

# WHAT SHOULD FUTURE U.S. POLICY TOWARD RUSSIA BE IN PEACETIME?

Evaluating Trade-Offs of a Less-Hardline Approach



**R**ussia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has made a more constructive U.S.-Russia relationship implausible for the foreseeable future. However, once the fighting eventually stops, the United States will continue to face long-term structural incentives to improve the stability and predictability of its relations with Moscow.

**H**istory has shown that relations between even bitter rivals can shift over time. Future changes in the international system, competing policy priorities, or shifts in Russian behavior may create incentives for Washington to consider a less-hardline approach to relations with Moscow, as it has attempted in the past. Such a future policy would aim to advance U.S. interests by proactively addressing certain Russian interests and concerns. RAND researchers explored the trade-offs that states face when they adopt a less-hardline approach, examining the benefits and costs in four historical case studies and assessing what can be learned to inform future U.S. peacetime policy toward Russia.

## WHAT IS A LESS-HARDLINE APPROACH?

When two states are rivals or have significant differences, they can choose either a *hardline* or a *less-hardline approach* toward each conflict of interest. A state adopts a *hardline approach* when it tries to achieve its goals by outmaneuvering or coercing a rival and does not seek a resolution that accounts for the rival's interests. In contrast, a state adopts a *less-hardline approach* when it seeks to advance its own interests by proactively addressing what it perceives to be the rival's interests or concerns. We focus on less-hardline approaches in peacetime rather than concessions made in a crisis to avoid war or during an ongoing war to end the fighting.

The defining feature of a less-hardline approach is **a state's willingness to address the other side's concerns as a means of achieving its own goals**. However, less-hardline approaches can vary in breadth and depth, from small compromises on peripheral issues to larger concessions on more fundamental conflicts of interest. In addition, a state can shift toward a more conciliatory policy in one area even as it sustains hardline policies in others. Moreover, a less-hardline approach can still involve a tough stance during negotiations.

The figure illustrates the differences between hardline and less-hardline approaches and provides examples of each.

### Hardline Approach

State tries to achieve its peacetime goals through a competitive approach that seeks to outmaneuver or coerce a rival and does not seek a resolution that accounts for the rival's interests

#### EXAMPLES

- Increase military force levels to coerce or intimidate a rival
- Use force against a rival or its proxies
- Pursue advantages in a conflict without consideration of the rival's interests

### Less-Hardline Approach

State seeks to advance its peacetime interests through a cooperative or accommodating approach that proactively addresses what it perceives to be the rival's interests or concerns

#### EXAMPLES

- Negotiate with the rival to resolve or manage a conflict of interest
- Make unilateral concessions to the rival
- Encourage allies to engage in negotiations or take unilateral steps that address the adversary's interests or concerns
- Reduce military forces near the adversary's homeland or in other areas where the two countries have a conflict of interest
- Provide tacit or explicit acceptance of the other side's aggression in an area where both countries have an interest

## POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND COSTS OF LESS-HARDLINE APPROACHES

Scholars and policymakers have made numerous claims about the potential benefits and costs of cooperative approaches, as shown in the table.

One potential benefit involves concessions and side payments from the rival, which can be made during negotiations to reach a deal. Resolving one or more conflicts can also reduce the risk of peacetime competition escalating to war. So, a less-hardline approach can reduce the costs associated with hardline approaches, such as defense spending, sustaining a forward military presence, or maintaining readiness for war. A less-hardline approach might reduce the rival state's threat perceptions or insecurity, making the state less likely to undertake aggressive or military action and possibly encouraging the state to take risks involved in cooperation on other issues.

### Potential Benefits

- Receive concessions and side payments from the rival state
- Reduce the costs associated with hardline approaches
- Reduce the risk of peacetime competition escalating to war
- Reduce a rival state's threat perceptions or insecurity

### Potential Costs and Risks

- Make concessions or incentives to a rival state
- Convince the rival state that the United States is weak-willed or irresolute, thus emboldening the adversary to be more demanding or aggressive

The most direct cost of a less-hardline approach involves the concessions or incentives that a state offers its rival, which could result either from unilateral concessions or as part of a negotiation. Another common concern is that less-hardline approaches will convince the adversary that the United States is *weak-willed* or *irresolute*, meaning it is not willing to bear significant costs to defend its interests. This, in turn, could cause the rival state to become emboldened—more demanding in negotiations, or more likely to launch military action—in the expectation that it will not meet resistance.

## CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING THE USE OF LESS-HARDLINE APPROACHES

Both the benefits and costs of less-hardline approaches can be affected by the circumstances in which these actions occur.

Scholars have suggested that there are multiple reasons why the benefits may not always be realized in practice or may be smaller than a state adopting a less-hardline approach might hope. First, insecurity and mistrust can make a state worry that concessions might add to the rival's power or diminish their own, or lead a state to believe that the rival may defect on any agreement. Second, the mix of a state's policies—including continued competition in one area—may affirm the rival's belief that there is no positive change in the state's behavior despite some less-hardline approaches. Third, states may have incentives to misrepresent the strength of their resolve on a given issue, so that they can press for a bargain that is more aligned with their own preferences; such incentives can make states suspicious about their rivals' claims.

Finally, when a nation's leaders adopt a strategy, there remains the risk that lower-level officials within the bureaucracy could adopt policies that unintentionally or intentionally run counter to that strategy or even try to sabotage a new strategy.

Just as the potential benefits of conciliation may depend on the circumstances, so might the costs. The distribution of power could affect whether a rival is emboldened by a less-hardline approach. A relatively weaker state may be less likely to be emboldened by a conciliatory policy out of concern that, if the weaker state undertakes aggression, it could find itself in a conflict in which the stronger state brings all its material advantages to bear against it. Finally, some scholars have argued that a weaker state's ambitions—whether it is happy with the status quo or is revisionist and seeks to change it—can affect whether a state is emboldened by conciliatory gestures.

## SELECTION OF **CASE STUDIES**

On the following pages, we present four historical case studies involving broad strategic similarities to the U.S.-Russia relationship before Russia's 2022 war in Ukraine. To select cases, we used the existing international relations literature to identify the circumstances (e.g., preexisting level of insecurity) that may affect the way that states respond to less-hardline approaches. We then sought cases that matched circumstances in the U.S.-Russia relationship in mid-2021 as closely as possible. Ideally, we would have selected cases that share similarities with what the U.S.-Russian relationship might evolve into after this war. Unfortunately, much remains uncertain about the war and its impacts.

We selected cases in which there is an asymmetric distribution of power, geographic separation, and pronounced mistrust between the parties and in which a globally stronger state adopted more-conciliatory policies toward a weaker rival. We also preferred cases in which the weaker state seeks more territory or greater influence in the domestic affairs of its neighbors, both states have nuclear weapons, and the stronger state has allies with a stake in the rivalry. Although all the selected cases involve either Russia or the Soviet Union, this choice was based on the issues described above rather than the countries involved.

In each case, we assessed how such policies affected the weaker state's perceptions and behavior and ultimately the course of the relationship between the two countries. We also considered how hardline elements of the stronger state's approach interacted with and mediated the effects of the less-hardline elements.

Although the ultimate trajectory of the conflict in Ukraine is not knowable at the time of this writing, many aspects of the prewar U.S.-Russia relationship (e.g., geography, alliances) appear likely to hold. The further the postwar U.S.-Russia relationship departs from the conditions that we used to select case studies in mid-2021, the greater the risk to the continued relevance of our findings.

## Anglo-Russian Negotiations over Central Asia (1899-1914)

### KEY COMPONENTS OF THE LESS-HARDLINE APPROACH

After years of negotiations, in August 1907, Britain and Russia concluded an agreement—the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907—that formalized their spheres of influence in Central Asia. Leaders from both nations hoped the agreement would reduce the risk of conflict in the region—where London and St. Petersburg had been competing for territory and influence for most of the 19th century—and free up resources for other national priorities. Three countries were central to the Anglo-Russian competition: Persia, Afghanistan, and Tibet.

