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The relationship between the EU, Russia, and the US

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New US administration and its policies

Much of the debate about the political relationship between the EU, Russia and the US focused on expectations with regard to the new US administration. While participants from Russia, EU Member States and the US differed in their assessments of the new US president, they were united in their uncertainty about his future policies.

Russian participants stressed Donald Trump's declared foreign policy goals to constrain China and fight Islamic terrorism, both of which they considered a potential window of opportunity for Russia. In his strive to prevent China from growing ever more powerful, President Trump would try to vow Russia away from too close a Russian-Chinese alliance. This could strengthen Russia's relative weight vis-à-vis the US. The fact that European security seems to be of secondary importance for the new US President takes away a key bone of contention between the US and Russia. President Trump, in this reading, poses a serious challenge to the cohesion of the West – but provides at least some opportunities for Russia.

At the same time, Russian participants made it clear that major contentious issues remain unsolved. Russia has no interest whatsoever to become a junior partner of either the US or

China. Military tensions with the US prevail with no solution in sight. Moscow and Washington continue to nurture diverging narratives about the causes of and responsibility for the current crisis. Therefore, even though some potential for an improvement of

the relationship seems to exist, its realization has yet to come to pass.

Participants from EU Member States saw continuity between the Obama and the Trump administration in so far as European and transatlantic security is no longer a strategic priority for the US. However, while the Obama administration consistently stressed the

importance of a strong and cohesive Europe, President Trump's statements point exactly in the opposite direction. One participant expressed the hope that this could have a uniting effect on the EU. EU and US participants stressed potential pitfalls, which could prevent a US-Russian "honeymoon". For instance, a more assertive US policy towards

China could put Russia in a complicated position given its own efforts to intensify partnership with its Eastern neighbour. The policies of the new US administration on some other issues, including on Iran, the JCPOA and post-conflict developments in Syria, could contradict both Russian and EU interests.

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Security cooperation: Danger of a new arms race

During the discussion on security cooperation speakers emphasized the imminent danger of a new arms race. While this concern was shared on all sides, the discussion brought to light different positions. It was pointed out by one EU participant, that the EU has a very small part to play in this area and, with the exception of France and the UK, has to “watch and pray” that current tensions not spiral out of control.

US/NATO missile defense plans remain a major contentious issue. Russian experts emphasized that Russia does not consider the system envisaged by the US defensive. It will, therefore, continue to be a source of mistrust on the Russian side. Given the imbalance in military capabilities and high technology, one Russian participant said, Russia will do anything to catch up with the US. Interestingly it was pointed out several times by different sides that the meaning of certain aspects of missile defense seems to have changed. The Polish MD site, for instance, lost relative importance to the rotating NATO battalions in eastern Poland in the overall context of US-Polish defense cooperation. A Russian participant pointed out that in case President Trump truly wanted to focus MD on homeland protection, this could be a starting point for discussion.

Western participants stressed how Russia had come to be seen again as a major threat over the past few years. This is especially true for the US, and it served, among other things, as a trigger for new weapons programmes. It also puts NATO in a difficult position, having to walk a very thin line between deterrence, on the one hand, and the need to maintain dialogue and search for “islands of cooperation” with Russia, on the

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deterrence – and therefore non-negotiable in a situation of strong international tension. US speakers countered that, not least because of certain actions and threats from Russia, many in the US believe that Russia had a first use approach towards non-strategic nuclear weapons. Participants were equally pessimistic about progress on conventional arms control in the current negative atmosphere.

‘NATO policy, it was stressed by speakers from the EU/US, would be shaped mainly by the development of Russian policy’

Syria, the situation in the Middle East and the international fight against terrorism, were seen as potential fields of cooperation. However, participants also questioned the sides’ capability to develop such cooperation beyond mere lip service. Russia’s return as a strategic player in the Middle East changes the regional setting, which now entails two loose coalitions with the US and the Gulf Arab States on one side, and Russia, Turkey and Iran, on the other. If not contained, these new geopolitical fault lines could lead to new and dangerous eruptions in the future. Furthermore, it was criticized that there is little strategic thinking about the desirable post-conflict political development of Syria. As one participant put it, “bombing jointly” may be a victory for cooperation, but it may lead to future conflict if there is no vision for the post-war situation. In this context some participants questioned Russia’s ability to

prove itself as a leader in the Middle East (not only militarily, but also politically and economically), if the US were to altogether withdraw from the region.

