It is probably obvious to the Russian leadership that the likelihood of Europe and the United States endorsing them is low, but the ambition that it displays is what matters here.

## 2.6 Russian Policy Toward the United States: Conclusions

Since 2012 Russian internal affairs have influenced its foreign policy position and made it more anti-American. The great-power ambitions, which had been a source of tension with the United States up until then, received an increased focus with the new policy and contributed to worsen the relationship. In the domestic arena the new policy, especially its anti-Western element, serves as a tool to distract the population from the state of affairs at home, to unite it against an external enemy and to legitimise actions at home and abroad.

Russia considers that the United States, by NATO enlargements, missile defence plans and involvement in Russia’s sphere of influence, is attempting to expand the area under its control and to encircle Russia. The aim of the United States would be to prevent Russia from occupying its rightful position on the international arena. Russia has chosen to take military action to defend its position in the case of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. The ultimate goal of the United States, according to the Russian view, is regime change in Russia.

There is a certain amount of ambivalence in the Russian approach to the United States. At the same time as the United States is seen as the main contender, Russia also wants to be an exclusive partner regarding matters of international concern. Simultaneously, the United States is described as strong and hostile, but also as weak and losing international leverage. The fact that Obama’s time in office is drawing to an end, and what Russia sees as a reduced US inclination to react to its behaviour, have led Russia to the conclusion that there is a window of opportunity for it to act. The engagement in the Syrian civil war implies a shift from a reactive to a more active way to assert its great-power status and position in relation to the United States. The incentive to act is, furthermore, increased by domestic factors

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<sup>90</sup> Lavrov 2014a.

<sup>91</sup> Lavrov 2014b.

such as the poor Russian economic development. The new social contract between Putin and the population requires the display of Russian great-power status internationally.

Russia's ambition is not only to improve its position in the international arena, but also to revise the international system to make it more advantageous to Russian interests. While limiting the influence of the United States, Russia wants to increase its own influence with regard to European security.

In the coming years the domestic political climate is not likely to improve and the regime's need for an external threat will continue. The huge investment made by the Russian leadership in pinpointing the United States, NATO and the EU as adversaries also renders a change in position difficult. It is, therefore, probable that relations between Russia and the West, especially the United States, will remain problematic for years to come.

## 3 US Policy Towards Russia

### 3.1 Factors Driving US Foreign Policy

The scholarly literature on the basic orientation, or foundation, of US foreign policy is vast. To make a very long story short, analysts have concluded that US foreign policy is based on both material interests – “realist”, geopolitical or domestic – and ideational issues, such as “liberal” ideas, values and norms, and that this does not vary very much with the political party from which the president hails.<sup>92</sup>

However, even the most astute observers of US foreign policy differ sharply in terms of how to characterise its basic tenets. Henry Kissinger, a scholar as well as a well-experienced practitioner, has long argued that the liberal component of US foreign policy has dominated over all forms of more realist-oriented conceptions.<sup>93</sup> To be a realist in foreign policy terms, with all that that means both from a scholarly and from a practitioner-oriented perspective, does not square at all with a self-understanding which is basically liberal. And there is much behind the idea that US policymakers, including in the field of foreign policy, tend to embrace a liberal world view in identity terms and design policies accordingly. In the words of John Ruggie, the American identity is essentially an eminently liberal one, containing the following core values: “intrinsic individual as opposed to group rights, equality of opportunity for all, anti-statism, the rule of law, and a revolutionary legacy which holds that human betterment can be achieved by means of deliberate human actions, especially when they are pursued in accordance with these foundational values. ...Being an American”, Ruggie concludes, “is defined as believing and doing these things.”<sup>94</sup> It goes without saying that a foreign policy based on this liberal US identity would yield dramatically different results than, for example, an identity and foreign policy focusing on power maximisation, geopolitical considerations, and a disregard of the domestic political systems of other states, even if these systems are adversarial to Western ones (e.g. illiberal, or anti-Western in general).

Scholars have also analysed the domestic sources of US foreign policy.<sup>95</sup> These are somewhat tricky to deal with when analysing US policy towards Russia. During the Cold War, it was generally agreed that the constantly strained superpower relationship was based on both geopolitical and ideological confrontations, which had their roots in external and internal causes, respectively.

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<sup>92</sup> This is one of the main points made in Winnerstig 2000.

<sup>93</sup> See e.g. Kissinger 1994.

<sup>94</sup> Ruggie 1998:218.

<sup>95</sup> See e.g. McCormick (ed.) 2012.

After the end of the Cold War, the ideological confrontation is essentially gone, and the bilateral economic interactions between Russia and the United States are quite limited. Furthermore, there is no influential Russian ethnic lobby in the United States, in contrast to the US-Cuban or US-Israel relationship and many other bilateral settings. However, ideological conceptions of US leaders regarding other countries – e.g. Russia – might of course play a role in the formation of US policy concerning these countries, and it might be argued that this is a “domestic source” of the policy.

Thus, it is not possible to define US foreign policy in terms of its being based on, or fundamentally driven by, one single conceptual-theoretical foundation. In contrast to most other countries today, as the sole superpower the US can afford to base its policies on both geopolitical and other foundations, including domestic sources.

In this section, the official US foreign policy towards Russia is presented and analysed. The emphasis is on the Obama administrations, but in order to relate this to a historical context, the earlier Clinton and Bush Jr administrations are covered as well. By “official policy” we mean the official statements, reports and the like by official high-ranking US foreign policy and defence actors. As the study is limited in scope, the sources are primarily the highest-ranking ones.

