

Research Paper

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US Election Note: Russia Policy After 2016

Summary

- The United States' relations with Russia are extremely poor at the moment, driven by divergent views of the world order and by different priorities in Eastern Europe, in the Middle East and on some global issues such as nuclear non-proliferation.
- The major area of strategic contestation for the United States and Russia is Europe, which has significant implications for the Middle East (especially Iran and Syria) as well.
- Hillary Clinton, Ted Cruz and Bernie Sanders propose varying approaches for a long-term American strategy of containing Russia. Donald Trump would take US policy in a completely different direction, which could cede to Russia a huge degree of influence in Eastern Europe and the Middle East.
- As president, Cruz or Clinton would build up the American military presence in Europe in order to deter Russia, Sanders would prioritize diplomatic approaches to containment, while Trump would seek to pull back significantly.
- Were Ted Cruz to follow through with his pledge to restore US sanctions on Iran, it would drive a wedge between the United States and its Western European allies, which Russia could capitalize upon.

Introduction

Managing the United States' relationship with Russia will be one of the major geopolitical challenges for the next president. While President Barack Obama's first term was a relatively calm period for the two countries, characterized most notably by American attempts to 'reset' the relationship, since 2013 tensions between them have increased to their highest level since the end of the Cold War.

Nevertheless, despite their clear and overt disagreements over the structure and operation of the existing world order, the United States and Russia share several interests. These range from the extremely broad, such as nuclear non-proliferation, to very specific joint endeavours, such as the operation of the International Space Station. The United States has taken a largely two-track approach in relations with Russia, with some issues sharply dividing the two and others requiring them to work closely together. The next president must be able to work towards vital national and global interests while the Russian government will likely remain determined to challenge the basic tenets of the world order. This election note examines the strategies propounded by the major candidates of the two parties in this context.¹

Background

In the 2012 presidential election, Russia was – aside from one memorable exchange between Mitt Romney and Obama during their third debate² – a minor political issue at most. In the four years since, much has changed. Bolstered until mid-2014 by high oil prices, Russia recapitalized its military, focusing on creating a smaller but better-equipped and more capable force. In 2014, it annexed Crimea and began to support an insurgent movement in eastern Ukraine, continuing to do so even after a Malaysia Airlines flight originating in Amsterdam was shot down over Ukrainian territory controlled by its proxies.

In response to these actions, the United States imposed sanctions on members of President Vladimir Putin's inner circle and sectors of the Russian economy, and encouraged its European allies to do the same. It also moved to bolster its military forces in Europe, which had been reduced slowly over the past 25 years out of a perception that the primary threats to American interests were now elsewhere. As the United States took these steps, oil prices began a steep decline, which deeply affected the heavily oil- and gas-dependent Russian economy.³

The foreign policies of Russia and the United States intersect on numerous key global issues, but four stand out and are likely to continue to do so after the next president takes office: Ukraine, Iran, Syria and nuclear weapons.

¹ At the time of writing, John Kasich remains in the race, but he lags far behind Trump and Cruz in the delegate count and lacks a plausible strategy to win the nomination, except as a long shot through a contested convention.

² From the debate of 22 October 2012: Romney: 'Russia I indicated is a geopolitical foe. Not... Excuse me. It's a geopolitical foe, and I said in the same – in the same paragraph I said, and Iran is the greatest national security threat we face.' Commission on Presidential Debates (2012), 'October 22, 2012 Debate Transcript', <http://debates.org/index.php?page=october-22-2012-the-third-obama-romney-presidential-debate> (accessed 20 Apr. 2016).

³ According to preliminary figures published by Russia's statistics service (Rosstat), the economy contracted by 3.7 per cent in 2015. BBC News (2016), 'Russian economy hit by oil price slide', 25 January 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-35398423> (accessed 20 Apr. 2016).