Britain was motivated to seek the accommodation in order to rein in the British Empire's spending on defense and to simplify the strategic landscape (particularly after its bitter loss in the Boer War) by removing Russian designs on India. Leaders in Britain also believed that Russia might be receptive to such an agreement following St. Petersburg's humiliating defeat in the 1904 Russo-Japanese war. Russia believed the accommodation would help deal with the immense internal instability that plagued the country since the Russian Revolution in 1905. The agreement was also seen as a necessary precondition to obtain international loans, which were vital for Russian domestic recovery.



Approximate Borders in South and Central Asia as of 1914

Neither side incurred significant costs as a result of the agreement. From the British perspective, Russia did not become more demanding or aggressive in Central Asia, and there was no evidence that Britain's pursuit of a less-hardline approach caused Russia (or other states) to view Britain as weak-willed. In the years following the Convention, Russia continued to pursue competitive behavior in Central Asia, but St. Petersburg's opportunism was at most a continuation of Russian strategy in the region prior to 1907 rather than an expansion of its objectives. From the Russian perspective, the Convention's costs were primarily in the forgone advantages that Russia could have pursued, particularly in Persia.

### BENEFITS AND COSTS

Of significant importance to both nations, Russia and Britain did not fight a war over Central Asia as many observers had predicted in the mid- to late 19th century. The agreement also mitigated Britain's threat perceptions of an urgent and direct Russian advance on India, though Britain did not subsequently reduce its expenditures on the defense of India where its force had previously been overextended. For its part, Russia was able to obtain international loans and secured Britain's support for revising the Straits Convention, which denied Russia access to the Turkish Straits. Improved relations with Britain also indirectly helped Russia (and Britain) achieve greater security vis-à-vis Germany and made a combined alliance with France easier to achieve in the years that followed.

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### LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

Ultimately, the agreement had a limited effect on improving overall relations between Russia and Britain because it left certain tensions in Central Asia only partially resolved. In particular, Russia became increasingly frustrated by the Convention's prohibition on regularized relations with Afghanistan and felt limited by the agreement's restrictions in Persia, particularly after revolution and instability in that nation created a power vacuum. Britain became concerned that Russia would simply absorb Persia in response to the unrest, and the discovery of oil in Persia in Britain's southern sphere increased London's desire for a partition of the country. Moreover, after the conclusion of the agreement, local proxies in Central Asia often pursued policies that challenged the agreement.

## U.S.-Soviet Negotiations on the Post-World War II Order (1945-1946)

### KEY COMPONENTS OF THE LESS-HARDLINE APPROACH

After Nazi Germany's defeat, U.S., Soviet, and Allied leaders all recognized that a postwar settlement was necessary to chart a course of reconstruction, redraw political boundaries, and create an international system that would be both stable and durable. President Harry Truman wanted Soviet assistance in defeating Japan and building a durable international peace; Soviet Premier Josef Stalin wanted international recognition of a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and postwar reconstruction assistance. Both wanted to prevent the reemergence of a powerful Germany or Japan that might, in their view, provoke a third world war. The United States sought a negotiated agreement with the Soviets that addressed key issues for both sides, believing that the Soviet need for economic assistance gave the United States leverage and that the Soviets could be incentivized to behave more cooperatively by addressing some of their demands.



The Potsdam Conference left to right: Joseph Stalin, Harry Truman, Winston Churchill.

### BENEFITS AND COSTS

This less-hardline approach rested on negotiations over postwar borders and governance in Central and Eastern Europe, the resolution of which could have conferred de facto Allied recognition of the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. U.S. willingness to negotiate on the composition of a Polish government and other border issues allowed the two sides to reach agreement on a number of key issues. The clearest example was Secretary of State James Byrnes' willingness to trade U.S. recognition of the Soviet-drawn Polish border in return for a modified reparations policy preferred by the United States.

Both sides ultimately came to believe that the costs of accommodation were too great, however. By the fall of 1945, the United States began to stake out a more-hardline position in areas considered vital to U.S. interests, such as the Turkish Straits, and to ensure that the Soviets accepted U.S. primacy in Japan (including Soviet exclusion from the administration of postwar Japan). By early 1946, Soviet actions in Turkey and Iran led U.S. officials to conclude that the Soviet Union was an expansionist power whose activities ran counter to core U.S. interests.