Constitutionally, the president of the United States leads foreign and defence policy, but the practical implementation of this is to a very substantial degree led by the secretaries of state and defence, respectively. Also, not only the White House but the departments of state and defence as well produce a number of official reports, which are considered official US policy on various subjects. Besides major speeches, like the yearly *State of the Union* speech and others, top policy documents like the *National Security Strategy* (issued by the White House, i.e. signed by the president), the *Quadrennial Defense Review* (issued by the Department of Defense (DoD) and signed by the secretary of defence) and the *National Military Strategy* (issued by the DoD and signed by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, i.e. the highest-ranking US military official) will be analysed in the following. The constitutional role of the president means, however, that if the documents’ contents differ in substance – which is rare – or in emphasis – which is quite common – the presidential documents will be considered as the “official” policy.

As additional sources, think tank or academic texts on US policy towards Russia will be added to the discussion in the section that deals with the Obama administrations’ policies, as official texts always are political products rather than texts reflecting an underlying empirical reality. Hence, academic articles contribute to a better understanding of the current American debate on the issues and can also be used as an interesting background to the official policy statements. Furthermore, interviews with a select number of think-tank analysts, performed in the autumn of 2015, will also be used as sources for the analysis of the Obama



administrations, in order to present a current understanding in Washington, DC of the administration's handling of the policy towards Russia.

## **3.2 The Historical Post-Cold War Background: the Clinton and Bush administrations**

### **3.2.1 The Clinton Years: "Russia First" and NATO Enlargement**

During the Clinton years (1993–2000), the policy towards Russia was decidedly mixed. In the first place, a constructive relationship with Russia, as one of the world's most powerful nations, was regarded as a major goal of US policy. A "strategic partnership" with Russia should be formed, as part of what became known as the "Russia first" policy.<sup>96</sup>

At the same time, from 1994 onwards the Clinton administration actively advocated the enlargement of NATO to a number of former Warsaw Pact countries, which had been asking for NATO membership almost as soon as the Warsaw Pact was dissolved. This was justified in two ways: as a means to keep NATO's primacy in European security, and as a means of safeguarding the "democratic peace" in Europe, eventually leading to the integration of Russia in what was then called "the community of free-market democracies". NATO enlargement was explicitly not considered as a means of keeping Russia at bay, and the Russian objections to this plan were dismissed by US decision-makers as "misconceptions" and "zero-sum game thinking", which – according to the Clinton administration – belonged to the Cold War rather than the new era.

In an interesting take, the Clinton administration dismissed the Russian objections to NATO enlargement for the following reason: as Russian public opinion allegedly was quite indifferent to the issue, the objections of the Russian leadership could be dismissed.<sup>97</sup> In the run-up to the decision to enlarge NATO to include three former Warsaw Pact states (Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary) in 1997, the Clinton administration saw this entire policy as being pursued on behalf of the Eastern European countries, and not being directed against Russia. It also noted that differences between the United States and Russia had to be dealt with from the perspective that Russia now was a "great" power and not an "imperial" power. In this reasoning, the view that Russia was the successor state of the loser of the Cold War was quite obvious.<sup>98</sup>

A brief summary of the Clinton policy towards Russia thus indicates that it was built on a recognition of Russia as a major power but at the same time on the

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<sup>96</sup> This section builds on Winnerstig 2000, ch. 7.

<sup>97</sup> See *ibid.* 196ff.

<sup>98</sup> See *ibid.* 182ff.

premise that its objections to US policies in certain areas – e.g. NATO enlargement – could be disregarded, as they were considered illegitimate.

### **3.2.2 George W. Bush (2001–2008): From Respectful Partnership to Military Concern**

In June 2001, at his first meeting with the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, the then US president, George W. Bush, expressed delight at meeting President Putin in person for the first time, and noted that he was convinced that both leaders could “build a relationship of mutual respect and candor”.<sup>99</sup> He also famously said that he had looked Putin in the eye and found him “to be very straight forward and trustworthy” as well as having got “a sense of his soul”.<sup>100</sup>

However, the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 made the so-called war on terror the all-consuming focus of the Bush administration, peaking with the 2003 invasion of Iraq and its aftermath. All forms of problems with Russia were sidelined, and instead the president noted, in his 2002 *State of the Union* address, that “a common danger is erasing old rivalries. America is working with Russia and China and India, in ways we have never seen before, to achieve peace and prosperity. In every region, free markets and free trade and free societies are proving their power to lift lives.”<sup>101</sup>

In the 2002 *National Security Strategy*, which was to a large extent dominated by the ongoing war on terror, Russia was again considered as a basically friendly state. The United States, the strategy stated, is building a new strategic relationship with Russia, based on the “reality” that the two countries are no longer “strategic adversaries”. However, the Russian elites’ “lingering distrust” of the United States and Russia’s “uneven commitment to the basic values of free-market democracy” were issues of concern, according to the strategy.<sup>102</sup> Thus, domestic developments in Russia, in terms of elite identity and diminishing support for democratic values, were the most salient ones in the eyes of the Bush administration.

As Russia protested against the 2002 US withdrawal from the ABM treaty, and was acting against the US-led invasion of Iraq, relations between the countries soured somewhat. Moreover, the decision to continue to enlarge NATO in 2002 – which resulted in a substantial increase in the number of NATO members, including the three Baltic states, in 2004 – generated Russian protests, though not of the 1997–99 kind. It is a sign of a certain lack of importance of Russia to the United States that Russia was not mentioned at all in President Bush’s *State of the*

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<sup>99</sup> Bush 2001.

<sup>100</sup> Wyatt 2001.

<sup>101</sup> Bush 2002a.

<sup>102</sup> Bush 2002b:27.