Ukraine

Russia's annexation of Crimea and its support for insurgent groups in the Donbas region of Ukraine have created major problems in its relations with the United States – and Europe – since early 2014. Neither situation is likely to be resolved in the near term. There are no indications that Russia will reverse the annexation – which was formalized by a vote in the Russian parliament in March 2014 – and it clearly intends to continue to create instability on its border with Ukraine as part of a long-term strategy to exercise control over its 'near abroad'. The Minsk Accords have only dampened, not ended, the violence in Donbas and a longer-term political solution still is elusive.⁴ So far, the United States has sent non-lethal aid, such as uniforms, body armour, night-vision goggles and trucks, to support Ukraine's military, but it has not answered Ukrainian calls for advanced weapons, particularly anti-tank missiles. The continuation of EU sanctions on Russia is not a given; they must be renewed on a regular basis by the European Council, and some member states would prefer for them to be lifted.⁵ As a result, the task of the next president will be to address EU security and economic concerns while building a long-term, sustainable strategy for Russia, Europe and Ukraine.

Iran

The United States and Russia worked with China, France, the United Kingdom and Germany to develop and implement the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran regarding the latter's nuclear programme. As a result, all are currently committed to the implementation of the JCPOA, which prevents Iran from further developing a nuclear weapons programme and curtails its enrichment and reprocessing activities in return for the easing of most of the sanctions that had been imposed on it. Russia has various commercial relationships with Iran, including arms sales, along with shared geostrategic interests in the Middle East, including in Syria. This is likely to lead to a tightening of their bilateral relationship in coming years.⁶ In this context, the next US president will have to continue working with Russia to ensure Iran's implementation of the agreement on its nuclear activities.⁷

Syria

Syria has long been aligned with Russia, as it was with the Soviet Union before 1991. Russia has a naval base at Tartus, which was its only military facility outside the territory of the former USSR. It has backed President Bashar al-Assad since the beginning of the uprising against him in 2011. In 2013 the United States and Russia agreed a plan to dispose of the Syrian regime's chemical weapons stocks, which forestalled American military action but did not interrupt Russian conventional aid to the regime. In 2015 Russia began a military intervention in Syria to support the embattled regime. In the meantime, the United States had called for Assad's removal and backed, if hesitantly, some of the rebel groups opposing him. Despite suggestions that Russian forces would target Islamic State

⁴ Voice of America News (2016), 'Germany, France Urge Ukraine and Russia to Implement Minsk Accord', 23 February 2016, <http://www.voanews.com/content/german-french-foreign-ministers-anxious-about-ukraine/3203343.html> (accessed 20 Apr. 2016).

⁵ European Council (2016), 'EU restrictive measures in response to the crisis in Ukraine', <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/ukraine-crisis/> (accessed 20 Apr. 2016).

⁶ Khajehpour, B. (2015), 'Iran-Russia relations after nuclear deal', Al-Monitor, 12 July 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/07/iran-russia-nuclear-sanctions-economy-gas-oil.html#> (accessed 20 Apr. 2016).

⁷ This is unless the new president decides to revoke the agreement, which Cruz has indicated he would do.

of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), they have gone largely after other rebel groups, including those supported by the United States.⁸ And despite Russia's announcement of a military 'withdrawal' in March, Moscow has indicated that it will continue direct and indirect support for the Syrian regime. Given Russia's political and military commitment to Assad, any US efforts towards a lasting solution to the war in Syria will inevitably have to involve Russia.

Nuclear weapons

Despite the squeeze on its economy imposed by sanctions and, to a greater degree, by low oil prices, Russia has continued to increase military spending.⁹ It has showcased new weapons systems on land, sea and air in exercises as well as in operations in Ukraine and Syria. Despite arms control overtures to Russia in Obama's first term, both sides have continued to update their nuclear weapons capabilities. According to the State Department, Russia is in violation of the terms of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty of 1987.¹⁰ The deployment and testing of nuclear missile systems, as well as the stalled decrease in the number of deployed nuclear weapons, continue to be of concern, particularly in light of Putin's more forward-leaning language on their role in a conflict, and could be destabilizing. In order to increase stability and re-establish confidence-building measures, the next president will have to manage American strategic priorities in light of Russia's increased assertiveness in the nuclear field.

Policy positions

Democratic candidates

Hillary Clinton

Hillary Clinton has a much greater track record on foreign policy than her opponents in either party. Her tenure as secretary of state was marked by an attempt to thaw US–Russian relations, based around the 'reset' policy instituted during Dmitry Medvedev's term as president. But, if elected, Clinton would take office at a time when relations with Russia are substantially more complicated and troubled than when she left the State Department in 2013.

