

US – Russia Relations:

Past, Present and the Prospects for Improvement

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(Kremlin Press Office - Anadolu Agency)

This policy outlook examines the underlying causes of the strained relations between the US and Russia and aims to analyse its future trajectory. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, tensions between the US and Russia have steadily increased with the new ruptures causing relations to become frostier. Russia's projection of power, interference into US elections and cyber-attacks on US agencies are some of the current issues causing Washington to adopt a more confrontational approach. These are in addition to the Biden administration's stated concerns for democracy and human rights issues in Russia. Moscow has also grown increasingly concerned over the longstanding US policy of NATO enlargement and the West's support for pro-democracy movements in Russia and neighbouring countries. Given the history of rivalry between the two, which exacerbates threat perceptions and complicates the process of establishing a trust-based relationship, the possibility of more cooperative and less confrontational relations in the short term is low. This could change should Russia perceives China's rise as a more serious strategic threat than the US.

Introduction

The relationship between the US and Russia has been deteriorating in recent years, particularly since Russia invaded Ukraine and annexed Crimea in 2014, marking the first major territorial change in Europe since the Second World War. According to some analysts, relations are at the [lowest](#) level since the end of the Cold War. Washington is concerned with the Russian interference in US elections, cyberattacks on American interests and a military build-up on the Ukrainian border while Moscow considers US policy in general, particularly its economic sanctions, as intended to curb Russian influence and effectively continue the Cold War-era strategy of containment. More recently, the tension between the two saw another peak on March 17, 2021, when Russia recalled its ambassador from Washington after US President Joe Biden commented during a TV interview that he [believed](#) Russian President Putin was a “killer” and that “Russia would pay the price” for its meddling in the 2020 US presidential elections. This was followed by the Biden administration’s imposition of economic and diplomatic sanctions on April 15, 2021, which [resulted](#) in the expulsion of ten Russian diplomats. The Biden administration noted that sanctions were imposed in response to alleged Russian election interference and hacking of US federal agencies. In retaliation, Russia [expelled](#) ten US diplomats on April 16, 2021, and demanded the US ambassador to Moscow to leave the country. Russia also barred eight current and former officials including the FBI Director, Director of National Intelligence and Secretary of Homeland Security from entering the country. Moreover, tensions rose sharply in April following Russia’s military [build-up](#) near the Ukraine border, the most significant since the annexation of Crimea. Against this backdrop, Presidents Biden and Putin held their first meeting in Geneva on June 16. Among other things, the two sides [agreed](#) to send back their ambassadors, coordinate efforts on arms control and hold additional consultations on cybersecurity issues. Despite President Putin’s description of the meeting as “[constructive](#)”, key underlying issues remained unresolved.

Some [attribute](#) the deterioration of relations between Russia and America to President Putin as it is widely held that he is personally shaping the direction of the Russian foreign policy in line with his preferences. Since his return to the Presidency in 2012, Putin has pursued an aggressive and expansionist foreign policy as demonstrated by the 2014 annexation of Crimea and Russian involvement in Syria. This line of [analysis](#) implies that Russia’s current assertiveness would diminish should he no longer hold the post. However, structural changes and historical reasons appear to be as important as the personality traits of the leaders with regards to Russian-American relations. The relative decline of America’s power and Russia’s efforts to reassert itself as a major power seem to be one of the main reasons for the recent deterioration of relations. Addition-

ally, the two countries’ respective threat perceptions about the other have also been deepened over the course of the years in the aftermath of the Cold War as a result of certain policy preferences. As such, while the US has started to view Russian foreign policy as a challenge to the US-led world order, Russia has regarded US policies, particularly NATO enlargement, as designed to contain Russia.

Post-Cold War Relations

With the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the US pursued a policy of integrating Russia into the West with the belief that Europe would be more peaceful and stable through the transformation of Russia into a liberal democracy and free-market economy. Hope and optimism were particularly high during the Yeltsin presidency. Yeltsin needed the United States to overcome domestic political challenges while the US supported Yeltsin’s efforts to open Russia to the world and consequently to integrate it into the American-led world order. As a result of this rapprochement, the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council was [established](#) in 1997, functioning at that time as a formal platform to maintain the relationship between Russia and the West. Relations continued more or less on a similar trajectory during President Putin’s early years, exemplified by the [formation](#) of the NATO-Russia Council in 2002, which aimed at increasing cooperation and consultation between Russia and NATO member countries. Russia also supported the US “War on Terror” campaign initiated after the 9/11 terror attacks through intelligence sharing in particular. However, ensuing developments together with the legacy of the Cold War, have negatively impacted the trajectory of US – Russia relations.

