

Testimony of Ambassador Michael McFaul¹

Director of the Freeman Spogli Institute, Professor of Political Science, and Hoover Institution Senior Fellow at Stanford University

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“Exposing and Demanding Accountability for Kremlin Crimes Abroad”

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According to detailed reporting informed by U.S. intelligence officials in the *New York Times*, and then confirmed by several other news outlets in the United States, including *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post*, as well as corroborated by British officials speaking to their media, Russian President Vladimir Putin paid Taliban rebels in Afghanistan to kill American soldiers.² U.S. intelligence officials revealed to *The New York Times* that they had traced the transfer of funds for these bounties from a bank account controlled by the Russian

¹ Michael McFaul is the Ken Olivier and Angela Nomellini Professor of International Studies in Political Science, Director and Senior Fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, and the Peter and Helen Bing Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, all at Stanford University. McFaul served for five years in the Obama administration, first as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Russian and Eurasian Affairs at the National Security Council at the White House (2009-2012), and then as U.S. Ambassador to the Russian Federation (2012-2014). His most recent book is *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin's Russia* (2018).

² <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-spy-unit-paid-taliban-to-attack-americans-u-s-intelligence-says-11593214584>; https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/russian-bounties-to-taliban-linked-militants-resulted-in-deaths-of-us-troops-according-to-intelligence-assessments/2020/06/28/74ffaec2-b96a-11ea-80b9-40ece9a701dc_story.html; and <https://news.sky.com/story/russia-paid-taliban-fighters-to-attack-british-troops-in-afghanistan-12016425>. Some experts have speculated, without first-hand knowledge, that Putin would not have known about the payment of such bounties. I am skeptical. Analysts frequently underestimate Putin's personal level of engagement in intelligence matters. He takes a particular interest in these kinds of issues. His top intelligence officers, including the head of the GRU, are highly motivated to make sure Putin is briefed on such matters. Even if true, the Russian president is still accountable for the actions of his GRU officers.

military intelligence, GRU, to a bank controlled by the Taliban.³ Later reporting based on sources in the U.S. intelligence community claimed that “Russian bounties offered to Taliban-linked militants to kill coalition forces in Afghanistan are believed to have resulted in the deaths of several U.S. service members...”⁴

We need to learn more about this latest instance of Russian belligerence against the United States before drawing definitive conclusions. Intelligence officials should continue to brief Congress. More hearings should be held with senior foreign policy decisionmakers in the Trump administration, since the administration’s explanation of the intelligence is confusing and has changed. According to NSC spokesperson, John Ulliot, “The veracity of the allegations continues to be evaluated.”⁵ Trump’s Press Secretary then asserted that there was no consensus within the intelligence community about this finding, but that claim stands in tension with the detailed reporting that asserted this intelligence appeared in the Presidential Daily Briefing (PDB) on February 27, 2020. Intelligence on sensitive matters almost never is 100% verified. But in my three years of working at the National Security Council in the Obama administration, I do not recall flimsy, unconfirmed, circumstantial, or heavily disputed intelligence appearing in the PDB; debates with the intelligence community usually are resolved before a story appears in this most precious of intelligence products (Remember, it is a serious crime to leak secret intelligence to the press, suggesting that this intelligence must have been credible and frightening enough for a U.S. official to risk going to prison in order to publicize it). At the moment of this

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/30/us/politics/russian-bounties-afghanistan-intelligence.html>

⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/russian-bounties-to-taliban-linked-militants-resulted-in-deaths-of-us-troops-according-to-intelligence-assessments/2020/06/28/74ffaec2-b96a-11ea-80b9-40ece9a701dc_story.html

⁵ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/russian-bounties-to-taliban-linked-militants-resulted-in-deaths-of-us-troops-according-to-intelligence-assessments/2020/06/28/74ffaec2-b96a-11ea-80b9-40ece9a701dc_story.html

hearing, however, the basic and detailed facts as reported in numerous media outlets have not been refuted. These latest revelations would only be an escalation of Russian support for the Taliban that started years ago.

Putin's Pattern of Growing Belligerent Behavior

If true, Putin's act against American soldiers is shameful, criminal, and reprehensible. All Americans -- as well as our allies in Afghanistan, in Europe, and around the world -- should be outraged. But we should not be surprised. For several years now, but especially since 2014, Putin has behaved like a rogue actor in the international system. In his early years as president, Putin wanted to become a respected member of the international community. He valued membership in the G-8, and enjoyed his partnership with President George W. Bush in fighting the global war on terrorism, which included the Taliban back then. Putin even assisted our war efforts in Afghanistan. President Medvedev did too. In one of his first acts of cooperation with President Obama, Medvedev signed a lethal transit agreement in July 2009, which allowed American lethal equipment to transit through Russia to Afghanistan by rail and helped to expand the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), a transportation system vital for supplying our soldiers. When Putin returned for his third term as president in 2012, however, he had little interest in cooperation with the United States. By then, he believed firmly that the United States and the Obama administration were out to get him. He believes that we actively promote democracy to undermine autocratic regimes that we do not like, including his own.⁶ Putin now

⁶ For elaboration, see Michael McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin's Russia* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2018).

sees the United States as his central enemy. He aims to weaken the United States in all ways that he can, be it amplifying American domestic divisions through his media platforms, sowing divisions within the NATO alliance, or keeping the U.S. bogged down in Afghanistan. He not only fears our liberal, democratic values, but actively promotes a counter illiberal, orthodox, nationalist ideology. As Putin stated bluntly in an interview with *The Financial Times*, “The liberal idea has become obsolete.”⁷ He loathes the so-called “liberal international order”, which in Putin’s view, serves American hegemony and undermines Russia. With greater passion and more determination than Chinese Communist Party leader Xi Jinping, Putin seeks to weaken the United States and not just revise but destroy the international system. For years now, Putin has defied the norms, rules, and laws of the international system, and dared us to try to stop him.

The list of Putin’s illegal, belligerent acts is long and growing.

In 2008, he invaded Georgia and then recognized the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states in a violation of international law.

