

## Approximating a Consensus: Core Elements and Constraints of a Transatlantic Russia Policy

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Deterrence-and-dialogue forms the central feature of the transatlantic approach to Russia the Trump Administration inherited from its predecessor. The response by NATO to Russia's intervention in Ukraine, which aroused renewed fears about the stability of the European security system has been to go back to basics, namely the Cold War Harmel Report, which set for a generation the policy direction of a strong NATO defense that enabled efforts to develop political dialogue with the Soviet Union. Since 2014, that balance has shifted decidedly toward deterrence as a prerequisite for meaningful political dialogue, which can then play a role in managing tensions. An analysis of transatlantic Russia policy should begin by considering the nature of the threats and challenges from Russia in current circumstances.

Russia's view of its strategic environment is apparent in policy documents such as its national security strategy and its military doctrine.<sup>11</sup> Ivo Daalder recently described Russia's objectives: to weaken the bonds between the United States and Europe and within the European Union (EU); to undermine NATO's solidarity; and to strengthen Russia's strategic position in its neighborhood and beyond.<sup>12</sup> Essentially, this means undermining the European order that has prevailed for the past 70 years, in both the post-War and post-Cold War periods. Russia pursues these objectives with a blend of civilian and military tools such as information operations, computer network exploitation, and influence operations directed against



countries across the transatlantic community. In that regard it should be clear that a transatlantic policy is necessary, because the threats from Russia are to the transatlantic community as a whole.

There are, however, interrelated constraints on the ability of the United States and Europe to develop a truly coordinated policy. In Washington, there is a high degree of policy paralysis toward Russia. There is no clear Russia policy, although the administration identifies some objectives such as resolving the Ukraine crisis and finding a way forward in Syria. A second constraint is the slow pace of staffing key positions – progress has been made, but there are still significant gaps. A third factor is the investigation by Special Counsel Robert Mueller of matters related to Russia's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. Fourth, the Congress is reasserting its foreign policy prerogatives (and the executive branch in some cases has ceded initiative to Congress). The

<sup>11</sup> Oliker, Olga, „Unpacking Russia's New National Security Strategy“, CSIS, Commentary, January 7, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Daalder, Ivo H., „Responding to Russia's Resurgence. Not Quiet on the Eastern Front“, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 96, Nr. 6, pp. 30-38.

Congressional sanctions law on Russia, Iran, and North Korea, which the administration grudgingly signed in the face of a veto-proof majority, has established significant constraints on the Trump administration. The law, to take just one example, targets significant Russian arms sales to third countries, which are now subject to mandatory sanctions under Section 231 of the law. This adds a new degree of complexity to the executive branch's dealings with Moscow and with Russian arms customers across the globe. Fifth, there is a fundamental uncertainty about key aspects of U.S. policy: because the Trump administration values unpredictability so highly, it engenders confusion not only among U.S. enemies but also among allies and friends. When unpredictability itself is elevated to a strategy, it undermines the credibility of assurances from senior U.S. officials. It is hard to reconcile this with the interests of a global power leading a worldwide system of defense alliances and trade and economic relationships.

In Europe, the constraints are different. First, populist parties have risen in prominence across Europe, many having pro-Russian inclinations or at minimum policy views in harmony with nationalist Russian positions. This goes hand in hand, second, with anti-EU politics in Europe, although Brexit and Marine Le Pen's loss in the French presidential election may indicate a ceiling to euroskepticism. Third, coalition negotiations in Germany continue, and the shape of the government that emerges will have a significant effect on the scope for European policy on Russia. Fourth, there is an asymmetry of foreign-policy tools between the United States and Europe. An example is the U.S. use of secondary sanctions, which historically has been controversial for European allies, but which played an important role in the Iran nuclear diplomacy. Secondary sanctions related to Russia may cause transatlantic friction, but they also highlights the broader range of tools Washington possesses to pursue policy objectives. And fifth, measures of public opinion in Europe

highlight a stark decline in confidence in the U.S. as a partner and critical views of Trump administration policies on issues ranging from climate change to the Middle East. This creates a challenging environment for European governments that want to cooperate with Washington on Russia.

