

# Russia and the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election

## Rusia ante la coyuntura de las elecciones en Estados Unidos, 2020

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### ABSTRACT

Given the outlook for the upcoming 2020 U.S. presidential election, in which Donald Trump (Republican) seeks re-election, and Joe Biden is the Democratic Party candidate, questions arise regarding how the result may impact Russia internationally. The aim of this analysis is to study the fact that, regardless of whether Republicans or Democrats win, for Russia the bilateral relationship with the United States will continue to be a challenge in geopolitical and security terms. If Trump is re-elected, U.S. foreign policy will follow the line of economic and political defensive measures and continue to retreat from geopolitical spaces and global leadership to guarantee his America First crosscutting theme. If Biden is elected, Russia will not lower its guard, because the Democrats seek to regain those lost or weakened spaces of leadership. To approach the topic, this article will first analyze how Russia situates itself in the twenty-first century, and this is related to its contemporary vision, geopolitical thinking, and strategy. Second, from a neorealist perspective, the authors examine what happened in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections and why Russian meddling has been alleged. It is also necessary to look at the key concept of power and how Joseph Nye studies it from a global-power-shift perspective and how this relates to information technologies, exploring how it has been related to the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine. Third, the authors look at the geopolitical scenarios in which the U.S. and Russia have interests, agreements, and disagreements, since these will help explain the article's overall aim.

**Key words:** United States, Russia, 2020 elections, geopolitics, realism, security, power

### RESUMEN

Dado el panorama de las elecciones presidenciales de 2020 en Estados Unidos, en donde Donald Trump buscó la reelección por el Partido Republicano, y Joe Biden fue el candidato por el Partido

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Demócrata, surgen las interrogantes sobre cómo este resultado puede impactar a Rusia en el escenario internacional.

El objetivo de este análisis es estudiar que, sea la victoria republicana o demócrata, para Rusia la relación bilateral con Estados Unidos –en términos geopolíticos y de seguridad– seguirá siendo un reto. Si Trump es reelecto, la política exterior de Estados Unidos seguirá la línea de medidas defensivas –económicas y políticas–, así como la retirada de los espacios geopolíticos y de liderazgo global para garantizar su eje “America first”. Si Biden es electo, Rusia no bajará la guardia, pues los demócratas buscan recuperar esos espacios de liderazgo perdidos o debilitados. Para estudiar este tema, este texto primero analiza cómo se sitúa Rusia en el siglo XXI, lo cual está relacionado con su pensamiento geopolítico y estrategia contemporáneos. En segundo lugar, desde una perspectiva neorrealista, el documento examina lo que sucedió en las elecciones presidenciales de Estados Unidos de 2016 y por qué se responsabiliza a Rusia. También es necesario abordar el concepto clave de poder y cómo Joseph Nye lo estudia desde una perspectiva global, su relación con las tecnologías de la información, y cómo se le ha relacionado con la llamada Doctrina Gerasimov. En tercer lugar, el documento continúa con los escenarios geopolíticos donde Estados Unidos y Rusia tienen intereses, acuerdos y desacuerdos, ya que éstos ayudarán a explicar el objetivo de este artículo.

**Palabras clave:** Estados Unidos, Rusia, elecciones 2020, geopolítica, realismo, seguridad, poder.

## INTRODUCTION

November 3, 2020 is election day in the United States. After the first phase of the presidential election cycle, which includes primaries and caucuses, two candidates are bidding for the U.S. presidency: Joe Biden for the Democratic Party, and Donald Trump for the Republican Party, running for his second term as president. The relevance of this election lies in the difference between these two candidates. However, questions arise regarding bilateral relations with Russia: In what scenario will this relationship develop if Biden takes up residence in the White House or if Trump remains, given Vladimir Putin’s intention to extend his mandate until 2036 and the difficulties these two countries have had?

Given the need to study this event from the Russian perspective in order to understand the bilateral relationship, this article will first analyze how Russia situates itself in the twenty-first century, and this is related to its vision, geopolitical thinking, and strategy today. This matter leads us to the second part, the analysis of what happened in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections and why Russian meddling has been alleged, given how it has been related to the new information technologies. The 2016 U.S. election provides an appropriate context for a neorealist perspective since

it involves the election's security and a threat to U.S. sovereignty. This is relevant since the predominant discourse has been that Russia benefits from Trump's presidency to the point of meddling in that country's democratic process. It is also necessary to examine the key concept of power and how Joseph Nye studies it from a global power-shift perspective and how it is related to information technologies, exploring how it has been related to the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine.

After studying how Russia stands in the twenty-first century and what happened in 2016, the article continues with the geopolitical scenarios in which the U.S. and Russia have interests, agreements, and disagreements, since these will help explain the article's ultimate aim: establishing that, whether Republicans or Democrats win, for Russia, the bilateral relationship with the U.S. in geopolitical and security terms will continue to be a challenge. If Trump is re-elected, U.S. foreign policy will follow the line of defensive economic and political measures as well as its retreat from geopolitical spaces and global leadership to guarantee his America First central slogan. If Biden is elected, Russia will not retreat from the international arena, because the Democrats seek to regain those lost or weakened leadership spaces and because Russia has defined a pragmatic geostrategy for at least the next decade.

