

## U.S.-RUSSIA POLICY

America's current approach to Russia isn't working: the reflexively hawkish policies adopted in the wake of Moscow's meddling in the 2016 presidential election have failed to significantly alter Russian behavior and have made cooperation on issues important to U.S. national security more difficult. A more effective policy would acknowledge the unpleasant realities of today's U.S.-Russian relationship while focusing on deterrence and reengagement on critical issues.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Push back when necessary.** Take appropriate steps to prevent and deter Russia from meddling in domestic affairs, for example, by establishing clear redlines and developing creative responses to Russian violations.
- **Cooperate on interests of mutual concern.** Work with Russia on issues truly important to U.S. interests, including nonproliferation, Iran, and North Korea.
- **Prioritize arms control.** Negotiate a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty and a replacement for the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.
- **Push European allies.** Encourage NATO members to increase spending on defense and commit to halt NATO expansion.

### BACKGROUND

Russia presents a conundrum for policymakers. For three decades, the U.S.-Russia relationship has rocked between controversy and cooperation. While it is a relatively weak and declining state, Russia nevertheless has the ability to take actions that are counter to U.S. interests and maintains the world's second-largest strategic nuclear arsenal. Russia's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election has resulted in a justifiable and bipartisan enmity among policymakers that has not been seen since the Cold War.

These increased tensions have encouraged knee-jerk policy responses like last year's sanctions legislation. Though the impulse behind the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act is understandable, it is largely punitive and offers no clear incentive for Russia to change its behavior.

Other policies also promote confrontation: the latest National Security Strategy describes Russia as a "revisionist power," listing it as a challenge along with "rogue regimes" such as Iran and North Korea. Meanwhile, the Trump administration's proposal for new low-yield nuclear weapons is designed to counter Russia's nuclear arsenal and could make conflict with Russia more likely.

Unfortunately, confrontational rhetoric and policies offer little hope for improving the situation. Instead, U.S. policy should start with a more accurate assessment of Russia and seek to lower tensions where possible. Working with Russia on areas of mutual interest—particularly nonproliferation—would also serve to defuse tensions. These cooperative approaches to Russia should be combined with a strong deterrent stance, creating clear redlines against future Russian election meddling and developing credible and effective policy responses to hostile behavior.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

["Power and Pragmatism: Reforming American Foreign Policy for the 21st Century"](#) by Emma Ashford, in *New Voices in Grand Strategy* (Washington: Center for a New American Security, April 11, 2019).

["How Reflexive Hostility to Russia Harms U.S. Interests"](#) by Emma Ashford, *Foreign Affairs*, April 18, 2018.

["Here Comes the New Russia, Same as the Old Russia"](#) by Emma Ashford and Trevor Thrall, featuring Matthew Rojansky, *Power Problems*, podcast, March 21, 2018.