In 2014, Putin annexed Crimea, defying one of the most sacred rules of the international order since the end of World War II. No Soviet leader since Stalin had ever annexed territory during the Cold War. After Crimea, Putin fomented separatist movements in eastern Ukraine, resulting in over thirteen thousand people dead and roughly two million Ukrainian citizens displaced and provided the rocket that shot down MH17 over Ukraine, killing all 283 passengers and 15 crewmembers on board, another criminal act.⁸

⁷ <https://www.ft.com/content/670039ec-98f3-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36>

⁸ <https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2017/07/05/statement-by-the-minister-of-foreign-affairs-on-mh17-5-july-2017>

In 2015, Putin deployed the Russian air force to Syria to prop up a ruthless dictator, Mr. Assad, who had used illegal chemical weapons to kill innocent civilians. A U.N. panel has accused the Russian military of committing “war crimes” when bombing Syrian civilians indiscriminately.⁹

In 2016, Putin violated American sovereignty, deploying multiple methods – including fake social media accounts, purchases of digital ads, the use of conventional broadcast and print media outlets, and the stealing of data from the Democratic Party -- to influence the outcome of our presidential election and amplify polarization in American society more generally.¹⁰ During the Cold War, Soviet propogandists also tried to influence American attitudes, but the scale and scope of the Russian intervention in our 2016 president election was unprecedented

In 2016, Russian intelligence agents allegedly tried to orchestrate a coup in Montenegro, just as the country was moving towards joining NATO.

In 2018, Putin tried to assassinate Sergey Skripal in Salisbury, UK using the Novichok nerve agent, which was easily traceable back to Russia. Skripal had been released from prison in Russia in a spy swap between the United States and Russia in 2010.

In 2019, Putin’s agents allegedly murdered Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, a Chechen Georgian citizen, in Berlin.¹¹ Last week, another Chechen dissident was assassinated in Austria.¹²

⁹ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/03/united-nations-accuses-russia-of-war-crimes-in-syria.html>

¹⁰ For details of Russian methods as well as dozens of policy recommendation for how to prevent Russian meddling in the future, see Michael McFaul, ed., *Securing American Elections: Prescriptions for Enhancing the Integrity and Independence of the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election and Beyond*, (Stanford University, June 2019).

¹¹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-18/germany-says-russian-officials-ordered-killing-in-berlin-park>

¹² <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/07/05/chechen-dissident-shot-dead-in-austria-a70786>

Now in 2020, American intelligence revealed that Putin offered Taliban fighter bounties to kill U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan. The pattern is clear.

Moreover, Putin tightened his autocratic control of Russian society through suppression of the civil society and independent media, firmer control of regional leaders, and greater state ownership in the economy, throughout this period of time. Russian opposition figures have been harassed and arrested, including episodically one of Putin's most vocal critics today, Aleksey Navalny; assassinated, including in 2015 one of Russia's leading opposition leaders at the time, Boris Nemtsov; and poisoned, including most notably Vladimir Kara-Murza. The deepening of autocracy at home has correlated with Putin's growing belligerence abroad.

Trump's Pattern of Indifference to Putin's Belligerent Behavior

To date, President Trump has not responded, rhetorically or otherwise, to Putin's bounty killings of American soldiers. President Trump could have easily said the following, "My administration takes very seriously the protection of every American soldier. We are investigating seriously these allegations and asking hard questions of our Russian counterparts." He chose not to take even this simplest of actions.

His alibis for a nonresponse are changing and disturbing as well. Trump's first defense for why he did not do anything was that he had not been briefed on the matter. If true, that excuse is shocking and suggests a fundamental breakdown in the process for providing the president with vital intelligence. Many senior White House officials, including National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien and his senior team, as well as cabinet secretaries, receive the PDB every day. Even if Trump did not read about Putin's sinister actions against our soldiers in

Afghanistan (according to multiple sources, Trump does not take the time to read the PDB) and these action were “unconfirmed,” surely O’Brien should have told the president about this intelligence. This is especially true since Trump was making controversial policy decisions regarding Russia at the time, including inviting Putin to the G7 summit, announcing troop reductions in Germany, and calling Putin an amazing six times between March 30, 2020 and June 1, 2020. Trump’s alibi later changed when he claimed that the whole thing was “just another Hoax.”¹³ Trump was taking no action because Putin allegedly did not do anything wrong.

Tragically, Trump’s nonresponse follows a consistent pattern. President Trump has changed his mind on many foreign policy issues. His own former National Security Advisor, John Bolton, observed, “There really isn't any guiding principle [in foreign policy] that I was able to discern other than what's good for Donald Trump's reelection...”¹⁴ But when it comes to Putin, Trump has maintained a firm and consistent view for four years. Trump wants to befriend Putin. In pursuit of that goal, the President of the United States of America has parted ways with the rest of his administration, his own Intelligence Community (IC), and maybe his own domestic political interests to praise Putin and excuse reckless, belligerent behavior.

In 2016, candidate Trump promised to look into recognizing Crimea as a part of Russia and lift sanctions, and made excuses for Putin’s criminal behavior with a classic of ‘whataboutism’ defense. He argued, “Well, I think our country does plenty of killing also...”¹⁵

¹³ <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1278284552679624705>

¹⁴ <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/21/john-bolton-trump-reelection-book-333086>

¹⁵ <https://www.mediaite.com/tv/donald-trump-defends-putins-murder-of-journalists-our-country-does-plenty-of-killing-also/>

As president, Trump has consistently tried to befriend Putin, even when it was considered politically unwise to do so and when nearly his entire administration opposed his approach.¹⁶

In 2017, in an interview with Bill O'Reilly on Fox, President Trump affirmed his respect for Putin. When O'Reilly challenged Trump by calling the Russian president a "killer," Trump defended Putin, whom he has never met, by criticizing the United States: "We've got a lot of killers. What do you think? Our country's so innocent?"¹⁷

In 2018, Trump delivered his most shocking display of fealty before Putin at their summit in Helsinki. During a press conference after their meeting, Trump stood next to Putin and told the world that agreed with the Russian president and disagreed with his own intelligence community in believing that Russia did not interfere in the 2016 presidential election.¹⁸ At that same summit, Trump also embraced Putin's crazy proposal of allowing Russian government prosecutors to interrogate U.S. officials who Putin claimed falsely had committed crimes against Russia.¹⁹ After their one-on-one meeting with Putin, Trump refused to debrief his senior staff. According to one senior White House official, "He didn't want to share ... His mind-set was: This is between me and my friend."²⁰

In 2019, at their meeting in Osaka, Japan, Trump and Putin laughed together about the evils of the independent media. Trump said, "Get rid of them ... Fake news is a great term, isn't

¹⁶ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/01/16/sorry-trump-is-not-tough-russia/>

¹⁷ <https://video.foxnews.com/v/5311148976001#sp=show-clips>

¹⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44852812>

¹⁹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/putin-wanted-to-interrogate-me-trump-called-it-an-incredible-offer-why/2018/07/26/7bb11552-90d2-11e8-b769-e3fff17f0689_story.html?noredirect=on

²⁰ <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/06/29/what-fiona-hill-learned-in-the-white-house>

it? You don't have this problem in Russia, but we do." Putin replied, "We also have... It's the same."²¹

So, Trump's decision in 2020 to not criticize Putin follows a consistent pattern. Trump's unbridled embrace of Putin may be his most consistent foreign policy over the last four years.