## PLACING THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Russia returned to the international scene in 2014 with the conflict in Syria and the Crimea issue. Nevertheless, its public reappearance can be situated prior to that, since the time of the Obama administration and the "Russian Reset." The international community was keen to believe that early twenty-first-century Russia would totally embrace "Western values," even more so after the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the Yeltsin era, but the new president offered another vision. Vladimir Putin became the Russian president in 2000, but it was not until 2008 that his administration showed the first hints of defiant military muscle in the war with Georgia.

Barack Obama's "Russian Reset" strategy began in 2009, a period when Putin became the Russian prime minister and Dmitry Medvedev the president. This strategy consisted of restarting the bilateral relationship with Russia with a clean slate. The person in charge of carrying out this diplomatic move with Russian Secretary of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov was U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who later lost the election to Trump despite winning the popular vote (Nieto, 2018: 95). For this sole purpose, the Bilateral Presidential Commission between Russia and the

United States was created, but it stopped working in 2014 because of the Crimean conflict (Dougherty, 2017). This reset period was important because of the following events: the New START 2010 agreement to reduce strategic weapons, the Afghanistan cooperation talks, the sanctions against Iran, and Russian “neutrality” regarding the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervention in Libya in 2011 –at that time Russia neither agreed nor disagreed on the matter.

The Obama administration made other efforts to improve this reset, like the initial minor importance given to the Ukraine situation (the 2014 Maidan revolts) on the U.S. agenda (Nieto, 2018: 95). Nevertheless, in the end, this issue caused tension between the two countries, since the Kremlin also accused Hillary Clinton of being responsible for encouraging those revolts and, therefore interfering in Russian affairs. Even though both administrations had shared concerns on topics such as counterterrorism or cybersecurity (a result of the G-8 talks in Ireland in 2013), issues still remained unsolved such as NATO accepting former Soviet countries, the different goals and interests each country has in Syria, and Crimea’s return to Russian jurisdiction (Nieto, 2018: 96; Gromyko, 2020). However, despite the reset button, Obama had to issue executive orders that sanctioned any individual (politicians, entrepreneurs, bankers) who contributed to destabilizing the Ukraine. Among the “Crimea sanctions” was the expulsion of Russia from the G8 for its actions against the Ukraine, turning it into the G7. The reset button did not work; however, Russia was again in the spotlight.

It is important to remark that after a hiatus from the presidency, Putin returned to power in 2012 with a strong, patriotic narrative that encouraged Russia’s historical and geopolitical role in the world. The “motherland” has been a continuum in Russian politics ever since it was an empire. This time, Putin and his administration had started to work on a different vision, basically a “Russian way.” This geopolitical and geo-economic vision of a Greater Russia involves its seeking to go global pragmatically, not leaning entirely on Asia or Europe (the Atlantic tendency), but returning to its Eurasian essence, being careful of key geopolitical spaces and creating partnerships around the globe. This goal is present in the third General Provision of the 2016 *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, and further developed in the second chapter of this same document (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016).

This geopolitical narrative and official stance explain Russia’s pragmatism regarding the recognition of territories such as South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the annexation of Crimea, since it justifies Russia’s moves in Georgia and the Ukraine. According to NATO’s Membership Action Plan (MAP), the door to NATO is always open for those aspirants who fulfill the criteria for membership. One key element for

understanding what Russia wanted to achieve in a geostrategic move against NATO's expansion is in the MAP's first criteria, which involves political and economic issues (NATO, 1999). The aspirants, such as Georgia and Ukraine, are expected to settle their international disputes peacefully, and this includes territorial disputes. They also had "to settle ethnic disputes or external territorial disputes including irredentist claims or internal jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means in accordance with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) principles and to pursue good neighborly relations" (NATO, 1999).<sup>1</sup> Russia reacted to these two countries' NATO candidacy—and therefore to NATO's expansion—by taking advantage of their internal problems causing an international territorial dispute and preventing them from meeting the aforementioned criteria.

This has contributed to an old narrative of Russia being the enemy of the West and wanting to invade its former Soviet space, a narrative that has reached the point of categorizing any U.S.-Russia confrontation (economic, diplomatic, political, cultural) and any NATO-Russia geopolitical tension as a "New Cold War." It is important to state that trying to revive the Cold War logic is attempt with no solid foundation to bring back a historical period, a classical geopolitical competition in a bipolar and ideological confrontation between two super-powers, which played out in substantially different circumstances (National Research University Higher School of Economics, 2018). Moreover, no matter which administration we study, "The U.S. has an idea or perception of what Russia ought to be and not what Russia is" (Matos, 2020). This is consistent with Erich von Drygalski's idea that "We must see foreign nations as they really are, not as we would like them to be," referring to Russia and its relationship with the West (Haushofer, 1998: 35).

