

The New Cold War: US-Russian Relations Under the Trump Administration (2017-2020)

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The new Cold War is alive and well. While the original Cold War is much different from the new, it aids in providing a glimpse into what may lie ahead if tensions are not properly addressed. President Trump initially sought to address these very tensions with Russia before he was inaugurated on January 20, 2017, but events would unfold that would inevitably render that goal as a herculean task with no indications of improvement. The Trump administration would be plagued by sensational news and media hysteria that would inevitably overemphasize—or inflate—the Russian threat. This narrative is seemingly joined by Russia’s purported threat narrative that the West is actively trying to undermine Russian society. The culmination of both countries’ respective threat narratives and the lack of predictability only make miscalculation and escalation more probable, thus indicating that the bilateral relationship has entered a dangerously low point not seen since the original Cold War.



The New Cold War: US-Russian Relations Under the Trump Administration (2017-2020)

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by

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## I. INTRODUCTION

As the Berlin wall fell the future seemed full of hope, this momentous event marked the end of a tumultuous period for the international community. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 officially brought the close of the Cold War and ushered in a period where the United States stood as the only superpower. Primed with the energy of the end of the Cold War, the US was hopeful that it would be able to guide these once Soviet states towards democracy. The US quickly became consumed with the spread of liberal democracy, inspired by the “end of history” viewpoint of Francis Fukuyama and the declaration of itself as the “indispensable nation.” Fast forward to the present day and we see that the good intentions of the US did not culminate in the way envisioned, we once again feel the “chills and drafts” reminiscent of days long past (Schmemmann 1989). Since the conclusion of the Cold War, American presidents have contemplated, acted, and failed to adequately deal with Russia and the many problems that it presents to US foreign policy leading to a “second” or “new” Cold War. In the years since the end of the Cold War advancements in technology and an ever changing political climates have created a global environment that is far different. Today globalization has blurred the lines and regional and global affairs are more complex than ever with the US, Russia, and China all vying to grasp a stronghold of power on the global stage. This globalization coupled with a technology primed, conflict-ridden environment means that a ‘new’ Cold War is increasingly more dangerous than its predecessor.

Given the significance of entering into the new Cold War, there has been a substantial amount of divergence within the scholarly community on the confirmation of such a happening. In 2008 journalist Edward Lucas was the first notable scholar to characterize the then-current US-Russian relationship as a “new” Cold War in his book titled *The New Cold War*. Lucas (2008;

2014), Cohen (2018), Conradi (2017), Legvold (2014), and Trenin (2014) concur that the tumultuous relationship between the US and Russia since the end of the original Cold War has culminated into a new cold war, one with consequences that are much dire than the last. Others including Monaghan (2015), Stent (2015; 2019), and McFaul (2018) refrain from declaring that a new Cold War has started as they disagree on terms and placing blame but are in agreement that relations have reached a historical low and that continued decline could be devastating given the current state of military capabilities and policies.

Donald J. Trump was elected as president of the United States in 2016, this presidential election was a significant catalyst in the new cold war as allegations of Russian interference resulted in numerous investigations and heavy politicization by the US media and led to increased tensions (Mueller 2019). While Russia never formally accepted responsibility as of yet and probably will not do so; Putin has discussed the possibility of Russian interference in the US 2020 election cycle, albeit in jest (Marshall 2019). This episode of interference should not come as a surprise as Russia has always sought such policies, but the revelation of advances in social media and the ongoing discord in American politics has allowed their efforts to be more effective (Baines and Jones 2018). While the US-Russian relationship has remained unstable for years, there is significant evidence that the Trump Administration exasperated an already declining relationship and these events contributed to the continuation and acceleration albeit small to the new Cold War.

This research will therefore focus on the Trump presidency and analyze the series of events that have taken place in relation to the new Cold War. This research will lend itself to the school of thought that a new Cold War is and has been occurring and will seek to showcase that US-Russian relations have significantly declined under the Trump Administration. This research will aid in filling a gap in the literature by presenting a relationship between the Trump Administration

and the continued existence and acceleration of the new Cold War, an area that is lacking in this up and coming research arena.

This research will argue the claim that the US and Russia find themselves in a new Cold War that has worsened under the Trump Administration by analyzing events, policies, and attitudes through a constructivist lens. Constructivists find it pertinent to include perception in their analysis rather than focusing solely on objective facts. Identity, perceptions, and beliefs are the main motivators for both individuals and states. The three main tenets of constructivism include that human interaction is not driven by material factors but rather ideational drivers; the strongest ideational factors are therefore intersubjectively shared through collective understanding and it is from these that the actors gain their identity and ideals (Jung 2019). It is through these tenets that constructivists believe that international relations are driven by social facts that exist because of societal agreement (Adler 1997). Understanding these tenets of the constructivist approach is essential for this research, the threat narrative developed by both the US and Russia respectively has served as a driving force in the relationship. While the environment in which the US and Russia have interacted has varied over the years with each new administration, the presence of dualling threat narratives has remained a constant presence. Looking at US-Russian relations during the Cold War and into the present-day it can be seen that the quality of the relationship has been directly correlated to the current threat narrative being peddled by each side, therefore solidifying the constructivist rationale that identity, perceptions, and beliefs are fundamental components of international relations and confirming that an analysis of the threat narratives can provide unique insight to the US-Russian relations and even aid in predicting why and how relationship conditions could improve or worsen over time.

This research is expected to yield a plethora of information that lends itself to insight on the new Cold War and the role the Trump administration has had in the worsening of US Russian relations through the following situations: Donald Trump was inaugurated in 2017—after an abnormal election cycle filled with anti-Russian and anti-Trump sentiments by both Republicans and Democrats—and assumed the duties and responsibilities of the US presidency as Barack Obama left office. This came in the wake of Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election, which garnered widespread media coverage highlighting the most recent milestone in the decline of the bilateral relationship. The media hysteria only served to further the anti-Russia narrative and left the president-elect to reckon with this new reality of Russian interference which would prove to captivate much of his presidency placing him and his administration in an inconvenient position to implement any improvements to the bilateral relationship as any sort of beneficial agreement with Russia would be suggested as possible ‘collusion’ or ‘treasonous.’ This positioned the US Congress to push the narrative that Russia is a significant national security threat and crippled any hopes the incoming American president had at improving relations. This social construction that mirrors the original Cold War rhetoric from both Russia and the US has proved to have a negative effect on the already raging new Cold War.

## **II. ORIGINAL COLD WAR Vs. NEW COLD WAR**

While the new Cold War is not simply a continuation of the original Cold War, there are many instances from that time that we can use today to understand the situation we find ourselves in currently. Therefore, a brief overview of the Cold War is pertinent to this research and will serve as a foundation for building an understanding of a new Cold War and the consequences of such an occurrence. The original Cold War occupied a large portion of the 20<sup>th</sup> century lasting from 1947 to 1991 (historians differ on when it started) and was an ideological conflict between the Soviet Union and the US with three main dimensions (McCauley 2013). The first being a conflict over the political control of Europe. The second being the global nuclear arms race that ensued after the US successfully used the first atomic bomb. Lastly, the third dimension was a conflict over influence and control in the Third World. This state of relations between the US and the Soviet Union caused many to fear a possible nuclear war between the two dominant global powers.

The rivalry that became the original Cold War propelled out of a temporary World War II alliance two years after the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945. This division emerged out of profoundly different political and economic differences with the US having a free market economy with free elections and press while also providing its citizens with several personal freedoms and the Soviet Union being a single-party Marxist-Leninist society utilizing a planned economy and government-controlled press while also restricting many personal freedoms of its citizens (Edwards and Spalding 2016). This division extended to both country's respective allies and the Eastern and Western Blocs. Although this rivalry reached far and wide, there was no large-scale war between the two superpowers, which gave way to the term "cold" to describe this period of intense and deliberate competition between the USSR and the US. This deliberate competition

would spill over into the Third World and cause it to be subjected to the many tragedies that military conflict brings in the form of proxy wars (Edwards and Spalding 2016).

Due to the original Cold War's many nuances and lengthy duration, the historian Martin McCauley divides the timeline into four main periods. "The first, Cold War I, spans the last years of Stalin and concludes with his death in 1953...Then follows the second period, one of danger and confrontation (known as brinkmanship), from the death of Stalin until détente breaks out in 1969...Then follows the third period, one of détente and the desire of both superpowers to normalise their relations and reduce the risk of confrontation...The ensuing fourth period, Cold War II, saw an acceleration in the arms race and a rising political temperature" (McCauley 2013). The original Cold War ultimately came to an end with the economic collapse of the Soviet Union.

After World War II the Soviet Union began to consolidate its power over the Eastern Bloc, which prompted the US to initiate a campaign of global containment of communist expansion, first proposed by George Kenan and would be the main US strategy for the duration of the original Cold War. The political control of Europe was highly contested during this period and paved the way for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to be created to protect Western Europe from communist expansion and the belligerent Soviet Union. The first major crisis of the original Cold War was the Berlin Blockade lasting from 1948 to 1949 and serves as the first large-scale attempt to counter Western interests (Edwards and Spalding 2016).

The fate of Germany was at the center of much intense debate nearing the end of World War II. The Yalta Conference in Crimea was the first such official debate over the future of war-torn Europe and consisted of US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Stalin. Each leader brought their perspectives and albeit conflicting interests to the discussion. However, at the conclusion of the Yalta Conference, all the leaders agreed on the

unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany and the division of Germany and Berlin into four occupational zones divided amongst the victors: the US, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union (McCauley 2013).

Subsequently, issues arose over the Soviet Union adhering to some of the outcomes of the negotiations and a second conference was needed. The Potsdam Conference would, again, consist of the US, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union lasting from July to August of 1945 in Potsdam, Germany. The final agreements of this conference would return Europe to its pre-war borders and make other substantive changes to the future of Germany and the political control of Europe (Edwards and Spalding 2016).

Following the Potsdam Conference, Germany was divided into four occupation zones with the US in the south, Great Britain in the northwest, France in the southwest, and the Soviet Union in the east. Berlin, Germany's capital city, was also located in the east and was now in Soviet-occupied territory, but it was also divided amongst the same countries (McCauley 2013). This would have sections of Germany falling under either the "west" or the "east" mirroring the US and its allies in the West and the Soviets in the East. This aspect of the original Cold War would last until Germany was unified in 1990 (Edwards and Spalding 2016).

