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The United States, Russia, and Europe in 2018

Chipping Away at Four Gordian Knots

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In October 2018, a select group of Russian and American experts met at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington. Their meeting, convened by CSIS and the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), aimed to discuss four topics central to U.S.-Russian relations: the conflict in Ukraine, the future of the European security order, the war in Syria, and the question of interference in other states' political processes. The attendees participated not as representatives of their countries or governments but rather as experts working collaboratively to define the problems at hand and consider possible solutions. Their goal was to identify the positions of stakeholders with an eye to defining the possibilities for future negotiations and paths out of conflict.

Despite the importance of all four of those topics to global and regional security, to say nothing of bilateral relations between the United States and Russia, the expert group agreed that the biggest challenge to resolving any of them is that Russian, American, European (including Ukrainian), Syrian, and other relevant governments do not see their resolution as urgent. Although these stakeholders may not be happy with the status quo, they often see alternatives as likely to be worse, or at least to pose new risks.

In Ukraine, for example, the conflict in Donbas continues to cost lives. Nonetheless, all the stakeholders see problems with any conceivable path toward resolution, at least in the short term. If Ukraine regains the Donbas, it must integrate it, at great economic and likely political cost. Indeed, under some scenarios, control of the Donbas could weaken Western support for Ukraine. From Moscow's perspective, resolution means the loss of an important bargaining chip and the danger that domestic and foreign audiences will see the Kremlin as having backed down. Calculations are further complicated by the tendency of stakeholders to hope that time is on their side: that waiting will lead to a better outcome. This leads to a tendency to postpone decisions until one or another future milestone is met. Elections (U.S., Russian,

Ukrainian; presidential and parliamentary) have repeatedly served this purpose, only to come and go with no appreciable change in policy.

Participants suggested, however, that the status quo may not be as durable as those who accept it think and that time is on no one's side. A new Ukrainian president may find it harder to justify any concessions. Ukraine and Russia are increasingly at odds in the Sea of Azov, a situation that could escalate. The recognition of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's autocephaly from the Moscow Patriarchate leadership also stands to change the balance.

Experts who participated in the workshop agreed that it would be helpful to integrate the United States into the Normandy process for resolving the conflict rather than maintain separate channels through which Washington negotiates directly with Moscow. This step would strengthen Normandy and preclude those involved from leveraging different negotiating fora against one another. A single agreed forum would, it is hoped, increase the pressure on all sides for resolution. The group also felt that although a new agreement is not out of the question in the future, for now Minsk II should remain the framework for resolving the conflict. Participants believe that when and if the political will emerges in Moscow and Kyiv, it will be possible to agree on a plan for the Donbas that provides a measure of political autonomy (including to maintain a role for the Russian language) and does not allow representatives from the region to obstruct the functioning of the Ukrainian government or exercise a veto over its foreign policy.

The group also agreed that a peacekeeping agreement in Donbas should continue to be pursued, even in the absence of a broader settlement. Indeed, the role of a peacekeeping agreement will be to create the space (and further incentives) for such a settlement. Although there exist substantial disagreements about the scope and form of a peacekeeping force (regarding phasing, location, role in governance, size, and participating countries), the framework exists and the negotiating space in principle allows room for compromise.

The group's discussion of European security echoed that regarding Ukraine. The Ukraine crisis is, of course, a crucial component of European security. Moving beyond it, however, or assuming its resolution, still leaves many other challenges on the continent. Moreover, when it comes to Ukraine, conversations about possible solutions are ongoing, even if progress is inadequate. But in the context of broader European security issues—how the many countries that share the continent can feel more secure without threatening the perceived security of others—participants felt there was a dearth of forward-looking thinking, creative ideas, or even interest.

This is worrisome because participants saw the current situation as dangerous, with a high risk of crisis and an arms race. Moreover, resolution of both the Ukraine conflict and the current impasse between the United States and Russia are necessary but not sufficient for progress on broader issues of European security. At the same time, the gap in concrete thinking means that experts like those assembled can play an important role in laying the groundwork for a new conversation about limits and constraints. Formal agreements are not likely in the current political climate. But that means that now is exactly the right time to think about what sorts of arrangements could be decided once the will emerges.

Critical questions include the prospects and parameters for bringing the conventional arms control framework up to date and revisiting the Helsinki Final Act, such that these can be truly useful to all parties. At a minimum, it would be necessary to define what the "substantial" combat forces mentioned in the NATO-Russia Founding Act look like. Moreover, new weapons and military technologies must be integrated and geographical constraints on basing, including questions of reinforcement, must be part of

the conversation. It is possible to envisage how the combination of these can lead to a mutually acceptable arrangement. Participants postulated that perhaps NATO should be less worried about Russian defenses in Kaliningrad, as coastal defenses do not threaten Poland (or Sweden). Perhaps Russia also can be reassured through a more concrete discussion of which weapons may be deployed in NATO's easternmost member states. However, given the evolving political situation in Europe and beyond, any moves along these lines must also allow for changes in alliances—what might happen when new members join or old members leave.