Russia's idea of itself is even more complex than the description of it as a regional power that wants to be global. Russia relies on its geopolitical role and relevance and its spatial identity. Here, we need to examine the foreign policy perception still present within Russian political elites. We should not forget the heritage of the Russian empire and the Soviet Union. President Putin does this intentionally when he reiterates that the USSR's collapse was the largest geopolitical catastrophe because it was followed by the breakdown of the balance of power. Also, when he participated in the unveiling ceremony of the monument to the Peacemaker Tsar Alexander III, his words are clear, "Russia has only two allies, its army and navy." According to Putin, Alexander III stood up for the country's interests directly and openly,

<sup>1</sup> For more in-depth information, see the NATO website, [https://www.nato.int/nato-welcome/index\\_es.html](https://www.nato.int/nato-welcome/index_es.html), the Washington Summit NATO Guide from April 1999, available at <https://www.nato.int/docu/rdr-gde/rdr-gde-sp.pdf>.

and that policy ensured the growth of Russia's influence and authority in the world (Putin, 2017).

The current Russian administration is convinced that the country is called upon to play a unique role in the world, namely to be "the protector of others and defender of many," like the Slavic people and the Christians in the Middle East. We can see here the influence of Russian *émigré* writer Ivan Ilyin and the contemporary geopolitical thinker Alexander Dugin, among others; but the fact is that the mentality of empire or great power continues to be very much alive among Russian decision-makers.

Despite the fact that realists and neorealists maintain that the international structure is more important than individuals, in the international arena the following question is relevant: When are the actions of individuals likely to have a greater or lesser effect on the course of events? Here, it is appropriate to briefly refer to Margaret Hermann's studies regarding how individuals (decision-makers, heads of government) affect a country's foreign policy. Historically, Russian individuals have dictated foreign policy and strategic doctrines; examples are Peter the Great; Catherine the Great; Alexander III; historians and geographers like Nikolai Karamzin, Petr Savitski, and Vladímir Ivanovich Lamansky; and decision-makers like Breznev and Gorbachev. In this case, Margaret G. Hermann's studies can help explain why Putin became the key figure of this twenty-first century Russia. According to Hermann, individuals matter in the making of foreign policy; leaders do make a difference. Whenever there is a leadership change in a major power, like the U.S. or Russia, studies and analyses are made of the impact in their foreign policy.

According to Hermann (1980), individual actions and perspectives affect the course of events when one or many of the following situations regarding political institutions is present: when they are young, unstable, in crisis, or collapsed or when institutional constraints are limited. In the case of Russia, since the process of Glasnost and Perestroika began, and after the USSR collapsed, its political institutions were in crisis, and when Putin came to power, this new country had young institutions plus an unstable framework. This context gave Putin the chance to progressively orient himself as an independent leader, above all after 2012.

Following Hermann's analysis, Putin displays a high level of nationalism, with strong emotional ties to the nation and its patriotic discourse, a high level of perception of control (being able to influence the nation), and has presented a need for affiliation (the concern for establishing and maintaining approachable relationships with other spheres and nations).<sup>2</sup> Adding Hermann's study to a neorealist approach and the fact that Russia is a multinational entity with complex intertwined territories

<sup>2</sup> For more in-depth information regarding personal characteristics of individual leaders, see Margaret G. Hermann (1980: 7-46).

whose geopolitical dynamics intersect with the historic legacy of the USSR, it is important to note that, since 2000, a *de facto* unitary state has been formed, thanks to the federalist dynamic imposed on the whole territory under Putin's administration.

However, Russia has gone through different stages, and this has had an impact on the shaping of its territory in the construction of its spatial identity and its pragmatic stance in the twenty-first century. Its power dynamics have played out amidst this: from the Rus of Kiev to the dominion of the Golden Horde over the Rus; from the birth of Russia to the arrival of the Romanovs; and through the communist period until now. This spatial identity relies on a vital space even beyond the boundaries established by politics over time, and that relationship between space and population is linked to the patriotic principle of the Russian people.

The historic fate [of Russia] was to become the largest contiguous political unit in the world and to expand throughout Northern Asia. The territory was distant from both Western Europe and the Mediterranean world. . . . During the first 700 years, its status as a peripheral country was strengthened by its adherence to the minority Orthodox Christian faith. Under Peter the Great, Russia became part of Western culture and henceforth took part in all phases of it, beginning with the Enlightenment . . . . Russia's accelerated industrialization starting in 1860, and then, for most of the twentieth century, Marxism reordered Russian society and territory. (Buskovitch, 2012: 11)

Russian geopolitical and geo-strategic interests throughout its history have not only been about invading, occupying, or defending tangible spaces, or about exploiting or not exploiting resources. They also involve monitoring the *status quo* in key areas and reconciling interests where there is no winning scenario or in non-vital areas with the intention of focusing efforts on what is essential. This shaped the spatial identity of the Russia that we know today and is the heart of its geopolitical pragmatism. Its multiple expansions –even including the Cold War outer-space race– and loss of territories and spaces throughout its historical stages, have forged an idea and an ideal of greatness, of an almost millennial and Slavophilic origin that has a territorial meaning that has had geographic and diachronic continuity with other empires that have vanished with time. It is the spatial idea of the land of the Rus that has survived, and that Russian Land (the Russian concept of *Zemliá*) is present in the vision of Vladimir Putin and the Great Russia project.