The US columnist Walter Lippman first popularized the term 'Cold War' and became the common term used to describe the hostile bilateral relationship between the US and the USSR by 1947 (McCauley 2013). The Truman doctrine was put into effect in 1947, which aimed to counter any advancement of communism. In addition to the Truman doctrine the Marshall Plan was announced in 1947, which was the economic arm of the anti-communist effort that sought to provide aid and create stability in European markets (McCauley 2013).

Following these events communism would expand to Czechoslovakia in 1948 and serve as a warning to many in the west that it was reaching westwards. The Berlin blockade a year later would only increase tensions. Then in 1949 the People's Republic of China was founded and ushered in the possibility of a second communist threat on par with the Soviet Union (McCauley 2013). As these events transpired western Europeans became increasingly fearful that their countries would be subjected to a communist takeover and NATO was formed as a deterrent to communist expansion. Though the creation of NATO did not quell communist expansion and further communist advances were made in Asia by 1950. This would be the catalyst for the US involvement in both Korea and Vietnam in the years to follow (Edwards and Spalding 2016).

The nuclear arms race between the two superpowers ensued after the US successfully created the first nuclear weapon through its very own Manhattan Project. This new type of weaponry would first be used on Japan at the end World War II and then be the subject of a nuclear arms buildup between the US and the USSR until the end of the original Cold War after the Soviets had acquired the prerequisite technology to begin development (McCauley 2013). The nuclear arms race would consist of warhead development and delivery vehicles where both countries would try and develop more to deter the other.

The fight for nuclear supremacy was viewed as an existential threat. Each country feared a more capable adversary where they would be left unable to effectively retaliate against a nuclear first strike. This fear led to the implementation of the mutually assured destruction (MAD) doctrine, which implied the destruction of both the aggressor and the defender (McCauley 2013). It was believed that to deter a country from using a destructive weapon it also needed to develop a weapon that could inflict the same if not more damage to prevent the enemy's usage of it (Westad 2017).

In 1953, the death of Stalin and the election of President Eisenhower marked a new period in the original Cold War (McCauley 2013). This period initially showed promise of the possibility of reducing tensions and de-escalating the conflict with the USSR's launch of the doctrine of peaceful coexistence in 1952 after it detonated its first atomic bomb. This would make conventional war unlikely due to its increasingly destructive nature from both superpowers now having nuclear capabilities. Ideas were circulated among the Soviets on the possibility of uniting Germany; however, it was opposed by both West Germany and France. In July of 1953, an armistice was signed in Korea and a ceasefire would follow in Indochina ushering a sense of optimism.

However, the optimism would soon fade and the period of 1953-1969 would be remembered as a show of brinkmanship and many bloody conflicts. In 1956, conflicts in Egypt and Hungary would erupt. The Soviet Union's Khrushchev would visit the US in 1959 and meet with President Eisenhower to start another round of negotiations, but this too ended before it materialized into improved relations by 1960 at the Paris Summit. This abrupt end to this round of negotiations stemmed from the blowback of the American U2 reconnaissance aircraft being shot down while over Soviet Union territory. This was subsequently followed by crises in both Berlin and Laos in 1961 and eventually led to the creation of the infamous Berlin Wall (McCauley 2013).

As it turned out, the most dangerous event transpired in October of 1962 and would be forever known as the Cuban Missile Crisis. This particular moment in history brought both superpowers to the brink of nuclear war. In brief, the crisis stemmed from the Soviet Union's optimism that the end of capitalism was close and showcased Khrushchev as a high-risk negotiator in stark contrast to Stalin who only took minimal risks (McCauley 2013). However, while Khrushchev was, in fact, a high-risk negotiator he eventually would back down after concessions were made by both the US and the Soviet Union. There were several positives to come from this

intense moment one being a nuclear test ban treaty that was signed in 1963 and the other being a hotline established from Moscow to Washington, D.C. to streamline discussion in face of another crisis (Edwards and Spalding 2016). Negotiations would continue until 1967 even after Khrushchev's removal in 1964.

Following Khrushchev's removal in 1964, the US made the fateful decision to intervene in Vietnam in 1965 and would also make cause to go into the Dominican Republic. In 1967, the third Arab-Israeli war started with both superpowers supporting opposing sides. The 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia would send shockwaves across the west and raised the temperature of the original Cold War (it should be noted that President Johnson assured Moscow that Czechoslovakia was in the Soviet Union's sphere of influence). This served to damage the attractiveness of Soviet communism. The election of President Nixon in 1969, marked the end of the era of brinkmanship and ushered in a new period of negotiations known as *détente*.

*Détente* would last from 1969-1979 and provided the necessary dialog between the two superpowers to produce several strategic agreements (Legvold 2016). In 1972, President Nixon and Brezhnev would sign the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I) after both countries recognized their nuclear parity marking a major milestone in reducing nuclear tensions. By 1975, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) signed the Helsinki Final Act, which accomplished one of the Soviet's goals in recognizing the inviolability of the post-World War II borders in Europe while recognizing human rights violations as a legitimate cause for international concern. The Paris Accords would be signed in 1975 and gave the US its much-needed withdrawal from Vietnam after years of destruction and loss of life that would be remembered as a major US foreign policy failure. Though, the period of *détente* would come to an end by 1979 following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. This was the result of two grave

miscalculations by the Soviet Union: that the invasion would be swift and effective and that it would not increase tensions with the US (Oberdorfer 1998).

The invasion of Afghanistan ushered in the second phase of the Cold War. This period was characterized by an undeniable sense of urgency by both sides to prepare themselves should the other act. The tension created by this anticipation of attack only worsened conditions and the likelihood of war increased. In the states Reagan bolstered his willingness to act in the Third World, this attitude worked towards the US' focus on military superiority and spreading western ideals. These behaviors by the Reagan administration produced a response from the Soviets, who in turn installed SS-20s, intermediate-range ballistic missiles, in eastern Europe. The heavy-handed militaristic approach not only occupied the actions of the Soviets but was emphasized in the security policy of the time (Edwards and Spalding 2016).

These charged interactions continued as the second Cold War unfolded. The Reagan administration demonized the Soviets and accused the eastern power of supporting international terrorists. This quickly escalated and led to the US viewing the Soviets as the masterminds behind all global unrest (Reagan 1983). Ultimately, a back and forth game arose and a win for the Soviets was a clear loss for the United States and vice versa. This intense attitude was driven in part by the rise of several communist states in Africa, Central America, and the Middle East from 1974 forward. This drove the US to make attempts to cull the growth of the communist community. This effort took various forms but some of the most memorable approaches being the Olympics boycott in 1980 and the trade boycotts (Stent 2019).

The Soviets remained settled in their views and behaviors and even as they welcomed a new leader, Yuri Andropov, in 1982 little change was seen. Andropov brought with his leadership a failed reliance on the peace movement of the time, believing that this movement alone would

alter policies and deter the West Germany government missile installation. Andropov's leadership ended as quickly as it began after he succumbed to illness. The following years were a stark contrast to the previous period. The selection of Mikhail Gorbachev as the Soviet leader in 1985 ushered in a wave of change. The relations between the Soviets and the international community witnessed the most significant alterations. Gorbachev quickly made note that the ongoing arms race was doing little for the Soviets and touted a broader approach to security. In the previous years, it was thought by other Soviet leadership that military prowess was the answer to effective security policy. Gorbachev's leadership looked past all this and instead focused on state interdependency and nuclear disarmament (McCauley 2013).

Using this new way of thinking, Gorbachev and his Foreign Minister Edvard Shevardnadze set out to connect with the international community. By November 1985, the Soviets had secured a meeting with President Reagan in Geneva, marking the first summit in nearly six years. This meeting produced many favorable outcomes including a signed agreement to limit the nuclear arsenal by nearly 50 percent, the opening of new consulates, and agreements for civilian aircraft (Taubman 2017). This progress was temporarily offset as the summit in 1986 witnessed upset over the Strategic defense initiative between the two powers. However, the 1987 Washington D.C. summit more than made up for the failed 1986 summit as terms for what would later become the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty were agreed upon (Stent 2019). The treaty was signed the following year at the final summit. The following years showcased the ups and downs of the Soviet and American relationships. Disagreements over the implementation of the INF treaty were followed by the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan. The presidency of George W. Bush saw the signing of the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) and the Strategic Arms Reduction treaty (START) in the early '90s, while it should be noted that these successes were

never properly achieved due to Soviet opposition and the collapse of the USSR. These events served as the final acts of the Cold War and by 1990 Soviet leadership had announced the end. However, the true end of the Soviet Union would not come until the following year (Matlock 2004).

The Soviet Union would cease to exist in 1991 with the Russian Federation taking its place albeit in a smaller form. The Soviet economy simply could not keep up with the US in its spending on military assets and as a result, many of the Soviet states would gain their independence significantly damaging Moscow's influence over them. Russia would no longer occupy the same importance in diplomatic negotiations with the US, which embarrassed the one-time superpower on an international scale (Stent 2015).

The original Cold War was fueled in large part by incompatible belief systems and an aggressive focus on internationalism. The Soviet Union was an empire that sought to export its own political and economic system as a model for the rest of the world. This quickly spiraled into a fierce competition for economic, technological, and military domination. When the Berlin Wall fell this fierce competition fell with it, and the period of the head-to-head battle between the Soviets and the United States resolved with only a few "...chills and drafts" remaining (Schmemmann 1989). Fast forward thirty years and we once again find the energy between the US and Russia intensifying. This time the world is in a different state, one with consequences and tension much different than the Cold War of the past. Understanding what a new Cold War will look like begins with a look at the years leading up to it.

From the end of the last Cold War to the present day, the global community has witnessed significant change. Following 1989 the US moved throughout time fueled by two sentiments for its foreign policy. The first the "end of history" approach coined by Francis Fukuyama which

focused on the inevitable success of liberal capitalist democracy over other government forms because the peace that came along with this approach would be impossible to separate from. This approach therefore heavily advocated for the spread of liberal democracy. This easily supported the second sentiment which viewed the United States as an “indispensable nation” whose absence would mean the loss of global security and inhibit multilateral efforts. These sentiments worked to support the unipolar world the United States had found itself in (Fukuyama 2006).

