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# Hearing on “What Comes Next for U.S. Policy Towards Russia?”

BY

**Dr. Andrea Kendall-Taylor**

*Senior Fellow and Program Director, Transatlantic Security Program  
Center for a New American Security*

## I. Introduction

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and distinguished Members of the Foreign Relations Committee, thank you for inviting me to speak today about the future of U.S. policy towards Russia – a topic that is both critical and fraught. It is critical because we are quite clearly locked in a period of intense and what is likely to be prolonged confrontation with Russia, with the war for Ukraine at the center of that confrontation. Because of the war, the risk of escalation, including direct military conflict between the United States and Russia, is higher than it has been in decades. Although the United States and its allies are not directly engaged in the war with Russia in Ukraine, we should be very clear that Russia sees itself as being at war with us.

The future of U.S. policy towards Russia is also fraught. It is fraught because so much is changing – Russia itself is changing as a result of its war on Ukraine in still unknowable ways. The nature of the Russian threat is evolving. We can be sure that nothing will improve so long as Putin is in power, but there is uncertainty about the political changes that the war might trigger inside Russia and what Putin's eventual departure will mean for relations with Moscow. Russia's war in Ukraine requires us to re-examine long-held assumptions and understandings about Russia, and it is those updated assessments that should guide Washington's future policy approach to Russia.

## II. Expectations for the Future of U.S.-Russia Relations

I want to start by making three points that should inform our expectations and understanding of the future of U.S. relations with Russia.

**First, the nature of U.S.-Russia relations will remain confrontational so long as the war continues, and the conflict is likely to be protracted.**

Even as the Russian military struggles to make gains on the battlefield, Putin is confident that the West will eventually tire of its support for Ukraine or that political changes in the United States and Europe will result in less military assistance for Kyiv. But even more, continuing the war is in Putin's personal interest. Fighting on makes sense for Putin for one fundamental reason: wartime autocrats rarely lose power. Being at war shuts down avenues for a country's citizens, military, and security forces to challenge their leadership. In research I conducted with my colleague Dr. Erica Frantz, we found that since the end of World War II, only seven percent of personalist authoritarians—as Putin is—have been unseated while an interstate conflict that began under their watch was ongoing.<sup>1</sup> Other data similarly show that leaders who initiate wars are especially unlikely to be ousted amid them.<sup>2</sup>

The same does not hold true for dictators who lose wars; they become more vulnerable to ejection. Although personalist dictators such as Putin tend to be among the most resilient to military defeats, Putin's expectations of what might happen if he is ousted are likely to shape his calculus.<sup>3</sup> Leaders who worry that they will be jailed, exiled, or killed—a fate most common among personalist autocrats like Putin—suggest he will be especially sensitive to even small increases in risk to his stability. And Putin's very clear responsibility for the invasion makes him particularly vulnerable. According to one study, leaders who are culpable for wars are especially motivated to continue fighting them—even in the face of hardship—because domestic actors will want to punish them if they fail.<sup>4</sup> Even if Ukraine is wildly successful in its counter-offensive, Putin has every incentive to fight through the hardship, meaning that this war will go on for a long time, significantly constraining the scope of U.S.-Russia relations.

<sup>1</sup> Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz, "Putin's Forever War: How the Invasion Empowers Russia's President," *Foreign Affairs*, March 23, 2023. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/putins-forever-war>

<sup>2</sup> Giacomo Chiozza and H.E. Goemans, *Leaders and International Conflict*, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah E. Croco and Jessica L.P. Weeks, "War Outcomes and Leader Tenure," *World Politics* 68, no. 4 (October 2016): 577-607. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26347363>

<sup>4</sup> Sarah E. Croco, "The Decider's Dilemma: Leader Culpability, War Outcomes, and Domestic Punishment," *The American Political Science Review* 105, no. 3 (August 2011): 457-477. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41480852>

## Second, not only is Putin poised to maintain power, but the confrontational nature of U.S.-Russia relations will likely persist past his departure.

So long as the war continues, Putin is likely to be able to weather any blowback. Not only does the ongoing war improve his prospects for political survival, but so too does the political system he has built over his long tenure. Putin has created in Russia what political scientist Milan Svoblik calls an established autocracy, wherein regime officials and elite are fully dependent on the leader and invested in maintaining the status quo from which they benefit.<sup>5</sup> In research I conducted with Dr. Frantz, we find that the typical post-Cold War autocrat who had governed for 20 years (Putin has been in power for 23 years) ended up ruling for a total of about 36 years. The changes he is orchestrating inside Russia make the future of U.S.-Russia relations more problematic. Putin is already taking Russia in a darker, more authoritarian direction. While authoritarianism in Russia has been hardening since Putin returned to power in 2012, his invasion of Ukraine has intensified this authoritarian turn. Russia's wrongful detainment of Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich in March and sentencing of opposition activist Vladimir Kara-Murza to a 25-year jail term in April, for example, are eerily reminiscent of Soviet times.