According to this vision, Russians have categorized spaces where the limits are not necessarily those of the proximity of state sovereignty. Such is the case of the creation of geopolitical areas of influence that become part of their thought and territorial identity; they become the spatial meta-narratives, such as Eurasia, the Euro-Atlantic

space, the former Soviet space, geopolitical scenarios, or the Russian Far East (Trenin, 2001: 75-79).

Following Dmitri Trenin, this geopolitical engineering merged into spheres of influence that gave, first to the USSR and now to Russia, a strategic depth in the military and political spheres (Trenin, 2001: 78). He argues that Russia belongs to different *geopolitical faces*, more related to its spatial and not just territorial identity, that are linked to its foreign policy objectives and defense of interests, including the extension of its interests beyond the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

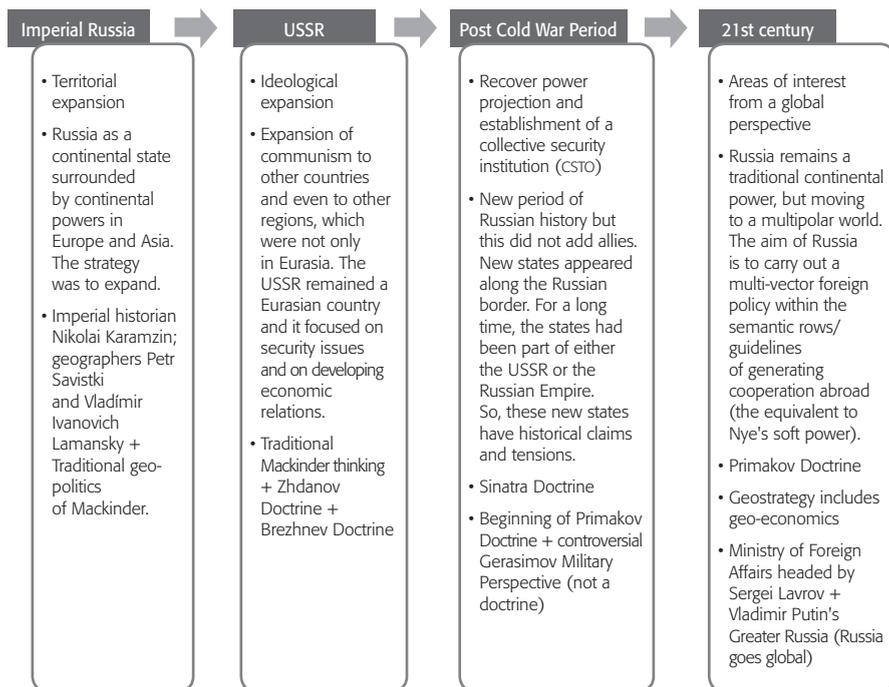
In this sense, Russian geopolitics, both traditional and contemporary, take into consideration these fundamentals:

- 1) Russia occupies the largest territory in the world; this means it has a major capacity of projecting its power and territory.
- 2) It occupies an incredibly special geographical location, which was and still is important to Russian geographers and decisionmakers: Mackinder's Heartland. It is the core even for Spykman's geopolitical theory. The land of the Russian Empire, the USSR, and the Russian Federation was always in the middle of the competition between land powers and sea powers.
- 3) Russian long-standing geopolitical traditions continue to influence its current geostrategy, and a historical constant factor has been *expansion*: first, regarding territory; second, regarding its ideology and influence; and third, and currently, its areas of interest (National Research University Higher School of Economics, Russia, 2018).

Russian geopolitics has been driven by decision-makers, political practitioners, and different doctrines, as shown in Figure 1. The Zhdanov Doctrine was the response to Churchill's Iron Curtain. It was established after Andrei Zhdanov, third secretary of the USSR Communist Party, delivered a speech recognizing the world had been divided in two blocs: the imperialist bloc (U.S., Western Europe) and the democratic bloc (USSR, Eastern Europe). The Brezhnev Doctrine was useful for justifying the Soviet move in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and the Sinatra Doctrine was mainly Gorbachev's policy of allowing Warsaw-Pact-member countries to solve their domestic issues without Soviet intervention. The Primakov Doctrine defined the Russian foreign and defense policies for over 20 years and projected it as an indispensable actor with an independent foreign policy in a multipolar world, but opposed to NATO's expansion. We will study further this doctrine in the second part of this article, when contrasting it to the Gerasimov approach and explaining why it is related to the alleged meddling in the 2016 U.S. elections. Finally, contemporary geopolitics still takes into consideration Russia's

world location in the Heartland as a relevant concept, but also keeps in mind the Primakov Doctrine, adding it to non-traditional expansion but seeking a balance of power by establishing strategic partnerships worldwide for a Greater Russia.