In modern-day, these sentiments have done little to culminate in a stable relationship with the Russian government. Although it should be noted that the US leadership has repeatedly tried to quell issues with Russia and maintain some form of companionship in hopes of guiding Russian leadership in the democratic way (Talbot 2007).

Since 1991, the bipolar international order is no more, and the new Cold War sees the unipolar order—that was formed by the US in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union—in decline. The ideological positions have become more blurred as the Russians have abandoned communism in favor of an authoritarian government with some vague elements of a market economy, while the US appeals to democracy increasingly sound hollow and hypocritical. This decline in US credibility abroad has only proved to further Russia’s main objective which is to abolish the unipolar order in favor of a multipolar order, and it has made modest progress with the formation of BRICS (comprised of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). Russia has forced the West into the reality that this new Cold War will be fought over the narrative through means of information warfare or political warfare. The dawn of the internet has been proven to amplify Russia’s destabilizing operations abroad, as seen in the 2016 US presidential election with other Western countries also falling victim to these sorts of operations (Stronski and Sokolsky 2020).

Additionally, Russia is not the Soviet Union of yesteryear, especially in terms of its military and economic power, and is now much weaker than its predecessor. This indicates that Russia does not currently pose a significant military threat to Western Europe with no plausible scenario of existing indicating that Russia could or would invade Europe with ground forces and engage in conventional warfare.

Today, the Trump administration has made claims of wanting amicable relations but has made few actions to support those claims. This raises many concerns as the world we knew during the Cold War and the modern one is vastly different. One stark difference is the expansive nuclear arsenal that both countries presently hold, this not only puts the US and Russia at risk but also the global community, a dramatic but realistic claim. Though the numbers are less-than during the height of the original Cold War, both countries appear to be moving towards tactical applications for their nuclear weapons—hardly a new concept (Brumfiel 2019). After the original Cold War, the US saw the storage of tactical nuclear weapons as a liability and saw no further application for the weapon systems, proceeding to dismantle almost their entire stockpile of battlefield nuclear weapons—unlike their Russian counterparts who have kept thousands of tactical nuclear weapons that are ostensibly battle-ready (Brumfiel 2019). Russia maintains that “limited nuclear first use” provides an advantage, “potentially including low-yield weapons” with recent Russian statements indicating a lower threshold required for “Moscow’s first-use of nuclear weapons” (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2018). If Russia did utilize this “first-use” method, the US and the rest of the West would not be able to respond proportionally and would be forced with two possible reactions: either retaliate with a larger nuclear weapon or back down to avoid a nuclear war.

This threat of tactical nuclear devastation in the reality of the new Cold War becomes increasingly concerning when analyzing the actions or lack thereof by the Trump administration

to maintain arms control treaties with miscalculations and escalation seeming inevitable. In recent years, the US has withdrawn from the INF treaty that was signed during the original Cold War (largely over US allegations of Russian non-compliance) and in just a few months another original Cold War-era treaty is set to expire in 2021—the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START). The possible withdrawal from both treaties does little to move the US and Russia away from the steep decline into the new Cold War which could prove costly. Experts suggest withdrawal could trigger an arms race, one of the igniting actions of the original Cold War, and ultimately result in unchecked nuclear modernization on both sides. While the original Cold War was riddled with competition and the daunting possibility of imminent nuclear war, the current situation is riddled with the increased possibility of miscalculations and escalation only hoping for the stability the original Cold War provided making the actions of today's Cold War more strategically complicated (Stent 2015).

The actions of both the US and Russia have contributed to the emergence of a new Cold War. The end of the Soviet Union and the toppling of the Berlin Wall provided a time for the Russian leadership to take up the torch of democracy but it found itself deeply submerged in oligarchic capitalism which fueled corruption and poor conditions inside its borders. This failure to follow the US into democracy and the questionable actions of the Russian government especially those concerning human rights did little to develop trust between the two powers (Kennan 1997; Coffey 2016).

The past years have witnessed an abundance of displays of military power, economic attacks, and cyber operations and it is clear that through the US lens an aggressively revanchist Russia is a danger to existing Western institutions as they continue to seek to reclaim global power status in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The events of the past few years highlight the willingness by both parties

to become self-absorbed in their narratives and unlike the original Cold War, there seems to be little effort to recognize overstressed boundaries and the need for predictability, therefore leaving room for increasingly volatile actions and escalation of conflicts. These differences pose to culminate in a war that is far different from those of the past.

In the absence of the original Cold War, the US was able to put bilateral relations with Russia on the backburner as it was now a declining power and not the threatening superpower it once was leaving the US to occupy a unipolar moment. This led Russia to international embarrassment as the US advocated for democratic institutions abroad while moving NATO closer to Russia's borders. Tensions would only increase with the rise of Russian President Vladimir Putin who retained a skeptical view of the US. After several lapses in relations, Putin would publicly come out against the US and NATO expansion at the 2007 Munich Security Conference marking a significant low point in the bilateral relationship. This public critique by the Russian president was followed by several bouts of hostile actions provoked by Russian insecurity and belief that it is entitled to a 'sphere of influence.' These actions would take place in Estonia (2007), Georgia (2008), and most recently in Crimea and eastern Ukraine (2014-present) spurring international outrage. To make matters worse, Russia would blatantly interfere in the US 2016 presidential election further exacerbating the existing tensions.

While the new Cold war may owe its namesake to the past there is an abundance of assumed differences between the two events. The original Cold War witnessed the world through a bipolar lens, but the new Cold War sees the US up against an ambitious Russia amidst a backdrop of other American adversaries actively engaging in practices to subvert US influence and credibility abroad. If additional adversaries did not complicate a new Cold War beyond the scale of the original event, then the increasingly complex global environment with a plethora of conflicts

and threats would. The combination of time, new adversaries, and a far more complicated international environment has encouraged the boundaries of the battlefield to be blurred. A new Cold War of the 21<sup>st</sup> century sees the conflict cross numerous boundaries using technology and globalization to the participants' advantage. These new technologies powered by approaches such as information warfare, may produce beneficial results for the aggressor in the short-term but represent an opportunity for escalation and provocation to the detriment of both countries—and any country that gets in the way—in the medium to long-term. Given the knowledge of the current state of each countries' nuclear arsenals and the weakening relationships between the US and its potential adversaries, it is easy to see that while the new Cold War shares tenets with its predecessor, the Cold War amidst the backdrop of modern times is significantly more threatening.

#### *Constructivist analysis*

This overview has provided a portrayal of the events that occurred during the Cold War and even some of the more discussed attitudes held by those involved. However, it seems essential to provide a more in-depth look at the driving forces that motivated these actions and stances on several key issues. As discussed, the acknowledgment of perspective, ideology, and culture is pertinent to understanding the motivation behind the Cold War as well as the new Cold War we have entered it is those same ideological underpinnings that once again fuels the flames of this aggression between the US and Russia.

Ideology, geopolitical interests, and cultural beliefs were at the center of these issues, and understanding the viewpoint of the Soviets and the US means understanding their viewpoint of each of these elements. Any analysis of the Cold War would tell you that geopolitics were pertinent in the time as the world found itself with only two superpowers and a vacuum of power in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East following World War II. With the Axis powers gone, the race to

implement influence over the areas left behind became essential. From the viewpoint of the US and its allies, the Soviet Union and its 'hostile' belief system would be the most likely candidate in the role of a Eurasian superpower, a position that the US had already attempted to prevent in the World Wars. For the Soviets, the Western powers seemed content with depriving them of excelling themselves into this position of power and receiving any compensation for their role in the war- a position that displeased the Soviets and seemed in their eyes to be aimed at their destruction (Zubok and Pleshakov 1997).

It can be suggested that if these events would have taken place inside a geopolitical bubble devoid of ideology, perspective, or cultural forces that the resultant issues would have simply led to a solution through traditional means. However, the strong role ideology and culture quickly accelerated the issues between the two powers into a complex engagement that was often regarded as a fight for the "soul" of man (Leffler 2007). This conflict is the same struggle that makes a new cold war so dangerous. It places the fundamental beliefs of both sides at the forefront of the issue, allowing the threat narratives to develop into one side truth versus the other. This truth versus truth narrative is innately dangerous as belief systems come under attack suspicion and fear sentiments against the opponent become engorged. Opponents enraged by attacks on their ideals may react with an overcompensation in its aggressions and security measures. Examining the first Cold War it can be seen that many of the actions taken at home and abroad by both parties were the result of this fear and suspicion and ultimately many of the behaviors were driven not by actual threats but by suspicion of such.

This idea of perspective will continue to remain at the forefront of issues and will stand to be one of the linking factors between the new and old Cold War and could even be suggested as a means to quell some of the tension in the US-Russian relations. While the environment is different,

the actors still are moving forward with the idea that their truth is accurate, this changes the conflict in a way that can impede handling this with a more traditional approach. As we explore the events and attitudes following the end of the Cold War and into the Trump Administration we will see that many of the outstanding issues are entrenched in perspective and often lead to the worsening of the relationship based on the US and Russia being unwilling to adjust their viewpoints on key issues and demonizing each other based on their ideals.

### **III. THE DECLINE IN US-RUSSIAN RELATIONS SINCE 2017**

The year 2017 ushered in a new era of American politics. Donald Trump has now officially been inaugurated as the 45<sup>th</sup> president by January 20, 2017, and one of the first items that he would have to confront would be the Russian election interference and what it meant for US-Russian relations moving forward. This came at a moment after, while on the campaign trail, Trump advocated for rapprochement with Russia and to once again attempt to ‘reset’ relations as his predecessor, President Obama tried to in 2010 and failed to accomplish. This positioned the new president in an awkward place domestically with the US Congress’ bipartisan support for stronger sanctions against Russia (U.S. Congress 2017). This would set the tone for US-Russian relations for the next four years of Trump’s presidency and not giving much hope for improvement in the short-term.