Stalin, meanwhile, saw U.S. actions as part of a pattern of behavior that threatened Soviet security and indicated that U.S. attempts to accommodate Soviet interests were not genuine. U.S. actions—including the dropping of atomic weapons over Japan, excluding the Soviets from Japan's postwar administration, and initially refusing to recognize Soviet-friendly governments in the Balkans—persuaded the Soviet Union that the United States would not provide the guarantees in Eastern Europe that the Soviets desired.

### LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

The long-term impact of the United States' limited efforts to accommodate Soviet interests affected the overall structure of the future Cold War. Lack of accommodation in the postwar administration of Japan allowed the United States to retain its preeminent position there without Soviet involvement in the political development of postwar Japan. In Europe, meanwhile, U.S. policy resulted in the de facto confirmation of the Soviet sphere of influence in the east.

As tensions worsened, Europe became the focal point for the growing superpower confrontation. This division would subsequently become both the basis for the postwar order and a flashpoint for several of the most-severe crises during the Cold War.

## U.S.-Soviet Détente (1969–1975)

### KEY COMPONENTS OF THE LESS-HARDLINE APPROACH

The period between 1969 and 1975 saw a mutual easing of tensions and stabilization of the superpower context between the United States and the Soviet Union. Détente was premised on the belief that the United States could manage Soviet power through arms control agreements and expanded East-West trade that would stabilize the relationship, bind the Soviet Union to the status quo, reduce the costs of competition, and lower the risk of war.

The immediate priorities for U.S. defense policy were to deter a nuclear attack on the United States or its allies, to counter and contain Soviet influence until the system collapsed upon itself, and to maintain a stable international system conducive to the spread of liberal democratic capitalist systems. On the Soviet side, Leonid Brezhnev's foreign policy priorities were to prevent war while establishing favorable conditions for the spread of communism and safeguarding the post-1945 European borders that he and other Soviet officials believed provided a necessary buffer against hostile Western forces. The need to reduce costs and risks became more urgent as Soviet relations with China deteriorated in the 1960s. The Soviets sought to achieve their objectives by balancing two competing approaches. Maintaining a general strategic parity in nuclear forces was necessary to deter a surprise attack and to allow Soviet negotiators to engage with the United States as equals. At the same time, minimizing the risk of inadvertent confrontation or escalatory spiral required a reduction in tensions and an increase in improved communications with the United States and Western Europe.

### BENEFITS AND COSTS

Détente had an overall, if temporary, stabilizing effect by incentivizing deescalation and confidence-building measures during repeated international crises. The United States was able to secure a set of discrete objectives vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, including restrictions on certain types of armaments obtained through the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) and new frameworks for economic, trade, and scientific cooperation. European-led initiatives, such as the Quadripartite Agreement, settled the issue of Western access to Berlin, while the Helsinki Final Act provided a framework for the peaceful settlement of disputes along with military confidence-building measures intended to avert miscommunications and misperceptions that could spark a crisis. Our review of the literature did not find compelling evidence that U.S. offers of accommodation emboldened the Soviet Union to increase its demands or reduce its assessment of U.S. resolve below existing expectations.



### LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

U.S. accommodations did not (and were not designed to) alter the fundamental competitive dynamic between the two states. The unresolved contradiction between the pragmatic Soviet desire to relax tensions with the United States and its ideological commitment to global revolutionary movements ultimately proved a constraint. Although the United States and the Soviet Union established a precedent for nuclear arms control, the nuclear arms race continued throughout this period.

U.S. offers to expand trade, negotiate arms limitations, and implement other cooperative practices did not persuade the Soviet Union to suspend its competitive activities, including new defense programs and interventionism in the Third World. In the absence of a wider settlement, U.S. efforts to pursue less-hardline policies catalyzed a domestic political backlash that strengthened over time and ultimately restricted the White House's will and ability to follow through on its promises or to offer new concessions.

