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The U.S.-Russia Bilateral Relationship

Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning on the United States, the Russian Federation, and Challenges Ahead. The U.S.-Russia bilateral relationship is fraught with more tension than at any point since the end of the Cold War. Ever since President Vladimir Putin returned to power in 2012, the bilateral relationship has increasingly soured, and today, Russia poses a serious threat to the security and interests of the United States and its allies in Europe. Russia is engaged in a sophisticated, long-term strategy to undermine the rules based order that the United States and its allies constructed after World War II. Russia's tactics aim to undermine our democratic institutions, sow divisions within NATO and the EU, and carve out a sphere of influence. Because of Russia's blatant and continuous efforts to undermine U.S. interests at home and abroad, the role that Congress plays to defend these interests is more important and necessary than ever before.

As we speak, Russia is deploying a wide array of tools to achieve its objectives, including military, cyber, intelligence, and economic efforts aimed at harming the United States, exacerbating rifts in Europe, and coercing neighboring states to make concessions to Russian interests. Most alarmingly, Russia has redrawn Europe's borders for the first time since World War II, and assaulted neighboring states with military force. Russia invaded Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 when those states took steps to integrate more closely into the West. Russia's support for separatists in eastern Ukraine, designed to subvert Ukraine's sovereignty, continues unabated while the Kremlin continues to lie about the true nature of its intervention there. The fighting in eastern Ukraine, which has intensified in the past week, has claimed the lives of around 10,000 Ukrainian soldiers and civilians since 2014 while inflicting enormous costs on the Ukrainian economy.¹

¹ Inna Varenysia and Nataliya Vasilyeva, "Deaths Mount Daily as Renewed Fighting Hits Eastern Ukraine," Associated Press, January 31, 2017. <http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-01-31/3-ukrainian-troops-killed-in-fighting-in-eastern-ukraine>.

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The Russian military has also been deeply involved in the ongoing conflict in Syria, where since September 2015 it has worked with the Assad regime to combat opposition forces. Despite Putin's outward claim that his intervention is aimed at eradicating terrorist groups, the bombing campaign has dramatically improved the position of Assad's forces while doing little to weaken the Islamic State (IS) and other extremist groups operating within Syria's borders. Senior U.S. officials have said that Russia's intervention changed the calculus of power in Syria completely, leaving Assad in a much stronger position.² Efforts by the United States to reach a political settlement in Syria have gone nowhere due to Russian stonewalling and repeated ceasefire violations. Humanitarian organizations and journalists have for months reported extensively on Russian bombing of civilians, hospitals, and schools.³

Military operations like these have allowed Russia to showcase some of its new capabilities, doctrine, and training. Since 2011, Russia has been modernizing its nuclear forces and honing new conventional capabilities to the tune of \$700 billion. In addition to conducting operations abroad, Russia has used its newly-modernized and more formidable forces to routinely threaten U.S. allies. Russia regularly conducts largescale snap exercises near its western borders while sending warplanes and submarines to skirt allied airspace and waters, often turning off transponders or engaging in maneuvers that risk accident or miscommunication. Russian submarine activity in the Baltic and Arctic Seas is at a post-Cold War high, and coincides with years of deterioration in U.S. and allied anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities.

In addition to dramatically modernizing its military forces, Russia has deployed hybrid forms of information and cyber warfare in ways that, until now, have been unfamiliar to most Americans. By weaponizing stolen information and propagating disinformation, Russian intelligence services have worked to discredit the United States both at home and abroad, disrupt its foreign policy, and sow divisions internally. The most recent glaring example, of course, was Russia's intervention in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, which the Intelligence Community confirmed was aimed at aiding the election of President Trump and undermining Americans' confidence in our electoral system.

Russian intervention in foreign elections to advance its interests is not a new phenomenon, and it is not confined to the United States. The governments of Germany and France have sounded alarm bells that Russia is currently conducting similar operations on their territory in advance of national elections this year, targeting candidates thought to be unfriendly to Russian interests. Throughout Europe, Russia supports (both politically and financially) populist parties that fuel anti-EU and anti-immigrant sentiment. One example of such assistance was a Russian bank's loan of over

² Greg Miller, "U.S. Officials: Russian Airstrikes Have Changed 'Calculus Completely' in Syria," *The Washington Post*, February 9, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com>.