#### **2016 US Presidential Election**

The Russian government interfered in the 2016 US presidential election under the broad mission of sowing discord in American politics and tarnishing the credibility of democracy through the dissemination of disinformation and leaking of genuine e-mails of the Democratic National Committee (DNC), which damaged the Clinton campaign just before the election. This was an information warfare campaign, as stated in the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence’s inquiry, that utilized the St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency (IRA) and the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GRU) to spread disinformation and increase the social divisions among Americans while also attacking candidates that have taken positions that were not in Russia’s interests (U.S. Congress 2017). These Russian entities took to readily available social media outlets, such as Facebook, to insert their divisive and inflammatory rhetoric into American society. The report also indicated that all of the actions taken

by these hostile Russian actors were done at the behest of the Kremlin to influence the 2016 US presidential election by influencing the polarization of the nation through political division.

### **Russian ‘Collusion’ Investigation**

The revelation that a foreign government, specifically Russia, deliberately sought to support candidate Trump’s bid for the US presidency was the catalyst for the ensuing, so-called, ‘Russian Collusion Investigation.’ President Trump would counter and deflect any possible connections to him and Russia as “fake news” and describing the process as a “witch hunt.” The investigation was headed by Special Counsel Robert Mueller III, a previous director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and lawyer who has served under Democratic and Republican administrations. Throughout the investigation, there were Trump campaign associates would be criminally charged due to concealing Russian contacts amid other crimes. Trump would continue to make attempts to recast himself as the victim along with his allies advocating that the whole investigation was politically motivated by national security officials in his predecessor's administration. The FBI would initiate a counterintelligence investigation into members of the Trump campaign with the code name ‘Crossfire Hurricane’ and quickly focused on Carter Page, George Papadopoulos, Paul Manafort, and Michael Flynn (Apuzzo, Goldman, and Fandos 2018; Sanchez 2019). The document that was used to start the investigation was originally drafted, approved, and disseminated by Peter Strzok in clear disregard for FBI protocols among other abnormalities (an FBI special agent is unable to approve their case due to possible ethical violations) (US Government Publishing Office 2018). This FBI counterintelligence investigation would serve to only increase media hysteria over possible Trump-Russian ‘collusion.’

Special Counsel Robert Mueller III would release his findings for the general public’s viewing of a redacted version of his report in April 2019. It would find many unsettling facts about

Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election along with counterintelligence risks from members of the Trump campaign (Mueller 2019). Although the report did not produce any evidence of a coordinated effort by the Trump campaign and the Russian government there were still notable causes for concern. This showcased a Trump campaign that overwhelming had little to no government experience, making it an easy target for foreign intelligence services to exploit along with entrapment-style operations by the FBI and its British counterparts.

This was followed up by a Republican-led Senate Panel supplemented investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election. This would mark the end of a historic congressional investigation that gained high-profile status due to large publicity on the developments of the initial Mueller investigation. This report, much like Mueller's, did indicate that there was extensive evidence of Trump campaign advisors and associates with Russian connections (U.S. Congress 2020b). This would include Paul Manafort, a previous Trump campaign chairman and associate, and Konstantin V. Kilimnik who was labeled as a "Russian intelligence officer," which investigators stated as having a possible connection to Russian election interference operations conducted by the GRU (U.S. Congress 2020b). Democrats would cite this development as a major indicator of what collusion "looks like" as Manafort had discussed details of campaign operations with Kilimnik. The information in this report would be used at the Democratic National Convention using it to portray President Trump as an incompetent leader ill-equipped to be commander-in-chief and guardian of US secrets.

The Senate Republicans would use the report to draw a rather different conclusion, again playing into the palpable partisan divide in Washington. They would highlight the report's findings that the Trump campaign did not participate in a coordinated conspiracy with the Russian government, which was used to justify Republican conclusions of no collusion. While this was a

bipartisan report confirming much of what Robert Mueller III released in April 2019 President Trump maintained that it was still “a hoax” when confronted about the Senate report. A White House spokesman would later attempt to seize the narrative by stating much of the same as the Senate Republicans—no evidence of collusion.

The interference by Russia in the US election did little to aid in changing the US threat narrative and therefore only served to maintain the perspective that Russia is a threat to the US and democracy. While Russia did not directly affect any vote counts, it still meddled in the democratic process. This quickly led to the demonization of Russia by the US media and continued the deep-seated distrust for Russia by the American people. From a Russian perspective, the interference in the election may have had less to do with getting Donald Trump elected and more with undermining American democracy and promoting distrust and disinformation in the process. While the Trump campaign did shy away from the connections between themselves and the Russians, the damage from the perspective of the American people was already done. Highlighting the perspective of both sides’ aids in understanding from where the threat narrative continues to be derived. The American people have long been skeptical of Russian actions and ideas, the interference in one of our most important civic duties did little to ease the suspicion and hysteria associated with the US threat narrative and ultimately was detrimental to the state of relations. Looking at other incidents during the Trump administration we begin to see this pattern develop where acts of aggression on both sides spark fear and resentment and result in this downward spiral in the US-Russian relations.

### **Skripal Affair**

In March of 2018, it was reported that a former Russian spy Sergei Skripal came in contact with the nerve agent “novichok” while in Salisbury, England with his daughter, Yulia. The incident

almost proved to be fatal resulting in the hospitalization of both Sergei and Yulia with widespread blame being placed on two Russian citizens reportedly part of the GRU, Alexander Petrov and Ruslan Boshirov (Vasilyeva 2018). Russian President Putin would deny these allegations and attack the credibility of the security cameras that were used to identify the Russian nationals (Vasilyeva 2018). This would lead to the development and implementation of new US sanctions against Russia. The US Department of State (DoS) released the following statement shortly after the incident, “Pursuant to the Chemical and Biological Weapons Control and Warfare Elimination Act of 1991 (CBW Act), the United States is announcing a second round of sanctions on Russia for its use of a “novichok” nerve agent in an attempt to assassinate Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia Skripal in the United Kingdom on March 4, 2018” (Radio Free Europe 2019). The DoS went further by adding that this inhumane act carelessly endangered thousands of lives while having two Amesbury (approximately seven miles north of Salisbury) residents become seriously ill months later. A 44-year old woman and British national, Dawn Sturgess would later succumb to complications after coming into contact with the nerve agent on her wrist, and the other British national, Charlie Rowley would survive (Lombardo 2018). An investigation into their deaths claimed to reveal that the nerve agent was previously disposed of into a trash bin and contained in what resembled an untampered perfume bottle (Morris and Rawlinson 2018). Rowley believed it to be an expensive bottle of perfume and brought it home to his partner, Dawn and she would apply the substance to her wrist sending both her and Charlie to the hospital (Morris and Rawlinson 2018). Russia responded to the development of the new US sanctions and assured that if implemented it would further deteriorate bilateral ties. This tit-for-tat style diplomacy led to the expulsion of a total of 150 Russian diplomats believed to be spies, from over twenty Western allies with sixty being expelled from the US resulting in the largest “concerted blow to Russian

intelligence networks in the west since the cold war” (Borger, Wintour, and Stewart 2018). The US would also proceed to order the closure of Moscow’s consulate in Seattle, Washington effectively ending Russia’s diplomatic presence on the west coast (Borger, Wintour, and Stewart 2018).

### **Military Posturing**

Russian military behavior plays a large role in US-Russian relations and any alteration could have an adverse impact on the less-than stable relationship. The concerning actions of Russia and its conflicting interests with the West has become increasingly pertinent to understand Russia’s current and future militaristic intentions. Given Russia's actions in Georgia, Crimea, eastern Ukraine, and Syria along with Russia’s superiority in the nuclear arena and development of hypersonic missiles and other advanced weapons systems charged with the task of defeating Western missile defenses it is realistic to believe that Russia’s military capabilities are growing at a reasonable rate (Fisher 2011). As Russia remains a considerable threat, understanding its capabilities today and in the future is vital. While an untold amount of possibilities is possible in the future, current conditions and past actions can provide insight, specifically regarding defense budgets.

The US has significantly increased defense spending since Trump became president. The overall combined US defense budget from 2016 to 2019 has increased 16 percent, with the budget in 2019 accounting for 38 percent of global military spending (SIPRI 2020). The fiscal year 2020 defense budget saw an enacted amount of \$704.6 billion with the most recent, the fiscal year 2021 president’s budget request totaling \$705.4 (U.S. Congress 2020a). The actual congressionally approved amount for the fiscal year 2021 showed an increase of \$1.3 billion from the previous year’s enacted level while being \$3.7 billion below the president’s original request totaling \$694.6

billion (U.S. Congress 2020a). This most recent defense budget reflects significant nuclear modernization with investments in missile defeat and defense and the space domain following close behind with a renewed focus on great power competition (Office of the Undersecretary of Defense 2020).

In 2019, Russia ranked fourth in defense spending in comparison to other countries at \$65.1 billion, rising 4.5 percent from 2018 (SIPRI 2020). This allowed Russia to re-enter the top-five military spenders after failing to reach it in 2018. However, even with the increase in Russia's defense budget Kofman (2019) indicated that analysis of Russia's budget in the form of US dollars is not accurate. Russia purchases from Russian defense manufactures in rubles giving them more buying power which in effect places them somewhere in the area of \$150 to \$180 billion (this estimate is based on the 2018 Russian defense budget of \$61.4 billion) with a "higher percentage dedicated to procurement, research and development than Western defense budgets" (Kofman 2019). This notable rise in both countries' defense budgets could have a destabilizing effect if the trends were to continue.

As aforementioned, the Trump presidency has seen a rapid decline in the US-Russian relationship, and this has been directly reflected in the military attitudes, expenditures, and actions on both sides. This change of a higher perceived threat level and the likelihood of confrontation is reflected in the 2019 Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community which stated that Russia views its military power as a key component to safeguard its vital interests meaning that if Moscow perceives a threat to a vital interest then there will most likely be a military response (Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2019). This makes the situations in Ukraine, Syria, and Venezuela very tense as Russia has a significant stake in all three outcomes. Ukraine has strong historical ties to Russia and is strategically important as a 'buffer' from the

West. Syria presents an interesting milestone in Russian affairs since it is the first time that Russia has deployed to a non-neighboring territory as a means of force projection on behalf of the Assad regime to ensure the integrity of the sitting government and deter foreign attempts to meddle in 'domestic affairs.' Venezuela presents the most recent foreign venture that has antagonized US-Russian relations with Russia once again backing the repressive government to preserve state sovereignty.