One of the reasons for the deterioration of the relations had to do with the Kremlin’s increasing concerns that US moves, particularly its support for pro-democracy initiatives, unrestrained use of force and expansion of NATO, was intended to [encircle](#) Russia and curb its geopolitical influence. NATO’s military intervention in Kosovo in 1999 was a [major](#) breaking point for Russia as Moscow considered this as a violation of Serbian sovereignty. Additionally, the fact that the NATO intervention was carried out without the authorisation of the United Nations Security Council increased Russia’s concerns regarding the extent of the US unilateralism in global affairs by disregarding Russia’s concerns and interests. Moreover, since the NATO operation was carried out on territory outside of the alliance’s member states, Russia grew more concerned with regards to NATO’s strategic posturing and intentions to take an active role outside its traditional domain. The developments evolving around the Kosovo intervention led Russia to be sceptical about the US intentions and also reinforced Russia’s sense of [marginalization](#) from the international



A general view of a plenary session at the NATO summit in Brussels, on June 14, 2021. (NATO/Jan VAN DE VEL/Pool - Anadolu Agency)

community. For [some](#), the Kosovo intervention marked the beginning of the end of the rapprochement between the US and Russia. The US intervention in Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent regime change operation further increased Moscow's concerns and led to an opinion that the US does not and will not recognise any limits on the use of force. The so-called 'Colour Revolutions' only [deepened](#) Russian mistrust. Moscow blamed the West and the US in particular for the street protests that took place in countries that Russia considers within its sphere of influence. The conviction that the US-sponsored regime change further distanced Russia from the West.

The enlargement of NATO deserves special attention to better understand the evolution of US – Russia relations. After the end of the Cold War, despite the expectations that NATO would play a relatively more marginal role or even cease to exist, its enlargement became one of the critical components of the US approach to restructuring the regional order. The US [viewed](#) NATO enlargement as a way of providing stability and peace in Europe through the transformation of former Soviet countries into democracies. Yet, even at that time, some warned that NATO expansion would provoke a Russian reaction by further alienating Russia from the West. For instance, George Kennan [described](#) NATO expansion as “[...]the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold-War era.” He claimed that NATO enlargement would provoke Russia by igniting nationalistic and anti-Western sentiments,

hampering the tendency towards democratisation in Russia and reviving the Cold War rivalry between Russia and the West. In a similar vein, Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis also [contended](#) that NATO expansion was “ill-conceived, ill-timed, and above all ill-suited to the realities of the post-Cold War.” In the early years of the post-Cold War era, Moscow [believed](#) that NATO would appreciate the concerns of Russia and therefore not push to expand the alliance towards its borders. However, the Clinton administration neglected these concerns and followed the opposite suit, especially by integrating Baltic states into NATO. The possibility of Georgia and Ukraine's acceptance into the alliance further raised Russia's concerns. During the 2008 NATO summit, the alliance declared its intention that Ukraine and Georgia would [become](#) NATO members without specifying an exact date. The possibility of two neighbouring states joining NATO has been taken very seriously by Russia. Putin firmly [declared](#) in 2008 that “The presence of a powerful military bloc on our borders, whose members are guided, in particular, by Article 5 of the Washington treaty will be seen by Russia as a direct threat to our country's security.” Putin recently [reiterated](#) that, despite good relations at that time, the West compromised Russian interests by enlarging NATO, adding that the expansion of the alliance and advancement of its infrastructure towards Russia's borders is “a matter of paramount significance” for the security of Russia.



US President Joe Biden attends the US-EU Summit in Brussels, Belgium on June 15, 2021. (Dursun Aydemir - Anadolu Agency)

The Biden Administration's Russia Policy

One of the main [tenets](#) of the Biden administration's foreign policy is to return the US to a position of global leadership. The Biden administration has also declared its intention to restore relations with its European allies, which were disrupted during the Trump era. This is in addition to its intention to commit the US to multilateralism and the promotion of democratic values in order to uphold the liberal order. Regarding Russia, since taking office in January, the Biden administration has appeared to adopt a firm stance on the recent disputes while refraining from any moves that might potentially escalate into a new and serious crisis. In this sense, he is considered the first president not to attempt to [restart](#) relations with Russia upon taking office.

