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Opening Statement of the Honorable **Ed Royce (R-CA), Chairman**
House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing:
“U.S. Policy Toward Putin’s Russia”
June 14, 2016

(As prepared for delivery)

Winston Churchill famously described Russia as “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” But less well known is what he said next: “but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.”

The problem is that we’re not dealing with the interests of the Russian people, but instead with the interests of Vladimir Putin. And he has not demonstrated much interest in cooperating with the United States. In fact, many of his policies are directly undermining America – from selling advanced weapons to Iran to destabilizing our allies by driving waves of Syrian refugees across their borders. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, we have been forced to increase our military presence in Europe to make clear our readiness to defend NATO countries.

Yet Putin continues to escalate. Over the past year he has repeatedly sent Russian warplanes to buzz U.S. ships and planes in international waters. These are reckless and provocative acts. A miscalculation could easily result in direct confrontation.

As this Committee has examined, Russia’s propaganda machine – what one described as the “weaponization of information” – is in overdrive, undermining governments including NATO allies. Meanwhile, back in Russia, independent media and dissidents are forcefully sidelined.

A big part of the problem is that the Administration has repeatedly rushed to try to cooperate with Russia, beginning with a string of one-sided concessions in the New START arms control agreement. We were quick to join diplomatic efforts in Syria even as the opposition forces we support have come under repeated Russia attack. This has convinced the Russians that, once again, the Administration will concede a great deal, for little return.

That does not mean we should rule out cooperation with Russia. But cooperation means benefits for both sides. A tougher and more consistent approach on our part might convince Putin that cooperation is more advantageous than the reflexive confrontation he often resorts to.

We have clearly demonstrated that we are open to cooperation. It is Putin who is not. If he continues playing a zero-sum game and regards the U.S. as an enemy to achieving his ends, then the possibility of compromise is zero. Much of his behavior to date fits that description, most glaringly seen by his invasion of Ukraine and Georgia.

Unfortunately Putin has repeatedly calculated – rightfully so – that the Administration’s response to his aggression will be limited. The U.S., in cooperation with the EU and others, has imposed sanctions which have resulted in significant pressure on the Russian economy. But the Administration has refused to

provide Ukraine with the weaponry needed to stop Russian tanks, which can only be interpreted in Moscow as weakness.

The tragedy is that there are many problems where both countries could benefit from cooperation. One of the most obvious is combating Islamist terrorism. One witness today has intensively studied its rapid spread in Russia and Central Asia, which together provide the largest number of recruits for ISIS outside of the Arab countries.

Putin says he is genuinely concerned about this rising threat. In fact, that was his stated goal in intervening in Syria. But as we know, his real agenda was to save the Assad regime, which has meant targeting the opposition forces far more than ISIS.

It's clear that U.S. strategies to deal with Russia have failed. If we want to accomplish a different result, we must negotiate from a position of strength. Only then will cooperation be possible with a man who has demonstrated that the hope of cooperation cannot survive the cold calculation of his narrow interests.