*Union* speeches in 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2008,<sup>103</sup> and only once in a major Pentagon document.<sup>104</sup>

In the president's 2006 *National Security Strategy*, however, the basis of US Russia policy was linked to Russian domestic issues. Strengthening the relationship, the strategy noted, was dependent on Russian domestic policies, but recent trends "regrettably point toward a diminishing commitment to democratic freedoms and institutions. ...[E]fforts to prevent democratic development at home and abroad will hamper the development of Russia's relations with the United States, Europe, and its neighbours."<sup>105</sup>

Meeting in April 2008, Bush and Putin signed a "U.S.-Russia Strategic Framework Declaration", which stated that the two countries did not consider one another an "enemy or strategic threat", but rather were dedicated to becoming strategic partners.<sup>106</sup> This view, based on the idea of mutual partnership, was not reflected at any length in the Bush administration's last *National Defense Strategy*, published only a couple months later.<sup>107</sup> In fact, the strategy already considered Russia as a major problem. In the first place, Russia was considered a military concern as its "retreat from openness and democracy could have significant security implications for the United States, our European allies, and our partners in other regions."<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, according to the strategy

"[Russia] has continued to bully its neighbours [and] withdrawn from arms control and force reduction treaties, and even threatened to target countries hosting potential U.S. anti-missile bases. Furthermore, Moscow has signalled an increasing reliance on nuclear weapons as a foundation of its security. All of these actions suggest a Russia exploring renewed influence, and seeking a greater international role."<sup>109</sup>

Thus, in 2008 at least the US Department of Defense had changed its mind on Russia's military behaviour.

Secondly, the 2008 defence strategy was also based on a line of thought linking domestic Russian developments to its external behaviour. Essentially, the Russian "retreat from democracy" and "intimidation of its neighbors" were interrelated issues in the view of the Bush administration; although the US did not expect a

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<sup>103</sup> In President Bush's 2007 *State of the Union* speech, however, Russia is mentioned twice and in a rather favourable manner, as one of the major US partners helping to deal with Iran and North Korea. See Bush 2007.

<sup>104</sup> Rumsfeld 2005:4.

<sup>105</sup> Bush 2006.

<sup>106</sup> See Bush and Putin 2008.

<sup>107</sup> Gates 2008:3f.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*:4.

future military confrontation with Russia, its concerns over Russian policies came out very clearly<sup>110</sup>

As Russia invaded Georgia in August 2008, the US-Russian relationship reached a new low. The Russian actions were condemned and the then secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, argued that these actions served only to send Russia into international isolation.<sup>111</sup> The subsequent Russian recognition of the two Georgian breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was also condemned by President Bush personally.<sup>112</sup>

The general approach of the Bush administration, then, had obviously shifted from a very optimistic stance in 2001 to a much more negative view of Russia and its actions eight years later. In sum and thematically, the official Bush Jr policy towards Russia can be said to have gone through three phases:

- 1) an initial phase of striving for partnership,
- 2) a second phase of clearly limited interest in Russia as such (as seen in the non-appearance of Russia in several important US official texts), and
- 3) a third phase, based on emerging concerns about Russia as a military threat, primarily based on Russian domestic developments (especially the downward path of Russian democracy and the increasingly hostile regime identity, as US policymakers saw it).

## **3.3 The Obama Administration – The Rise and Fall of the Reset Policy**

### **3.3.1 The introduction of the Reset Policy**

Barack Obama took office in January 2009, less than half a year after the Russian invasion of Georgia. Despite – or perhaps because of – this, however, the Obama administration very soon charted a new course in its relations with Russia. At the annual Munich conference on security policy in February 2009, Vice-President Joe Biden argued that the last few years had seen a “dangerous drift” between Russia and NATO, and that it now was time to “press the reset button and to revisit the many areas where we can and should be working together with Russia”.<sup>113</sup> Especially in the fields of counter-terrorism and nuclear weapons reductions Biden saw many possibilities for US-Russian cooperation, while acknowledging that the United States would not recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid. 10f.

<sup>111</sup> de Quetteville et al. 2008.

<sup>112</sup> Bush 2008a.

<sup>113</sup> Biden 2009.

states, or any Russian “sphere of influence”. The bottom line, according to Biden, was that “the United States and Russia can disagree and still work together where our interests coincide. And they coincide in many places.”<sup>114</sup>

“Reset” then became the defining concept for much of the first Obama administration’s policy towards Russia. President Obama himself invested a great deal of political capital within the context of the reset policy in order to conclude a nuclear arms reductions deal with Russia and its new president, Dimitri Medvedev. The decision by the Obama administration to replace a robust missile defence system in Europe that had been negotiated by the Bush administration with another, less costly and more gradual, approach was also seen as a major gesture to Moscow.<sup>115</sup> This policy change left several Eastern European leaders concerned regarding Obama’s policies towards Russia.<sup>116</sup>

In fact, the concern felt in Central and Eastern Europe had already been fleshed out in an open letter to the Obama administration by a number of officials and other actors from the former Soviet bloc countries, including former presidents Vaclav Havel and Lech Walesa. In the letter, the Obama administration was warned against Russian policies, while Russia was portrayed as “a revisionist power pursuing a 19th-century agenda with 21st-century tactics and methods”.<sup>117</sup>

Many US analysts – both academic and in the think-tank community – did, however, support the reset policy from the outset. Strobe Talbott, the architect of the “Russia first” policy of the Clinton years, argued in 2009 that no new Cold War was on the horizon and that the reset was thus good policy. Russia must, Talbott argued, be including itself into global interdependence and an international rules-based order. The West must also include Russia in the international system.<sup>118</sup> Other analysts agreed, and pointed to the early effects of the reset – nuclear arms reductions negotiations, cooperation on Iran etc. – but noted also that Russia is not and cannot be a superpower, and that differences with the United States regarding its periphery might cause new tensions.<sup>119</sup>

In some contrast, a number of optimistic long-term assessments of Russian policy also emerged in the United States. Some analysts noted that Russian opposition to NATO enlargement and other US policies came not out of emotions but out of interest, but also that there was “little evidence” and highly unlikely that Russia under Putin would seek hegemony in its neighbourhood.<sup>120</sup> In the long term, these

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<sup>114</sup> Biden 2009.

<sup>115</sup> See e.g. Barnes and Stack 2009.

<sup>116</sup> The roll-out of the new policy happened on an ominous day – 17 September, the 70th anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939 – which exacerbated the concerns in the Central and Eastern European countries.