Russia's increased military activism and use of force are some of the biggest concerns for the US. Thanks to its military modernisation process since 2008, Russia has been projecting power in its neighbourhood, as seen in Georgia and Ukraine, and also abroad as in the case of Syria. Russia has also increasingly turned to [private](#) military companies in its foreign operations. In response to the recent tensions over Russia's military deployment near the Ukraine border, the Biden administration [expressed](#) its support for Ukraine by stating "standing up for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine remains a vital concern for Europe and the United States". However, despite the reit-

eration of unwavering support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression, the Biden administration's support has been mainly rhetorical and there are good reasons to expect that the US will not actually defend Ukraine militarily if Russia attacks again. Hence, for some [analysts](#), what amounts to empty promises from the US might contribute to prolonging the crisis and even exacerbate the situation in Ukraine, as it could lead Kyiv to miscalculate the need to accommodate the ongoing crisis.

Russia's cyber operations directed against US government agencies and critical infrastructure networks are another area of [concern](#) for the Biden administration, a topic that was high on the agenda in his meeting with Putin in Geneva. The US claims that Russian cyber-attacks are intended to retrieve private information and undermine political processes in the country. The recent cyber-[attack](#) on the Colonial Pipeline, an oil pipeline system located in Texas, on May 7, 2021, was one of the latest incidents that strained the relations. As a result of the attacks, the supply of oil to the US East Coast was disrupted around for about a week. Although Biden [said](#) his administration does not believe that the Russian government was behind the ransomware attack, the subsequent investigation revealed that the hackers who carried out the attack were living in Russia, prompting Biden to note that Russia bears some responsibility for attacks emanating from its soil. In addition to the cyber-attacks, the Biden administration is also concerned with Russian interference in US elections. According to a CIA [report](#), security agencies in the US were highly confident that Putin "ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the US presidential election" in order to "under-



Chinese President Xi Jinping meets Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow, Russia on June 05, 2019.
(Kremlin Press Office / Handout - Anadolu Agency)

mine public faith in the US democratic process, denigrate [Hillary] Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency." The Biden administration has also accused Russia of interfering in the 2018 midterm elections and 2020 presidential elections. Another CIA [report](#) noted that Russia conducted influence operations to undermine public confidence in the elections and widen social divisions.

Another issue that worries the Biden administration is the growing military, economic and diplomatic [cooperation](#) between China and Russia. According to a 2019 US intelligence [assessment](#), Russia and China are "more aligned than at any point since the mid-1950s" and their partnership is likely to be deepened as they have similar interests. Russia's improved relations with China have been most reflected in their economic cooperation where bilateral trade volume has [surpassed](#) \$100 billion for the first time in history reaching, \$107 billion in 2018. They have also appeared keen on incorporating their respective strategic megaprojects, the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Russian Eurasian Economic Union, to deepen regional economic integration. The strategic partnership between the two is also observable in the realm of [security](#) as they regularly conduct joint military drills and air patrols, revealing the level of convergence in their security objectives and they share strategic technological know-how. Russia and China also [cooperate](#) in critical United Nations Security Council decisions, demonstrating the extent of similarity between their worldviews. Both are vocal about the need to redesign the international system per the emerging global distribution of power. In response to the challenges presented by the partnership between Russia and China, the Biden administration has sought to drive a wedge between the two countries to disrupt their cooperation. For instance, after he met with Putin, Biden

underlined the asymmetrical relationship between Russia and China by [saying](#) Russia "is being squeezed by China" adding that Russia has "a multi-thousand-mile border with China. China is moving ahead [...] seeking to be the most powerful economy in the world and the largest and the most powerful military in the world. You [Russia] are in a situation where your economy is struggling." Yet, the Biden administration might need to put in more effort to find areas of divergence in order to drive a wedge between Russia and China.

