

ILLUSIONS VS REALITY: TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF U.S. POLICY TOWARD RUSSIA, UKRAINE, AND EURASIA

EUGENE RUMER, RICHARD SOKOLSKY, PAUL STRONSKI, AND ANDREW S. WEISS

The U.S.-Russian relationship is broken, and it cannot be repaired quickly or easily. Improved personal ties between President Donald Trump and President Vladimir Putin may be useful, but they are not enough. The Trump administration needs to temper expectations about breakthroughs or grand bargains with Moscow. Instead, the focus should be on managing a volatile relationship with an increasingly emboldened and unpredictable Russian leadership. The real test for any sustainable approach will be whether it advances U.S. interests and values, especially in the wake of Moscow's reckless meddling in the November presidential election.

Key Themes

- The breakdown in U.S.-Russian relations is a product of long-standing disagreements about the fundamentals of each country's national security interests and policies.
- The Kremlin's political legitimacy is increasingly predicated on stoking fears of external threats and anti-Americanism.
- Moscow's relationship with its neighbors will be inherently unstable due to persistent Russian attempts to dominate their political and economic orientation, and a yawning power and wealth differential.
- Better U.S.-Russian relations are impossible without a major course correction by either or both sides. It is unlikely that Putin will compromise on core Russian interests. Thus, unless Trump is prepared to cave on U.S. principles and interests, relations will remain largely competitive and adversarial.

Policy Recommendations

Four principles should guide U.S. policy toward Russia and its neighbors:

The United States' commitment to defend its NATO allies will remain unconditional and ironclad.

America should fully implement the measures it has announced to bolster deterrence and to defend NATO's eastern flank.

The United States and its allies will defend the norms that underpin European security.

These include the Paris Charter For a New Europe and the Helsinki Final Act.

The United States will continue its strong support for Ukraine. Halting the conflict in Donbas, deterring further Russian aggression, and supporting Ukraine's domestic reforms will be top priorities for U.S.-EU diplomacy.

Engagement with Russia will not come at the expense of the rights and interests of Russia's neighbors. The United States must recognize, however, the limits on its capacity to promote democracy and human rights in this region.

The following problem areas should be addressed without delay:

- signaling to Russia that its interference in the domestic politics of the United States or its allies is unacceptable and will be met with a strong response;
- reducing the risk of an accidental or unintended NATO-Russian military confrontation;
- achieving a durable, verifiable ceasefire in eastern Ukraine; and
- working together on Iran and other countries of proliferation concern to keep WMD and nuclear materials out of the hands of terrorists and dangerous regimes.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Eugene Rumer is a senior fellow and the director of Carnegie's Russia and Eurasia Program.

Richard Sokolsky is a senior fellow in Carnegie's Russia and Eurasia Program.

Paul Stronski is a senior fellow in Carnegie's Russia and Eurasia Program.

Andrew S. Weiss is vice president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment.

CONTACT

Tara Medeiros
Deputy Director of Communications
+1 202 294 3996
tmediros@ceip.org

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