<sup>117</sup> See Adamkus et al. 2009.

<sup>118</sup> Talbott 2009.

<sup>119</sup> Nation 2010.

<sup>120</sup> Shleifer and Treisman 2011:128.

analysts argued, Russia's identity would be solidly rooted in the West, and the possibility of its joining the EU might become reality.<sup>121</sup>

The concerns voiced by Central and Eastern European politicians were, however, echoed early on by a number of US analysts. Robert Kagan, a well-known neoconservative analyst, claimed in 2010 that an obvious result of the administration's reset had been a "wave of insecurity" among the Central/Eastern European and Baltic countries.<sup>122</sup> Similarly, experts on Russia at right-wing think tanks advocated that the US should revoke the policy as Moscow "speaks the language of arms" while the Obama administration's emphasis on "soft power" only "encourages Moscow to expand its hegemony" in its neighbourhood.<sup>123</sup> Others noted that Russian espionage and aggressive actions against US officials continued despite the reset, implicitly arguing that the policy should be discarded.<sup>124</sup>

Finally, another defining feature of Obama's first-term foreign policy was indirectly related to the reset policy: the so-called "pivot to Asia". This policy, first outlined in an Obama speech in Canberra, Australia, in 2011, was geopolitically and geo-economically driven: Asia was becoming both richer and more fragile from a security policy perspective, and the Obama policy aimed to strengthen the position of the United States in the region and to promote a stronger military presence in Asia.<sup>125</sup> Russia was not mentioned at all in the Canberra speech, but the entire "pivot", later relabelled "rebalancing", policy towards Asia built on the conception of a successful reset with Russia. The geopolitical problems in Europe were considered to be gone, and US political energy could thus be directed towards Asia, and especially the issue of the rising power of China, instead.<sup>126</sup>

### 3.3.2 The Reset and Nuclear Arms Reductions

The Obama administration continued its reset policy and negotiated nuclear arms reductions with Russia on a regular basis. In his first *State of the Union* speech, President Obama mentioned Russia only once, but in a positive way in the context of nuclear arms control.<sup>127</sup> As a result, the new START Treaty was signed by presidents Obama and Medvedev in the spring of 2010. The reset policy was widely regarded as a necessary condition for this to happen.

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid. 137.

<sup>122</sup> Kagan 2010.

<sup>123</sup> Cohen 2010.

<sup>124</sup> Lake 2011.

<sup>125</sup> See Obama 2011b.

<sup>126</sup> The fact that very little actually materialised in terms of an increased US military presence in Asia is beyond the scope of this report.

<sup>127</sup> Obama 2010a.

This attitude was echoed in the Pentagon's 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR). Russia was devoted fairly limited space in the document, and essentially in the context of nuclear arms reductions. Although it was stated that “the United States will continue to engage with Russia’s neighbours as fully independent and sovereign states” – a veiled and indirect criticism of Russian foreign policies – the basic thrust of this report was optimistic.<sup>128</sup>

In the subsequent first *National Security Strategy* of the Obama administration, published in May 2010 – about a month after the signing of the new START Treaty – Russia stands out as an essentially friendly actor, and the essential counterpart in terms of arms reductions and countering terrorism. The United States, the strategy argued, seeks “to build a stable, substantive, multidimensional relationship with Russia, based on mutual interests. The United States has an interest in a strong, peaceful, and prosperous Russia that respects international norms.” It also set out “... to build deeper and more effective partnerships with other key centres of influence—including ...Russia ...with the recognition that power, in an interconnected world, is no longer a zero sum game”.<sup>129</sup> The only forms of criticism of Russian behaviour that can be traced in the strategy are highly indirect, and relate – as in the QDR – to US support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Russia’s neighbours.<sup>130</sup>

In December 2010, the US Senate ratified the new START Treaty. Although the ratification process had been less than easy for the administration, the ratification in itself was seen as a major victory for the Obama reset policy. This was reflected in the president’s 2011 *State of the Union* speech, in which he argued that the United States was promoting peace through resetting the relations with Russia.<sup>131</sup>

The Pentagon’s 2011 *National Military Strategy* echoed this. Strengthening relations with Russia, building on the nuclear arms reduction efforts, and inviting Russia to even more cooperation on counter-terrorism, missile defence, Asian security and other issues was the name of the game. The strategy, issued by the top US military officer, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, thus contained an essentially friendly view of Russia.<sup>132</sup>

This became the overarching view of the Obama administration for the next two years. In a presidential document called *National Defense Strategic Guidance*, published in early January 2012, Obama noted that the US “engagement with Russia remains important, and we will continue to build a closer relationship in areas of mutual interest and encourage it to be a contributor across a broad range

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<sup>128</sup> Gates 2010.

<sup>129</sup> Obama 2010b:44.

<sup>130</sup> Obama 2010b: 8f, 11f, 23f.

<sup>131</sup> Obama 2011a.

<sup>132</sup> Mullen 2011:13.

of issues”.<sup>133</sup> In his 2012 *State of the Union* speech, Obama mentioned Russia only once and just in passing.<sup>134</sup> The same speech in 2013 also mentioned Russia just once, in the context of nuclear arms reductions.<sup>135</sup>

Both critics and supporters of the reset policy within the US analytical community often regard the nuclear disarmament issue as the key driver of the Obama reset policy as a whole. To the critics, President Obama’s wish to reduce nuclear weapons in the world would lead him to bad deals with the Russians.<sup>136</sup> The supporters argued that the entire purpose of Obama’s Russia policy, including the reset, was to set the stage for nuclear weapons reductions, aiming at a “global zero”. This overriding goal then guided the entire US policy towards Russia, and produced results such as the new START Treaty. The reset policy was therefore considered basically successful.<sup>137</sup> Some analysts have also concluded that the desire to promote a limited number of other issues was as important as the nuclear disarmament factor: the so-called Northern Distribution Network (allowing US equipment bound for the Afghanistan mission to go by train eastwards across Russia), US-Russian cooperation on Iran and generally better Russian-European relations.<sup>138</sup> However, the idea that the nuclear factor was the major one is fairly dominant in the US debate on the reset.