Regarding potential areas of divergence between Russia and China, any attempt to dominate the region, particularly in Central Asia, the Russian Far East and the Arctic, could result in power contestation between the two. Of particular concern is [Central Asia](#) where Russia has historically strong ties thanks to the shared Soviet past while China has steadily increased its influence in the region through its economic and financial interactions. The increasingly strong Chinese presence in a region Russia regards as its backyard has the potential to precipitate a political rivalry and may exacerbate Russia's concerns. Additionally, although the economic partnership seems mutually beneficial for both sides, gains are not ultimately evenly [distributed](#). Russia is reliant on energy exports to China to sustain its economic growth in the face of the Western sanctions while China has continued to diversify its economy and found new and cheaper suppliers of energy resources and raw materials, thereby reducing its dependency on Russia. Hence, the imbalanced and asymmetrical relationship and Russia's growing dependency on China could become a concern in the future, increasing the likelihood of a cool down in relations. So far, the two have successfully managed to avoid the eruption of any conflict as China has been acting with self-restraint and accommodation.

Russia's Foreign Policy Approach

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia pursued a foreign policy that can be described as pro-Western and Atlanticist by seeking engagement with the US and European countries. However, since the early 2000s, Russia has changed its trajectory by pursuing an assertive and aggressive foreign policy, which peaked with the invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and the annexation of Crimea. Some have [attributed](#) Russian aggression to a mix of an embedded strategic culture and elite structure. Accordingly, Russia's security-oriented strategic culture dating back to the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union is primarily characterised by balancing against the West while its elite structure in foreign policy decision making is primarily composed of officials from a military or intelligence background. Still, others have [asserted](#) that the West is to blame for Russia's assertiveness, suggesting that NATO enlargement and EU support for democracy in former Soviet territories are the reasons for Russia's aggression. Reflecting a more nuanced understanding, some [claimed](#) that it is not the simple expansion of NATO, but rather its existence and continued centrality that has driven Russian foreign policy, most importantly its relations with the US. Regardless of the lack of consensus on the factors driving Russian foreign policy, experts and scholars alike agree that Russia has been pursuing an assertive foreign policy aimed at confronting the West and the US and reasserting Russian influence in the international arena.

Russia recently [adopted](#) its new national strategy document on July 2, 2021. The document is critical to understanding Moscow's threat perceptions, its strategic priorities and methods to respond to these challenges. The document notes that the world is in a transition period where the hegemony of the West is declining, risking more conflict, as it is envisaged by the document that the West will push back in order to preserve its status. To deal with these challenges, the document prioritizes concrete measures to be taken in the field of economy, government, education, technology and science and information. Although the new strategy document mainly builds upon the previous one adopted in 2015, it depicts a more hostile environment for Russia and [presents](#) the ever-increasing possibility of a confrontation with the US and its allies due to the expansion of NATO towards Russian borders and the presence of US anti-missile defence systems. The document asserts that Russia will take both "symmetrical and asymmetric measures" in response to these threats and challenges presented by foreign countries.

More specifically, the document officially defines the US and its allies as unfriendly states seeking to undermine the stability and security of Russia. Additionally, efforts related to what the Kremlin sees as the Westernization of Russian

culture and imposition of Western moral values are regarded as national security concerns. After noting the importance of what it refers to as 'traditional Russian values', the document concludes that these values are under heavy attacks from the US and its allies including transnational organisations threatening Russia's cultural sovereignty. In this sense, the document [reads](#) that the "Westernization of culture increases the danger that the Russian Federation will lose its cultural sovereignty." It also highlights the importance of developing closer relationships with non-Western states, including China and India, and with international organisations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and BRICS. The document clearly characterizes the US military deployment in Europe and its alliance system on the continent as efforts to contain Russia. These are in addition to the dominance of the US-based technology companies in the information field and the US dollar in global finance, which are seen as tools that can be deployed to curb Russia's influences. It is also noted that Western countries are trying to undermine Russia by interfering in its domestic issues and supporting protests. Similar to events in 2011, Russia has [blamed](#) the US and its allies for the nationwide protests that erupted after opposition leader Alexei Navalny was jailed.