³ Max Fisher, "Russia's Brutal Bombing of Aleppo May Be Calculated, and It May Be Working," *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/29/world/middleeast/russias-brutal-bombing-of-aleppo-may-be-calculated-and-it-may-be-working.html>.

\$11 million to French presidential candidate Marine Le Pen’s National Front, which promises to hold a Brexit-style referendum on continued French membership in the EU should it win elections this spring. If Le Pen wins and removes France from the European Union, it is unlikely that the European project will survive, news that Moscow would no doubt celebrate. President Putin knows that a failed EU would have dire consequences for the United States and the global economy.

Russia also spends significant resources on a vast network of propaganda outlets, including Russia Today (RT) here in the United States, to disseminate disinformation that weakens democratic consensus and strengthens the political fringe. RT reportedly spends \$400 million on its Washington bureau alone.⁴ RT has more YouTube subscribers than any other broadcaster, including the BBC.⁵ Russia oversees dozens of other “news” sources in tandem with RT, seeding salacious stories through one website that are picked up and amplified through others. Deep in the shadows, Russia employs hundreds of English-literate young people—many aspiring writers—to operate a vast network of fake online identities. In a 12-hour shift, these professional internet “trolls” might be expected to write 15 blog posts and 200 comments,⁶ the tone and content of which are dictated by overseers from the Kremlin. The goals of these efforts vary. Sometimes, the goal is to “stack tinder, throw matches, and see what happens.”⁷ Other times, the misinformation campaigns have narrowly defined policy objectives and targets.

Russia’s ability to wage information warfare has been greatly aided by its heavy investments in cyberspace, where the United States remains ill-equipped to counter or deter its aggressive probing. Russia’s activity in this domain reflects an updated national security strategy that emphasizes asymmetric tactics to exploit vulnerabilities in adversaries while weakening their ability and resolve to counter Russian policy. In recent public reports, the U.S. Intelligence Community identified Russia as one of the most sophisticated nation-state actors in cyberspace. Significant Russian cyber incursions in the United States have included penetrations into the computer systems of the White House and State Department as well as critical infrastructure.

⁴ “Portman Delivers Speech on Bipartisan Bill to Counter Foreign Government Propaganda,” Office of Senator Rob Portman, March 16, 2016. <http://www.portman.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2016/3/portman-delivers-speech-on-bipartisan-bill-to-counter-foreign-government-propaganda>.

⁵ The Director of National Intelligence, “Background to ‘Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections’: The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution,” the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, January 6, 2017, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf.

⁶ Adrian Chen, “The Agency,” *The New York Times*, June 2, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html?_r=1.

⁷ Emerson T. Brooking and P.W. Singer, “War Goes Viral,” *The Atlantic*, November 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/11/war-goes-viral/501125/>.

Similarly, European capitals have suffered cyberattacks that have debilitated national institutions. This happened in Estonia in 2007 when a barrage of attacks disabled the websites of entire ministries, banks, companies, political parties, and media publications. Similarly, last year Germany experienced a slew of attacks of likely Russian origin on major national institutions. The West's collective vulnerability to Russian cyber aggression led NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to declare cyberspace a new operational domain alongside sea, air, and land, meaning that a cyberattack from Russia or anyone else could trigger the Alliance's Article 5 obligations.⁸ National governments and multilateral institutions have launched new efforts to fortify our collective cyber defenses but much more remains to be done to deter, detect, and disrupt such attacks.

Russia also relies on energy coercion to intimidate our European allies and fuel instability in its near abroad. For years, European and American leaders have promoted greater energy diversification in Europe to reduce the continent's dependence on Russian gas. But despite those calls, Russia remains capable of blackmailing European nations with energy resources, threatening to cut off gas supplies at the height of winter and advancing pipeline projects that harm the energy independence of Allied nations highly exposed to Russian gas. Unfortunately, there are significant policy divisions among Europeans on future and ongoing energy projects involving Russian gas and investment. These political divisions give Putin a strong opening to drive Europeans even farther apart while expanding Russian influence over the continent.