Nonetheless, U.S. attempts at accommodation planted the seeds for the transformation of the Cold War in the late 1980s. To an extent unrecognized by either country at the time, the trade, cultural exchange, and human rights provisions of the Helsinki Act would embolden a new generation of transnational activists who successfully challenged the communist system across Eastern Europe. Moreover, the era's arms control negotiations established both a framework and a proof of concept for the later Intermediate Nuclear Forces agreement, which would impose more significant reductions a decade later.

## U.S.-Russia Reset (2009–2013)

### KEY COMPONENTS OF THE LESS-HARDLINE APPROACH

U.S. policy toward Russia underwent a “reset” when President Barack Obama took office in January 2009. The Obama administration came into office convinced that the existing hostile relationship with Russia was counterproductive for U.S. interests. Three core principles were at the heart of the reset: (1) an emphasis on engagement with Moscow, (2) a rejection of linkage in U.S. policy (i.e. a deliberate decision not to tie cooperation on one issue to Russian behavior on an unrelated matter), and (3) less emphasis on geopolitical competition with Russia.

The reset was circumscribed from the start. The Obama administration sought to make progress on nonproliferation, arms control, and Afghanistan—issues in which Russia played a key role—and wanted to create broad international consensus and engender multilateral action on such priorities as curbing Iran’s nuclear ambitions. So it pursued cooperation on these and other issues while avoiding compromises on the core bilateral disputes, such as the regional order on Russia’s periphery and strategic stability.

### BENEFITS AND COSTS

Although circumscribed, the reset nonetheless produced important results. The United States and Russia concluded a wide array

of agreements and arrangements, from cooperation to rein in Iran’s nuclear ambitions to the New START arms agreement of 2011, which reduced deployed strategic nuclear warheads by one-third and modernized the bilateral inspection, notification, and data exchange regime. The Obama administration also used the reset to create an institutionalized framework for bilateral relations, the Bilateral Presidential Commission.

The reset’s impact on Russian behavior was significant, leading to a more cooperative stance, although that change was relatively short-lived.

There is no evidence that the reset emboldened Russia to be more aggressive. The instances of Russian aggression that followed the deterioration in relations, including the 2014 annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine, appeared to have their roots at least partly in the reset’s limitations—from Russia’s perspective—rather than a perception of U.S. weakness sparked by the less-hardline approach.

### LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

The reset’s positive impact on the U.S.-Russia relationship faded as the pace of agreements and achievements waned by late 2012. The limited nature of the accommodation is a significant factor in explaining the relatively short period of improved relations. Once the relatively low-hanging fruit of agreements on overlapping interests had been harvested, what remained were the deeper disputes. Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012 also had an independent, negative impact on the relationship.

The reset was not an attempt to transform the U.S.-Russia relationship. Nonetheless, some of the agreements survived the end of the reset and the deterioration of relations in 2014.



## POTENTIAL EFFECTS OF FUTURE LESS-HARDLINE APPROACHES IN ADVANCING U.S. INTERESTS

Taken together, the case studies highlight several findings regarding how less-hardline approaches might, or might not, advance the interests of the stronger state pursuing them. Researchers also identified several findings with clear implications for how Russia is likely to respond to a future less-hardline approach by the United States.

### **Less-Hardline Approaches That Do Not Address Core Russian Concerns Are Unlikely to Stabilize the U.S.-Russia Relationship over the Medium to Long Term**

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In all the case studies, the stronger states sustained hardline policies on some issues (e.g., development and fielding of new nuclear systems and conventional arms buildup in Europe in the U.S.-Soviet Détente case study) even as they adopted less-hardline approaches on others. In addition, the source of future conflict often remained in areas where rivals had not resolved or even attempted to address their differences. When the countries *did* address core issues, there were fewer sources of conflict over which the relationship could deteriorate in the future.

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has likely made the United States and its allies in Europe even less willing to provide fundamental concessions than they were before; therefore, a future less-hardline approach toward Russia is likely to have clear limitations on its scope. If the United States decides on such an approach, policymakers should be realistic about how durable and successful such a limited less-hardline approach has the potential to be.