Given the increasingly threat-filled security environment presented by the latest strategy document, one can expect Russia to be more assertive in responding to perceived threats not only in the traditional military realms but also in the economy, technology and cultural realms. This might suggest increased confrontation with the US in cyberspace, financial organisations and cultural institutions. Given the importance attached to upholding democratic values and human rights by the Biden administration, any attempt to put pressure on Russia over these issues might trigger a staunch Russian reaction, thereby paving for a new confrontation. For instance, Biden [warned](#) Putin that Russia would face devastating consequences if jailed Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny, whom the US believes was poisoned by Russian intelligence, were to die in prison. Although he did not specify what measures would be taken, the Biden administration had already revealed its resolve when it imposed sanctions on seven Russian officials and fourteen Russian entities over the alleged poisoning of Navalny. Reflecting these concerns, following his meeting with Putin, Biden [stated](#) that "I made it clear to President Putin that we will continue to raise cases of fundamental human rights because that's who we are". These criticisms over democracy and human rights abuses are perceived by Moscow as being part of the US attempt to contain Russia and influence its domestic politics. According to Putin, Navalny and pro-democracy movements are being used by the US as fronts for influence.



US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin meet in Geneva, Switzerland on June 16, 2021.
(Kremlin Press Office - Anadolu Agency)

The Future of US – Russia Relations

In light of recent developments, US-Russia relations are unlikely to become more cooperative anytime in the near future. As the recent meeting between the two country's leaders showed, the core issues between the two countries are far from being resolved. However, as US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [stated](#), the US hopes to develop stable and predictable relations, eschewing conflict and escalation. One reason for this has to do with China. Just like the Trump administration, the Biden administration also considers China's economic and military growth as the primary strategic [threat](#) and wants to focus the majority of its resources on Asia. Hence, keeping relations with Russia less confrontational would allow Washington to focus more attention on its priorities. However, developing a stable relationship with Russia remains a major challenge. The [belief](#) held by American foreign policymakers in the aftermath of the Cold War that Russia was in an irreversible decline and would never again have the power to confront America has contributed significantly to the emergence of today's strained relations. American officials have long neglected Russia's concerns, particularly as they relate to the NATO enlargement process and open declarations of support for pro-democracy movements in Russia's neighbourhood. Moreover, the United States had been mistaken about the extent of possible Russian reaction in the face of a perceived existential threat as was seen in the case of the Russian military operation in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. Hence, downplaying Russia's concerns will not help stabilise relations. Regarding tensions in Ukraine, US efforts to turn the country into a pro-Western state by incorporating it into NATO and the EU do not help assuage Russia's security concerns. As Russia demonstrated in Georgia in 2008, any attempt in this direction could be responded to with military measures. Although the US has stalled Ukraine's membership in NATO, it has reiterated on many occasions its full support for the democratic reforms

and pro-Western regime in Ukraine. Moscow's presumed understanding that the US is unlikely to counter it militarily in Ukraine has arguably limited the extent of the current confrontation. However, should Ukraine be admitted into NATO, Russia may seek to enforce its redlines as it did in 2014. Perhaps more importantly, the primarily rhetorical support offered by the US to Ukraine risks the latter miscalculating the extent to which the West, and the US in particular, is willing to step up and defend Ukraine's pro-Western strategy.

As Russia's latest national security strategy document demonstrates, Russia primarily sees the world from a security lens and considers itself under threat from the US and its allies more than ever. These perceived threats are not only in the form of traditional military threats but also economic, cultural and informational. For [some](#), this amounts to paranoia while for [others](#) this makes Russian foreign policy US-centric focused excessively on countering the US. The negative Russian perception of the US does not appear to be fading away and the possibility of establishing a trust-based relationship between the two seems to be low thanks to the legacy of the rivalry during the Cold War and US policies disregarding Russian concerns in the following period. One factor that might affect the perception of Russia is the rise of China. In this regard, Mearsheimer [concludes](#) that as the competition between the US and China intensifies, Russia would have three options. First, it might increase its cooperation with China and become an ally to confront the US. Second, it might bandwagon with the US coalition in order to check Chinese influence in Asia. Finally, Russia might stay on the sidelines as neutral and benefit from the competition between the two major powers. If China continues to grow economically, Mearsheimer assumes Russia is more likely to consider this as a serious threat and thereby partner with the US. However, it should be noted that even if this scenario were to come to fruition, the two countries will not develop cooperative relations [overnight](#). Rather, given the current mistrust between the two, this can be expected to take years and require great efforts from both sides.