If anything, Putin is moving Russia in a more totalitarian direction as he attempts to mobilize Russian society in support of his war not just on Ukraine, but also on the West with the United States at its center. As Russian analyst Andrei Kolesnikov has observed, it is no longer possible for Russians to stay disengaged. As he notes, "More and more, Russians who are economically dependent on the state are finding that they have to be active Putinists."<sup>6</sup> Society is being militarized, public acts of support are growing, as are incidents of Russians reporting on the "anti-patriotic" activities of their fellow citizens. Putin's propaganda that frames the United States as the enemy, along with what is likely to be deep Russian resentment over Western sanctions and the role US and European weapons have played in the very high number of Russian casualties, are likely to have long term effects on the way that Russians view the United States and the relations between the two countries. Amid the Kremlin's propaganda, many Russians appear to feel besieged and, often, just as embittered as Putin himself; these dynamics are very likely to sustain an aggressive Russia, even after Putin departs.

Given the societal changes taking place inside Russia, the expectation in Washington must be that authoritarianism and the contours of Russian foreign policy will outlast Putin. The historical record shows that for all post-Cold War autocrats (except monarchs) in power 20 years or more, authoritarianism persists past the leader's departure in 76-percent of cases. When such leaders are also older personalist autocrats, authoritarianism endures—either with the same regime or with the establishment of a new one—92-percent of the time.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the same authoritarian regime often remains intact after longtime leaders leave office—a prospect that would be made more likely if Putin exits on account of natural death or an elite-led coup.<sup>8</sup>

Such continuity would likely extend to the nature of the Russian regime and its external relations. Successors that deviate from the status quo are likely to provoke fierce resistance from the "old guard" who have considerable control over the levers of power in the system. Beyond sidelining (if they can) individuals who pose a particularly serious threat to them, new leaders who inherit office tend to adhere to the previous program. In countries such as Syria and Uzbekistan, for example, the successors of longtime leaders (Bashar al-Assad and Shavkat Mirziyoyev, respectively) showed early signs of liberalization through actions such as the release of political prisoners, only to revert to traditionally more repressive practices.

<sup>5</sup> Milan Svoblik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Andrei Kolesnikov, "Putin's Second Front: The War in Ukraine Has Become a Battle for the Russian Psyche," *Foreign Affairs*, April 7, 2023. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/putins-second-front>

<sup>7</sup> Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz, "After Putin: Lessons from Autocratic Leadership Transitions," *Washington Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2022): 79-96. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0163660X.2022.2057112>

<sup>8</sup> See also: Erica Frantz and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, "When Dictators Die," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 4 (October 2016): 159-171. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/when-dictators-die/>

In part for these reasons, research by Sarah Croco finds that when successors come from the same regime as leaders involved with the initiation of a war, they are likely to continue the conflicts they inherit.<sup>9</sup> By invading Ukraine, Putin has saddled future Russian leaders with vexing problems—ending the war, resolving questions about the illegal annexation of Crimea and the four Ukrainian territories, wartime reparations, and accountability for war crimes, for example—that will long complicate Russia's relations with the United States and Europe. Although a new leader could change the tone of Russia's external relations—just as the transition from Putin to Medvedev created an opening for U.S.-Russia cooperation that did not exist with Putin as President—the broad contours of Russian foreign policy would likely endure.

### **Third, along with the intent, Russia will retain significant capacity to challenge the United States, although the nature of the threat is evolving.**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been a massive strategic blunder, leaving Russia militarily, economically, and geopolitically weaker. Given these facts, there will be a strong temptation to downgrade Russia as a threat. That would be a mistake. Russian power and influence may be diminished, but Russia will adapt. In particular, the more vulnerable Putin feels given the degradation of Russia's conventional forces in Ukraine, the more likely he is to rely on unconventional methods to accomplish his objectives. With its back against the wall, the Kremlin will also have less compunction about trying to destabilize its enemies through sometimes exotic and hard-to-track methods in the biological, chemical, cyberspace, or artificial intelligence realms.<sup>10</sup>

For starters, the Kremlin will almost certainly intensify its disinformation campaigns. Russia has seen just how effective such campaigns can be: disinformation and propaganda have contributed to decisions by leaders in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East to remain neutral or circumspect in the aftermath of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. By accusing Ukraine of carrying out atrocities that Russian soldiers have committed in the war, framing Western sanctions instead of Russia's invasion as responsible for high food and energy prices, and convincing many that it is fighting a defensive war against an expanding NATO, Russia has diluted criticism of its military aggression.