Clinton began her tenure as secretary of state in 2009 intending to rebuild a relationship damaged by the American war in Iraq, the Russian war in Georgia, and differing policies and priorities on several fronts. The reset produced short-term results, including an agreement to allow the United States to cross Russian airspace to resupply its forces in Afghanistan and the scaling back of US plans for missile-defence systems in Eastern Europe. The reset also set the stage for the New

⁸ Stubbs, J. (2015), 'Four-fifths of Russia's Syria strikes don't target Islamic State: Reuters analysis', Reuters, 21 October 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-strikes-idUSKCN0SF24L20151021> (accessed 20 Apr. 2016).

⁹ Gady, F. (2015), 'Russia's Military Spending to Increase Modestly in 2016', *The Diplomat*, 10 November 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/11/russias-military-spending-to-increase-modestly-in-2016/> (accessed 20 Apr. 2016).

¹⁰ Gordon, M. (2015), 'U.S. Says Russia Failed to Correct Violation of Landmark 1987 Arms Control Deal', *New York Times*, 5 June 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/06/world/europe/us-says-russia-fails-to-correct-violation-of-landmark-1987-arms-control-deal.html?_r=0; and Woolf, A. F. (2016), *Russian Compliance with the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty: Background and Issues for Congress*, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/R43832.pdf> (both accessed 20 Apr. 2016).

START nuclear arms control treaty, which Clinton emphatically supported.¹¹ However, the Russian regime saw actions later in her term as more adversarial. In 2011 she persuaded Russia to abstain from vetoing UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which permitted intervention in Libya, but it viewed the subsequent expansion of the mission to include support for the forces deposing Muammar Gaddafi as a 'bait and switch'.¹² After Libya, there were no further major joint initiatives between the two countries while Clinton was in office, and it was clear that the relationship was deteriorating, even though the critical breach did not occur until the Ukraine–Russia crisis, a year after she had left the State Department.

The deterioration of relations means that it is unlikely that Clinton, upon taking office in 2017, would seek to bring back the spirit of the 'reset'. Her record suggests that, while she is more inclined towards working collaboratively with the United States' allies than her Republican counterparts, she favours a somewhat more assertive approach to Russia than the one Obama has taken. She has said that the United States is not doing enough to support Ukraine against Russian aggression. She would likely be more receptive than Obama to calls for arming the Ukrainian military, depending on the status of the ceasefire and progress towards a political solution in Donbas.

Clinton has distanced herself from Obama's Syria policy and favoured a more comprehensive training programme for Syrian rebels in 2012. Her calls for a no-fly zone and enhanced support for rebel groups suggest that she continues to want the removal of the Assad regime, though defeating ISIS would be higher on her priority list and she has indicated openness to a political solution negotiated with Putin.¹³ On Iran, Clinton would maintain the nuclear deal but would be resistant to further diplomatic openings (at least in the short term). She has called for additional sanctions to penalize Iran for its ballistic-missile programme as part of a 'distrust and verify' initiative.¹⁴

Though she used the term specifically in relation to Iran, 'distrust and verify' is an apt way to describe Clinton's approach to Russia. She is not at all averse to confrontation or the use of the sharper implements of American power. Having tried and failed to build a better relationship with Russia, she will be entirely comfortable with steadily increasing American pressure on it across regions and issues in order to shore up the United States' strategic position in the world.

Bernie Sanders

Bernie Sanders would bring a notably different approach to Russia. In his campaign, he has largely prioritized domestic policy over foreign policy, particularly focusing on economic justice. With a few exceptions, he tended to avoid foreign policy issues until relatively late in the primary season.¹⁵ In keeping with that broad strategy, he has made relatively few comments about Russia, although he has suggested that the United States should seek a more inclusive approach and create a new

¹¹ *The Hill* (2010), 'Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's remarks on New START', 17 November 2010, <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/129707-secretary-of-state-hillary-clinton-remarks-on-new-start> (accessed 20 Apr. 2016).

¹² Becker, J. and Shane, S. (2016), 'Hillary Clinton, 'Smart Power' and a Dictator's Fall', *New York Times*, 27 February 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/us/politics/hillary-clinton-libya.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=span-ab-top-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=0 (accessed 20 Apr. 2016).