### 3.3.3 Putin, Syria, Snowden, and the End of the Reset

Some analysts argue that the end of the reset policy had already come in early 2012, not least due to personality issues. President Obama introduced the reset when Medvedev was his Russian counterpart. In early 2012, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton supported the then ongoing anti-Putin demonstrations in Moscow, which was seen as a sign of the end of the reset as such; the “values gap” between US and Russian policymakers and elites had widened too much for any friendly relationship to endure.<sup>139</sup> In 2012, Vladimir Putin was again elected as the president of Russia, and to some analysts this led to a fundamental change of the Obama administration’s attitude towards Russia: Putin was personally blamed for the downturn in relations, and President Obama himself allegedly viewed Russia as increasingly irrelevant and Putin as an illegitimate leader.<sup>140</sup>

However, the developments in Syria during the summer of 2013 meant that even at the highest level official US-Russian relations became strained. Russian

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<sup>133</sup> Obama 2012a:3.

<sup>134</sup> Obama 2012b.

<sup>135</sup> Obama 2013.

<sup>136</sup> See e.g. Brookes 2009.

<sup>137</sup> Indyk, Lieberthal and O’Hanlon 2012:29ff.

<sup>138</sup> Lo. 2015:169ff.

<sup>139</sup> Lo 2015:175f.

<sup>140</sup> Mauldin et al. 2014.



policymakers tried to discourage the US administration from attacking the Syrian Assad regime militarily. The Obama administration was planning to do this to counter the Assad regime and punish it for its use of chemical weapons in the Syrian civil war. Eventually, after successfully demanding that Syria should give up its chemical weapons stockpile and transfer it to the international community for destruction, Russia persuaded the United States not to attack its Syrian client.

The negotiations on Syria initially led to a high level of controversy between US and Russian policymakers, but in the end both sides claimed victory; the US side argued that its threat of a military attack on Syria had compelled the Assad regime to give up its chemical weapons, and the Russian side – being the patron of the Assad regime – avoided a military attack against its client and was thus able to score a major diplomatic victory.<sup>141</sup>

The Obama administration was widely criticised for its handling of the Syrian crisis.<sup>142</sup> It also led to seriously bad relations between the US and Russia, including the US cancellation of a bilateral summit in the context of the St Petersburg G20 meeting in September 2013.

On top of this, the eventual defection of the former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden to Russia in 2013 contributed to the general bad state of affairs between the two countries. The Snowden affair was immediately used by some analysts to discredit the Obama reset policies.<sup>143</sup> Thus, in the autumn of 2013, the US-Russian relationship was deteriorating sharply, and the reset was long gone.

### 3.3.4 Ukraine and Crimea

Even if the reset policy was a moot point in 2012, the Obama administration still wanted to stop the relationship from deteriorating even more. In 2012, the noted US expert on Russia Angela Stent saw President Obama as working on keeping a “post-reset status quo”. She identified issues in the relationship, but also fewer problems:

Ukraine and Georgia’s Euroatlantic aspirations are no longer contentious because EU and NATO membership are, in reality, off the table. ...Russia’s neighbours are less likely to become issues of contention in US-Russian relations in the next few years .... In any event, Russia will remain an important US partner, albeit a challenging one, over the next four years.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> See Gordon 2013.

<sup>142</sup> See e.g. Murpy 2013 and Schake 2013.

<sup>143</sup> See e.g. Satter 2013.

<sup>144</sup> Stent 2012:135f.

As we now know, Russia's issues with its neighbours became a major issue of contention already in 2014, with the Russian aggression towards Ukraine and its illegal annexation of Crimea in March that year. It is probably fair to say that this development came as a relative surprise to the Obama administration. Its official policy did not contain any comments related to possible Russian aggression towards Ukraine. For example, in his January 2014 *State of the Union* speech, Obama did not mention Russia at all, but noted – in the context of Ukraine, where the Euromaidan protests against the pro-Russian Yanukovich regime had been going on for weeks – that the United States stands “for the principle that all people have the right to express themselves freely and peacefully, and have a say in their country's future”.<sup>145</sup>

Likewise, the Pentagon's 2014 QDR, published in March 2014 – only a couple of weeks before the Russian illegal annexation of Crimea – basically contained a fairly friendly view of Russia. The United States, it said, was willing to undertake security cooperation with Russia when its interests align with Russia's, for example in the fields of further nuclear arms reductions and missile defence, and in the context of rogue regimes such as the one in North Korea.<sup>146</sup> Some indirect criticism was present, though, in terms of concerns regarding the Russian military modernisation and “actions that violate the sovereignty of its neighbors”.<sup>147</sup>

In the European context, the QDR hinted at further reductions of the US military posture in Europe and indirectly justified this on the basis of the essentially friendly US-Russian relations and constructive US-Russian engagement in Europe.<sup>148</sup>

With the events in Ukraine in late March 2014, however, the US tone shifted dramatically. Announcing sanctions against Russia on 20 March, Obama noted “an illegal referendum in Crimea; an illegitimate move by the Russians to annex Crimea; and dangerous risks of escalation, including threats to Ukrainian personnel in Crimea and threats to southern and eastern Ukraine as well”.<sup>149</sup> This kind of rhetoric now became the new normal in the US policymakers' views, and was exacerbated after the downing of the Malaysian Airlines MH17 jetliner over eastern Ukraine in July 2014. Obama all but accused the Russian regime of actively helping the Russian separatists that were suspected of having fired the surface-to-air missile that shot down the aircraft,<sup>150</sup> and US-Russian relations sank to unprecedented lows.

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<sup>145</sup> Obama 2014a.

<sup>146</sup> Hagel 2014.

