



National Committee on American Foreign Policy

A U.S.-Russia Bilateral Conference

July 13, 2020

By Stephen Whittaker

U.S.-Russia relations continue to ebb toward a low point. Seemingly worsened by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, continuing a dialogue with colleagues overseas is of paramount importance. Building from this belief, the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) and the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) convened their fifth meeting since 2015, the first in a bilateral format. Having previously engaged in a recurring trilateral conference addressing relations among the U.S., Japan and Russia, the leadership of both the NCAFP and RIAC perceived a critical need to confront core issues in the U.S.-Russia relationship, and bring attention to them amid mutual unease.

Coming together on July 13, 2020 via video teleconference, noted experts on the U.S.-Russia relationship addressed the following core subjects:

- *What is the impact of COVID-19 on Russia and the U.S.? Has the pandemic created opportunities for cooperation or has it led to increased competition? What are the implications of U.S.-China tensions for Russia?*
- *How will the presidential election and U.S. domestic tensions affect U.S.-Russia relations?*

With these questions setting the stage, the participants' comments and presentations largely addressed three major themes: a definite state of confrontation between the U.S. and Russia; the question of shifting global polarity; and how the relationship can progress in the short term.

Cooperation versus Competition and Confrontation

From the opening of the conference, it became abundantly clear that most participants perceived the U.S. and Russia in a state of confrontation. Early comments from both Russian and American participants focused on the management of a competitive relationship, with emphasis on calling out and addressing its more adversarial elements. One Russian framed this as paramount: the U.S. and Russia cannot productively discuss broad cooperation without first answering hard questions.

Drawing the ongoing pandemic into the fold, several participants highlighted how COVID-19 has served to deepen distrust between the U.S. and Russia. Extant problems and concerns only seem to have grown worse since the start of the year, not been overcome or replaced. As one American suggested, these problems are deeply rooted and find their origins in the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and Russian intervention in the Donbass. At that point, one can find a clear shift in broad American perceptions of Russia and the U.S.-Russia relationship. Though the participants did not delve deeply into the complexities surrounding Ukraine, several agreed that it is the critical subject that the two governments must address to move the U.S.-Russia relationship into more cooperative territory.

A Russian participant, drawing on this negative American public perception, also noted a similar phenomenon in Russia. They suggested that adverse public opinion in both countries creates two problems: because perceptions remain sour, it is difficult for leaders and decision makers to adopt policies that are counter to public preferences; additionally, political leaders on both sides continue to find the status quo useful. Conflict, real or imagined, plays into the domestic political advantage of leaders on both sides. It is enormously difficult to settle a confrontation when it serves, ostensibly, as the preferred state of affairs. Furthermore, as an American participant detailed, it is not surprising that the pandemic deepened this public opinion divide and showcased a lack of cooperation. National leaders are pressed to protect their own people first and foremost, making conversations about resource sharing and joint efforts unpalatable at the height of a crisis (especially when relations are already tense).

Though this lack of cooperation was a prevailing theme in the conversation, another American participant noted a number of areas in which cooperation continues. Cooperative health-related efforts continue on a small scale through legacy agreements; joint efforts related to space have remain largely insulated from political headwinds; arctic cooperation and dialogues have seen measurable progress; and arms control continues to be a mutually beneficial subject of conversation. Arms control will continue to recur as a key area through which the relationship can move forward.

The U.S.-China Relationship and Shifting Global Polarity

A second major theme that emerged from the conference was the idea of shifting global polarity, and how potential shifts impact U.S.-Russia relations. Broadly, several participants framed the axis of international affairs around the U.S.-China relationship. While certainly a key aspect of the international order, there was some divergence in terms of what intensifying U.S.-China confrontation and rivalry means for other global powers.

A participant initially suggested that the world is rebalancing into a bipolar international order, with the U.S. and China sharing primacy. This would imply that other nations gravitate to one actor versus the other and shape policy around this choice. Other views put forward included the deepening of a multipolar order, or the development of global tiers, rather than poles. The link between these two bipolarity alternatives was the suggestion that there is an obstacle to organized bipolarity on a global scale: powers beyond the U.S. and China can still have an outsized impact on world affairs. A Russian participant called particular attention to the European Union, India, and Russia, all of whom avoid being grouped exclusively with the U.S. or China.