¹³ Kopan, T. (2015), 'Hillary Clinton: I want Russia 'at the table' on Syria', CNN, 1 December 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/01/politics/hillary-clinton-2016-election-cbs/> (accessed 20 Apr. 2016).

¹⁴ Richardson, B. (2016), 'Clinton calls for new sanctions on Iran', *The Hill*, 16 January 2016, <http://thehill.com/policy/national-security/266173-clinton-calls-for-new-sanctions-on-iran> (accessed 20 Apr. 2016).

¹⁵ Hudson, J. (2016), 'Exclusive: Bernie Sanders Begins Building Foreign Policy Team', *Foreign Policy*, 24 February 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/02/24/exclusive-bernie-sanders-begins-building-foreign-policy-team/> (accessed 20 Apr. 2016).

alliance structure that includes it.¹⁶ His general emphasis on diplomatic solutions implies that he would be unlikely to seek to arm the Ukrainian military or significantly build up American forces in Eastern Europe. Like Clinton, Sanders has indicated – in very general terms – that he would be open to scaling back the United States’ nuclear modernization plans, though like her he has not gone into great detail on this topic on the campaign trail.

Sanders would approach Russia in a way consistent with his worldview, which (in contrast to his more populist domestic policy platform) is relatively mainstream for the Democratic Party. In his view, Russia is fundamentally a rational actor that can be bargained with and accommodated through soft power networks centred on the United States. This would lead to policy choices different from Clinton’s, particularly in terms of the quantity of American military assets he would deploy forward in Eastern Europe. But Sanders’ belief in the importance of multilateralism and maintaining alliance relationships would drive him towards maintenance of the existing power balance rather than a sharp turn away from current US policies.

Without a deep bench of his own foreign policy advisers, Sanders would likely turn to Democratic national security officials with experience in the Obama and Bill Clinton administrations. This would limit the difference between Obama’s policies and his, at least in the short term. In the longer term, Sanders might be more willing to relax the American sanctions on Russia or to put less pressure on the European Union (EU) for maintenance of its sanctions, though his support for them in the wake of the annexation of Crimea suggests that he is perfectly comfortable with sanctions as a coercive tool. Finally, given his high valuation of human rights issues, he might use Russia’s crackdown on dissidents and its increasingly restrictive stance on social issues to justify continued American pressure on it across the board.

Republican candidates

Donald Trump

Donald Trump’s position on Russia has not been articulated clearly, but his statements suggest a fundamentally different approach from that of the overwhelming majority of his counterparts in the Republican Party. His willingness to take Russian proclamations at face value and to move away from current American policy places him in a category largely by himself in this election.

This fits into a broader theme in Trump’s foreign policy views – wanting to fundamentally reconfigure the United States’ role in the world. He takes a transactional view of alliance relationships and is in favour of either withdrawing American forces from allied countries or requiring allies to pay financially or in kind for strategic support. His statements on NATO, in particular, suggest that he rates much more highly the potential costs savings of withdrawal from alliance commitments than any security benefits such arrangements confer.¹⁷

¹⁶ Sanders, B. (2015), ‘Prepared Remarks: Senator Bernie Sanders on Democratic Socialism in the United States’, Bernie 2016, 19 November 2015, <https://berniesanders.com/democratic-socialism-in-the-united-states/> (accessed 20 Apr. 2016).

¹⁷ Costa, R. and Rucker, P. (2016), ‘Trump questions need for NATO, outlines noninterventionist foreign policy’, *Washington Post*, 21 March 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/03/21/donald-trump-reveals-foreign-policy-team-in-meeting-with-the-washington-post/> (accessed 20 Apr. 2016).

Trump has praised Putin effusively and defended him against allegations that he was complicit in the deaths of Russian opposition figures and journalists. Putin has returned the praise, referring to Trump as ‘a bright and talented leader’.¹⁸

Trump’s position on Ukraine also differs from Republican orthodoxy and conforms to his broader position that the United States should be doing much less ‘policing’ in the world unless its interests, as he sees them, are strongly engaged. While not taking an explicitly pro-Russian line, he has been much less in favour of American involvement in Ukraine than his rivals in either party.¹⁹ Trump’s statements that the status of Ukraine is a ‘European problem’ suggest that he would not supply its military with lethal aid and that he might even withdraw existing non-lethal and economic aid, regardless of the impact on Ukraine’s precarious position between West and East.