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The impact of Western sanctions on Russia

The discussion on sanctions focused on the impact of Western sanctions on Russia while there was very little reflection on Russian counter sanctions. It was emphasized by EU and US participants that their goal was not “to destroy Russia”, but to protest against Russian illegal policies and to help protect the European security order. While assessments on their overall impact on the Russian economy differed, some participants listed a number of unintended consequences. For instance, it was pointed out that the sanctions had hit Russian small and medium size enterprises particularly heavily. This would be difficult to repair even if sanctions were lifted. It was also assumed that, because of the loss of mutual trust, the mere absence of the sanctions at some point in the future would not suffice to restore economic relations. It was pointed out that the EU/the US lacked clear criteria for the efficiency of sanctions.

In conjunction with the Russian leadership's stronger reliance on a protectionist economic policy since 2014 sanctions also helped create a new group of stakeholders inside the Russian economy. Those actors display strong interest in the preservation of sanctions and the continuation of the current crisis in political and economic relations between Russia and the West.

Some Russian participants criticized the lack of flexibility of the Western sanctions approach. The Ukrainian government was accused of not being interested in the implementation of the Minsk agreements but rather in the continuation of the conflict in order to maintain the sanctions against Russia.

Participants also questioned the West's ability to keep up a coordinated sanctions policy. There was consensus that a collapse of the sanctions would be more problematic for the EU than for the US. It was also emphasized that sanctions alone do not substitute for a

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Russia policy or strategy. With transatlantic cooperation weakening, however, it may become even more difficult to conceive an efficient strategy for relations with Russia.

Recommendations

Most recommendations were formulated in regard to security cooperation:

- Given the bleak prospects for strategic, tactical and conventional arms control participants across the spectrum agreed that the sides should focus on “secondary issues” like mil-to-mil contacts, confidence building measures etc. While practical cooperation between NATO and Russia will most likely remain suspended, such a policy of small steps could aim at risk reduction.

- Most participants also agreed upon the necessity to cooperate on the Middle East. Iran should not be contained as an enemy, one speaker pointed out, but considered an important (if controversial) regional actor. The sides should take this as a starting point to develop a minimalist agenda for cooperation including the prevention of a “cold war” between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the preservation of the JCPOA and more strategic reflection on a nuclear-free zone in the Gulf for the post-JCPOA implementation period.

- Participants called for a strategic dialogue on the future political order in Syria.

There was little agreement regarding future action on sanctions.

- One Russian participant called on Western decision makers to reconsider their policy of isolating Crimea if they wanted the Crimean population's perception of the conflict to change. This was, however, challenged by EU participants.

- Several speakers – if from diverging perspectives – problematised the linkage between the lifting of the economic sanctions and the full implementation of the Minsk agreements.

EU-Russia Experts Network on Foreign Policy (EUREN)

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Not all core group members were present.
The Chronicles do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the core group.

About EU-Russia Experts Network

The **EU-Russia Experts Network on Foreign Policy (EUREN)** was initiated by the EU Delegation to Russia at the beginning of 2016 as a new form of interaction between EU and Russian foreign policy experts, analysts and think tanks.

EUREN brings together experts, analysts and foreign policy think tanks from Russia and EU member states to discuss topical foreign policy issues with the aim of coming up with concrete recommendations. The network meets on a quarterly basis inviting approximately 30 experts for one or two full days of discussions on a given topic. The meetings take place at the venues of the participating think tanks, both in Russia and different EU capitals.

About this edition

This edition of the **EUREN Chronicles** is the result of a two-day meeting discussion that took place on the premises of the **Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)**, Moscow, 2-3 February 2017.



Public Diplomacy EU and Russia offers a platform for dialogue between Russian and EU selected audiences on a number of bilateral and global issues. Personal ties built over the years are an indispensable element of our relations with Russia, particularly with an eye to the future of the next generations.

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