Cyberattacks are likely to be an ever more important and disruptive tool. And, most ominously, the more damage the Russian military incurs in Ukraine, the more likely it is to rely on the prospect of nuclear escalation to offset NATO's conventional superiority in Europe. The Russian military appears genuinely more comfortable with the notion of limited nuclear use relative to its Western counterparts. To be sure, the use of nuclear weapons is a political decision, but the preponderance of evidence suggests that Russia's political leadership might well consider limited nuclear use if faced with the kind of defeat that could threaten the regime or the state. A future crisis or conflict with NATO would leave Moscow with few conventional options before it decided to threaten or potentially use nuclear weapons, shortening the pathway to nuclear war.

The growing import of nonstrategic (or tactical) nuclear weapons to Russia's military means that the country is less likely than ever to agree to negotiated limits on its nuclear arsenal. Russia's decision to suspend its participation in New START underscores this dynamic. This is particularly problematic given that Russia has a more diversified nuclear arsenal than the United States does, with different types of nonstrategic weapons, and doctrinally appears to be more willing to use those weapons in a conflict. The current hostility in the U.S. Congress toward Russia and Moscow's record of violating the treaties it signs also lower the odds that the United States and Russia will agree to a replacement for the New START treaty once it expires in 2026. In the absence of an agreement, Russia's ability to produce strategic nuclear weapons and deploy new systems would be unchecked, and the United States would lose important insights into Russia's strategic nuclear arsenal. Notably, China is also modernizing its nuclear arsenal. As a result, the United States will find itself dealing with two unconstrained nuclear powers, both focused on the United States as the primary threat.

<sup>9</sup> Croco, "The Decider's Dilemma."

<sup>10</sup> Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Michael Kofman, "Russia's Dangerous Decline: The Kremlin Won't Go Down Without a Fight," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2022. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/russia-dangerous-decline>

### III. Recommendations for U.S. Policy Toward Russia

#### The best path to a better relationship with Russia runs through Ukraine.

The United States has very limited ability to directly shape the trajectory of U.S.-Russia relations. The single most important way to shape the future trajectory of the relationship is by enabling Ukraine to defeat Russia. A Russia that makes significant territorial gains in Ukraine is likely to be emboldened—a persistent if not growing threat to Europe and the United States. Such a Russia would not only pose direct threats to the United States and its allies, but its sustained aggression would distract the transatlantic partners from tackling other, pressing global challenges.

A military defeat of Russia, in contrast, raises the prospect of more meaningful political change in Russia. Given the hardened environment Putin now operates in, significant political change is unlikely to occur absent a seismic shift. A Ukrainian victory in the war could provide a catalyst for change. Translating a Russian defeat into political change is far from guaranteed; the personalist nature of Putin's regime creates particularly strong headwinds to change. Research shows that because personalist dictatorships have few institutional mechanisms to facilitate coordination and their elite view their fates as being tied to that of the leader, personalist leaders are the most able to withstand military losses.

Yet even personalist authoritarians are not immune to the aftermath of a poor military performance. Research by Chiozza and Goemans shows that of those leaders who were ousted as a result of a war, all had experienced a military defeat. In fact, approximately half of all leaders who lose a war also lose power.<sup>11</sup> As with other seismic events – like economic or natural disasters – military defeats can expose leaders as incompetent, making visible cracks in the autocrat's shield that shatter their aura of invincibility. Such shocks also create a focal point for mobilization, facilitating the collective action that is necessary to dislodge entrenched regimes. A Ukrainian victory, then, raises the prospects for more meaningful political change in Russia, and critically, could provide future Russian elites and the Russian public with a valuable lesson about the limits of military power.

Most immediately, the U.S. Congress must continue to provide the military aid and assistance that Ukraine needs to defeat Russia. In addition to sustaining military and economic assistance, Congress could adopt legislation that lays out a long-term schedule for delivering weapons to Ukraine. Such a clear, extended plan could make Moscow more pessimistic about the future of its campaign. Money and resources are far more likely than words to shape Putin's calculus about his wartime prospects.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Congress can contribute to securing a Ukrainian victory by making clear that Kyiv has a guaranteed place in the West. The U.S. Congress should fully endorse Ukraine's war aims and lead the charge in building support for Ukraine's NATO membership, including for immediate steps that would deepen Ukraine's integration into NATO.