Recent U.S. Strategy

After Russia invaded Ukraine and annexed Crimea in 2014, America and its allies undertook a series of punitive measures to signal transatlantic unity and resolve. First, the United States and Europe imposed tough sanctions on Russia, targeting government officials and other individuals responsible for Russia's Ukraine policy and human rights abuses. The West then took steps to isolate Russia on the world stage. In 2014, Russia was asked to leave the G8, transforming the Head of State gathering back into the G7. Working with its NATO allies, the United States also took steps to reassure Central and Eastern Europe by stationing rotational troops in the Baltic States and Poland and staging exercises on their territory. Finally, because Ukraine's territorial integrity is a common interest to both sides of the Atlantic and reflects decades of American commitment to Europe's peace and security, the United States and its allies stepped up political, financial, and military support for Ukraine.

Few would disagree that the European and U.S. sanctions (conveniently paired with a drop in oil prices and Putin's economic mismanagement) have hurt the Russian economy. Almost every indicator—the value of the ruble, capital flight, living standards, growth, investment, access to foreign

⁸ Colin Clark, "NATO Declares Cyber a Domain, NATO SecGen Waves off Trump," *Breaking Defense*, June 14, 2016, <http://breakingdefense.com/2016/06/nato-declares-cyber-a-domain-nato-secgen-waves-off-trump/>.

capital markets, or federal budget constraints—points to an economy that is weaker and more unstable than it was just a few years ago. At best, the Russian economy faces slow growth; at worst, it faces prolonged stagnation.

Despite Russia’s flailing economy, though, President Putin has yet to halt his aggressive behavior in his neighborhood and elsewhere. Overseas, Putin continues to both believe he is at war with the West and pursue a multifaceted strategy to undermine the rules based order, transatlantic unity, and U.S. leadership. At home, he continues to curtail freedom of the press, weaken civil society, and suppress any opposition. According to two reports by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, “Vladimir Putin is presiding over the worst era for Russian human rights since the Soviet Union.”⁹ Just this week, a prominent Russian opposition leader, Vladimir Kara-Murza, suddenly fell into a coma at a Moscow hospital and now clings to life. His current illness is eerily similar to his sudden incapacitation in 2015, which doctors concluded was “acute intoxication by an unknown substance.” As members of this committee may recall, Mr. Kara-Murza submitted a letter to this committee last month during Secretary of State Tillerson’s confirmation hearings, warning us all that Russia’s practice of violently targeting opposition figures has intensified in recent years.¹⁰ Members of the committee may also recall that two years ago Kara-Murza’s close mentor and friend, Boris Nemtsov, was gunned down just outside the Kremlin.

The Way Ahead

The new administration is currently contemplating how to approach Russia going forward. What seems clear is that instead of taking steps to make the current strategy more durable, innovative, and effective, the President will likely opt for a new grand bargain. Throughout the campaign and during the transition, President Trump made several statements expressing an interest in engaging the Russians with the hope that the United States and Russia could enhance their counter terrorism cooperation. The president has also expressed an admiration for President Putin and his leadership style. Last weekend, in an interview with Bill O’Reilly on Fox News, President Trump put Russia and the United States on the same moral plane, suggesting that both countries kill people. Those statements and others have led many to conclude that the administration is indeed leaning towards the idea of grand bargain.

As the administration weighs its policy choices regarding Russia, I recommend the following:

⁹ Harriet Alexander, “Vladimir Putin creating ‘worst human rights climate since Soviet times,’” *The Telegraph*, April 24, 2013. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/vladimir-putin/10015065/Vladimir-Putin-creating-worst-human-rights-climate-since-Soviet-times.html>.

