

Prepared Testimony
By Jack F. Matlock, Jr.
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Foreign Affairs Committee,

Thank you for your invitation to join these distinguished scholars to discuss the important issue of U.S. relations with Russia. Ambassador McFaul co-authored a fine book which is required reading for my students of U.S.-Russian relations at Duke University. He is also, of course, one of my successors as American Ambassador in Moscow and I am envious that he had a much larger staff to deal with Russia than I had for the entire Soviet Union. I have long been impressed by Dr. Cohen's research. He and I once were mutually supportive when we were the only Americans participating in a security conference in Moscow in the 1990s. It is an honor to join them in this discussion.

I am deeply concerned with the direction U.S.-Russian relations has taken of late. The mutual accusations and public acrimony has at times been reminiscent of that at the height (or depth!) of the Cold War. Yet the issues are quite different. The Cold War was fundamentally about ideology: the attempt of the Communist-ruled Soviet Union to spread its control of other countries by encouraging what Karl Marx called "proletarian revolutions" against existing governments. The Soviet leaders called their system "socialist," but it was actually state-monopoly capitalism that tried to replace market forces with government fiat. It was a catastrophic failure in meeting people's needs, but managed to build a formidable—and in some respect, unmatched—military power.

Today's tensions are not about ideology. Russia is now a capitalist country and is not trying to spread communism in the world. Today's tensions are more like those that, through incredible misjudgment, brought on World War I. That is, competition for control of territory in and outside Europe. We know how it ended; every European country involved suffered more than they could possibly have gained.

Competition over territory was bad enough a century ago. Since World War II, however, the danger has risen exponentially if countries with nuclear weapons stumble into military conflict. The number of nuclear weapons that remain in U.S. and Russian arsenals represent a

potential existential threat to every nation on earth, including specifically both Russia and the United States.

So how did we end the Cold War and reduce this threat? One key element was an agreement that President Ronald Reagan and General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev made in their very first meeting. They agreed on a statement that Reagan had made in two previous speeches: “A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” And then they added, since both countries were nuclear powers, “That means, there can be no war between us.” With that statement agreed, Secretary of State George Shultz was able to argue convincingly that an arms race between us was absurd. We could not fight each other without committing suicide, and what rational leader was going to do that? In just a couple of years we had abolished a whole class of nuclear weapons in our arsenals, and shortly thereafter cut strategic nuclear weapons in half.

In concluding the New Start agreement, the Obama administration made an important contribution to our national security, but since then nuclear cooperation with Russia has deteriorated and seems practically non-existent. It is urgent to restore that cooperation if we are to inhibit further proliferation. We are unlikely to do so if we proceed with plans to increase our military presence in Eastern Europe.

I am aware that one of our presumptive candidates for president has indicated that he might find some form of nuclear proliferation desirable. I believe that is profoundly mistaken, as is the idea that allies should pay us for their protection. I do not believe we should use our fine military as hired gendarmes to police the world, even if those protected were willing to pay the costs. These comments, however, do reflect one important truth, and that is that military alliances can create liabilities rather than augmented power. The larger an alliance becomes, the more varied will be the security ambitions of its members. When our interests are not closely aligned, an American security guarantee can create a moral hazard. What is to keep an “ally” from picking a fight unnecessarily and then expecting the United States to win it for him? To some degree, this may be happening already. To take just one contemporary example, I have trouble finding much concurrence between American security interests and Turkish behavior.

Yes, when we have made commitments, we must honor them. But we must be more careful and selective about taking on liabilities. And some of our alliances, formed under the different conditions of the Cold War, should be reviewed. Perhaps it is time to have a European commander of NATO and a supportive role for the United States.

I have views on how we might deal with Russia on current issues such as Ukraine and Syria, democratization and human rights, and will share them if you wish. I believe there are dignified ways we can reduce tension with Russia on those issues and others. However, the main thing we should bear in mind is that in confronting the greatest dangers to civilized life in this century such as terrorism, failed states, organized crime, and environmental degradation, U.S. and Russian basic interests do not conflict. As we deal them, as we must, Russia will either be part of the problem or part of the solution. It is obviously in our interest to do what we can to encourage Russia to join us in confronting them. They are unlikely to do so if they regard us as an enemy, or a competitor for influence in their neighborhood.

Above all, however, we must return to the position Reagan and Gorbachev set out: “A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought, and that means there can be no war between us.” To act on any other principle can create a risk to our nation—and the world—of unimaginable gravity.