Trump's desire to appease Putin has gone well beyond words. Trump has taken several foreign policy decisions that benefit the Russian president, including ordering American soldiers to leave Syria, announcing his decisions to reduce the number of American soldiers stationed in Germany, and inviting Putin to attend the G-7 summit planned for 2020 in Washington, a decision that no other G-7 leader supported. Even on small issues of little relevance to American national interests, Trump has sided with Putin, to include defending the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan or suggesting that Montenegro might spark World War III.

Ideologically, Trump shares Putin's hostility towards liberalism (the European use of the word, not the American) and multilateralism and embraces populist, nationalist, orthodox ideas championed by Putin. Trump and Putin have courted the same group of illiberal leaders in Europe, including Viktor Orban in Hungary, Matteo Salvini in Italy, Nigel Farage in the United Kingdom, and Marie Le Pen in France. Conversely, both Trump and Putin have tepid relations with Chancellor Merkel in Germany.

How Trump's Embrace of Putin Undermines American National Interests

Nearly every American president has been compelled to negotiate with world leaders who do not share our values in order to pursue American security interests. Close personal

²¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/28/us/politics/trump-putin-election.html>

relationships with world leaders can be useful in pursuing U.S. national interests. Trump is not the first American president to forge a personal bond with a Russian leader.

What is different about Trump's diplomacy, however, is that he has defined a "good relationship" with Putin as the goal of his efforts, rather than as a means for securing some concrete benefit for the American people. To date, Trump's courtship has not produced one tangible foreign policy objective, or as the U.S. government refers to them, "deliverables."

Trump and Putin have not signed a nuclear arms control deal or even extended the existing New START Treaty. Putin has not helped Trump prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, or aided Trump's diplomacy regarding North Korea. Putin obviously is not facilitating American diplomatic and military objectives in Afghanistan. In our conflicts with China, Putin always sides with President Xi. As a result of Trump's embrace of Putin, the United States and Russia have not signed any trade deals. Trump has not succeeded in convincing his Russian friend to allow Americans to adopt Russian orphans again or to release falsely indicted Paul Whelan from a Russian prison.

Trump's over personalization of American diplomacy has gradually undermined many sound policies of his administration regarding Russia. In his administration's early years, reporters and analysts were told to watch what the administration does and ignore what the President himself says. However, on almost every major policy issue concerning Russia, there was a deep divide between Trump and the rest of his administration. With time, Trump has damaged his own administration's national security achievements.

The Trump administration has rightly continued to enhance America's commitments to NATO and encouraged other allies to do the same. In June 2014, in response to Russia's intervention in Ukraine, President Obama launched the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) to

spend \$3.4 billion to enhance America’s military presence in Europe. At the 2014 NATO summit, country leaders agreed to increase their defense spending to 2 percent of GDP, and the Trump administration has continued to press NATO allies to meet that commitment. In 2018, the Trump administration renamed the program the European Defense Unitive (EDI) and increased funding to \$6.5 billion by FY 2019.²² At the 2018 NATO summit in Brussels, the Trump administration provided leadership in launching the “Four Thirties” NATO Readiness Initiative, which established a goal for the alliance to be able to deploy thirty land battalions (roughly 300,000 soldiers), thirty naval combatant ships, and thirty air squadrons (approximately 300 aircraft) within thirty days to the eastern-most member states by 2020.²³ President Trump personally, however, has done major damage to the alliance’s unity and cohesiveness. His constant attacks on NATO leaders, including first and foremost Angela Merkel, his incorrect accusation that NATO countries “owe” the United States payments, and his general disdain for the alliance undermined the NATO’s credibility to defend against Russian attacks. Popular support of the United States in NATO countries now hovers at dangerously low numbers, which could undermine our collective response to a future Russian belligerent action in Europe.

The Trump administration made the right policy decision to provide lethal military assistance to Ukraine as well. This provision of javelin anti-tank missiles helped to deepen ties between the United States and Ukraine.²⁴ Yet again, Trump personally undermined the benefits

²² https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/EDI_Format_FINAL.pdf

²³ <https://www.dw.com/en/nato-defense-ministers-put-aside-tariff-tensions-to-approve-new-four-thirties-plan/a-44116264>

²⁴ In 2016, Trump’s campaign tried to remove support for lethal assistance from the Republican Party Platform. Numerous reports have suggested that Trump personally never supported the shipment of this lethal military assistance. See <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/15/trump-resisted-ukraine-sale-javelin-antitank-missile/>

of this decision by conditioning the shipment of military assistance to the opening of an investigation into Joe Biden's business activities in Ukraine, despite no evidence whatsoever of any wrongdoing. U.S.-Ukraine relations today are more strained than any time since Ukrainian independence in 1991.

In 2017, the U. S. Congress, supported by some in the Trump administration, rightly passed the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) in response to Russia's interference in the 2016 U.S. election, violation of human rights, annexation of Crimea, and military operations in eastern Ukraine.²⁵ Nonetheless, Trump personally has never endorsed sanctions, reluctantly signed into law CAATSA because of veto-proof majorities in Congress, and then mysteriously lifted sanctions on three Russian companies in 2019 controlled by Oleg Deripaska, a Putin ally and one of Russia's richest oligarchs.²⁶

The Trump administration rightly sustained and expanded Operation Inherent Resolve, launched by President Obama in 2014 to destroy ISIS in Iraq and Syria. But in 2018, Trump personally announced his decision to withdraw American armed forces from Syria, an abrupt choice made without inter-agency deliberation which triggered the resignation of Secretary of

²⁵ H.R.3364 - Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, *U.S. Congress website*, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/3364/text> . In April 2018, the Trump administration implemented additional sanctions against seven Russian oligarchs and twelve companies that they owned or controlled, 17 senior Russian government officials, and a state-owned Russian weapons trading company and its subsidiary, a Russian bank. In August 2018, the Trump administration rightly implemented additional sanctions in accordance with the Chemical and Biological Weapons Control and Warfare Elimination Act of 1991 (CBW Act), after issuing a finding that the Russian government used illegal chemical weapons to try to assassinate Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in the United Kingdom.

²⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-47023004>

Defense James Mattis.²⁷ The American hasty withdrawal was a gift to Putin but had the added advantage for Moscow of producing Mattis' departure from the administration.²⁸

Trump administration officials, including the current U.S. ambassador to the Russian Federation, John Sullivan, have rightly criticized human rights violations in Russia. Ambassador Sullivan recently flew a rainbow pride flag outside of the U.S. embassy to celebrate LGBT Pride Month, an act that earned him ridicule from Putin. American non-government organizations continue to receive funds from the Trump administration to support Russian civil society, independent media, and rule of law. Even still, President Trump personally has never criticized Putin or his government for anti-democratic actions or defended human rights. Trump (to the best of my knowledge) has never met with a Russian civil society leader. Trump's indifference to advancing democracy abroad while at the same embracing autocrats around the world has undermined the moral authority of the United States on issues of human rights and democracy internationally, including in Russia.

The Trump Administration's National Security Strategy, published in 2017, labeled both China and Russia as revisionist powers, stating bluntly, "China and Russia began to reassert their influence regionally and globally... In short, they are contesting our geopolitical advantages and trying to change the international order in their favor."²⁹ Trump personally, however, has never used such language to describe Russian actions in the world. Never.

²⁷ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-announces-mattis-will-leave-as-defense-secretary-at-the-end-of-february/2018/12/20/e1a846ee-e147-11e8-ab2c-b31dcd53ca6b_story.html

²⁸ In Kremlin circles, both Generals Mattis and McMaster were perceived as hawks on Russia, constraining Trump from doing the allegedly right thing regarding U.S. policy towards Russia.

²⁹ The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905-2.pdf>, p. 27.

Possible Immediate Trump Administration Responses

It Trump wanted to push back on Putin's actions in Afghanistan, he has a wide menu of options.³⁰ Most importantly and easily, President Trump could simply state the facts that the U.S. intelligence community has reported to him, even if it needed to be caveated, and criticize Putin for aiding the Taliban. Trump could announce that he has asked his government to continue to investigate this intelligence reporting and will hold Putin accountable for any American deaths underwritten by Russian financial assistance to the Taliban. Since Trump has never criticized Putin before, the very act of such a statement would have profound, positive consequences for U.S.-Russian relations.

Second, and again very easily, the U.S. could demarche the Russian government, calling in the Russian ambassador to the State Department to demand an explanation of Russian anti-American activities in Afghanistan. Demarches are used frequently and are very low-cost diplomatic acts.

Third, to strengthen his case and embarrass Putin, Trump could declassify the intelligence. Previous presidents have declassified intelligence to advance foreign policy objectives.³¹ According to reporting in *The New York Times*, the United States knows which bank accounts were used to transfer funds to the Taliban. Trump could publicize this information, including the names of the banks that facilitated the transactions.

³⁰ According to press accounts, the National Security Council convened a meeting in March to discuss such options, suggesting that the U.S. administration had taken seriously the intelligence reporting. As a former NSC official, I can report that this organization does not normally organize meeting to discuss policy options in response to flimsy, unsubstantiated intelligence,

³¹ For instance, during the meeting of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2009, the Obama administration declassified intelligence about Iran's nuclear program. The act of declassification helped to produce international support, including from Russia, for new sanctions against Iran, codified in May 2009 in UNSCR 1929.

Fourth, the Trump administration could request discussions of these allegations at the United Nations, the OSCE, NATO, and other international forums to bring more attention to Russian belligerent behavior.

Fifth, the Trump administration could sanction Russian officials involved in this bounty program policy, including banks and companies that facilitated these operations. U.S. prosecutors could seek indictments against Russian officials involved in any criminal activity, send those indictments to INTERPOL, and thereby limit the international travel of these Russians agents.

This list could go on. But Trump will not even take the first step. So, listing subsequent possible steps is a futile exercise.

Immediate Congressional Responses

The U.S. Congress has limited levers to pull in response, but three are available immediately. First, the U.S Congress must continue to demand direct briefings from the Intelligence Community and demand testimonies from Trump administration officials to learn more about the updated intelligence and facts concerning the current national security decision-making process. Did Trump really call Putin several times without being briefed by his national security staff about this intelligence? Did Trump actually know about the intelligence but proceeded anyway? Especially four months before an election, the American people have a right to know how these decisions are being made.

Second, the U.S. Congress must pass immediately the DETER Act, which obligates the U.S. government to implement new sanctions in the event of Russian interference in the 2020

presidential election. Putin does not have the same means available sway American voter preferences. However, Putin and his proxies still have many ways to undermine the legitimacy of our presidential election, including hacking registration lists in Election Day, spinning false stories about election fraud or voter suppression, or amplifying suspicions about the accuracy of the vote count. Republicans and Democrats should share a common interest in wanting to avoid such a scenario on Election Day. Passing the DETER Acts would help to decrease Russian meddling.

Third, the U.S. Congress should hold hearings and then draft legislation to make Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) an independent non-government organization, no longer affiliated with U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM). RFE/RL has done its most effective work in providing independent reporting to Russia and other countries in the region when it had greatest distance from the U.S. government. The lines between RFE/RL independence and the U.S. government have become blurred by recent leadership changes and board removals.³² The Trump administration as well as future presidents need international media outlets to explain their policies and advance their values, but that is a different function from the kind of reporting that RFE/RL has done so successfully in the past. The U.S. Congress should pass legislation to create a permanent firewall between RFE/RL (and other private grantees), and Voice of America and the U.S. government more generally. RFE/RL should no longer be a grantee of the U.S. Agency for Global Media, but instead receive a direct appropriation from the U.S. Congress. The CEO of the U.S. Agency for Global Media should not have the power to appoint or dismiss the leadership of RFE/RL. Instead, RFE/RL leaderships should be appointed by

³² On recent troubling decisions made by CEO Michael Pack at USAGM, see <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2020/06/18/its-not-broke-and-youre-not-fixing-it/?utm-access=newsletter>

a bipartisan, independent board. The funding mechanism and governance structure of the National Endowment for Democracy in the United States or the BBC in the United Kingdom could serve as useful models. A similar restructuring may be useful for other grantees of the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) -- Radio Free Asia, the Middle East Broadcasting Network, and the Open Technology Fund.