¹⁰ Andrew Kramer, “Putin Critic, Who Said He Was Poisoned in 2015, Falls Into a Coma,” *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/06/world/europe/russia-vladimir-kara-murza-putin.html?_r=0.

First, make any changes in U.S. policy conditional on Russian actions. Engaging face to face with the Russian government makes sense. This is something the Obama administration did even during some of the darkest periods in the bilateral relationship. But even so, President Trump should proceed with considerable caution. Experience proves that President Putin often overpromises and under delivers. The most recent example of this was in regards to U.S. efforts to establish a “Joint Implementation Center” with Russia in the fall of 2016 to conduct strikes against IS. Despite promises to the contrary, Russia failed to meet the agreed upon conditions for the establishment of such a center, causing the entire concept to collapse. The new administration should therefore ensure that any change in U.S. policy be conditional. For example, the United States should make clear to the Russians that it will not even consider lifting economic sanctions until Russia has met its commitments outlined in the Minsk Protocol. Putin knows full well that unraveling sanctions is far easier than imposing them, which can take years.

Second, be wary of aligning with Russia in Syria. President Putin likes to tell the world that Russia is fighting the Islamic State in Syria. Before the new administration seeks ways for Russia and the United State to do more to combat the Islamic State together, it should seek greater clarity on what exactly the Russians have done in Syria to date. Contrary to what President Putin has said about Russia’s actions in Syria, almost 80 percent of the Russian strikes in Syria have been in areas not held by the Islamic State.¹¹ Instead, Russia has targeted non-extremist opposition forces and has indiscriminately bombed civilians, hospitals, and homes around the country. Why? Russia’s overarching goal, along with Iran’s overarching goal, is to keep its ally Bashar al-Assad in power.

Russia’s geopolitical goals are thus fundamentally opposed to those of the United States in Syria. The new administration should therefore be very wary of aligning with Russia inside Syria. Doing so would bolster Russia’s strategic position in the Middle East and provide cover for Russian war crimes that have killed tens of thousands of civilians under the pretense of fighting terrorism. It would also make the United States a de facto partner with Iran, the very country the new administration just “put on notice.” In addition, it would lead the United States to partner with the Assad regime, which for six years has perpetrated brutal war crimes against its own people with Russia’s cover and assistance. Allying tacitly with the Assad regime could come back to haunt the United States down the line by provoking more radical extremist sentiments and attacks against us, and also by alienating important regional allies that have opposed the Assad regime for years.¹²

¹¹ “Majority of Russian Strikes in Syria Aren’t Targeting ISIL,” *Reuters*, October 21, 2015.

<http://www.newsweek.com/majority-russian-airstrikes-syria-arent-targeting-islamic-state-385710>

¹² Hal Brands and Colin Kahl, “The Strategic Suicide of Aligning with Russia in Syria,” *Foreign Policy*, February 7, 2017. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/07/the-strategic-suicide-of-aligning-with-russia-in-syria/>.

Third, don't do anything with Russia without consulting European allies. While almost all of America's allies in Europe would support the new administration engaging with the Russian government, no ally wants this to occur in isolation. If the new administration were to cut a grand bargain with Russia above the heads of U.S. allies in Europe, the very foundation of the transatlantic relationship would start to crack. The EU has been a stalwart partner in imposing sanctions on Russia even though it has felt the negative consequences of those sanctions far more than the United States. The new administration should therefore consult European allies on its Russia strategy before reaching out to Moscow. And it should do so not just out of respect for our European allies but because many countries in Europe have valuable insights and experience in working with President Putin and the Russian government more broadly.

Fourth, reassure skittish allies about U.S. commitments to NATO and European security. President Trump's rhetoric about NATO's obsolescence before and after the election has alarmed U.S. allies in Europe at a time when Moscow is actively seeking to undermine the future of the European project. Yes, European allies can and should do more to enhance their defense budgets. But naming and shaming individual allies and calling into question our commitment to uphold Article 5 of the NATO Treaty only plays into Russia's hands. President Putin wants nothing more than a divided alliance and a split in the transatlantic unity that has been on such prominent display in recent years. We should not grant him that victory and instead engage with Russia from a position of strength. Russia wishes it had the vast network of partners and allies that the United States has today. We should not do anything to jeopardize that network.