As discussed, the relations between the US and Russia have become a back and forth quarrel that has become increasingly dependent on the perception of both sides to the actions of the other. In recent times military posture acceleration by the US especially where NATO and its members are concerned has sometimes been done to influence a change in Russian behavior, with the same being said for the Russians who often act with a certain American response in mind. We can once again see perspective become a driving force in this delicate relationship, especially where posturing is concerned. In the next section, we will see how this perspective has influenced each side to make certain decisions regarding their forces and how such actions have directly influenced the decline of relations and continued the development of a new cold war.

### **Maneuvers**

Military maneuvers provide useful insight into the challenges and effects of warfare without the necessity of actual battle or opponents through demonstrations of capabilities and power that are meant to deter an adversary. It is also called military posturing, which indicates growing tensions between adversarial states, such as the US and Russia. These situations can also provide the necessary training for personnel and give valuable clues into future aspirations for military and political conquests. In recent years, the uptick of military maneuvers in unexplored environments

and wartime relic battlefield has given insight as to what is to come. By analyzing some of the more significant and recent maneuvers an understanding of the future battlefield can be gathered.

In 2017, the US participated in Sabre Guardian, a ten-day military exercise, involving 25,000 American and allied forces that took place across three former Warsaw Pact countries—Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania—the training allows for younger military personnel to become acquainted with the tactics that would be utilized against an adversary like Russia (NYT). These visible episodes of military training do not go unnoticed by Russia, to which they participate in their forms of scenario-based military exercises along its western border with Europe prompting the Pentagon to increase the number of training rotations and exercises on NATO territory. These military maneuvers would only increase on both sides with time.

Following the original Cold War, the Arctic witnessed a huge degradation in the Russian military capabilities based there. Therefore, the attention from NATO in this area also equally declined, however in recent months the interest in this area has once again increased as part of the global geopolitical competition between the West and Russia. The increased accessibility in the Arctic brought on by ice loss in the past decade has prompted Russia to dedicate economic and military resources to revamp this area. This has materialized into refurbished military facilities and an uptick of military exercises including submarine activity and flights of Russia's long-range bombers (Woody 2020b). The Arctic is strategically important since it is the shortest connection between the US and Russia.

The resurrection of the Arctic arena stands to be very concerning for the US and has demanded action on their end. In 2018 operation Trident Juncture witnessed 50,000 troops and numerous military vehicles from the NATO alliance sailed the Arctic waters in one of the largest war games in decades. Again, in May 2020 the Arctic witness more action from NATO members,

the US and Britain conducted operations in the Barents Sea, an exercise they have not conducted since the 1980s (Woody 2020a). The resurrection of these Cold War-era military actions highlights the change in the atmosphere surrounding the US and Russian relationship and serves as yet another indicator that tensions are quickly escalating and the US-Russian relationship is continuing to decline.

### **Militaristic Provocation**

Under the Trump Administration, there have been several incidents that can be described as a provocation by the Russians. These events are highly concerning and show reduced comradery and stability between the two powers. In February of 2018, armed privately contracted military forces conducted an attack on an area where US and Syrian Democratic forces were active (Hauer 2019). This attack required the US to fly in AC-130 gunships to end the assault. In late August 2020 Russian fighter jets were identified off the coast of Alaska causing several Air Force F-22s to take flight in an attempt to intercept the flights. The unusual flight habits of the Russians are not limited to the Alaskan airspace, US B-52 Bombers in the Black Sea witnessed Russian Su-27s cross within 100 feet of the plane disrupting the bomber maneuverability (Youssef 2020). Shortly before reporting of these two events, the public had learned that several US soldiers were injured in a vehicular accident in Syria in which Russian forces are accused of blatantly sideswiping a US military vehicle. These air and sea confrontations serve to raise tensions, marking yet another instance of troubling alterations to behavior between the US and Russia.

However, it is important to note that the Russians are not alone in this habit of provocation. The US is historically guilty of provoking the eastern power. Beginning with the violation of promises made to then-leader Gorbachev with the addition of several central and eastern European countries to NATO during the Bush and Clinton presidencies. This expansion brought the alliance

right to Russia's border. The US has also participated in deployments that put US forces within these countries for near-permanent periods. The Bush and Obama administrations seemed to attempt to push the agenda further and attempted to add Georgia and Ukraine to NATO, a move that was perhaps a tad too close to Russia's sphere of influence. While the incidents discussed above include the Russian provocation actions, it is important to note that in the summer of 2020, several American aircraft were intercepted by Russian forces as they approached the Russian coastline (Carpenter 2020).

These provoking actions bring to light the likelihood of the new cold war we find ourselves to continue to escalate. The behavior of the US and Russia does little to de-escalate the tensions between the powers and if continued could escalate to a point that turns the new cold war hot.

## **Deployments**

While military activity around the globe is commonplace, the deployments of the past few years have been large indicators of the global political climate. Examining a few of these major deployments and the resulting events furthers the understanding of the existing and deteriorating relationships within the global community as it relates to the US and Russia.

### ***Crimea***

In February 2014 unmarked Russian forces coined 'little green men' entered and took over the Supreme Council of Crimea. This takeover also included the capturing of several strategic locations around Crimea and the introduction of a pro-Russian government headed by Sergey Valeryevich Aksyonov. The new government conducted a vote on the status of Crimea through a referendum and a startling 96.7 percent voted "yes" (a startling number alleged to be achieved through fraud or voter intimidation) to secede from Crimea and join Russia in March of 2014 (Somin 2014). At this point, Russia officially absorbed Crimea into the Russian Federation. These

actions by Russia came as a shock to the international community. Ukraine, the US, and numerous other countries considered the annexation of Crimea to be a severe violation of international law. In direct response to Russia's violation of the important norm of inviolability of borders, Russia was expelled from the G8 and served with sanctions. Russia's actions in Crimea emboldened their attitude to act on their aggressive ambitions (Pifer 2020).

### *Ukraine*

In April of 2014, pro-Russian demonstrators in the Donbas region of Ukraine quickly escalated into a civil war between Ukraine and Russian-backed separatist forces, the Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples Republics groups. Russian forces escalated the conflict when they crossed the Ukrainian border in several areas. In July of 2014, Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH17), a civilian passenger plane, was shot down by a Russian-made missile, killing the 298 passengers. This would spark international outrage and many countries would hold Russia responsible, ultimately leading to more severe sanctions by the West (Noack 2019). By September of 2014, both sides would sign a cease-fire after a two-week counteroffensive by the Russian supported rebels, which threatened to erase the modest gains the Ukrainian military has made (MacFarquhar 2014). November of the same year witnessed an uptick in equipment and troops from Russia to the separatist's areas of control. Just as they were outraged at the Crimea annexation, the international community condemned the actions being carried out by Russia. Its tactics ended in sanctions and condemnation on a global scale. Throughout the events in Ukraine, Russia has often tried to downplay its role in backing the separatists but in the years since the start of the war, Russian officials have claimed some responsibility. The conflict has continued to drag on for several years and has been dotted with monumental events such as in 2018 when Russian forces fired on three Ukrainian vessels and eventually seized them, this led to the Ukrainian government declaring

Martial law along the Ukrainian coast and Russian border (Sullivan 2018). In the years since the conflict has fallen into a stalemate with no resolve in the future. The US refused to arm Ukraine during the Obama administration; however, during the Trump administration, Ukraine has been provided with lethal military indicating a more confrontational US policy towards Russia (Carpenter 2018). Ukraine is strategically important to Russia and the two countries are drenched in historical connections making the possibility the conflict triggering a major war with Russia more likely. Thus, entrenching Ukraine in this frozen conflict has affected its ability to integrate with the West by keeping Ukraine in a state of constant turmoil playing to Russia's advantage for years to come.

### *Syria*

Russia has supported Syrian incumbent Bashar al-Assad since 2011 and their move from political backing to military involvement in 2015 cemented their support for the government. This movement was substantial and served as the first armed conflict Russia had involved itself outside of the former Soviet Union since the Cold War. Following the approval from the Russian Federation Council, Putin launched missile and air attacks on ISIL, the Free Syrian Army, the Army of Conquest, and al-Nusra. Russia's intervention in this war seems based on two main drivers, one to spread Russian influence and the second to fix an issue they suggest the US has failed to do despite our heavy presence in Middle Eastern conflicts. Quoting Putin "Rather than bringing about reforms, an aggressive foreign interference has resulted in a brazen destruction of national institutions. ... Instead of the triumph of democracy and progress, we got violence, poverty, and social disaster. Nobody cares a bit about human rights, including the right to life" (Putin 2015). Russia's intentions to do what the US could not have yet to materialize a half-decade later, but Russian influence and abilities have been well proven. An analysis from the Foreign

Policy Research Institute finds that the Russian performance was perceived as exemplary and is believed to demonstrate that Russia is more than capable to intervene outside its borders (Hamilton e.a. 2020).

The US began helping the Syrian rebels at the beginning of the civil war, these efforts quickly evolved from food rations in May 2012 to intelligence “finding” in the same year (Hosenball 2012; Mazzetti, Goldman, and Schmidt 2017; Furneaux 2019). There were two programs to support the anti-Assad ‘rebels’ in Syria: the CIA program that started in 2012, which was called Timber Sycamore, and the Pentagon program that started in 2014, which was called ‘train and equip.’ Following several intelligence and training programs which made attempts to train a litany of fighters, many of these programs came to an end after they failed to provide substantial results. The CIA program was eventually terminated by the Trump administration in 2017 with its critics saying it was ineffective and expensive (Mazzetti, Goldman, and Schmidt 2017). While the Trump Administration initially seemed to attempt to continue putting pressure on the Assad regime and continue to focus on achieving diplomatic objectives, by December 2018 the Trump Administration announced a withdrawal from Syria but this never came to fruition as the deep state disagreed with that choice and the troops ultimately remained in place despite the original plans to only leave 400 men as a contingency force.