The Long Game: The Need for a Bipartisan Grand Strategy to Contain Putin's Russia

Short-term reactions to Putin's latest actions are not enough. In the long run, American foreign policymakers – Republicans and Democrats together, the executive and legislative branches together – must craft and sustain a comprehensive strategy for containing Putin's belligerent actions abroad and simultaneously cooperate with Moscow on a small set of issues of mutual benefit. Putin is an old man, set in his ways after twenty years in power. He is not going to change his mind suddenly about his perceptions of the American threat, so trying to restart a major positive bilateral agenda will fail. Last week, he amended the Russian constitution to allow him to rule until 2036. Washington must accept that Putin is here to stay and will not end his assault on democracy, liberalism, and multilateral institutions anytime soon. Instead, American policymakers must dig in for the long haul, and articulate a bipartisan, nuanced, long-term, grand strategy for addressing the challenges of dealing with Putin's Russia today similar in scale and scope to our strategy of containment during the Cold War. We must not romanticize the merits of containment or the glory days of confronting the Soviet threat. There are many differences

between the Cold War and our current era; some less threatening, some more.³³ Compared to the Cold War, our current debate, policymaking, and policy implementation towards Russia seems disjointed, politically polarized, and tactical, not strategic. There is a better way. A new strategy must include a big dose of containment, combined with smaller doses of selective engagement and selective isolation. Like a successful, sustainable strategy for responding to China's rise in the 21st century, U.S. foreign policymakers must deploy a complicated set of policies designed to both contain and engage Russia, to both deter and cooperate with Putin, and all the while pursue ways to connect directly with Russian society. Washington must find ways to deepen containment of the Kremlin's economic, military, and political influence, while also working with the Kremlin when doing so is truly necessary.

Enhancing Resilience at Home

Containment must start at home. Limiting Putin's ability to influence U.S. elections should be priority number one. As already mentioned, a most immediate and easy step would be for Congress to pass the DETER Act.

More generally, our entire election infrastructure needs enhanced cybersecurity resilience. If the federal government can require all cars to have seat belts, then federal authorities can require elementary cybersecurity protections such as dual authentication for all processes related to voting during a presidential election. Since we know that Russian cyber actors probed our electoral machinery in 2016, we must focus particular attention on enhancing

³³ I deliberately call our current era the "Hot Peace" to echo the Cold War parallels but still distinguish it from the specific circumstances of the Cold War. On the comparison, see McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace*.

the security of computers and networks involved in voter registries and the vote count. Those who operate these computer and network systems must be required to adopt specified cybersecurity protocols (e.g. dual authentication) and receive training about phishing, false identities, and other methods for preventing hacking attempts. Several states still have some precincts that lack paper trails for each ballot cast. These sloppy practices have to end. Every precinct must be able to produce a paper record for every vote.

Congress should also pass laws to provide greater transparency about Russian media activities inside the United States. The U.S. government must develop clearer rules and regulations for constraining foreign activities of influence -- especially through traditional media and social media -- during our elections and more generally. Progress has been made. American social media companies independently have taken a series of measures to reduce disinformation and increase transparency.³⁴ But the norms, rules, and laws for defending American sovereignty are still poorly developed.

³⁴ “Defending Democracy Program,” *Microsoft*, <https://news.microsoft.com/on-the-issues/topic/defending-democracy-program/>; “Making Ads and Pages More Transparent,” *Facebook Newsroom*, April 6, 2018, <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2018/04/transparent-ads-and-pages/>; “We’re Making Our Terms and Data Policy Clearer, Without New Rights to Use Your Data on Facebook,” *Facebook Terms Update*, <https://www.facebook.com/about/terms-updates>; “Hard Questions: What is Facebook Doing to Protect Election Security?” *Facebook Newsroom*, March 29, 2018, <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2018/03/hard-questions-election-security/>; Michee Smith, “Introducing a new transparency report for political ads,” *Google Blog*, August 15, 2018, <https://www.blog.google/technology/ads/introducing-new-transparency-report-political-ads/>; “Transparency Report, Political Advertising on Google,” *Google*, <https://transparencyreport.google.com/political-ads/overview>; Vijaya Gadde, Bruce Falck, “Increasing Transparency for Political Campaigning Ads on Twitter,” *Twitter Blog*, May 24, 2018, https://blog.twitter.com/official/en_us/topics/company/2018/Increasing-Transparency-for-Political-Campaigning-Ads-on-Twitter.html; Ads Transparency Center, Twitter, <https://ads.twitter.com/transparency>; Bruce Falck, “Providing more transparency around advertising on Twitter,” *Twitter Blog*, June 28, 2018, https://blog.twitter.com/official/en_us/topics/company/2018/Providing-More-Transparency-Around-Advertising-on-Twitter.html

Beyond elections, the American federal government must devote greater resources towards containing Russian cyber threats against critical infrastructure.

Strengthening NATO

To contain Putin in Europe, NATO's deterrent capabilities must be enhanced. After the annexation of Crimea and military intervention in eastern Ukraine, NATO leaders rightly initiated new measures to strengthen deterrence, including a pledge by all members to increase defense spending to 2% of GDP, forward deployments of light-armed brigades in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, and greater resources for countering cyber and disinformation operations. Regarding conventional ground forces, however, NATO lacks the capability to repel a Russian attack. NATO's southern flank is especially vulnerable.³⁵ Military mobility between countries in the alliance is constrained. And political divisions within the alliance are worse than ever before.

The United States must signal recommitment to defending our allies and work with allied leaders to enhance military readiness. A first easy step would be to reverse Trump's decision to reduce the number of American soldiers deployed in Germany.³⁶ U.S. leaders must continue to encourage all NATO allies to meet their pledges from 2014 of spending 2% on defense. NATO countries must spend more to enhance military mobility, reduce the time to cross borders, and enhance command and control regarding transportation operations.³⁷ More resources and

³⁵ For a list of several concrete steps to strengthen deterrence on this flank, see <https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/nato-needs-a-coherent-approach-to-defending-its-eastern-flank/>

³⁶ <https://www.dw.com/en/berlin-says-washington-benefits-from-us-troops-in-germany/a-53831996>

³⁷ For more concrete recommendations on how to enhance mobility, see General Curtis Scaparotti, Ambassador Collen Ball, *Moving Out: A Comprehensive Assessment of European Military Mobility* (Washington: Atlantic

planning must be devoted to improving NATO's reactionary ability on its southern flank, which has not received the same level of attention as our Baltic allies.³⁸ NATO should deploy greater attention and resources to better deterrence in the most northern borders of the alliance, especially in the "GUK Gap," seas between Greenland and Iceland and the United Kingdom.³⁹ Last updated in 2011, NATO's maritime strategy must be refreshed as well.⁴⁰ New weapon systems must be deployed. As Juliane Smith and Jerry Hendrix have recommended, "Big-ticket items such as Anti-submarine warfare (ASW)-equipped frigates, nuclear and conventionally powered submarines (if national budgets and technical expertise allow), and maritime patrol aircraft should be priorities for certain allies' defense acquisition plans. Nations with larger and more technically advanced economies should focus more on high-end capabilities, but maritime nations with smaller economies must also contribute some ASW capabilities in proportion with their abilities."⁴¹ U.S. officials must demonstrate leadership within NATO to improve decision-making within the alliance.⁴² More broadly, American leaders must understand the relationship between economic development, energy diversification, and security in that part of Europe closest to Russia and then seek ways to enhance development on all three of these fronts simultaneously.⁴³ Providing greater support of