**Figure 1**  
MAIN RUSSIAN GEOPOLITICAL STAGES



**Sources:** Developed by Daniela Sandoval Careaga, using data from Laruelle (2012); National Research University Higher School of Economics (2018); Gerasimov (2013); and Kemaev (2020).

## THE 2016 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

A democracy is only as resilient as its people. For generations, our society has protected free press, free speech, and free thought. Today, actors such as Russia are using information tools in an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of democracies. Adversaries target media, political processes, financial networks, and personal data. (The White House, "National Security Strategy," 2017)

As stated above, there is a more complex idea behind Russian foreign policy than simply being “the other” for the United States. The shared U.S. and NATO vision regarding Russia is that it wants to undermine Europe and North America and seeks to destabilize their democracies to favor its own position, aiming to follow an “operationally opportunist approach” (NATO, 2018: 1). The NATO General Report about this issue states,

Wherever Russian meddling has been suspected, hackers and trolls have demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the anxieties that divide a country. In the United States, Russian operatives purchased advertisements that inflamed religious and political grievances to undermine its civil society. In Germany, Russian bot networks exploited debates over the government’s refugee policies to try to weaken Chancellor Angela Merkel (Meister, 2016). Moreover, in Spain, Russian media and Russian bot networks fanned Catalanian separatism. These incidents show Russia’s use of technology to weaken a sitting government, undermine the opposition, or make liberal democracy appear undesirable. (NATO, 2018: 2)

According to the U.S. government and the investigations, during the 2016 elections, Russian agents posed as U.S. citizens using Facebook and Twitter to spread biased information or fake news. “John Kelly, the founder of a social media marketing firm, noted that [t]he Russians aren’t just pumping up the right wing in America. They’re also pumping up left-wing stuff –they’re basically trying to pump up the fringe at the expense of the middle” (NATO, 2018: 2). In short, for the U.S., Russia wants to shape international affairs in its favor via the manipulation of information through social media that send messages that would radicalize the U.S. population. We can see this behavior also in the fact that Russia allegedly helped the Brexit campaign, thus trying to weaken NATO.

The U.S. 2016 presidential election was then the most relevant case of Russian meddling in elections, involving theft and selective dissemination of information, a propaganda campaign, and efforts to hack into voting systems across the country, according to the U.S. Congress (NATO, 2018: 4). Along with official documents and the NATO report,

Russian officials launched a propaganda and misinformation campaign that relied on state-funded media, third-party intermediaries, and paid trolls. Throughout the campaign, the fictitious DCLeaks and Guccifer 2.0, as well as WikiLeaks, contacted journalists and published e-mails, private phone numbers, campaign documents and other documents . . . controlled by the Russian GRU [the Russian Main Intelligence Directorate].

Further[more], these events were extensively reported by Russian media outlets, including English-language outlets such as RT and Sputnik. (NATO, 2018: 5)<sup>3</sup>

This way, the U.S. Congress, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the National Security Agency (NSA) backed up the investigations that stated that President Putin ordered this meddling to undermine the U.S. democratic process and denigrate Hillary Clinton with the e-mail scandal. “[The Russian government] aspired to help President-elect Trump’s election chances when possible by discrediting Secretary Clinton and publicly contrasting her unfavorably to him” (Library of Congress, 2017: 1).

It is appropriate to examine this episode from the theoretical perspective that involves exercising power. From the U.S. American perspective, the 2016 elections were the framework for a violation of its sovereignty since it involves the most important process in their democracy. U.S. foreign policy has had a predominant realist and neorealist perspective throughout its history, with the notion that the exercise of power is constant, it only differs in the form and extent to which it is applied (Sarquís, 1993; Weber, 1989). Following these guidelines, since power is central and the international system is anarchic, security turns into a key concept along with the national interest. Therefore, it matters how other states project and exercise their power. Traditionally, no one could know if another state was going to take up arms to coerce someone else, so they armed themselves; this is also known as the “security dilemma” (Dunn Caveltly and Mauer, 2010: p. 10). Nowadays, the complexity grows when no one can know if another state will come up with traditional or contemporary tools or strategies that will affect you. The 2016 elections have been classified in this context because of their relationship with a relatively new space of non-traditional confrontation, cyberspace, involving the manipulation of selective information, a propaganda campaign, and influencing the elections across the country. This also has to do with offensive realism. For example, Mearsheimer (2001: 19-22) postulated that states cannot be certain of others’ intentions with absolute confidence since all states will seek opportunities to improve their relative positions and will strive for power even if the goal is preserving their independence.