### **A Future Less-Hardline U.S. Approach to Russia of Limited Scope Could Still Lead to Limited but Durable Gains**

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The negotiations between stronger and weaker states either resolved or created mechanisms to better manage one or more conflicts of interest. Many of these gains (e.g., the de facto division of Europe into spheres of influence after

World War II, the 2010 New START) proved to be durable, surviving a deterioration of relations on other issues for years or more. This does not mean that a future limited U.S. outreach to Russia would necessarily have this effect, although the case studies suggest that there is a potential for lasting, if narrow, gains from a limited less-hardline approach.

### **In a Peacetime Context, There Appears to Be Little Evidence That Negotiating with Russia or Making Limited Concessions Will Embolden It to Become More Demanding or Aggressive**

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Given the 2022 Russian war in Ukraine, caution regarding whether Russia might be emboldened by future U.S. policies to undertake yet further aggression is certainly warranted. Russia has clearly demonstrated a willingness to use force to achieve its goals, even in the face of substantial costs. The question for future U.S. policymakers, however, is whether a less-hardline approach would make Russia more or less likely to pursue the types of aggression or other escalating demands of which it has clearly demonstrated it is capable. On this score, our case studies provide limited evidence for concern. Russia may remain an aggressive, revisionist state, but so too were all the weaker states in our case studies. There is no evidence that these states became more demanding or aggressive when a stronger state adopted a less-hardline approach toward them.

## **Attempting to Implement Less-Hardline Approaches Could Create Domestic Constituencies Committed to Their Success in Both the United States and Russia**

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Once leaders decide to undertake less-hardline approaches, those leaders often become publicly identified with the approaches' success or failure, making them strong advocates for the continuation of less-hardline approaches. Such a dynamic could be seen following the 2009 reset, when President Dmitry Medvedev proved willing to deliver on key U.S. requests over the objections of Russian hardliners. In the future, leadership support could make a less-hardline U.S. approach toward Russia more durable or successful than might otherwise have been anticipated. Although political pressures are likely to create strong disincentives for U.S. policymakers to pursue less-hardline approaches toward Russia, ensuring that such policies produce a visible success may prompt officials to be more patient and flexible in implementing the policy in ways that may improve Russian perceptions of the sincerity of the U.S. approach.

## **Russia May Be More Willing to Reciprocate Offers of Negotiation by the United States During Periods When It Believes That International Trends Are Moving Against It**

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A weaker state that refuses to reciprocate a less-hardline approach might shift its position when faced with a higher-priority threat, such as mounting tensions with another rival or high or increasing perceived costs and risks associated with the status quo. Although the outcome of the 2022 Russian war in Ukraine is uncertain at the time of this writing, the conflict has already imposed dramatic costs on Russia that—should those costs continue to be felt in Russia in subsequent years—might help create incentives for Russia to reciprocate any less-hardline approaches offered by the United States. However, the attractiveness of these incentives might be mitigated by the fact that the United States and its

allies are imposing many of the costs that Russia is experiencing. These efforts—and the Russian invasion of Ukraine that prompted them—have sharply increased the hostility in the U.S.-Russian relationship and may affect Russian willingness to offer any reciprocal concessions.

## **The Combination of Antagonistic U.S.-China Relations and Close Russia-China Relations Will Decrease Russian Willingness to Make Concessions in Negotiations with the United States**

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The hardening of U.S.-China tensions is likely to reduce Russia's incentive to respond favorably to less-hardline U.S. approaches, particularly those that are more limited in nature. During détente, it was Soviet anxiety about the emerging rapprochement between the United States and China, coming shortly after the Sino-Soviet split, that encouraged Moscow to pursue closer relations with Washington, for fear of being sidelined or facilitating a clear U.S.-China axis opposing its interests.