Council. 2019). <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/news/press-releases/atlantic-council-releases-landmark-report-assessing-european-military-mobility/>

³⁸ For a list of several concrete steps to strengthen deterrence on this flank, see <https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/nato-needs-a-coherent-approach-to-defending-its-eastern-flank/>

³⁹ <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/forgotten-waters>

⁴⁰ <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/forgotten-waters>

⁴¹ <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/forgotten-waters>

⁴² For a list of detailed reforms, see <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/nato-seventy-alliance-crisis>

⁴³ For detailed recommendations, see <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42405.pdf>

the Three Seas Initiative, for instance, is one concrete step.⁴⁴ Doctrinally, NATO must return to its core mission of a defensive mission within Europe and spend less resources and strategic thinking on expeditionary forces and missions outside of Europe. Furthermore, NATO must develop a new doctrine for addressing the challenge of China's rise for European security.⁴⁵ Finally, NATO must enhance communication channels with Russia. Given the newly modernized weaponry on both sides, but especially Russia's new deployments of missiles previously prohibited by the INF Treaty, neither NATO nor Russia can afford an escalation of confrontation based on misperceptions or bad information.

In affirming our commitments to the alliance, U.S. leaders should remind Putin that NATO is a defensive alliance that has never attacked Russia and would be insane to ever do so. Enhanced NATO military capacity within allied countries bordering Russia is only threatening the Russian armed forces if they attack a NATO ally. Making the Russian military option more costly preserves peace; or as President Ronald Reagan once said, "peace through strength." The best way to keep the peace in Europe is to ensure Putin knows the high costs of military operations against a NATO member.

Lastly, the United States should stop opposing independent European security initiatives, such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defense Fund (EDF). Instead, the U.S. should see these efforts as contributing in win-win ways to common American and European security interests.

⁴⁴ <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11547>

⁴⁵ For some concrete new ideas, including the creation of a NATO-China Council, see <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/natos-role-in-a-transatlantic-strategy-on-china/>. See also <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2019/09/nato-respond-china-power>

Maintaining and Lifting (at the Appropriate Time) Economic Sanctions

Another pillar of containment must be to maintain the current economic sanctions regime against Russian companies and individuals until Putin changes his behavior. As Putin himself has said, “Every crime must have its punishment.”⁴⁶ The crime of annexation must have a punishment. The crime of interfering in American elections must have a punishment. The crime of assassination, especially on foreign soil, must have a punishment.

The United States worked closely with allies and partners to put in place the most comprehensive set of sanctions against Russia ever as a punishment for its outrageous annexation and military intervention in Ukraine. Economic sanctions are a blunt, but necessary tool for reprimanding illegal, belligerent Russian government behavior. U.S. diplomats must maintain these sanctions now, as fatigue is growing in Europe. To lift sanctions before Putin changes his actions in Ukraine would send a terrible signal.

Some have argued that sanctions have not worked, and they should therefore be abandoned. Sanctions have produced direct, lasting negative economic effects on the Russian economy, but have not compelled Putin to quit his war in eastern Ukraine, leave Crimea, abandon Assad, or stop sowing division in American society.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, there are increasing signs of Russian societal dissatisfaction. Putin’s approval rating recently fell to its

⁴⁶ <https://www.ft.com/content/670039ec-98f3-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36>

⁴⁷ Russia is not a democracy, so societal pressure for policy change is difficult to achieve at all and most certainly will not come quickly. In all targeted countries, the feedback loop from sanctions to economic downturn to foreign policy change is a long and indirect one. In Iran, for instance, it took several years (and a presidential election producing a new leader) before sanctions deployed in 2010 helped to pressure the theocratic regime to negotiate a nuclear deal.

lowest level in several years.⁴⁸ Economic elites show incremental but growing signs of division, especially between those who need access to the global economy to prosper (that is, those who need access to international markets, especially capitals markets, as well as trade, foreign investment, and technology) compared to those more focused on Russia's domestic economy. If Russia's economy continues to grow at anemic rates, we should expect these anxieties about Putin's current foreign policy course to grow. Perhaps the best evidence that sanctions are working is Putin's irritation with them and his efforts to lift them. Even before Trump took office, Russian envoys and officials were discussing the need to lift sanctions with Trump's campaign, and the Russian government has continued to denounce American sanctions today. At the Helsinki summit in July 2018, Putin made clear his obsession with the Magnitsky Act, and its main champion, Bill Browder, by devoting several minutes of the joint press conference to spinning a fabricated tale about how U.S. government officials helped Browder launder money out of Russia to help finance the Clinton campaign. On August 10, 2018, in response to press reports about new sanctions legislation, Prime Minister Medvedev stated most aggressively that new sanctions against Russian banks would be a "declaration of economic war" and that Russia would retaliate "economically, politically, or, if needed, by other means".⁴⁹ If sanctions were so ineffective, why are all of these Russian government officials working so hard to lift them? Clearly, sanctions matter. Lifting them before Putin changes his behavior would signal American weakness.

⁴⁸ <https://www.levada.ru/indikatory/>

⁴⁹ "U.S. curbs on Russian banks would be act of economic war - PM Medvedev," *Reuters*, August 10, 2018, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-usa-russia-sanctions-moscow-reaction/u-s-curbs-on-russian-banks-would-be-act-of-economic-war-pm-idUKKBN1KV0FM>

To the extent possible, private American interests – individuals, companies, and shareholders – should not be adversely affected by existing or new sanctions. Our aim should be to deter and punish Putin, his government, and their proxies, not American traders and investors engaging in the Russian private sector. The growth of the Russian private sector – autonomous from the Russian state and cooperating with the American private sector – still serves American national interests, as actors in this sector of the Russian economy are the most likely to pressure Putin to stop isolating Russia through aggressive foreign policy actions.

In addition, U.S. diplomats must publicly articulate that economic sanctions against Russian companies and individuals are not designed to weaken Russia or trigger regime change. Rather, they were put in place in response to very specific actions made by Putin, and will be lifted when Putin reverses those specific actions.

Helping Ukrainian Democracy Succeed

No theater in the fight to contain Putin is more important than Ukraine. Ukraine is the new West Germany of today's "Hot Peace." Building a secure, wealthy, democratic Ukraine, even if parts of the country remain under occupation for a long time, is the best way to contain Russian ideological and military aggression in Europe. A successful democracy in Ukraine is also the best means for inspiring new democratic possibilities inside Russia and other former Soviet republics. Conversely, a failed state in Ukraine will confirm Putin's flawed hypothesis about the shortcomings of U.S.-sponsored democratic revolutions. Therefore, we must increase our military, political and economic support for Ukraine.