Structural realism, therefore, as a practical revival of realism after the Cold War, studies the state’s position in the system but taking into consideration that states are constrained by the structure of this international arena (Waltz, 1979). This poses a

<sup>3</sup> This report states that U.S. officials uncovered approximately 120 fake Russian-backed accounts on Facebook and more than 50 000 on Twitter.

relevant issue: if the international system determines outcomes and relates to the balance of power, then exercising power becomes crucial because of the gains. Who will have a better position within the system? Who will gain more? One state may use power to damage or destroy another. Morgenthau (1978) stated that for the realist theories, morality is to be judged by the political consequences of a policy or action. Therefore, regarding the alleged meddling, Russia would have acted to maximize its power relative to that of the U.S. to improve its chances within the system. Following this logic, Russian meddling was going to satisfy that nation's self-interest by favoring the Republican candidate.

Following this argument, then, despite Trump's political inexperience and unpredictability, the Kremlin would have viewed him in a more favorable light than Clinton regarding Russian interests in its former Soviet space, and for this country to maintain its international retrenchment, a policy that has grown progressively since Obama's second term. In Putin's perception, Clinton played a role in a Washington-orchestrated plan to pursue a kind of Maidan but in Moscow, as a reaction to the events in Kiev (De Pedro, 2016: 36-37). Hillary represented a continuation of the Obama administration's foreign policies and its approach to Russia. For the Kremlin, Clinton would have consolidated an anti-Russian platform based on the traditional reading of Russia as the adversary. Mearsheimer wrote that after the Cold War, there were more possibilities for conflict since deterrence is more difficult and miscalculations are more probable (2001: 19-22). The problem relies on deterrence becoming even more difficult in cyberspace and leading to an asymmetrical confrontation scenario exhibiting power as a multidimensional currency in international relations.

Traditional geopoliticians like Alfred Thayer Mahan or Halford Mackinder are present in contemporary key concepts of the Russian geopolitical thinking like the World Ocean and their world location. These thinkers agreed with the classical realist approach that power is not only to be possessed but to be used, and Joseph Nye examined this topic categorizing the exercise of power into hard, soft, and smart. Nye's study is convenient for this section of the article since there have been significant changes in the international system regarding threats, specifically for the U.S. Ten years ago, transnational terrorism and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) were the main threats and still could be analyzed with Nye's hard and soft power –and even with smart power. In 2016, what kind of power exercise is meddling through social networks like Facebook?

Nye explained that the state could exercise power through coercion and military means (compulsion and deterrence), which have to do with hard power. He explained diplomatic means and negotiations also exist, as well as economic sanctions and cultural means; these are parts of soft power. Nye states (2010) that soft power is

not weakness, that it is a form of exercising power. It is the way to obtain what you want through attraction rather than coercion, and its main source is the attractiveness of culture, ideas, and policies. He stated that soft power must not be diminished, because it is a potent tool for changing negative perceptions about a country, and, combined with hard power when necessary, its result is smart power (Coutu, 2008).

Nevertheless, when it came time to answer what kind of power had been exercised in 2016, it was neither soft, nor hard, nor smart. Nye concluded there had been a global power shift. He stated in August 2020 that, indeed, great-power competition remains crucial regarding the foreign policy of states, and that power transitions among states still happen. The actual problem emerged when technology-driven shifts of power were not in the hands of states but those of transnational actors, like hackers financed by governments or agencies (Nye, 2020). How can this “shift in power” be dealt with? Nye answers that soft power is key to developing networks and building regimes and institutions to counter cyber threats, plus investing in domestic cybersecurity. This cooperation includes exercising power with others:

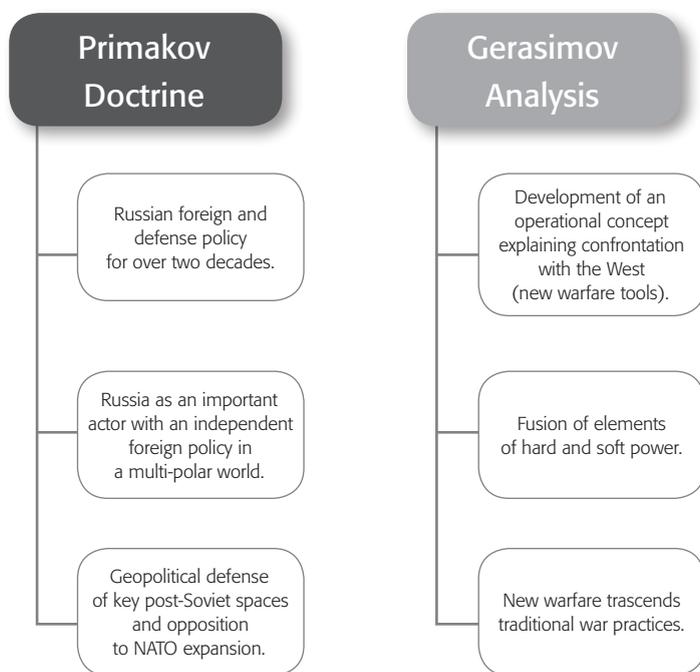
That type of thinking is missing from the current strategic debate. On many transnational issues, empowering others can help the U.S. to accomplish its own goals. . . . In this new world, networks and connectedness become an important source of power and security. In a world of growing complexity, the most connected states are the most powerful. In the past, [U.S.] America’s openness enhanced its capacity to build networks, maintain institutions, and sustain alliances. The question now is whether that openness and willingness to engage with the world will prove sustainable in U.S. domestic politics. (Nye, 2020)