Fifth, let's get to the bottom of what happened in our election. President Trump has publicly accepted the Intelligence Community's conclusion that Russia was responsible for intervening in the 2016 election. But countless questions remain about possible coordination between U.S. nationals (especially anyone with official ties to either political campaign) and Russian officials; what other vulnerabilities in the U.S. political system Russia may be working to exploit; and perhaps most importantly, how our government – working with allies – can prevent and deter such attacks in the future. We need an independent commission of foreign policy, national security and elections experts to set the record straight on what happened. As Congressman Eric Swalwell, ranking member of the CIA subcommittee, of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence said recently, “The specter of foreign leverage over our incoming president should send a chill down every American's spine.”¹³ Congress must make investigating Russia's intervention in the election a top priority, and I urge you to share your findings with the American people as openly as possible.

¹³ Eric Swalwell, “We Need an Independent Committee on Russia Hacking Now,” *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/12/we-need-independent-commission-russia-hacking-now>.

Sixth, continue to highlight Russia's dismal human rights record. In all the talk about Russian actions abroad, we sometimes lose sight of what President Putin is doing at home. The United States and its European allies should speak clearly in support of democracy and human rights in Russia; speak out against Putin's internal repression; and highlight political persecution in Russia. We should also pursue opportunities to work with elements of Russian civil society to support democratic governance, human rights (including LGBT rights), freedom of speech and transparency.

Finally, work with Congress to address the threat of Russia's cyber aggression. We know that Russia's intelligence agencies have been breaking into the United States' computer networks for decades, and while these attempts have wreaked havoc on our government's networks and imposed costs on companies that lose proprietary information in the private sector, we have been slow to respond decisively. The greatest mistake we can make at this juncture is to let up on calling out the Russians publicly for their brazen cyber espionage. Congress must fund efforts to bolster network security and work with the Administration to coordinate a whole-of-government approach to fortify our networks against Russian cyberattacks. I urge this committee in particular to hold more hearings on this issue and impress on all your colleagues and other parts of the government the serious national security implications of Russia's increasingly brazen use of this asymmetric tool of warfare. In this critical endeavor, the United States should not go at it alone; our NATO allies also find themselves on the receiving end of aggressive and destructive Russian cyberattacks. The Administration should elevate this issue to the top of the NATO's priority list.

Conclusion

In conclusion, engaging the Russians is a laudable goal, one that at different points in our history has served U.S. interests.¹⁴ But history also tells us a lot about the risks of short-term deals that put the liberal order at risk. The United States and its European allies have spent 70 years creating and reforming a collection of institutions that protect and promote the values we share. The new administration must avoid doing anything that would jeopardize that system, which, while imperfect, is also indispensable.

The new administration, despite the risks stated in this testimony and many others, may ultimately take steps to lift sanctions against Russia without demonstrable steps on Russia's part to implement Minsk II and withdraw its troops and materiel from Ukraine. Before that occurs, Congress should re-impose those sanctions legislatively over the President's veto. It is because of situations like this that the U.S. system of checks and balances is so important, and today, Congress's check on the President's power to conduct foreign policy has never been more needed. If Russia's foothold in

¹⁴ During and after the Cold War, our nations reduced our nuclear stockpiles through arms control agreements. New START, which President Obama signed with President Dmitry Medvedev in 2010, will reduce U.S. and Russian deployed strategic warheads by two-thirds from the original START Treaty. Russia joined us in imposing sanctions on Iran, without which the JCPOA could not have been negotiated.

eastern Europe becomes permanent, decades of post-World War II American policy dedicated to bolstering the freedom, unity, and prosperity of the European continent will have gone to waste. This would not only be a dereliction of our commitments to our European partners, but it would be in direct conflict to the very values that the United States embodies. In sum, Congress must stand at the ready to defend the liberal order, which has advanced U.S. values, interests, and security for the past 70 years.