Trump has named only a small number of foreign policy advisers, and few of these have served in previous administrations.²⁰ Only one – Carter Page – appears to specialize in Russia, and to the extent that his views have been made public, they are much more hostile to NATO than is common in Republican national security circles.²¹

On Syria, Trump again has taken a notably different tack from his Republican rivals. He seems to see Russian and American goals in that country as broadly compatible, despite the fact that US policy has been to work towards the ousting of Assad, while Russia’s military intervention to secure the Syrian president’s rule has heavily targeted rebel groups armed and supported by the United States. On Iran, Trump has been intensely critical of the JCPOA but has said that it is in need of reform rather than scrapping, as proposed by other Republicans.²²

It is difficult to parse Trump’s exact position on nuclear weapons based on his campaign statements. In an interview with the *New York Times*, he indicated that he was concerned about the age and condition of the US nuclear deterrent. But at the same time he suggested that the United States’ allies should pursue their own nuclear weapons programmes rather than relying on US military support.²³

Ted Cruz

Ted Cruz’s approach is largely in line with conventionally hawkish Republican foreign policy thinking on Russia. However, he has shied away from some of the more assertive elements of the party’s mainstream foreign policy platform. His team of foreign policy advisers is relatively

¹⁸ Botelho, G. and Diamond, J. (2015), ‘Putin praises ‘bright and talented’ Trump’, CNN, 18 December 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/17/politics/russia-putin-trump/> (accessed 20 Apr. 2016).

¹⁹ Birnbaum, M. and Del Real, J. (2015), ‘Trump tells Ukraine conference their nation was invaded because ‘there is no respect for the United States’’, *Washington Post*, 11 September 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/09/11/trump-tells-ukraine-conference-their-nation-was-invaded-because-there-is-no-respect-for-the-united-states/> (accessed 20 Apr. 2016).

²⁰ Indeed, a large number of Republican foreign policy experts have declared him unfit for office. They are unlikely to shape his foreign policy team should he take office. See, for example, War on the Rocks (2016), ‘Open Letter on Donald Trump from GOP National Security Leaders’, 2 March 2016, <http://warontherocks.com/2016/03/open-letter-on-donald-trump-from-gop-national-security-leaders/> (accessed 20 Apr. 2016).

²¹ Mufson, S. and Ryan, M. (2016), ‘One of Trump’s foreign policy advisers is a 2009 college grad who lists Model UN as a credential’, *Washington Post*, 22 March 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/03/21/meet-the-men-shaping-donald-trumps-foreign-policy-views/> (accessed 20 Apr. 2016).

²² Saletan, W. (2016), ‘Is Donald Trump the Only Leading Republican We Can Trust on Iran?’, *Slate*, 19 January 2016, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2016/01/donald_trump_is_the_only_serious_gop_candidate_who_hasn_t_promised_to_rip.html (accessed 20 April 2016).

²³ *New York Times* (2016), ‘Transcript: Donald Trump Expounds on His Foreign Policy Views’, 26 March 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/us/politics/donald-trump-transcript.html> (accessed 20 Apr. 2016).

unconventional by the standards of many of his former rivals in the campaign.²⁴ Cruz is not a forceful advocate of democracy promotion or aggressive intervention where American interests are not directly at stake; rather, he has sketched out a position that seems to be more driven by defending American interests than expanding them.

Nevertheless, Cruz has called for providing weapons to the Ukrainian military. The specific terminology that he uses – ‘defensive weaponry’²⁵ – indicates perhaps a slightly more limited approach than, for example, that championed by his former rival Marco Rubio, who had used the term ‘lethal aid’. Cruz’s policies would still represent a scaling-up of American involvement in Ukraine. His slightly more restrained language relative to the likes of Rubio indicates that he would be inclined to supply Ukraine with anti-tank missiles but that he would not seek to send more powerful weapons, at least in the short term.

Cruz has indicated that he believes the United States’ nuclear modernization should go ahead.²⁶ He is unlikely to support new nuclear arms talks with Russia in the short term, but given his frequent expressions of admiration for Ronald Reagan, who made such negotiations a cornerstone of his second-term foreign policy, it is not out of the question that he might.