However, by September 2020, the Pentagon announced that it would send a small number of troops to Syria in reaction to the aggressive encounters between US and Russian forces (Schmidt 2020). Officials say this deployment's purpose is to discourage the Russian military from entering the eastern security area and maintain the mutually agreed de-confliction processes.

### *Eastern Europe*

While the US was occupied with Syria, it was also expanding its military presence in other areas of the world to accommodate the developing political climate. 2017 witnessed a round of deployments that would be stationed along the Russian frontier. The US Army's 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Combat Brigade Team, 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division deployed nearly 3500 to Eastern Europe spreading out to the Baltic nations, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania after initially landing in Germany. These deployments represented one of the largest deployments of US troops to Europe since 1991. While the troops arrived during the Trump administration, it was the Obama Administration who issued these orders in response to a resurgent Russia who recently invaded Ukraine and the annexed Crimea. Russia's actions came as a surprise to military leadership. Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, the commander of the US Army ground forces in Europe can be cited as "The last American tank left Europe three years ago because we all hoped Russia was going to be our partner. And so, we had to bring all this back" (Birnbaum 2017).

Russia has continually advocated its core national identity as one of strength. This core identity has taken the form of successfully annexing Crimea and projecting its military power in Syria most recently. To add to this perpetuated message of strength, Putin in a 2018 speech praised Russian scientists for a breakthrough in military technology. Putin's own words concerning Russia's abilities portray a newfound sense of confidence that was not present in past decades. Putin describes Russian weapons that are would easily put to shame any anti-missile defense system including those found in DC. In an eerie speech concerning this newly found Russian sense of influence and power, Putin states "nobody really wanted to talk to us about the core of the problem, and nobody wanted to listen to us. So, listen now" (Putin 2018).

## *Modernization*

In tune with its other political and military approaches, Russia has remained aggressive in its efforts to advance its military capabilities. These efforts are likely to manifest in modernized military equipment, increased combat readiness as well as cooperation and connectivity across its military branches. This may include alterations to logistics, increased recruitment of professional soldiers, and upgrades to control infrastructures and communications.

Russia has outlined its military priorities for the coming years in its State Armament Plans (GPVs). Information obtained from these reports suggests that Russia's Naval and Aerospace forces will be the initial focus for this decade. The plans for the next ten years (2018-2027) will see a focus on ground troops and rapid reaction forces which include Infantry and Airborne support. The Russians seem to have incorporated lessons learned from their deployments in Ukraine and Syria and therefore have recognized the importance of heavy artillery and reconnaissance abilities as well as intelligence tactics. These plans will, fortunately, be limited by the country's economic situation and therefore will suppress their ability to procure or produce newer systems. They will instead have to turn to cheap and reliable systems with only a few innovations being possible for the time being (Bowen 2020).

It appears that in the future we can expect Russia to focus development on its ground forces including rapid ready forces. It is also important to note that Russia will likely focus on its long-range missiles given the US threat. However, it should not be overlooked that all of Russia's plans are based on projected abilities in the years to come, numerous factors could drastically alter these plans including Russian relations and economic standings. Based on all considerations it can be assumed that Russia will maintain its aggressive attitude towards dominance and security for itself and its interests just as it has in the past years (Radin e.a. 2019).

## **Breakdown of Arms Control Agreements**

Perhaps the most unsettling aspect of the increased hostile interactions between US and Russian militaries is that it is coupled with the deterioration of many nuclear arms control agreements that were originally put in place to bring stability and reassurance in a nuclear age. This aim of stability and reassurance is exactly what propelled President Ronald Reagan and Gorbachev in 1987 to sign the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which sought to eliminate both the US and USSR's nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of 500 to 5,500 kilometers (Kimball and Reif 2019 ). This agreement would have a significant impact on the nuclear arsenals of both countries after being officially implemented. That is until the US came forward and alleged that Russia had violated the treaty's obligations in a July 2014 Compliance Report (JCR). This complaint would be annually reiterated through 2018. Russia had come out in opposition to the US complaint and stated that it was operating within the legal limitations of the INF Treaty and articulated that the US was the noncompliant actor. However, by 2017, the Trump administration made public its aims to counter the alleged Russian violation. This would gradually progress over a year and in 2018 President Trump announced his intentions to leave the INF Treaty due to Russia's noncompliance and the evolving threat the US faced with a rising China. This would prompt Russian President Putin to announce that they would no longer be abiding by the obligations outlined in the treaty and by August 2, 2019, the US was no longer party to the INF Treaty marking a significant setback in nuclear arms control (Kimball and Reif 2019).

The US and Russian formal withdrawal from the INF Treaty was not the only setback in nuclear arms control agreements the two countries would face. The Open Skies Treaty (OST) was signed on March 24, 1992, and allowed each state-party to conduct short-notice, unarmed, reconnaissance flights over the opposing country's territory to collect data on military forces and

activities (Kimball 2020). However, the Trump administration announced its intentions to withdraw from the OST in early 2020 (Jenkins 2020). While satellites can collect much of the same data that has been collected from the implementation of the OST, some state-parties cannot rely on satellites, marking a significant decline in the original aims of the OST, which sought to produce stability in the nuclear age through transparency.

The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) treaty is also in jeopardy of being terminated. New START was originally signed in 2010, which was negotiated by the US and Russia to extend strategic-level nuclear reductions “past the expiration of previous arms control treaties, most notably the original START treaty” (Caplan 2017). This agreement has significantly reduced nuclear tensions through transparency and reassurance offering a certain amount of stability that is hard to guarantee in the modern world. The New START is set to expire in 2021 and while Russia has expressed interest to extend the treaty, the US has no interest unless China is included (Pifer, 2020). President Trump advised Russian President Putin that the treaty was “a bad deal” for the US during a phone call and would rather renegotiate versus blindly extending the treaty. This can be seen as the most recent episode in the deterioration of the arms control treaties between these two global powers. The lack of arms control treaties makes a revived nuclear arms race more likely and all arms races tend to be destabilizing and excessively expensive.

### **Political Rhetoric**

The Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election and what appears to be a continuing for the 2020 US presidential election has soured the vast public’s perception of Russia making it a “toxic domestic issue in a way that it has not been since the 1950s” (Stent 2020). Despite President Trump’s grand ambitions during his presidential campaign to improve relations with

Russia, he has not made any notable progress, and this is mainly due to the overwhelming bipartisan support on Capitol Hill that maintains the idea that Russia is an American adversary.

A Gallup poll that was released in February 2019 stated that the majority of Americans now consider Russia a major threat to the US interests (Saad 2019). One of the main findings of the poll, which coincided with President Trump's announcement of his administration's intentions to withdraw from the INF Treaty amid apparent Russian noncompliance, was that the American public now viewed Russia as the main enemy contrasting a 2018 poll which observed that North Korea was considered to be the main threat to US interests. The 2018 poll indicated that only 19% of the American public viewed Russia as the greatest enemy of the US with 51% indicating that North Korea holds that position. However, in a year, the number of Americans believing North Korea to be the main US enemy would shrink to a mere 14%, and have the number viewing Russia as the main US enemy rise to 32% with China coming in second with 21%. Though Gallup notes that Russia's percentage has risen amid federal investigations into Russia's possible involvement with the Donald Trump presidential campaign making these views more partisan than what would be considered normal. About half of Democrats (46%) marked Russia as the main US enemy in contrast to 14% of Republicans. The pollster also indicated that Russia has progressively received more negative than positive ratings since 2013, which can be explained through the development of US-Russian relations during the timeframe since then.

As one of the most renowned experts on Russia, Angela Stent has observed US legislators showing a steadfast "reticence toward normalizing relations with Russia" and can be seen at particular times to be acting "as a brake on pursuing any reset" in relations with the Kremlin in recent years (Shapiro and Martirosyan 2020). US Congress has been responding to Russia with the rhetoric of threats and in some cases punitive measures, which primarily come in the form of

economic sanctions which they believe to have little to no downside for US policymakers. As is the central thesis for this paper, that is simply not the case. The obvious downside for not improving relations is the risk of a ‘hot’ confrontation between the two adversaries, which could have devastating consequences. Former Senator Sam Nunn, a well-respected US statesman (especially in matters dealing with Russia), and former US Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz have articulated that the level of concern should be the highest since the Cuban Missile Crisis with the continual developments of arms control agreements reaching expiration without any promise of renewal and communication channels between Moscow and Washington being shut down.

A review of the political and military events of the past several years aids in highlighting that the relationship between the US and Russia has been weakening. This deterioration is risky, to say the least, as the Trump Administration allows most of the arms control measures to slip away despite them being one of the few remnants of US-Russia cooperation. Despite Trump’s aspiration for a better relationship with Russia, the administration misses the mark on areas where cooperation seems likely such as the continuation of a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START). This tactic is highly unusual given the importance placed on arms control treaties by the US, proving to be another area of significance indicating tensions are on the rise. Unfortunately, this inability to find reasonable means for coming together has often had terrible repercussions. All of this has seemingly led to a lose-lose situation as Russia has shown no signs of changing their behavior in reaction to US sanctions and the Trump administration has created little room for negotiation to improve the relationship in the short-term.

#### IV. CAUSES OF THE DECLINE IN US-RUSSIA RELATIONS SINCE 2017

American presidents since the collapse of the Soviet Union have sought to improve relations with Russia but all have failed to do so by the end of their terms in office. There is no surprise that presidential candidate Donald Trump would aspire to accomplish the same task. He stated at a campaign rally in Pennsylvania, “If we could get Russia to help us get rid of ISIS—if we could actually be friendly with Russia—wouldn't that be a good thing?” and was greeted with thunderous applause from the crowd. Trump would reiterate his previous statement moments later by implying that improved relations with Russia would be for the betterment of US national interests (Burns 2016). This counterview to how the US should manage relations with Russia left Trump susceptible to bipartisan criticism as Russia has acted as a belligerent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by taking aggressive actions in eastern Europe and with the revelation of 2016 election interference. All of this made it easy for broad criticism to be corralled against the Washington outsider. Trump faced much criticism during his election bid from his 2016 Democratic rival, Hillary Clinton in light of his friendly stance on Russia.