Several participants offered that Russia will likely seek to maintain its strategic autonomy and actively hedge against China in the future in furtherance of a multipolar or otherwise tiered international order. One participant, however, suggested the U.S. will continue to shape its Russia policy with China in mind. They offered that a linkage exists in American perceptions of Russia and China, with Russia serving as a junior partner in Chinese global designs. Whether real or imagined, this state of affairs will only worsen American perceptions and policy toward Russia if U.S.-China relations continue to degrade. An American participant highlighted a broad bipartisan consensus in the U.S. that is building against China. This trend is likely to continue if a Democratic U.S. Administration, that places greater emphasis on human rights and labor issues, wins office in the coming months.

Ultimately, a Russian participant concluded, while U.S.-China rivalry benefits Russia's strategic position, it can only undermine U.S.-Russia relations in the short to medium term.

Moving the Relationship Forward

From across the spectrum of participating experts, there was not much optimism for the U.S.-Russia relationship. As pointed out by an American participant, many of the ills of the current U.S. Administration are, rightly or wrongly, linked back to Russia. U.S. Russia policy has become deeply intertwined with domestic politics, creating a situation in which, rhetorically, it is almost necessary to be critical of Russia. A Russian participant offered that this state may only worsen should the presidency change hands in the coming months. They hinted at the irony that it may be simpler for the Trump Administration to advance sensible policy, notably on arms control, due to Republican control of the U.S. Senate. While a Democratic president might be more inclined to take action on that front, it is unlikely that a Republican-controlled Senate would offer a substantial policy victory to a rival Administration, even in the form of a comprehensive arms control treaty.

Arms control was continuously raised by participants as an area in which potential cooperation remained possible and in the mutual interests of the U.S. and Russia. Several raised the extension of New START as an action item that can be addressed immediately, with benefits for all parties. One Russian participant even remained optimistic that a more comprehensive treaty could also be negotiated, pointing to the historical examples of the Nixon and Reagan Administrations, under which major arms control treaties were negotiated and enforced despite particularly tense relations. However, several stressed that extending New START is a vital first step.

More broadly, many participants agreed that there was a tremendous need for enhanced dialogue between the U.S. and Russia, emphasizing the importance of continued exchange and mutual understanding. An American participant noted that this was needed at all stages, from Track II through, junior, working, and senior levels of government. This open form of communication can help to shift conversations on U.S.-Russia relations from one of "rules of the road" and "guardrails" for the relationship, to one of navigating roadblocks that lead to a more productive path forward. Cyberspace was noted as a particularly important subject needing this form of engagement.

Once the U.S. and Russia have a clear understanding of redlines and mutual pitfalls, both sides will know how to navigate areas of friction. Dialogue is a matter of prudence that both sides should recognize as essential in steering clear of future conflict.

**Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) –
National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP)**

Webinar “Russia – US cooperation in the present and post-COVID-19 world”

July 13, 2020

All Times MSK

Working language: English

17:15-17:30

Opening remarks

Andrey KORTUNOV, Director General, Russian International Affairs Council

Susan ELLIOTT, U.S. Ambassador (ret.), President and CEO, National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP)

17:30-17:50

Initial Remarks

Speakers:

Ivan TIMOFEEV, Director of Programs, RIAC

Tom GRAHAM, Distinguished Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations; Senior Advisor, Kissinger Associates, Inc.

17:50-19:00

Presentations and Discussion

Issues for discussion:

- *What is the impact of COVID-19 on Russia and the U.S.? Has the pandemic created opportunities for cooperation or has it led to increased competition? What are the implications of U.S.-China tensions for Russia?*
- *How will the presidential election and U.S. domestic tensions affect U.S.-Russia relations?*

Chair:

Susan ELLIOTT, U.S. Ambassador (ret.), President and CEO, National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP)

Panelists:

RIAC:

Sergey ROGOV, Academic Director, RAS Institute for U.S. and Canadian Studies; RAS Full Member; RIAC Member

Dmitry SUSLOV, Deputy Director, Centre for Comprehensive European and International Studies (CCEIS), Higher School of Economics; RIAC Member

Viktoriya ZHURAVLEVA, Head of Centre for North American Studies, IMEMO, RAS

NCAFP:

Tom GRAHAM, Distinguished Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations; Senior Advisor, Kissinger Associates, Inc.

John Francis TEFFT, U.S. Ambassador (ret.)

Celeste WALLANDER, President and CEO, U.S.-Russia Foundation; Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Russia/Eurasia (2013-2017)

19:00-19:10

Closing remarks