More broadly, Cruz supports a significant build-up of the American military presence in Eastern Europe. This would entail a large-scale escalation of attempts to push back against Russian influence in the region: the re-introduction of larger numbers of American forces there on a permanent basis and the deployment of additional missile defence systems to Europe.

In Syria, Cruz would offer additional aid to American-backed rebel groups that have been fighting the Syrian government and ISIS, but in contrast to some of his former Republican rivals his focus is very much on defeating ISIS rather than on pushing Assad out of power. He would likely accept Russian influence in determining a political solution to the Syrian conflict so long as it did not interfere with his counter-ISIS strategy.

Cruz has made opposition to the Iran nuclear deal a centrepiece of his foreign policy platform, indicating that he would revoke it ‘on day one’ of his presidency. Should he be elected, this would likely be as part of a strong overall Republican performance that would mean the party’s continued dominance of both houses of Congress – which would also make it more likely that under him the United States would reimpose sanctions on Iran unilaterally, in contrast to the previous mechanisms effected through the United Nations. The other parties to the JCPOA – the United Kingdom, Russia, China, France and Germany – would not be compelled by such a decision. Absent clear evidence of Iranian cheating on the deal, a unilateral resumption of sanctions by the United States would hand Russia significant leverage with US partners in Europe.

²⁴ Lake, E. (2016), ‘Cruz Assembles an Unlikely Team of Foreign-Policy Rivals’, Bloomberg View, 17 March 2016, <http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2016-03-17/cruz-assembles-an-unlikely-team-of-foreign-policy-rivals> (accessed 20 Apr. 2016).

²⁵ Fox News (2015), ‘Cruz pushes for US to arm Ukraine, as European leaders push for cease-fire’, Fox News Politics, 8 February 2015, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2015/02/08/cruz-pushes-for-us-to-arm-ukraine-plan-opposed-by-germany-ahead-possible-peace.html> (accessed 20 Apr. 2016).

²⁶ Meixler, J. (2016), ‘The 2016 Presidential Candidates on Nuclear Issues’, Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation: Nukes of Hazard Blog, 19 January 2016, <http://nukesofhazardblog.com/the-2016-presidential-candidates-on-nuclear-issues/> (accessed 20 Apr. 2016).

International implications

For the United States' allies – particularly those in Europe – the differences expressed by the candidates in their approaches to Russia are highly instructive. The relationship between the United States and Russia is complex and multifaceted; it touches on numerous critical aspects of the international security architecture. Ultimately, Sanders and Clinton would operate largely within that existing architecture while Cruz would push at its edges and Trump would seek to upend it.

The potential divergences are significant, even if there are also substantial and underappreciated similarities between the policies that the candidates, other than Trump, would seek to enact. (For example, Cruz and Clinton have pitched their rhetoric about Ukraine very differently, which would have some impact on policy, but the specifics of their plans are comparable.)

From the perspective of the United States' Western European allies, Cruz represents a potentially significant deviation on Iran. While Clinton and Sanders might manage relations with Iran differently, they would both maintain the nuclear deal, leaving space for European countries to broaden and deepen their political and economic engagement with Tehran while maintaining the viability of the two-track approach to Russia. Trump, too, would likely maintain the deal despite his criticism of it, and though he might try to create opportunities for American firms to compete with their European counterparts in Iran, his doing so would not change Russia's role there.

If Cruz followed through on his campaign promises and unilaterally restored American sanctions on Iran, it would place the United States' European allies in an incredibly difficult position – between an emergent relationship with a strategic Gulf country and a US ally that had just reversed a key element of its foreign policy of recent years. Cruz would thus allow Russia to paint itself as the reasonable, consistent party in Middle Eastern diplomacy and in non-proliferation matters. This would constitute major leverage in Russia's attempts to negotiate a favourable outcome in Ukraine and might serve as a catalyst for the EU to relax sanctions on it.

This is a reminder that the main area of strategic contention between the United States and Russia is Europe, where the former has numerous bilateral and multilateral alliance commitments to take into account. Aside from the Iran deal, Cruz, Clinton and Sanders are all dedicated – though in different ways – to the conventional American wisdom on the positive value of the United States' European commitments.

