

**Statement of John J. Sullivan,  
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U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations  
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Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, distinguished members of the committee, I am honored to appear before you to discuss U.S. policy toward Russia. I bring to the discussion my perspective as the U.S. ambassador to Russia from December 2019 to October 2022.

When I arrived at my post in Moscow, I was resolved to do everything I could to stop the downward spiral in relations between our countries. U.S. policy toward Russia at the time was, on the one hand, to confront and push back hard on the Kremlin in the many areas where we were opposed, e.g., election interference, cyber-attacks, and the wrongful detention of innocent Americans, to name some prominent topics on a growing list. But, on the other hand, to seek progress in those limited areas where the interests of our countries appeared more aligned, e.g., arms control, counterterrorism, and certain regional issues, including North Korea. At a minimum, I hoped we could stabilize our respective diplomatic platforms.

That policy approach clearly failed. During my first two years as ambassador, there was no lasting progress on any issue on which we engaged. Moreover, the pace of deeply disturbing events in Russia was non-stop, notably the poisoning of Alexei Navalny, which was part of a sweeping crackdown on political opposition, on what was left of independent media in Russia, and on civil society generally. The crackdown was intimately related to the constitutional and legal reforms introduced by the Kremlin in early 2020 that allow President Vladimir Putin to avoid the terms limits in the Russian constitution and serve as president until 2036.

Despite the lack of progress, my priorities as ambassador remained—even after the change in the White House in January 2021—to work to stabilize the U.S.-Russia relationship while defending U.S. national security and our democratic values; and to advocate for U.S. citizens detained in Russia and for U.S. businesses operating there. This was reaffirmed in June 2021, when I accompanied President Joe Biden to his meeting with Putin in Geneva. President Biden made clear that we would continue to confront and oppose the Russians in the many areas where U.S. interests were threatened or undermined by them, but we would engage with the Russians on, among other things, strategic stability, cyber security, and wrongfully detained Americans.

Our engagement following the summit had barely begun when there was a seismic policy shift after U.S. intelligence agencies collected considerable evidence of Russia's plans for Ukraine. Until then, the painful and bloody history of Russia's intervention in and seizure of territory from Ukraine had cast a heavy pall on the relationship between the United States and Russia but had not yet completely broken it. Relations with Russia were terrible, but we were still trying to find some common areas on which to work with the world's only other nuclear superpower. Beginning

in early November 2021, however, U.S. policy shifted to an exclusive focus on dissuading and deterring Russia from a further invasion of Ukraine.

Despite intensive efforts in U.S.-Russia bilateral channels, in the NATO-Russia Council, and at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, that policy failed when Russia's so-called "Special Military Operation"—a euphemism that would make George Orwell blush—began on February 24, 2022. It had been apparent to me well before then that the Russians were not negotiating in good faith and were going through a charade of diplomacy for Putin to lay the groundwork for a further invasion of Ukraine.

In the 15 months since Russia's aggressive and brutal war began, U.S. policymaking has focused, quite rightly, on robustly supporting Ukraine in its defense and on sanctioning and isolating Russia. That must be our immediate and imperative policy focus. No country, let alone a permanent member of the UN Security Council, can be allowed to succeed in waging an aggressive war of conquest, replete with grotesque war crimes, to redraw international borders. And make no mistake, Putin does not want to negotiate an end to his aggressive war short of victory defined on his terms. He believes that Ukraine is Russia's "historical lands," as he said in a speech in February of this year in which he also assured his fellow Russians that, "[s]tep by step, carefully and consistently we will deal with the tasks we have at hand," which are to "de-nazify" and "de-militarize" Ukraine. He does not make a statement like that lightly and we should take him at his word.

But it is appropriate to consider the broader context of U.S. policy toward Russia, even as the war in Ukraine and Putin's failed Special Military Operation continue. I offer a few brief thoughts on this topic based on our recent failures to influence or deter Russian policy choices.

First, it is important to understand as a policymaking threshold that Russia under Putin is an implacable adversary of the United States. He believes that Russia is at war with us. It is not a competition; it is a clash of "civilizations," as reflected in the recently adopted Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation. Putin and many other Russian nationalists are committed to this concept to their core. We repeatedly underestimate the depth of their hostility when we try to influence Russia. For any U.S. policy on Russia to succeed, we must understand our adversary.

Second, we must work to put in place security architecture through NATO and with intensive bilateral and multilateral diplomacy that protects not just Ukraine but Europe and the world from future Russian aggression by this implacable adversary.

Third, there can be no trust of any kind in the Russian government. After repeated statements from the highest levels in January and February 2022 that Russia would not attack Ukraine and had no plans to do so, who would trust that government? The Reagan-era mantra of trust but

verify seems quaint now. There can be no trust, only verification and justice for the victims of Russian war crimes in Ukraine.

Fourth, as difficult as it is to pursue diplomacy with Russia considering the foregoing, we should not give up entirely on engaging with the Russian government when our interests require, e.g., in advocating for nuclear arms control, including inspections under the New START Treaty, or for the proper treatment and release of wrongfully detained Americans. But our interests do not include pleading with the Russians for dialogue on any topic, whether it is arms control or the war in Ukraine. That is what they want, and it will lead only to more policy failure. The best advice I received as ambassador was never to ask the Russians for anything. We should approach any engagement or negotiation from a position of strength and confidence. The more we signal that we really want something, the less likely it is that we will achieve our policy goals.

Finally, to engage with Russia we rely on a safe and functioning embassy in Moscow. The price we have paid to maintain Embassy Moscow, however, is steep. The Russians, despite their professed commitment to reciprocity in our diplomatic relationship, have maintained an advantage over us. We have an embassy in Moscow and no consulates. They have an embassy in Washington and two consulates, in Houston and New York. Moreover, they have more diplomats assigned to their bilateral mission to the United States than we have in Russia, or at least they did some months ago when I was ambassador. We should take the Russians at their word and insist on reciprocity in our diplomatic relationship.

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Thank you for allowing me to address the committee. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the foregoing issues or any other matters in which members are interested.