



# U.S. Presidential Elections 2020: How Can the U.S. Do Business with Russia Differently?

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American foreign policy towards Russia has consistently featured as a priority issue during every pre-election season, and it would once again be of particular interest in the run-up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Both Democratic and Republican candidates, including the incumbent U.S. President Donald Trump, have outlined their strategy on how to deal with Russia at a time of strained relations between the two former Cold War rivals. Seen against the background of the current administration's alleged collusion with Russia in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, the candidates' policy on Russia would serve to determine the future course of U.S-Russia relations, both at the domestic and international level. The recent withdrawal from the INF Treaty has further necessitated the importance of nuclear stability and strategic engagement with Russia for next year's officeholder.

However, the Russia-views of the current crop of Presidential hopefuls does not instill much confidence in terms of achieving stability in relations as most candidates hold a negative outlook. For instance, the Democrat Party's front-runner and former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden has suggested that NATO must continue to 'forward-deploy troops & military capabilities to eastern Europe to deter and, if necessary, defeat a Russian attack against one of the alliance's member states.'<sup>1</sup> Rep. Elizabeth Warren, on the other hand, has suggested that the U.S. should shore up relations with its E.U. partners to maintain the strongest possible front against the Russian threat.<sup>2</sup>

On the issue of Russian aggression in Crimea to Syria, most seem to agree that Moscow needs to be checked with Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, a veteran of the Army National Guard, being a notable exception calling for closer cooperation with Russia in Damascus.<sup>3</sup> Another Democrat running for office, Rep. John Delaney, argued that

the U.S. should take a leaf out of the Cold War negotiations where the U.S. dealt with Russia from a position of strength, which would enable an honest dialogue about Russia's interests and role in the world.<sup>4</sup> Barring the few above voices representing realistic U.S. foreign policy goals, America's Russia policy suffers from an undue emphasis on NATO's enlargement objectives in Eastern Europe. Further, the U.S.'s inability to separate European politics from bilateral ties with Russia disregards Moscow's role as a stable actor whose opinion matters.

### **Re-define NATO's priorities**

Ever since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. has been guilty of viewing Russia solely from the prism of NATO. Despite Bush Sr.'s verbal promise to Gorbachev that NATO would not expand eastward,<sup>5</sup> the military organization has steadfastly attempted to absorb former Soviet states and eastern European countries into its fold. Starting with the German re-unification in 1990, the decision makers in Brussels did not pay heed to Russian concerns of military encirclement around its borders. In 1999, the inclusion of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic all but convinced Russia that NATO's goal was to undermine Russia's interests in its sphere of influence and eventually carry out regime change in the Kremlin itself. Following the accession of the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in 2004, along with Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia confirmed Russian fears of an imminent threat to its

strategic interests in the former Soviet territories.

The talks over Georgia's and Ukraine's eventual inclusion proved to be the final straw as Russia fought wars with both countries to raise the cost of their NATO membership. In spite of Russian warnings of dire consequences in the event of Ukraine and Georgia's membership, the U.S. continued to push for their inclusion even at times going against the wisdom of its European allies like Germany. For the new President to have any productive influence over Russia, it would be wise and realistic to halt NATO's further expansion. This would also allow the U.S. to re-assess the objectives of NATO, which at one point had entered into a pact with Russia called the NATO-Russia Council.<sup>6</sup> Established in 2002, the NRC was a mechanism to arrive at a consultation, consensus-building, cooperation, joint decision-making, and joint action. The forum was suspended after Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. In this context, the U.S. could help revive dialogue between NATO and Russia as a means to ensure peace and stability within their respective spheres of influence.

### **Bilateral Engagement with Russia**

Apart from allegations of election rigging by Moscow, US President Donald Trump had invited criticism for two of his references to Russia. The first one was the Helsinki Summit, where he was denounced by his country's media, intelligence agencies, and even the rank-and-file from his

party for being too soft on Putin.<sup>7</sup> The second one was his call for Russia's re-inclusion into the G8 for European security dialogue over the conflict in Ukraine and discussions on Iran, Syria and North Korea.<sup>8</sup> This statement sent U.S. allies (barring Italy) into a frenzy at a time when Russia had withdrawn from the INF Treaty and threatened to upgrade their missiles.

There were two blind-sides with this hyper-reactive response. Firstly, it is in the interests of regional security, most of all, Europe's primary objective, that the U.S. and Russia dilute their nuclear arms race and extend the New START Treaty from the Obama-era. Secondly, the inclusion of Russia on matters of international security would alleviate not only Russian concerns about Western disregard for its role as a co-partner but also resolve long-standing conflicts like the Syrian war where Russia can leverage its partners to come to the negotiating table. The U.S. should take a leading role in ensuring Russian participation in significant decisions, for which platforms like the G7 is a starting point. The U.S. has been drawn into European politics more than it was necessary, which has driven a wedge between the former Soviet states that want to accede to NATO and Russia. Recognizing that military retrenchment from European security affairs is not just sound policy, but would help the European countries to understand the costs of security maximization.

The U.S. is better off engaging with Russia on bilateral terms to find mutual agreement on common issues based on their respective national security objectives, as was the case with the Obama-Medvedev 'reset' from 2009 to 2011. The reset was by no means the most successful instance, but it showed that when two great powers attempt to achieve a breakthrough on those 'low-hanging fruits' like the New START, there could be mutual recognition of each other's role and by extension, their spheres of influence.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Joseph R. Biden, Jr. and Michael Carpenter, "How to Stand Up to the Kremlin," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2018 issue, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2017-12-05/how-stand-kremlin>

<sup>2</sup> "Elizabeth Warren", *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 16, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/article/elizabeth-warren>

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Shapiro, "2020 U.S. Presidential Candidates on Russia: What Have They Said So Far?", *Russia Matters*, May 23, 2019, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/2020-us-presidential-candidates-russia-what-have-they-said-so-far>

<sup>4</sup> "Election 2020: The Democratic candidates on foreign policy", *Foreign Policy*, June 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020-election/>

<sup>5</sup> Mary Elise Sarotte, "A Broken Promise?: What the West Really Told Moscow About NATO Expansion", *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-11/broken-promise>

<sup>6</sup> "NATO-Russia Council," *NATO*, July 09, 2019, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_50091.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50091.htm)

<sup>7</sup> Seema Sirohi, "You've Heard the Hysteria About the Trump-Putin Summit. Now Consider the Facts.", *The Wire*, July 19, 2019, <https://thewire.in/world/youve-heard-the->

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<sup>8</sup> Julian Borger, "G7: Trump's demands for Russia's readmission cause row in Biarritz", The Guardian, August 25, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/aug/25/g7-trumps-demands-for-russias-readmission-causes-row-in-biarritz>