On January 10, 2017, *BuzzFeed News* released a compilation of raw intelligence on president-elect Trump gathered by the now-famous former MI6 intelligence officer, Christopher Steele—now known as the Steele dossier (Gregory 2020). This would significantly alter the general public’s understanding of the newly elected president and the subsequent Mueller investigation as the dubious report posits that Trump is a Russian agent. This dossier would serve as a future reference point for Trump's allies in Congress to discredit the ensuing Mueller investigation as a “witch hunt” and “fake news.” The dossier was finally laid to rest by Inspector General Horowitz when he noted that it was compiled from “hearsay” and ‘third-hand gossip from

two low-level sources” with the only accurate information being found easily through public sources (Gregory 2020). This was considered a ‘dirty’ political attack that can be traced back to a Hillary Clinton funded Fusion GPS venture which enlisted Christopher Steele to compile the dossier (Simpson and Fritsch 2019).

The Mueller investigation would keep Trump’s name beside Russia in the news almost daily until the completion of Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s report, officially titled the “Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election.” The investigation would be extensive and intrusive leading to the indictments of many associates of the Trump campaign. This would also include Trump’s first pick for national security advisor, Michael Flynn who previously served as the head of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) from 2012-2014, who would eventually plead guilty to charges that came about in light of his contacts with Russia after failing to mention them to the FBI (Bullough 2014). His short tenure would only last twenty-three days and encourage sentiments early on that the newly elected President Trump could have a private interest in Russia. Many of the Republicans in the US Congress would align their public stances to that of the president, while the Democrats would continue to draw on the president’s alleged relationship with Russia as a means to remove him from political office. The Mueller Report would be only one angle that provided an unfavorable view of the president.

On January 16, 2020, the US Senate would formally initiate the impeachment trial of the 45<sup>th</sup> US president. This was preceded by an impeachment inquiry that started in September of 2019 after a whistleblower alleged the president may have abused his executive power regarding withholding military aid to Ukraine. The primary reason behind this was to allegedly enlist the novice Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky to investigate corruption in Ukraine involving an IMF loan and the money Hunter Biden, former Vice President Joe Biden’s son, received while

serving as a board member on Burisma. The whistleblower advised that the alleged ‘quid pro quo’ occurred during a July 25, 2019 phone call with the Ukrainian president that the whistleblower was party to.

After the impeachment inquiry took place the US House of Representatives would impeach the sitting US president on December 18, 2019. The articles of impeachment charged him with abuse of power and obstruction of Congress being the third impeachment trial in the young country's history. After a period of partisan fueled debates during the impeachment proceedings, the Republican majority would dismiss the eleven amendments proposed by the Democrats. This was subsequently followed by the acquittal of the 45<sup>th</sup> US president on February 5, 2020, as members of the US Senate were unable to garner a two-thirds supermajority on any single article of impeachment.

### **Political Turmoil**

Over the past four years, there have been increasing amounts of sensational news to reach the headlines in the US. In many instances the media has been able to capture in headlines President Trump’s divisive rhetoric which appears to stem from his *raison d’être* to fight indiscriminately against his opponents. President Trump has often taken aim at biased media, Democrats, or disloyal Republicans and his perception of the deep state (Crines and Hatzisavvidou 2018). This determination by President Trump to find fault in everyone except himself has inflamed domestic politics in the US since he took political office forcing his administration to be bogged down by unnecessary politically driven tension.

Before the 2016 US presidential election, many pollsters and political talking heads along with the majority of the US public believed that the Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton would be the 45<sup>th</sup> US president. However, events would unfold differently, and Donald Trump

would claim victory in one of the most interesting presidential elections in the modern era. Both political establishments—Democrats and Republicans—would disapprove of candidate Trump’s crude and uncouth manner that he conducted himself and did not wish to see him reach the presidency. This rash manner in which he conducted himself would make him ill-prepared for the national turmoil that lay ahead in the coming years of his presidency as he would be faced with groundless claims of “collusion” and be forced to take a strong stance against Russia when he initially wanted to improve bilateral relations allowing Russia to capitalize on the growing discord in US domestic politics.

This unforeseen division in US domestic politics has coincidentally fit perfectly with Russia’s overarching strategy to spread disinformation in the West and has served only to embolden their attempts to inflame these already existing tensions apparent in US society (Frenkel and Barnes 2020). This Russian strategy has been employed for the sole purpose of allowing it to reassert itself as a great power and the current state of US domestic politics provides a great opportunity for Russia to do so as the Trump administration is forced to reckon with this unfortunate reality. Putin has appropriately observed that the West is much stronger and far more capable when it acts as a cohesive unit and in light of this observation, he has sought a path to sow division amongst the countries that make up the West. This division, as Putin believes, will either allow the West to just accept Russia as a great power to avoid further conflict or have their resources and capabilities so divided that the West would be unable to prevent Russia’s great power ambitions (Galeotti 2019). It could be suggested that the US is in a state of domestic turmoil, which eliminates all possibilities of a unified nation until the problems are appropriately laid to rest.

## Political War

The revelations of the Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election brought further proof that Russia is indisputably waging an aggressive geopolitical campaign against the US—more broadly the West—to reassert itself as a great power while seeking to undermine the capabilities of those who wish to constrain it (Galeotti 2019). Moscow has perceived itself as being the target of a Western campaign of information warfare which has provided it with just cause to act in retaliation. Many in the West have called this form of Russian aggression ‘hybrid war’ (in Russian it is called *gibridnaya voina*), but some scholars have offered a rebuttal to this claim stating that instead of calling it hybrid war it is more accurately articulated as political war. Galeotti (2019) advocates that many in the West misunderstood this concept and its applicability to Russian relations with the West. While Russian military doctrine adheres to a similar model that was observed with first the annexation of Crimea and second with the ensuing civil war in the Donbas region of Ukraine, which demonstrated Russia’s use of non-military means to prepare the battlefield before the release of actual military units on foreign soil, it has a very different application to the West.

This Russian strategy is not entirely new and has its beginnings in the original Cold War. George Kennan, the architect of the original Cold War policy of “containment,” in 1948 provided the best definition for political war, “Political warfare is the logical application of Clausewitz’s doctrine in time of peace. In the broadest definition, political warfare is the employment of all the means at a nation’s command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives, to further its influence and authority, and to weaken those of its adversaries. Such operations are both overt and covert. They range from such overt actions as political alliances, economic measures (as ERP), and ‘white’ propaganda to such covert operations as clandestine support of ‘friendly’ foreign

elements, ‘black’ psychological warfare, and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states” (Kennan 1948). Russia’s national security and political establishment have been noted to have fully embraced this method of utilizing non-kinetic means in place of force.

The current context of US-Russian relations is unfolding in a different background than in 1948 with problems unique to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and a globally interconnected world. Galeotti (2019, p. 2-3) aptly provides a timely summary of the current reality, “At a time when peer-to-peer military action has become ruinously expensive in political and economic terms alike, and yet in a world in which everyone is interconnected—as much through the internet and cultural contagion as money flows, supply chains and markets—political war may increasingly be the dominant idiom for state-to-state contestation. Besides, technological, social, economic, and political developments all mean that, even if guns and missiles are getting more lethal, accurate, and long-ranged, memes and dirty money are also ever more powerful instruments. This may not be a ‘new way of war’ so much as how war is fought in a new world” (Galeotti 2019).

On June 14, 2016, the US public would first become aware that they were a victim of Russian political war when *The Washington Post* revealed that “Russian government hackers” had gained access to the computer network of the Democratic National Committee allowing foreign spies to glean their entire database of opposition research on Donald Trump, uncovering a Russian covert operation. A US cybersecurity firm, CrowdStrike allegedly exposed the tradecraft of those spies, which undoubtedly identified Russia as the foreign power behind the intrusion (however it should be noted that CrowdStrike does have connections to the Democratic Party and the FBI never looked at the DNC servers themselves) (Rid 2020). This would be followed by revelations of further Russian interference through two distinct Russian entities—the GRU and the IRA—widely known due to a considerable amount of the Mueller Report’s findings made public and widely

commented on by US media establishments. All of this culminates to reveal the normal happenings of intelligence agencies, which many Western nations also engage in against Russia. As aforementioned, this is not a new method of Russian strategy but rather a continuation of ‘active measure’ programs that aim to undermine the veracity of information to destabilize regions (Rid 2020).

Russia has also made strides overtly through a Russian media outlet—RT America TV, a Russian financed channel based inside the US. The Russian news outlet seeks to undermine faith in US democratic institutions and encourage political protest. Members of the US Intelligence Community have indicated that RT America has employed lengthy measures to obscure the financial connection to Russia as indicated in an assessment published by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence in 2017. This strategy is a mixture of covert intelligence operations—mainly cyber activity—and overt efforts by the “Russian government agencies,” “state-funded media,” “third-party intermediaries,” and “paid social media users or ‘trolls’” (Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2017). A leading researcher in online disinformation campaigns has observed that “Measuring the actual impact of trilling and online influence campaigns is probably impossible...But the difficulty of measuring impact doesn’t mean that there isn’t meaningful impact” (Rid 2020, p. 431). In the age of disinformation, the battle of the narrative is one of the most important obstacles a country must encounter to prove successful against whoever wishes to deceive its citizens and the US is no exception.

### **Differing Narratives**

The collapse of the Soviet Union ushered in an era of great international embarrassment and economic ruin. This amplified the existing narrative of Russia perceiving the US as an evil exporter of democracy when the US would largely cease to give the attention to Russia it had during the

original Cold War. Russians would feel increasingly marginalized on the international stage feeling that they were no longer given the right to their 'sphere of influence' as other great powers enjoy.

In an address to the Russian State Duma in 1999, Putin stated, "Russia has been a great power for centuries, and remains so. It has always had and still has legitimate zones of interest... We should not drop our guard in this respect, neither should we allow our opinion to be ignored" (Bullough 2014). This statement from Putin showcases his grand ambitions for Russia as early as 1999. This is an obvious attempt for Putin to bring back pride to his country with himself being a former intelligence officer in the KGB during the original Cold War. Though it is clear Putin's Russia has strong ambitions, it lacks resources making it a less capable power, which requires a degree of ingenuity to be successful. Putin has made Russia seem more capable than what it is making use of the resources that it does have effectively and seeking maximum impact of those resources. This was exploited when Russia would annex Crimea in 2014. This aggressive Russian nationalism has been fueled by rising tensions with the West. General Makhmut Gareev has been cited saying that not only does the West present an active threat, but that threat is rising (Galeotti 2019, p. 17).