The current arrangement of the U.S.-Russia-China triangle is roughly the opposite of the situation during détente, and it has likely only been hardened by the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Russia has few, if any, fears that China may abandon it in favor of greater engagement with the United States and its allies. The absence of Russian concern about Chinese abandonment does not preclude Russian acceptance of less-hardline U.S. approaches, but it does remove a potential incentive to reciprocate and could mean that Washington has to make a comparatively better offer to Moscow in such negotiations to prompt Russia to respond more favorably than it would otherwise.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The goals of the United States in its relationship with Russia are in a state of flux and could change over time. Therefore, we make recommendations about how U.S. policymakers should think about less-hardline approaches depending on their objectives.

### **If the United States Wishes to Adopt a Less-Hardline Approach to Russia as a Means of Stabilizing the Relationship, It May Need to Engage in Negotiations over Core Russian Security Concerns**

The case studies suggest that a less-hardline approach that addresses core security concerns is more likely to stabilize relations durably than one that touches on only secondary areas of dispute or matters of shared interest to both sides. In the context of the U.S.-Russia relationship, this would likely mean that if the United States hopes to use a less-hardline approach to stabilize the U.S.-Russian relationship in the future, it will likely need to broaden the scope of negotiations to address fundamental conflicts of interest, first and foremost regarding Ukraine but also missile defense and the regional order in Europe and Eurasia. In the past, the United States has assessed that the costs of accommodating Russia on these issues was too high.

### **If the United States Adopts a Limited Less-Hardline Approach to Achieve Narrower Goals, the United States Should Remain Alert That the Relationship Will Likely Deteriorate over the Unresolved Issues**

The United States could pursue a limited less-hardline approach to Russia (one that does not address Russia's core concerns) to achieve narrower aims rather than a more general stabilization of the relationship. Such an approach may produce some successes, but history suggests that if the United States chooses such an approach, it should remain prepared for future deterioration of, or crises in, the U.S.-Russia relationship.



## The Best Timing for U.S. Outreach to Russia May Be During a More Constructive Period in U.S.-China Relations or When There Are Tensions in the Sino-Russian Relationship

Russia's relationships with China and the United States are not entirely divorced from one another. In past periods of tension with China, such as in the 1970s, Russia has sought more-constructive relations with the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as a hedge; conversely, the recent nadir in U.S.-Russia relations has been accompanied by the closest China-Russia relations in recent memory. The current high level of tensions between the United States and China greatly reduces any concerns that Russia might have about a prospective U.S.-China entente. However, if U.S.-China relations were to become more constructive, Moscow might feel greater insecurity regarding its global standing and might approach negotiations with Washington from a more constructive perspective.



## As Policymakers Evaluate Less-Hardline Approaches, They Should Consider the Effects of Any Hardline Policies That They Sustain Simultaneously

When evaluating the effects of less-hardline approaches, an accounting should be made of the full range of U.S. policies that a rival experienced—along with other factors, such as domestic politics and relations with third countries. Focusing only on correlations between cooperative gestures and undesirable behavior by U.S. rivals can lead to unfounded assessments about the costs and benefits that should be expected from less-hardline options.

## Analysts Should Generate and Compare Options for Less-Hardline U.S. Approaches to Russia

China's rise and U.S. domestic challenges mean that the United States may consider less-hardline approaches toward Russia in the future. U.S. analysts should consider which specific approaches would be viable, given U.S. and Russian interests, the preferences and behavior of the countries directly affected by U.S.-Russia competition (e.g., Ukraine), U.S. alliance dynamics, and other factors. It would be useful for analysts to generate options for U.S. policymakers to weigh—and to implement if the opportunity to employ a less-hardline approach emerges. Scholars could also examine whether there are conditions under which less-hardline approaches embolden rivals.

This brief describes work done in the RAND Center for Analysis of U.S. Grand Strategy and documented in *Future U.S. Peacetime Policy Toward Russia: Exploring the Benefits and Costs of a Less-Hardline Approach*, by Miranda Priebe, Bryan Frederick, Alexandra T. Evans, Samuel Charap, Gabrielle Tarini, and Bryan Rooney (available at [www.rand.org/t/RRR1862-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RRR1862-1)). To view this brief online, visit [www.rand.org/t/RBA1862-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RBA1862-1). The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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