<sup>147</sup> Hagel 2014:6ff.

<sup>148</sup> Hagel 2014:35.

<sup>149</sup> Obama 2014a.

<sup>150</sup> Obama 2014b.

In January 2015, Obama's *State of the Union* speech contained a fundamental shift in terms of policy towards Russia compared to earlier years. The United States, Obama noted, is "upholding the principle that bigger nations can't bully the small - by opposing Russian aggression, and supporting Ukraine's democracy, and reassuring our NATO allies."<sup>151</sup> He also argued - maybe slightly prematurely - that US policy towards this Russian aggression had led to Russia being "isolated with its economy in tatters".<sup>152</sup>

A month later, the 2015 edition of the Obama administration's *National Security Strategy* was published. The concept of "Russian aggression" is mentioned several times in the report, and framed as one of the current most salient challenges to US security. Together with its European allies, the strategy argued, the United States was enforcing sanctions on Russia to impose costs and deter future aggression.<sup>153</sup> To underline the fundamental re-evaluation of the US view of Russia, the strategy stated that Russia's "violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity - as well as its belligerent stance toward other neighbouring countries - endangers international norms that have largely been taken for granted since the end of the Cold War".<sup>154</sup>

The strategy also presented, in no uncertain terms, the military aspects of US policy towards Russia: "We are reassuring our allies by backing our security commitments and increasing responsiveness through training and exercises, as well as a dynamic presence in Central and Eastern Europe to deter further Russian aggression."<sup>155</sup> These words are, to say the least, very different from the earlier six years of Obama policies towards Russia.

These security-political considerations were echoed by the Pentagon's 2015 *National Military Strategy* (NMS), published in June. It noted that Russia's actions were violating numerous international agreements and arms control treaties, such as the UN Charter, the Helsinki Accords, the Russia-NATO Founding Act, the Budapest Memorandum, and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. The strategy did not believe that Russia was seeking direct military conflict with the United States or its allies, but it was obvious that the Pentagon strategists considered Russia as an actor posing serious security threats to the international community as a whole.<sup>156</sup> For the NATO alliance, the NMS stated that the United States remains "steadfast in our commitment to our NATO allies. NATO provides vital collective security guarantees and is strategically important for deterring conflict, particularly in light of recent Russian aggression on its periphery."<sup>157</sup> In

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<sup>151</sup> Obama 2015a.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Obama 2015b:iii.

<sup>154</sup> Obama 2015b:10.

<sup>155</sup> Obama 2015b:25f.

<sup>156</sup> Dempsey 2015:2.

<sup>157</sup> Dempsey 2015:9.

practical terms, this is being played out in 2016 through a DoD budget proposal that allocates four times as much extra money to the *European Reassurance Initiative* of the US European Command, which will finance pre-positioning of US heavy equipment in the Baltic states and Poland. In its turn, this will also allow a full armoured brigade combat team to be continuously deployed in this part of Europe.

In other words, in the course of three years, the US view of Russia and Russian policy had gone from an essentially friendly partnership – with huge consequences for other issues, such as the “pivot to Asia” and the US military posture in Europe – to an adversarial relationship that bears at least some marks of the Cold War kind.<sup>158</sup> Somewhat ironically, the second Obama administration’s policy towards Russia had also become very similar to that of the second administration of George W. Bush.

### 3.3.5 The Future of US Policy Toward Russia

During the course of a fall 2015 visit, most of our interviewees argued that the events in Ukraine in 2014 and onwards came as a surprise to most people in to the US capital. They have had a dramatic effect in the US system, even if the White House (i.e. the president and his closest advisors), according to several respondents, are still trying to play them down.<sup>159</sup> Others note that US policy tends to be very person-centric; it is now anti-Putin but fails to see the system behind Putin.<sup>160</sup> Also, some analysts believe that the Obama administration wants to keep confrontation with Russia low as to not alienate the post-Putin Russian leadership.<sup>161</sup>

Some analysts also identify the Pentagon and the military commanders as the actors who are driving policy towards Russia, while the White House is playing a passive role.<sup>162</sup> Others view Obama as banking on Russia’s long-term problems; this, according to this view, is why he does not act more forcefully. He believes that Russia is a major regional power with huge economic and social problems and not a superpower.<sup>163</sup> Furthermore, to some analysts the White House seems to believe that compartmentalisation is the way to go – isolating issues that can be the subject of cooperation despite all other differences.<sup>164</sup>

Most analysts in Washington, DC seem to agree, however, that an adversarial relationship will continue, and that the US answer to Russian geopolitical moves

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<sup>158</sup> See Landler and Cooper 2016.

<sup>159</sup> Interview, Washington, DC, 2 April 2015.

<sup>160</sup> Interview, Washington, DC, 2 April 2015.

<sup>161</sup> Interview, Washington, DC, 21 October 2015.

<sup>162</sup> Interviews, Washington, DC, 20 and 21 October 2015.

<sup>163</sup> Interviews, Washington, DC, 20 and 21 October 2015.

<sup>164</sup> Interview, Washington, DC, 20 October 2015.

will also be geopolitical in character. According to several interviewees, war games on Baltic security are now being played in Washington's defence and security policy establishment. The major lesson from these games has been that the US military presence in the Baltic Sea area needs to be increased.<sup>165</sup> Many of our interviewees also concluded that the US forces in Europe will most likely increase.<sup>166</sup>

In particular, countering militarily the anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) issues in the Baltic Sea area is currently receiving a great deal of attention.<sup>167</sup> To counter the Russian threat in Europe generally, according to some Washington-based military-political analysts, the United States needs to invest in anti-tank capability as well as long- and short-range air defence capabilities.<sup>168</sup>

According to some analysts, there will probably be a moderate increase in the US military presence in Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic states.<sup>169</sup> Others argue that the target rather should be a full brigade combat team for each Baltic state, pre-positioning their equipment there and rotating personnel to these states on a permanent basis.<sup>170</sup> In any case, an increased military posture in Europe is highly possible, perhaps in the nuclear field as well.<sup>171</sup>

### **3.4 A Concluding Analysis of the Obama Policy: From “Appeasement from Strength” to Military Countermeasures**

In some contrast to the Clinton policies, the Obama administration started out considering more seriously some Russian objections to US policies – such as the missile defence system in Europe. Despite some misgivings among its European allies, the Obama administration actually went a long way to appease Russia in this regard. Given the United States' overwhelmingly stronger overall power position, this policy, including the reset policy, could be labelled “appeasement from strength”. As with the George W. Bush administration, though, the Obama administration's initial strong efforts for partnership with Russia ended in a highly adversarial state of affairs a few years later.