Beginning these conversations in expert fora today will create a knowledge base that policymakers can draw on when and if negotiations move forward. However, progress is unlikely as long as governments see risks as acceptable or perhaps even beneficial.

In the meantime, the group agreed that it was also important to take action on improving crisis management tools and approaches and to restart and reinvigorate military-to-military dialogues. The group also identified risk reduction in the Arctic as an area for discussion and progress. Finally, participants argued that the existing strategic stability talks between the United States and Russia should be broadened to include cybersecurity, “soft” security, and conventional security, as well as nuclear security. This approach could reinvigorate the talks and allow policymakers to consider some of the ideas that emerge from expert consultations. More frequent (every three months, for example) meetings might result, which would be all to the good. Furthermore, some key steps potentially could be taken through technical discussions within existing arrangements, including Open Skies and the Vienna Document.

Experts were generally pessimistic about progress in Syria. Moscow has attained some of its goals in that country, such as the continued tenure of the existing government and the establishment of Russia itself as a regional player. However, any hopes that Syria might be an arena for cooperation with the United States have been largely dashed. U.S. goals, meanwhile, are centered on the destruction of ISIS and limiting the influence of Iran. The group generally agreed that preventing the resurgence of ISIS was more likely (although dislodging ISIS and other extremist groups would be easier than preventing their return) than any true constraints on Iran. Russia, for its part, is unlikely to abandon Iran for many reasons, including its expectation that Tehran will remain a crucial player in Syria and the region. Indeed, Turkey and Iran are the two outside powers that are most likely to remain at the core of the struggle for Syria, as they are seeking control of territory and populations. Russia and the United States have substantial military weight, but their interests are less specific to the conflict itself. What happens in Idlib and the possible use of chemical weapons could escalate their involvement—and their disagreements with one another.

Despite the lack of U.S.-Russian cooperation, there is overlap between Moscow's and Washington's goals in Syria. Both want to prevent the resurgence of ISIS and al Qaeda. Both have strong relationships with Kurdish groups. Neither wants a war between Iran and Israel. Both want to limit their own presence and commitment. In principle, parallel actions towards common goals should be possible, even if true alignment is out of the question. One can imagine some coordination to ensure a secure semi-autonomous role for Kurdish communities in Syria's future as well as to address the challenges posed by foreign fighters.

However, it seems unlikely that either U.S. or Russian action, or the combination of the two, will do anything to stabilize Syria for the long term. The lack of enthusiasm to pay for reconstruction and the limited capacity to reconstruct effectively mean that the conflict in Syria will continue. The most likely way forward may lie in a deal between Russia and Europe, not the United States. But none of the experts

felt that even this outcome would succeed—in the end, resources and skills are likely to be inadequate to the gargantuan task at hand.

The final topic on the group’s agenda was political interference. This conversation was in many ways the most frustrating of the two days of discussions. Some participants felt that agreements or arrangements on at least a few specific topics were possible; for example, that the two countries could commit not to release information gleaned through intelligence activity in ways likely to affect political outcomes. They noted that countries consistently commit to noninterference (even as they also take actions that others see as interference). But not all agreed. Some suggested that agreements intended to regulate activities that are in fact illegal (that is, intelligence collection by various means) were unlikely to be negotiated or signed. Participants also found it challenging to agree on what sorts of activities could be on the table. If limits are defined, whether in elections, lobbying, media, or other areas, this might imply that anything that was not thus prohibited would still be permitted. Moreover, the question of reciprocity and equivalence across issues is far from clear, as participants from the United States and Russia exhibited very different perceptions, to say the least.

Experts also asked whether there was any point to agreements under current conditions, in which both parties would likely expect the other to cheat from the start. Some postulated that case-by-case tacit arrangements and codes of conduct would be more useful than anything formalized and public. Moreover, some discussion may help to better define rules of the road. But the group generally was more effective at raising questions than finding answers, demonstrating just how underdeveloped this difficult topic remains.

To conclude, the RIAC-CSIS convened expert group identified concrete recommendations for further study and for government action in the contexts of the Ukraine crisis and European security more broadly. They discussed possible ways forward in Syria but the experts around the table in Washington were not optimistic that they would be pursued. Participants were divided over possible mutual or unilateral limits on interference and perceived interference, although they agreed that the conversation was worth continuing. Although the damage done to the U.S.-Russian relationship is one critical issue, the challenges such activities pose for the future extend far beyond these two states and will continue to grow as information and other technologies evolve.

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