Under difficult circumstances, the Ukrainian government has achieved success since being invaded by Russia in 2014. In close cooperation with the IMF, the Ukrainian government has reduced its expenditures, raised heating tariffs, tightened monetary policy, and eliminated energy dependence on Russia – all difficult but important reforms for stimulating economic growth. Despite such progress, more needs to be done. Above all else, the political influence of Ukrainian big business conglomerates needs to be reduced. After positive signs at the beginning of his administration, Ukrainian president Volodmyr Zelensky has made some personnel and policy decisions that undermined his commitment to fighting corruption and economic reform. After an initial push of assistance from Europe, the United States, and the IMF, disappointment with President Zelensky is returning among Western policy circles. The recent politicization of U.S.-Ukrainian relations by Trump’s team in and out of the U.S. government has not helped. Senior U.S. government engagement in supporting democratic consolidation in Ukraine is missing. Many U.S. agencies, the U.S. Congress, American business, and the NGO community must engage more deeply with the Ukrainian government and society to assist democratic and market reforms. Nothing scares Putin more than a thriving economy and liberal democracy on his border.

The United States and our European allies should be doing more to reach out, nurture, and support directly the people in the Donbas, including the 1-1.5 million of them currently displaced in other parts of Ukraine. They need short-term humanitarian assistance, as well as long-term support — education, housing, and retraining — to rebuild their futures.

Expanding American Diplomacy and Enhancing Energy Diversification in Europe

Western countries must develop a coherent strategy to contain possibly coercive Russian government's economic activities in Europe, including first and foremost reducing dependence on Russian energy exports. Any policy that diversifies European energy supplies, including American exports of LNG gas, and reduces European dependence on Russian energy exports must be pursued. Projects like Nord Stream II do not serve that policy objective.

More generally, American foreign policymakers must devote more attention to Europe. Putin is courting individual European leaders. Opposite Putin, we must improve our diplomatic game in Europe. Above all else, the United States must stop framing all interactions with our European allies as zero-sum transactions. That holds true for NATO spending. That also holds true for trade negotiations. Threatening tariffs against allies should be a last resort and done through the WTO rather than on a bilateral basis. American presidents must stop appointing major campaign donors as ambassadors to our major European allies as well, and instead hire experienced foreign policy specialists – either career foreign service or political appointees – to these posts. Collectively, we must work more closely with democracies in Europe to combat Russian disinformation and devote more time and resources to promoting our allies' values as well as our own.

Enhancing Transparency about Russian Money in the United States and Around the World

The United States and the West should develop a coherent strategy of economic containment of the Russian government and its proxies (but not the Russian private sector). Putin uses these companies to advance his foreign policy interests.

The reporting in the United States about a bank account controlled by the GRU transferring funds to a bank account controlled by the Taliban once again showed the incredible capabilities of the American Intelligence Community (IC). The degree of detail about Russian illiberal activities documented in the Mueller Report that produced indictments of GRU intelligence officers was another illustration of our outstanding intelligence gathering capacity. This tool of deterrence is underutilized. While protecting methods of sources, American foreign policymakers should seek to declassify more information about Russian financial transfers and money laundering first inside the United States and second around the world. Russians should know how their leaders are spending and investing their money abroad. American and Russian voters have a right to know if Russian money is being used to buy political influence in the United States. In the United States, new legislation should be adopted to eliminate anonymous ownership of corporations and real estate as well as the transfer of funds abroad through law firms.⁵⁰

In conjunction with these more transparent policies, genuine private sector companies inside Russia should be encouraged to engage with Western investors and markets. The strategic goal should be to underscore the economic benefits of markets and Western integration and the economic costs of state ownership and mercantilist behavior.

Suspend Russia from INTERPOL

⁵⁰ See for instance, S.1717, The Corporate Transparency Act of 2017: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/1717>. Anders Aslund details how these mechanisms are used to launder money from Russia to the United States in *How the United States Can Combat Russia's Kleptocracy* (Washington, DC: The Atlantic Council, July 31, 2018): [http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/How the United States Can Combat Russia s Kleptocracy.pdf](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/How_the_United_States_Can_Combat_Russia_s_Kleptocracy.pdf)

The Kremlin's abuse of INTERPOL – through the inappropriate use of red notices and red diffusions – must be stopped. INTERPOL's constitution forbids the use of the organization for political purposes, yet the Russian government has attempted to use red notices and red diffusion mechanisms to silence and threaten critics. The U.S. Congress should codify in law the specific sanctions that the U.S. government will implement in response to future abuses of INTERPOL's red notice and red diffusion mechanisms.

Countering Russian Propaganda

The United States government should not seek to counter Russian propaganda with American propaganda. Instead, the best method for countering disinformation is real reporting from credible journalists in Russia, Ukraine, and other countries in the region. American direct funding of these media outlets would taint them. Instead, our focus should be on providing short-term training opportunities, year-long fellowships at American and European universities, and internships at Western media organizations. Education and the free-flow of information are our best tools in this long struggle against Russian propaganda. The United States and other democracies, in partnership with the philanthropic world, should unite to provide more permissive conditions for independent journalism, including when possible, in the Russian language (both inside and outside of Russia). For instance, funding for investigative journalists, support to locate servers outside of Russia, and aid to hide the virtual identities of journalists and their sources are just a few small steps for supporting independent media. Equally important, as already mentioned, RFE/RL must become in an independent, non-governmental organization.

More generally, it is essential that the United States seeks to contain, degrade, and counter Putin's international ideological campaign. American policymakers have to encourage social media platforms to demote Kremlin content. Algorithms organizing content on YouTube, Google, or Bing searches should not over represent information distributed by the Russian government through its propaganda channels. Readers must know when they are seeing content created by Russian state media sources. When that content does appear in searches, social media companies should provide sources from more reliable news organizations simultaneously; every time an RT article or video appears, a BBC story should pop up next to it. The United States must organize democracies around the world to develop a common set of laws and protocols for regulating Russian government-controlled media, including bots and trolls.

Selective Engagement

In parallel to an overall strategy of containment, U.S. policymakers need to engage the Kremlin on a small number of mutually beneficial issues. We did so during the Cold War. We can do both again.