While Nye’s answer was studied, written, and published, the 2016 elections case was taken as if the Kremlin itself had followed the guidelines of the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine, written by Russian Chief of General Staff General Valery Gerasimov. Since General Gerasimov published his paper, “The Value of Science in Foresight” (originally written in Russian as *Ценность науки в предвидении*), in 2013, the concept of hybrid warfare has been associated with him and taken as a doctrine. However, Gerasimov’s paper, first, has not been recognized by the Russian government as the official military doctrine; and second, it developed an operational concept for Russian military and hybrid activities and tools in support of the Primakov Doctrine. In this doctrine, Russia is a revisionist state in foreign policy and in geopolitics, where Russia strives toward a multi-polar world managed by many major powers that can counterbalance the U.S., looking for a new balance of power. This has been used also as the basis for Putin’s Greater Russia project; therefore, Russia insists on protecting its spaces, its primacy in Eurasia, and its opposition to NATO, as developed

in the fourth chapter of the 2016 *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, article 61 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016).

The Gerasimov paper analyzed the new challenges emerging from new approaches regarding war and conflict. He stated that non-military methods, tools, and strategies have been used more than arms and traditional military confrontation, using technology and the influence through information as examples. “The emphasis of confrontational methods is shifting toward the widespread use of political, economic, information, humanitarian, and other non-military measures, implemented with the potential for protests by the population. This is complemented by covert military measures, including information warfare and special forces operations” (Gerasimov, 2013).

**Figure 2**  
THE PRIMAKOV DOCTRINE AND GERASIMOV'S ANALYSIS, KEY POINTS



**Source:** Developed by Daniela Sandoval Careaga using data from Gerasimov (2013).

The Gerasimov approach to studying this new warfare as a gray zone was taken as a new Russian doctrine by the West, finding in it the explanation of how Russia

had acted in the 2016 elections. Since Gerasimov wrote about this “shift in power,” in Nye’s terms, this was taken as the guidelines for what Russia had done: eroding the adversary’s political leadership and even public opinion: a violation of sovereignty. In his paper, Gerasimov analyzed the revolts in North Africa and how social networks had played a role among the population in those countries. Gerasimov actually says that social networks are new in the conflict scenario, but hybrid warfare is not new because political and information manipulation have always existed and the U.S. applies it against Russia through its media and NATO (Gerasimov, 2013).<sup>4</sup>

Despite Russian meddling and that Clinton was not a desirable or convenient option for the Russians, it is crucial for this article to ask *if* Russia was the only factor favoring Donald Trump, since that would leave aside the U.S. domestic situation. Trump may have represented an interesting new option that was worth betting on, but that does not mean Vladimir Putin won the elections for him; that would leave aside other crucial variables that may have been capitalized in that context, such as Trump’s campaign promise of “draining the swamp,” a direct allusion to the U.S. politician corruption scandals.

Domestically speaking, almost everyone underestimated Trump, even the polls and the experts. Once Donald Trump was nominated, Haley Barbour, president of the Republican Convention, declared that the mission from that point forward was to show him as an outsider who was a real alternative to politicians’ dirty traditions (Tumulty and Rucker, 2016). As the presidential debates progressed and election date approached, most polls showed Clinton as the potential winner. By the second week of October of 2016, polls showed Clinton ahead:

- ABC/*Washington Post* by 4 points;
- Fox News by 7 points;
- GWU/*Battleground* by 8 points;
- CBS News by 9 points;
- NBC/*Wall Street Journal* by 11 points; and,
- Monmouth by 12 points.

These same polls showed Clinton carrying Wisconsin, Michigan, Virginia, Colorado, Pennsylvania, and New Hampshire (Prokop, 2016). Likewise, other projections, like the one made by Emerson College, showed the Democratic Party winning the presidency by 108 electoral votes (Barkoukis, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> For Russia, NATO’s 1999 bombing and intervention in Yugoslavia was part of the meddling the U.S. exercised in its former Soviet space. For the Kremlin, this represented a security threat because it could be repeated in other zones like Chechnia.

Nevertheless, the USC/*LA Times* poll not only predicted the Republican victory, but maintained a remarkably small difference between the nominees throughout the last year. Arie Kapteyn, the person in charge of this poll, said that despite its final result showing Trump as the winner of the popular vote by 3 percent, he was able to properly detect the Republican's appeal in one key demographic: white conservatives who did not vote in the 2012 election but were willing to vote that time (Lauter, 2016).