In the case of the Obama administration, however, the initial policy was apparently very deep-rooted. This can be understood particularly well through the fact that major strategic documents of the administration did not contain any negative

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<sup>165</sup> Interviews, Washington, DC, 1 April 2015 and 22 October 2015.

<sup>166</sup> Interview, Washington, DC, 20 October 2015.

<sup>167</sup> Interviews, Washington, DC, 21 and 22 October 2015.

<sup>168</sup> Interview, Washington, DC, 22 October 2015.

<sup>169</sup> Interview, Washington, DC, 21 October 2015.

<sup>170</sup> Interview, Washington, DC, 22 October 2015.

<sup>171</sup> Interview, Washington, DC, 22 October 2015.

references to Russia at all even in early 2014, even though the reset policy in itself had essentially failed about two years earlier, and even though the Russian aggression against Ukraine was well under way at that time. At the same time, Russia was not the centrepiece of the Obama administration's foreign policy; on the contrary, peaceful relations with the Russian partner were preconditions for the real thrust of the first Obama administration's target, i.e. the "pivot" or "rebalancing" to Asia. This, and the likewise deep-rooted conviction of Obama personally that he must obtain mutual US-Russian nuclear arms reductions, also probably explain why the Obama administration's official policy avoided for so long considering discussing the Russian actions in more straightforward terms. Other issues, outside the scope of this report, probably contributed to this as well: the effects of the financial crisis of 2008, the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, the domestic health care field and so on. The initial agenda of the Obama administration was, in this perspective, very substantial.

It took, in effect, a full-scale Russian invasion and illegal annexation of a part of a sovereign country with strong links to, if not an alliance with, the United States to bring the administration to change its policy in a more profound way. This is a marked contrast with the Bush administration, which started commenting officially and negatively on aspects of Russian behaviour a significant length of time before Russian external actions demanded it.

## 4 Analysis and Conclusions

In 2015 Russia and the United States essentially and in effect agreed that they were each other's adversaries for the first time in over 25 years. The aim of this study has been to analyse the causes behind this shift. To do this we will now return to the research questions of this study.

### *Are the differences due to different material interests – such as geopolitical interests – or to different values and identities?*

The Russian preferred outcome is a world in which the United States has lost some of its international leverage while Russia has gained the same. Russia aims to constrain US influence on the international arena and change the rules of the game, which in its view at present are dominated by, and designed to benefit, the United States. Russia moreover has the ambition to increase its impact on European security, an ambition which does not agree with the decisive role that the United States plays in European security at present. Hence, Russia's foreign policy goals and their fulfilment do not go hand in hand with a constructive relationship with the United States.

Explicit geopolitical motives aimed at countering Russia are harder to find in the official US policy. In fact, the US administrations covered have started out underlining their desire to create a partnership with Russia. However, they all ended up in a more or less sharp geopolitical confrontation. The Obama administration, which made partnership with Russia a stronger trademark than most other post-Cold War administrations, now finds itself in a relationship with Russia which is actually more adversarial than it has been at any time after 1991. In response to Russia's actions in Ukraine the United States has increased the amount of pre-positioned military materiel and, to a lesser degree, the number of soldiers in Europe to support its alliance in Europe geopolitically, and to reassure the European NATO members of its commitment. These measures, on behalf of both actors, have contributed to a worsened relationship.

Furthermore, it seems obvious that there are a number of gaps, in terms of understanding, expectations and values between the two actors. In the first place, there is a gap related to their lack of understanding of each other. NATO enlargement, according to the US policymakers, is primarily a way of securing militarily the younger democracies of Central and Eastern Europe – and these countries have been driving their membership processes without encouragement from the United States. For their Russian counterparts, NATO expansion is entirely a classic geopolitical way for the United States to encroach upon the legitimate Russian sphere of influence and encircle Russia. The current US military build-up in the eastern NATO member states further contributes to this impression.

Secondly, there is a gap in expectations between Russia and the United States. Russia expects the United States to understand the sensitivities it has regarding its sphere of influence and its perception of being cornered by NATO and its missile defence systems. The United States, on the other hand, expects Russia to understand that these Russian views are illiberal and illegitimate and thus not allowed to affect US foreign policy.

However, factors based on identities also play an important role. The difference in terms of identities and perceptions is one of the major foundations of the complexity in the relationship. Russian foreign policy revolves around the relationship with the United States and emphasises Russia's identity as a great power and as such an equal to the United States. The United States does not attach the same priority to Russia and has taken on a clear superpower identity, which makes it something different from Russia. Correspondingly, US policymakers often consider Russia to be a "regional power", far from parity with the United States - an attitude that clearly frustrates Russian leaders.

Interestingly, however, both countries hold the view that the other is weak. In the case of Russia this is based on episodes in the bilateral relationship, such as Russia's ability to prevent a US intervention in Syria in 2013 and the absence of strong US reactions to Russian actions in Ukraine and Syria in 2015. The United States considers Russia to be weak both due to economic problems and as a result of the democratic deficiencies in its domestic political system, which US policymakers often link to an increasingly aggressive external policy.