Most immediately, the Trump administration must work with Putin's government to extend the New START treaty. Not only does this treaty prevent a needless nuclear arms race, but its comprehensive verification measures provide valuable information about Russia's nuclear weapons and modernizing systems. The treaty's limitations especially serve American national interests today when Russia is investing heavily in the development of new nuclear weapons, and we are not. Preservation of the inspection regime helps us to keep the peace. Uncertainty about the other side's capabilities is always destabilizing, causing military strategists to develop war

plans based on worst-case scenarios. The intelligence we obtain from inspections is invaluable for making accurate assessments of Russia's nuclear capabilities. "Don't trust, only verify," should be the new slogan of our Hot Peace era. Moreover, if we pull out of this treaty, we will need to spend billions more on deploying additional nuclear weapons of little strategic value and billions more in trying to gather intelligence about Russia's nuclear modernization program that we can now collect intelligence more easily on through procedures codified in the New START Treaty. Trump's idea of requiring China to join these talks must be retired. Instead, the United States and Russia should extend the New START treaty, an outcome that serves U.S. national security interests, and U.S. arms control negotiators should begin discussions with their Chinese and Russian counterparts about a future multilateral treaty to limit the deployments of nuclear weapons. But these two actions should not be linked. Instead, they should be sequenced.

There are a number of other areas where cooperation can and should occur. American diplomats at the highest levels should engage with their Russian counterparts in the Minsk Process designed to end the war in eastern Ukraine. Our absence has been detrimental to progress. Washington and Moscow can also cooperate on fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. American and Russian officials should cooperate on our common agenda regarding climate change and nuclear nonproliferation, especially regarding Iran. Finally, we should seek to negotiate a minimal agreement on limiting cyber-attacks against each other. Infrastructure targets, for instance, should be off limits.

Greater Indifference

Similar to robust containment, American foreign policymakers must pursue greater isolation and indifference towards the Russian government. During the post-Cold War era, American presidents were eager to give their Kremlin counterparts symbolic leadership roles as a way to signal respect. Those days are over. Conversations about Russia rejoining the G-8 must end. Western government delegations should stop showing up at sporting events in Russia (Let the athletes play, but without government officials in the stands). Putin's bad behavior should not be forgotten in the pursuit of new eras of détente or rapprochement.

Concerning our most vital national security interests, the United States does not need Russian cooperation. Too often, American and European leaders exaggerate the importance of "better relations" with Putin for achieving security and economic goals. For instance, U.S. officials frequently highlight cooperation with Russia on fighting terrorism as a lowest common denominator of shared interests. Yet, even this issue area is hard to cooperate with Putin's government on since their definition of terrorist organizations are different than ours. Sometimes, as we have witnessed recently in Afghanistan and Syria, Russia is supporting directly and indirectly the very forces we are fighting. Indifference and isolation, rather than engagement and courtship, can be a better strategy on many issues. U.S. officials can devote a lot of time and energy chasing Russians to cooperate when that time and energy might achieve greater results without Russia in the mix.

American and European leaders are impatient and seek a return to more normal relations with Russia. Cooperative relations with Moscow are better than noncooperative relations. However, the pursuit of improved relations cannot come at the expense of forgetting Putin's past behavior. A more prudent and effective policy is to soberly realize that the status quo stalemate

is the best that can be accomplished right now. While Putin rules Russia, simply mitigating deterioration in our relations would be a major achievement.

Engaging Russians; Combatting Russophobia

While American leaders seek to implement a strategy of containment and limited engagement with Putin's government, non-governmental organizations, business leaders, and universities must expand direct contacts with their counterparts in Russian society. Not all Russians support Putin's autocratic policies at home or abroad. Those inside Russia who still seek to return to democracy and rejoin the West should be encouraged, not isolated. Putin's regime seeks to limit and prevent such contacts; we must discover new modalities for expanding them.

One of those modalities for closer cooperation is more permissive conditions for Russian immigration to the United States. Rather than erecting more barriers, the United States should be welcoming the best and the brightest from around the world, including from Russia.

American elected officials, commentators and journalists must stop demonizing the Russian (and Chinese) people. Above all else, American government officials as well as U.S. media outlets must distinguish between Russia and Russians – between Putin and the Russian people. They are not synonymous. "Russia" did not annex Crimea; Putin did. "Russians" did not interfere in our elections in 2016; Putin did. Not every Russian working in the United States is trying to steal American intellectual property. Not every Russian on Twitter criticizing U.S. policy is a bot controlled by the Kremlin. Not every Russian student studying in the United States is a spy. Our current conflict with the Russian government is not determined by Russian

culture or history; Putin the individual has made choices that have fueled this confrontation. Fueling “Russophobia” or propagating stereotypes about Russian national proclivities for imperialism or dictatorship only serves Putin’s political objectives.

Revitalizing American Democracy

The United States will be engaged in an ideological struggle with the Russian and Chinese autocracies for decades to come. To win that argument requires democratic renewal and better governance performance – a democracy that delivers – at home. American leaders need to better appreciate that poorly run elections damage the image of American democracy abroad. Voter disenfranchisement, police violence, elections that compel citizens to stand in lines for hours, gerrymandering, weak campaign finance laws, and elections which result in winners who do not win the popular votes all undermine America’s reputation as a functioning, inspiring democracy. Likewise, our poor performance in combatting COVID-19 offers autocrats the opportunity to argue that their systems of government works better than ours. Reviewing the long list of reforms needed to strengthen our democracy and improve our social and economic outcomes would be inappropriate at this hearing, but failing to see the connection between our democracy’s declining performance at home and our ability to fight and win the ideological battle with autocracy abroad would be a strategic error. Most immediately, there would be no greater gift to Putin and autocrats around the world than if we failed to conduct a free and fair election on November 3, 2020.⁵¹ It is imperative that we do all we can to guarantee a safe,

⁵¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/15/we-need-start-preparing-november-election-now/>

legitimate presidential election with results that are recognized by all for the future of democracy both in the United States and around the world.

Accepting Again Leadership of the Free World and the Liberal International Order

Finally, the United States is more likely to succeed in containing Putin's Russia by accepting greater leadership as the world's most powerful democracy and reengaging and reforming, and stop withdrawing from, the liberal international order. Going it alone is a suboptimal strategy. If Putin wants to undermine democracy and the liberal international order, then we should be seeking to build the largest coalition possible to defend democracy and the liberal international order. Easy first steps would be to rejoin the Iran nuclear deal (the JCPOA) and the Paris Climate accords. The United States also should seek to join The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea would help us achieve our national security objectives vis-a-vis Russia in the Arctic (and China in the South China Sea). Demonstrating greater leadership to reform and reinvigorate the Community of Democracies, the OSCE, UN Human Rights Council, and the World Trade Organization (WTO) also would help to draw clearer lines between democracies and autocracies in the world. Countries threatened by Russian coercion want to see the U.S. return as a more active player in the Caucasus and Central Asia. American withdrawal from international agreements and multilateral institutions in parallel to greater indifference to promoting democracy has created new opportunities for Russia (and China) to fill the global vacuum. It's time to reverse course.