The United States' Eastern European allies might welcome an aggressive build-up of US forces as championed by Cruz and to a lesser extent Clinton, while those in Western Europe seeking to give Russia more opportunities to de-escalate might be angered by them. By contrast, Eastern European countries might find Sanders' reliance upon soft power tools insufficiently reassuring.

Cruz's strategy in particular represents a high-risk, high-reward approach to Russia: a calculation that a show of force will convince Putin to operate within the US-led world order rather than simply raising the odds of unpredictable escalation while driving intra-European fissures. While Clinton's approach on this front is not wildly different from Cruz's, she has the advantage of familiarity with many of the major European and Russian players based on her time as secretary of state. That factor is inevitably a double-edged sword, but it does mean that she would be able to communicate

more effectively her policy and address European criticism from the beginning of her term. Cruz, Sanders and Trump would all have to build those relationships more or less from scratch.

For all that Clinton, Sanders and Cruz espouse divergent approaches and deeply divergent rhetorical styles, the United States' allies would find that any one of them would continue the fundamental trend of long-term American strategy towards Russia. Trump, by contrast, would offer the most significant deviation from it in 70 years. His apparent willingness to draw the boundaries of American national interest in such a way as to open the door for Russia to act freely in Europe and the Middle East places him in a category almost by himself among American politicians. Trump's policy would also mean that instead of the United States trying to defend the existing world order and Russia trying to challenge it, the status quo would be under attack from both sides.

In trying to operationalize his policy – for example, by withdrawing American troops from Europe – Trump would likely face massive bipartisan opposition in Congress and within the bureaucracy of the executive branch itself. But he has not demonstrated an interest in collaboration or in backing down when challenged by established opponents. He would likely seek to work around such obstacles, therefore, and try to implement his policies by executive fiat – which again would leave them vulnerable to push-back from Congress. That tension would limit the extent to which he could change the United States' course, but in stretching the boundaries and creating uncertainty he would lend further weight to the suggestion that America is an increasingly erratic and unreliable ally. And that would, in turn, provide leverage to Russia, which it could deploy in Europe, the Middle East and on broader issues of international security.

The other possibility would be that Trump and Putin find themselves at odds over some aspect of policy or perceived slight, leading Trump to switch to the sort of exceptionally hawkish tone that he has taken with China, Mexico and other perceived enemies. In this instance, lacking any significant economic levers over Russia – these being Trump's preferred means of dealing with opposing states, to judge from his rhetoric – it is not at all clear what approach he would take, or what means he would use.

In short, the United States' allies would need to re-examine basic aspects of their geopolitical positioning should Trump become president. Eastern European countries, in particular, would need to decide whether they could maintain a Western-facing orientation given a United States no longer willing to help them deter Russia, and Western European countries might need to reconsider seriously how much of a united front they could maintain on sanctions and Ukraine.

Regardless of the election's outcome, US policy towards Russia is liable to shift to a noticeable degree from January 2017. Whether that shift is a subtle realignment of the means by which the United States pushes back against Russian strategic contestation or a massive shift in its role in the world is less a question of a Republican or Democratic victory than a question of a Trump victory as opposed to any other outcome.

About the author

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About the 2016 US Election Note series

The November 2016 US presidential and congressional elections are occurring at a time of change inside the United States and uncertainty in the world. How the next administration adapts to a host of international challenges will be central not only to the United States' prosperity and security, but also, given its continuing global economic and political power, to the prosperity and security of countries across the world.

The months before and after the elections will witness an enormous number of analyses and reports by US institutions and media on the future of foreign and domestic policy, targeted principally at US public and policy-making audiences. Using Chatham House's international reputation for informed and independent analysis, the US and the Americas Programme will assess the likely trajectories of US international policy after the 2016 presidential election. Looking at US foreign policy from an external perspective, the Election Note papers will analyse the implications for other countries and help them to understand how a new president and his or her policies will affect them.

In the run-up to the elections, Chatham House is producing a series of Election Notes on major foreign policy issues, explaining the background, the relative positions of the main contenders for the White House, and the international implications of each. These Election Notes do not just provide independent analysis of what the candidates say, but draw upon an understanding of their record in public life, if relevant, and their domestic and foreign policy teams to offer a deeper and more rounded assessment of their likely approach to major foreign policy issues. They are intended to inform and be relevant to governments, businesses, NGOs, foundations and the broader public.

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