At the same time, Russia, slightly paradoxically, sees the United States as being strong enough to initiate and implement regime change in Russia. Moreover, the current Russian leadership sees the United States as a moral opponent as well, depicting it as the leader of the "degenerate" West. This is normally most explicitly spelled out in domestic Russian communications, but it affects the general view of the Russian identity vis-à-vis the United States.

### ***What role do domestic political factors play?***

In explaining Russian policy towards the United States, Russian domestic factors play a considerable role. To ensure regime survival after the protests in 2011–12 the policies acquired a more outspoken anti-Western element as the leadership adapted to existing sentiments to appeal to a new power base among the Russian population. The policy has a strong anti-American feature and stresses the idea of Russia as a great power. This idea had been a source of tension in the relationship with the United States before 2012, displayed in different views regarding the sphere of influence, NATO enlargement and missile defence, and as it was given a stronger focus relations became even more strained. On the domestic arena, the new social contract, which requires the demonstration of Russia as a great power through foreign policy successes abroad, further complicates the Russian-US relationship. The United States, identified as the enemy in the Russian political



discourse, plays moreover a crucial role as an external threat against which Russia can be united. This threat perception can also be used to legitimise actions internally and externally.

In the case of the United States, Russia is not the centre of attention in the US political discourse. Related to this, US domestic policy does not affect the bilateral relationship very much: there is no ethnic Russian lobby with the ability to influence US foreign policy substantially, US-Russian economic linkages are very marginal, and – in contrast to the Cold War era – there is not an ideological confrontation between the two countries big enough to be used by actors in the US domestic political debate. If, however, we count liberal ideology in foreign policy terms – as embraced by US politicians – as a domestic factor, this becomes an important domestic issue as well.

This has to do with the fact that *Russian* domestic political factors play a substantial role in US policy towards Russia. This has been most obvious when President Putin has governed Russia, as US policymakers then have made an issue out of the way in which the Russian domestic system has been turning non-democratic. This is mentioned quite frequently in official sources – especially when Russia, in American eyes, behaves geopolitically and badly. Thus US policymakers apparently want to make a strong link between a non-democratic domestic system and a geopolitically aggressive foreign policy.

### ***What kind of events seem to affect the relationship the most?***

From the analysis above, we can conclude that a number of events have affected the relationship to a very substantial degree. From the Russian perspective, the alleged role of the United States in the Orange revolution and in the Euromaidan as well as its ambition to offer Georgia and Ukraine MAP status in 2008 have played a decisive role. Putin's Munich speech, which clearly signalled a new type of relationship with the West, as well as the rallies in connection to his return to power, have had a strong impact. From the US perspective, the Russian war against Georgia in 2008, Russia's different position regarding Syria from 2013 and onwards and, especially, the Russian annexation of Crimea and its subsequent aggression in eastern Ukraine in 2014 and onwards are three of the most important factors. The return to power of President Putin in 2012 was also a clearly problematic event for the Obama administration, as the reset policy to a certain extent built on the good personal chemistry between Obama and then President Medvedev. Thus, both geopolitical and domestic events have affected the relationship in a negative way.

### ***What is the likely future development of the relationship?***

Both geopolitical, non-material and domestic politics factors seem to play major, and essentially negative, roles in the current Russian-US relationship – on both sides. For these reasons, the Russia-US relationship is not likely to improve in the

coming years. Most of the factors and issues analysed in this report are also reinforcing each other: geopolitical moves – such as the Russian illegal annexation of Crimea and the subsequent US military build-up in Eastern Europe – are leading to increased adversarial perceptions (or widening gaps) between the actors. Furthermore, Russian domestic developments are not likely to improve. Hence the anti-Western policy, the requirement of an external threat and the display of Russia's international standing will continue. The US view of Russia as an increasingly non-democratic, aggressive and revisionist state will therefore remain, which also contributes to increased levels of confrontation.

From a values-based perspective, the Russian-US differences in terms of values (societal, cultural and ideational) are increasingly obvious, although not yet at Cold War levels. In sum, most perspectives and most factors indicate that the deteriorating relationship between Russia and the United States will not be transformed into something better for a long time.

For the smaller countries of Europe, not least in the Nordic and Baltic Sea region, the deteriorating relations between Russia and the United States mean that increased tensions and increased demands on the defence forces of all the countries involved most likely will be the order of the day - for years to come.

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## **6 List of Institutional Visits**

### ***Washington, DC, 1–3 April 2015***

RAND Corporation

Center for Transatlantic Relations - SAIS/Johns Hopkins

Atlantic Council

Swedish Embassy

### ***Washington, DC, 19–23 October 2015***

Atlantic Council

Center for a New American Security (CNAS)

Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

Heritage Foundation

McCain Institute

RAND Corporation

Swedish Embassy

### ***Moscow, 9–13 November 2015***

Institute for Middle East Studies

Institute for the U.S. and Canadian Studies

Institute of Oriental Studies

Institute of Scientific Information for Social Sciences (INION)

Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO)

Russian International Affairs Council

U.S. Embassy in Moscow

In 2015 Russia and the United States essentially and in effect agreed that they were each other's adversaries for the first time in over 25 years. The aim of this study is to analyse the causes geopolitical, values- and identity-related, and domestic political causes - behind this shift.

Geopolitically, Russia aims to constrain US influence and change international rules, which in the Russian perspective at present are dominated by, and designed to benefit, the United States. Hence, Russia's foreign policy goals and their fulfilment go against a constructive relationship with the United States.

All the US administrations covered by this study have started out underlining their desire to create a partnership while eventually ending up in a geopolitical confrontation with Russia. Currently, the US relationship with Russia is actually more adversarial than it has been at any time after 1991.

Both geopolitical, non-material and domestic politics factors play major, and essentially negative, roles in the current Russian-US relationship. For these reasons, the Russia-US relationship is not likely to improve for years to come.

The study is written as a cooperative venture between the FOI Russia Programme (primarily the RUFs project) and the FOI Programme on Nordic and Transatlantic Security (NOTS).