#### Constrict and constrain the Kremlin.

Also critical to enabling Ukraine to defeat Russia is increasing and strengthening the sanctions against Russia. Such efforts are necessary both to alter Putin's calculus about his ability to sustain the war and to prevent the Kremlin from waging future aggression beyond its borders. Degrading Russian power requires Washington to build on the policies it set in motion following Putin's invasion of Ukraine. In particular, there are several actions the U.S. Congress could take. First, given the importance of Russia's energy sector, Congress should advocate for lowering the oil price cap down from its current price of \$60/bbl. Second, Congress could continue to expand existing sanctions. For, example, Congress could place sanctions on Rosatom, including a ban on Russian uranium, as well as personal sanctions on the management of Rosatom and Rosatom officials active in Ukraine. Third, U.S. Congress must invest in the enforcement of existing sanctions and export controls. Already there is evidence that Russia is working to circumvent them. In

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<sup>11</sup> Chiozza and Goemans.

particular, Congress should increase resources available to build enforcement capacity in key partner countries. Likewise, the creation of a unified database with all sanctioned entities and institutions, including related parties (such as subsidiaries and family members) could significantly strengthen export controls and their enforcement. Although these may not be short-term fixes, such actions are important in tightening existing measures in the longer-term.<sup>12</sup>

### **Strengthen deterrence in Europe.**

Russia is not in a position to start another war today, and certainly not with NATO. But this does not mean Western policymakers can be complacent. It may take Russia the better part of a decade to recapitalize its conventional forces in the aftermath of its attack on Ukraine, but NATO has its own recapitalization woes. European arsenals are being depleted. The United States, in cooperation with its NATO allies, must address shortcomings in the defense industrial base to ensure sustained supply to Ukraine over the long-term, and to ensure preparedness for future conflicts. Moreover, this war has demonstrated just how dependent Europe is on the United States for its security. Although it is tempting to argue that the United States should offload responsibility for deterring Russia to Europe given rising tensions with China, that is an unrealistic and dangerous proposition. It will take Europe decades to be ready. The United States, therefore, must remain committed to strengthening NATO, while working with its NATO allies to strengthen the European pillar within NATO over time.

### **Grow the coalition of countries confronting Russia.**

The unity and coordination between the United States and its allies in the wake of Putin's invasion has been extraordinary, but Russia is far from isolated internationally. Putin has doubled down on the information domain, effectively framing NATO and the West as responsible for the war; his narratives continue to resonate with many in the Global South. Only 34 countries have imposed sanctions on Russia since the war started. Russia continues to build ties in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. China, India, and other states in the Global South have abstained on votes in favor of Ukraine at the United Nations. Trade between Russia and these countries has increased. 87 countries still offer Russian citizens visa-free entry, including Argentina, Egypt, Israel, Mexico, Thailand, Turkey, and Venezuela.<sup>13</sup>

To build the coalition of countries needed to effectively confront Russia and minimize Russia's negative influence in the Global South, the U.S. Congress should continue to fund the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM). Importantly, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has also created opportunities that the United States and its allies can exploit. Russia, for example, will struggle to sustain arms sales—a historically important link that the Kremlin uses to tether countries to Moscow—given the degradation and poor showing of its military. The United States should look for opportunities to step in to replace those relationships, undermining needed revenue for the Kremlin and Russian influence more broadly. Likewise, some countries, particularly in Central Asia, that have close historical relationships with Russia have grown more skeptical of the Kremlin in the aftermath of its invasion of Ukraine. The U.S. Congress can send delegations to key countries to signal U.S. commitment. Such visits can help encourage these countries to better enforce sanctions on Russia, and over time, erode Russian influence.

### **Plan for and mitigate the impact of deepening Russia-China relations.**

Russia's war in Ukraine has been a critical test of the depth of Sino-Russian relations. Since Russia's invasion, China has remained an essential partner for Moscow. Although there have been limits to what Beijing has been willing to do for Russia, China has served as a vital lifeline for the Kremlin, including by parroting Russian talking points about the war, increasing purchases of Russian oil and gas, and continuing to export microchips and other component parts to Moscow that have been cut off by the West. If anything, the war in Ukraine and growing tensions between the United States and