After the successful annexation of Crimea, Putin would announce to his constituents, "[W]e have every reason to assume that the infamous policy of containment, led in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, continues today. They are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner because we have an independent position, because we maintain it and because we call things like they are and do not engage in hypocrisy" (Putin 2014). This was an unprecedented moment in post-Soviet history triggering a diplomatic crisis in Ukraine with a civil war in its eastern region by Russian sponsored separatists to follow the annexation. Following these events, Moscow would

effectively mobilize the Russian electorate by intensifying anti-Western rhetoric (Sakwa, Hale, and White 2019).

During Putin's third presidential term Russia published two *Foreign Policy Concepts* with the first in 2013 and the second in 2016 which reiterated traditional concerns in US-Russian relations. These highlighted the expansion of NATO and US anti-missile defense advancements, which have always been a cause for Russian disapproval citing national security concerns. Humanitarian intervention was also touched on in the documents reiterating Moscow's long-standing negative attitude towards foreign intervention as it violates state sovereignty (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2016). The point on intervention would also lead to include any form of military intervention stemming from Moscow's avowed disapproval of the course of action the U.S. has taken in the Middle East. Although Russia would intervene in Syria it was at the behest of the Syrian government unlike the U.S. reason for intervention which aimed to aid anti-government forces. This also indicated a significant shift in Russia's international ambitions as it is the first time Russia has deployed military forces outside of its immediate neighborhood.

In another example of this recurring theme painting the West as the enemy is in a 2016 speech given by Chief of the General Staff General Valerii Gerasimov where he states that Russia needs to concentrate on Western means of asymmetric warfare (Galeotti 2020, p. 18). This idea that Russia is under attack by Western institutions—predominantly US ones—is the narrative on the Russian side that hinders the improvement of US-Russian relations. While this serves as an obstacle for US cooperation, domestically Putin has satisfied the nationalists that have been calling for a more aggressive Russian foreign policy, therefore Putin is essence fulfilling the wishes of his constituents (Greene and Robertson 2019).

The Russian narrative is not the only obstacle to improved relations, likewise, the US also has elongated the decline in bilateral relations with the perpetuation of Russia as a threat in public domestic discourse. This has made it increasingly difficult for elected officials in the US to take a soft stance on Russia, especially in light of Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election and the ensuing investigation into the Trump campaign.

### **Perspective**

Throughout this research, it has been made clear that the US and Russian perceptions and behaviors have continuously impeded the ability of the relationship to move in a positive direction. Some of this perception has been self-induced while others have been resultant of actions or lack thereof by one side. It has been seen that both the US and Russia view each other as a serious threat and as result have found it necessary to take action to counter the behavior and actions of the other. This has directly affected the relationship in a negative manner and reveals a complex blame game in the aftermath. Russia sees the US military capabilities, continued NATO expansion, and the spread of democracy as actions that are seldom for their benefit. The US, in turn, sees Russia's growing military capabilities, nuclear ability, infiltration in its democratic processes, its support for terrorist regimes, and its inappropriate action in neighbor states as the reason for alarm and action. The past decades are riddled with examples of these perspectives chipping away at actionable reconciliation for the pair. This has led to the decline of international institutions, arms control agreements, and increased insecurity and uncertainty for the future. The detrimental role perspective has had in relations proved sufficient evidence that perspective should be considered heavily when attempting to understand the US-Russia relationship.

## **What it Means**

The US and Russia have created these domestic political narratives that implicate the other as the enemy which has only served to destroy any possibilities of cooperation or improvements in relations in the short-term. The domestic political climate US politics does not allow for any political party to justify being “soft” on Russia due in part to the support of Al Assad in Syria by Russia as well as the narrative of Russian election meddling and “collusion” with the Trump campaign even if it is in the national interest to reduce bilateral tensions. Russia’s own Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2019) has even blamed the lack of a constructive dialogue being formed under the Trump administration to the ongoing domestic political struggle in the US. Likewise, the Russian government has been advocating that the West has waged information warfare against it in an attempt to subvert Russian society and it has identified liberalism led by the US as the causes of everything that has gone wrong domestically.

## V. CONCLUSION

There is strong evidence of the new Cold War waged between the US and Russia albeit on very different terms than its predecessor. Russia is not the global superpower that the Soviet Union once was in terms of military and economic power with it being considerably weaker in those respects. Russia does not pose a significant military threat to Western Europe with no plausible scenario of Russia invading Europe with ground forces. The ideological positions have become increasingly blurred as the Russians have abandoned communism in favor of authoritarianism with some vague elements of a market economy. The U.S. appeals to improving democracy in Russia ring increasingly hollow and hypocritical. The geopolitical situation is much different as the world is no longer bipolar but has come at a time after the U.S. constructed the unipolar order in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse in 1991. Political warfare is now a common means of how conflicts are fought, over the battle of the narrative, which Russia has utilized the Internet to its advantage to promote its narratives and to destabilize the West. This comes at a time where both Russia and the US seem to behave more recklessly as they consider the other side weakened, leading to an increased possibility of devastating miscalculations.

The U.S. Congress is continually reminded by the deep state—or the military-industrial complex—that Russia poses a significant threat. However, it is this very action of inflating the threat that causes the actual threat level to rise, thus becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. U.S. defense contractors have quoted as saying that “the Russian threat is good for business” (Fang 2016). Additionally, Northrop Grumman, an aerospace and defense company, is to receive \$13 billion for research-related expenses through 2025 (Capaccio 2020). This is part of the U.S. Air Force’s replacement program for the Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM),

which is marketed as a deterrent for Russia (Fetter and Reif 2019). This is hardly a new phenomenon as the same occurred shortly after the end of the original Cold War and defense contractors feared losing US contracts under President Clinton (Ifill 1993). This is a problem that is set to persist as these companies create jobs and spend a considerable amount on lobbying policymakers.

The new Cold War is proving to be complex filled with nuance that only serves to further complicate the existing international situation with it worsening in the years since Trump became president. This means that there are few if any prospects in the short-term for the situation to meaningfully improve. The US and Russia find themselves both entangled in their respective threat narratives making it hard for either country to justify to its population a ‘soft’ approach even if it is in the national interests of both countries. The Trump administration has not acted in the interest of Russia, and relations have significantly deteriorated in light of current US foreign policy despite the onslaught of baseless, politically motivated accusations. The narratives have forced both countries into a corner in how they conduct bilateral relations and interact with others on the global stage. Russia is set to maintain its current trajectory with Putin remaining in office until at least 2024 with the option of running for reelection and remaining in office until 2036 in light of a recent constitutional referendum that passed in 2020 (Frye 2020).

Putin released a statement in October 2020, which essentially lamented on the fact that US-Russian relations have failed to improve under the Trump administration although he appeared to understand the lack of improvements was due to a “bipartisan consensus on the need to contain Russia, to curb our country’s development” (Isachenkov 2020). He seems to have hedged his bets on the US election by praising Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden’s comments on arms control. Although this statement was preceded by a condemnation of Biden’s “sharp anti-Russian

rhetoric” by Putin, it suggests that there is the hope of reinstating arms control treaties for the benefit of both countries. These prospects are few, however, even in light of a new presidential administration due to negative bipartisan attitudes towards Russia and Putin’s prolonged time in office.

Therefore, the US must seek to manage the relationship by limiting the possibility of a tragic confrontation. Russia’s outlook does not look particularly positive with it being locked in a stalemate in the Donbas and likely Syria further depleting its force projection capability. Putin’s Russia is also at the current state politically isolated with few economic options due to overwhelming sanctions. Furthermore, Russia has indicated to the West that it is far more aggressive than originally believed by increasing its military capabilities and pursuing objectives in eastern Ukraine and Syria while also attempting to divide the West through political warfare as was observed during the 2016 US presidential election. All of this has proven to the West that there needs to be a robust response to deter further such actions. Russia is also not immune to political warfare and can be seen as a real target for the West—and particularly the US—in the coming years if the trends remain the same. Galeotti (2019) has suggested, rather ironically, that perhaps the basis for nuclear deterrence during the original Cold War can offer lessons for political warfare. However, for this to take hold both sides would need to interpret the threat in the same way and without a robust Western response, Russia will continue to feel like they have the upper hand.

## **Recommendations**

This work concludes that it is unlikely that if a new American president is elected in 2020 it will significantly improve relations in the short term. The situation appears to be far too dire and internalized for either country to seek to improve relations in the medium term forcing one to look

in the distant future for a possible normalization of relations. In the meantime, the US can look for avenues to deescalate a possible military confrontation and inadvertent escalation during this new Cold War. There also needs to be an emphasis placed on renewing arms control agreements, while also continuing to remain open to the idea of a rapprochement with Russia in the unlikely event that the tensions of the new Cold War are dissolved on both sides. There are numerous approaches to find such solutions, this work finds the following suggestions to be the most well suited approach.

To improve the state of US-Russian relations three critical aspects must be addressed, and while listing them on paper is rather easy the practicality of the matter is quite more difficult. First, both Russia and the US must be willing to accept the current state of relations and what it means for the future if they do not improve while there is still time before a tragic miscalculation to do so. Second, both countries must look back at the end of the original Cold War and analyze the events leading up to the current state of relations and accept the role each played in facilitating the new Cold War. Third, they need to set forth policies that adhere to agreed-upon long-term objectives with safety measures on how to deal with immediate issues that will inevitably arise over time. These three recommendations are not to be represented as the only needed reform, but rather what is the most pressing of concerns to reduce the damage of the new Cold War.

In the short-term, perhaps finding a way to foster a small sentiment of peaceful coexistence between the Russians and US on Capitol Hill and advocating for improved bilateral relations would give US policymakers a push in the right direction while also providing the executive branch with greater flexibility to change or lift sanctions to foment a positive response from Russia and aid quelling the damage of the new Cold War before it takes turn for the worse. Additionally, in the long-term, both countries should strive for increased predictability. This can be achieved through more open forms of communications and through policies that require transparency by

both countries, lessening the probability of miscalculation, which is the most dangerous concern to date.

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