In light of those constraints, it is perhaps better to talk about approximating a consensus rather than forging one on the basis of broadly shared assumptions, tools, and objectives. The mercurial tendencies of the U.S. president only emphasizes the tentative nature of any transatlantic approach, despite the solid transatlantic credentials of key members of his foreign policy team.

Three core elements stand out as central for an effective approach. The first is Ukraine policy. The United States has legislated its sanctions, closing off the president's options unilaterally to lift them. Europe should continue on its course, which has proved more sustainable than many predicted when they were first introduced. The United States' appointment of Ambassador Kurt Volker as Special Representative for Ukraine negotiations is connected with Congressional and allied concern about Ukraine. The administration has accepted and incorporated this into its policy: as administration officials now state, any improvement of U.S.-Russian relations will depend on Russian steps to resolve the Ukraine conflict. The appointment of Ambassador Volker also has the benefit of bringing together three crucial requirements for effective engagement: competence, which Kurt Volker and the U.S. government team clearly possess; credibility, as a result of the Special Representative's close working relationship with the Secretary of State; and a clear executive branch policy supported by Congress. These circumstances, and the fact that Russia blatantly is violating European security order in Ukraine may be sufficient to manage differences with Europe over the scope and reach of U.S. sanctions law.

A second vital element of a transatlantic policy toward Russia relates to the civilian aspects of security. The transatlantic community has been on the right track in its military response, although it requires further refinement. The Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) of NATO tripwire forces along the northeast flank has improved deterrence, but NATO needs to take further steps to ensure that its rapid-reaction forces are able to move quickly in a crisis - the capacity for reinforcement is essential. The transatlantic community lags, though in establishing common policies on the necessary civilian measures related to Russia's subversion and influence efforts. The vulnerabilities in Western societies we have seen exposed so clearly in recent years are flaws of our own creation, not Russia's. Moscow has, however, exploited them effectively. Restoring a framework that neutralizes the troublesome interventions by Russia will depend on our domestic and civilian actions: increased financial and ownership transparency to prevent illicit flows; and spotlighting illicit political funding and other outside attempts to intervene in the political process. Unlike the Ukraine case, the United States and its western partners do not have structures that bring together competence, credibility, and policy to advance our shared aims. The transatlantic community should consider whether there is a role for special representatives to play in focusing national level efforts and coordinating international actions to reassert the integrity of our political and economic systems.

A third essential element is the transatlantic bond outside the military realm. Here I am most concerned: the failure thus far of the United States government to incorporate in its policy the role of the European Union as a security and foreign policy partner is a clear weakness. Across the spectrum, from law enforcement and border security to foreign policy action, the U.S. has an interest in a strong partnership with the EU, the security competencies of which are growing. Searching for a silver lining in this cloud, one recalls

that we have been here before. Previous U.S. administrations have entered office with little room in their policies for U.S.–EU cooperation, only to learn how important it can be in fields as diverse as data-sharing on terrorist threats or the economic sanctions that brought Iran to the nuclear negotiating table. At this point, U.S. policy initiatives in other regions have tested but not yet overburdened the transatlantic relationship, but they could do so. If the U.S. were to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal or otherwise attempt unilaterally to address Iran's security threats, or if Washington sought to resolve the North Korea nuclear and missile threat through the use of force would narrow the scope for transatlantic cooperation on issues that are a priority for the United States.

Transatlantic relations are in an uneasy equilibrium. There have been in 2017 mutually reassuring pledges of commitment to one another's security, and no competing U.S. priorities have yet complicated those central commitments. But the evolving U.S. policy, which will be reflected most clearly in the strategic reviews that will be released in the coming months, and the looming challenges in other parts of the world will complicate transatlantic diplomacy as the U.S. and Europe seek to preserve their security partnership and address the Russia challenge.