<sup>12</sup> The International Working Group on Russian Sanctions, "Working Group Paper #11: Strengthening Sanctions Against the Russian Federation," April 24, 2023. [https://fsi9-prod.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-04/russia\\_sanctions\\_working\\_paper\\_11\\_action\\_plan\\_2.0\\_v2.pdf](https://fsi9-prod.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-04/russia_sanctions_working_paper_11_action_plan_2.0_v2.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Fiona Hill and Angela Stent, "The Kremlin's Grand Delusions: What the War in Ukraine Has Revealed About Putin's Regime," Foreign Affairs, February 15, 2023. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/kremlins-grand-delusions>

China have amplified the geopolitical factors pushing the two countries together. The impact is significant. Not only is Beijing diluting Western pressure on Russia, but the more dependent Moscow becomes on Beijing, the more likely the Kremlin will be to toe China's line, amplifying the threat that China poses to the United States. This is especially true in the defense domain, where Russia may provide China with increasingly sophisticated capabilities, including submarine quieting and other technologies that make China a more formidable threat.

The U.S. Congress should think through now potential responses to China's providing lethal aid to Moscow. Likewise, the United States and its allies should prioritize intelligence collection on Russian and Chinese efforts to circumvent sanctions and export controls. Enhanced intelligence monitoring will also be required as more of their defense cooperation takes place out of the public eye. In addition, Washington should continue to work with Europe to build a common picture of the challenge that greater Russia-China coordination would pose and further encourage European leaders to articulate to China the potential costs of providing direct support for Russia's war effort.<sup>14</sup>

### Weaken autocracy's grip.

The United States should continue to pursue steps to improve the prospects of better relations with a future Russia. In particular, the United States can pursue measures now that can weaken autocracy's grip in the long run. Corruption, in particular, has been the lifeblood of Putin's regime. Longtime personalist regimes like Russia are the most corrupt type of authoritarian regime. Corrupt and illicit networks entrench regime interests and create high barriers to individuals outside the regime seeking to gain influence within the system. In this way, corruption facilitates the persistence of authoritarianism after a longtime leader's departure. Doubling down on anti-corruption—including by effectively enforcing sanctions on corrupt oligarchs and tracking down their assets, stepping up efforts to fight money laundering, reforming campaign finance, enhancing transparency of the financial and real estate markets, and increasing funding for investigative journalism—can weaken the structural support for authoritarianism in Russia and thereby create opportunities for political change in a post-Putin era.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to prioritizing anti-corruption efforts, the United States and its allies should step up support for Russian civil society—a key ingredient needed to sustain a more liberal and democratic Russia. Critically, Western actions can help Russian civil society actors to sustain their work in the face of the Kremlin's crackdown. In particular, large numbers of the opposition, journalists, and other Russian civil society actors have been forced to leave the country, creating new opportunities to support their work from outside Russia. Much can be done, for example, to support journalists that now operate outside Russia, including through visa support, fellowships, increased funding, and legal assistance. Such efforts are needed now more than ever and would make for a valuable investment in a better relationship with a future, post-Putin Russia.<sup>16</sup>

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Invading Ukraine was a massive miscalculation that will leave Russia militarily, economically, and geopolitically weaker. But it is up to the United States and its allies to demonstrate that we are up to the task of capitalizing on that mistake. It is these personalist autocrats—Putin and increasingly Xi Jinping—that are the most prone to miscalculation because they surround themselves with yes men. Putin's invasion of Ukraine has been an especially horrific miscalculation, but it is critical that the United States and its allies make the most of it. Getting Russia policy right—getting the competition with the world's autocracies right—starts with getting Ukraine right.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> See, "Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Nick Lokker, "Russia-China Relations Deepening Military Cooperation and Its Implications: A CNAS Working Paper," <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/russia-china-relations>.

<sup>15</sup> Kendall-Taylor and Frantz, "After Putin: Lessons from Autocratic Leadership Transitions."

<sup>16</sup> Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Maria Snegovaya, "Supporting Russian Civil Society," Center for a New American Security, December 1, 2022.

<https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/supporting-russian-civil-society>

<sup>17</sup> This testimony reflects the personal views of the author alone. As a research and policy institution committed to the highest standards of organizational, intellectual, and personal integrity, the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) maintains strict intellectual independence and sole editorial direction and control over its ideas, projects, publications, events, and other research activities. CNAS does not take institutional positions on policy issues and the content of CNAS publications reflects the views of their authors alone. In keeping with its mission and values, CNAS does not engage in lobbying activity and complies fully with all applicable federal, state, and local laws. CNAS will not engage in any representational activities or advocacy on behalf of any entities or interests and, to the extent that the Center accepts funding from non-U.S. sources, its activities will be limited to bona fide scholastic, academic, and research-related activities, consistent with applicable federal law. The Center publicly acknowledges on its website annually all [donors](#) who contribute.