Donald Trump carried 30 states and got 305 electoral votes, plus one from Maine—Maine and Nebraska are the only two states that do not go by the winner-take-all mechanism. Three hundred six votes, thirty-six more than the number needed to become the next president, but seventy-four electoral votes more than what Hillary would get. Nevertheless, it was the Democratic nominee who won the popular vote with over 2.6 million votes more than Trump's (*The New York Times*, 2016). Moreover, taking a closer look at the election by districts, we can see that votes for Clinton were concentrated in cities with a population of more than one million people. These cities share three main characteristics: residents have more diverse backgrounds; the percentage of people with a college education is much larger regardless of their backgrounds; and population density is higher.

These numbers show that if Russia intervened in the U.S. elections in 2016, it was through ads in social media targeting a population that could be swung in favor of Trump in some districts that could turn the state from blue to red. This explains why the difference in electoral votes was so large in favor of the Republicans despite having lost the popular vote by almost 3 percent.

## RUSSIA AND THE UNITED STATES IN CURRENT GEOPOLITICAL TERMS

Certain expectations existed in the 1990s of cooperation with the Kremlin in the context of a "new liberal era" (Milosevich-Juaristi, 2017; 2). Nevertheless, U.S.-Russia bilateral relations gradually declined and geopolitical tension rose after the 1999 NATO bombings in Serbia and when Russia opposed the war against Iraq in 2003. The situation was complicated even more by the revolutions in Ukraine in 2004 and Georgia in 2005 and, of course, NATO's expansion. The war against Georgia in 2008 and the Crimean issue in 2014 were points of no return for Obama's White House and his reset button.

An element that has contributed to this distancing is the singular historical perception of both countries regarding the end of the Cold War. Mira Milosevich explains,

[U.S.] Americans think that their political, economic, and military system gave them victory, so it was just and necessary to expand it to the territories that were part of the USSR. . . . Russian narratives about the end of the Cold War are very different. They do not admit that Russia was defeated. The Kremlin never hinted that it would recognize U.S. leadership. It only suggested that it would try to build a relationship between equal partners. (Milosevich-Juaristi, 2017: 3)

This analysis is appropriate because since 1993, the *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* has stated that Russia will strive to achieve the stable development of relations with the U.S., with the aim of being strategic partners and allies in the future (Mel'vil' and Šakleina, 2005: 27-30).<sup>5</sup> After 2014, the Russian Federation has placed itself on an equal footing with the United States in the management of global affairs. On the other hand, the well-known U.S. "liberal values" collide with their notion of Russia as an adversary, and NATO represents the extension of those values. The Kremlin perceives any expansion of this organization as an intrusion; this happened with Ukraine, Georgia, Montenegro, Bosnia, North Macedonia, and the rest of the Balkans. Russia then asserts its right to determine, promote, and defend its interests on its own, while the U.S. wants to enforce the rules established after the Cold War. To this very important situation, we have to add the suspicions of interference by the Russian government in the U.S. elections since 2016.

Taking all these events into consideration, two main areas are essential for both countries: their perception of the international order and, therefore, the promotion of their own values and interests. Just as the U.S. allegedly defends liberty and democracy, with Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again," Russia defends three core values that coincide at the center of their national interest and foreign affairs: their territorial integrity, their political identity, and their spatial identity. The latter clashes with the West's liberal view, particularly that of the U.S., which considers Russian spatial identity a violation of the sovereignty of other nations: "While Washington stresses that NATO is not trying to threaten Russia but is merely an instrument of security and stability that defends democratic values, the Kremlin maintains that the Atlantic Alliance [NATO] represents the greatest threat to Russia's security and defense" (Milosevich-Juaristi, 2017: 4).<sup>6</sup>

Speaking of Russian core values, it is relevant to recall that back in 2016, Vladimir Putin asked the Russian Academy of Sciences to discuss and work out a concept of

<sup>5</sup> To compare the different Concepts of Foreign Policy over time, go to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation website. This article refers to the 1993 document, "Official Conception of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation."

<sup>6</sup> This is demonstrated by the fact that NATO has accepted some former Soviet countries as members, such as Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, creating a "sanitary ring" around Russia.

what the Russian nation is and what Russian identity is about. The concept is not yet finished, but it is a fundamental matter regarding the development of Russian society and state that will have to be studied as part of their official documents. Adding the latter to their current geopolitical thinking and foreign policy, the issue arises that, regardless of whether Republicans or Democrats win in the U.S., Russia is defining its priorities in a civilizational way within previously defined aims of foreign and security policies in order to continue working on an independent foreign policy. Russia will continue defending this in the international order, as well as a multi-polar balance of power to counterbalance the U.S. in particular. The geopolitical challenges with the U.S. and with NATO will continue.

In the 2017 National Security Strategy, a key document of Donald Trump's administration, Russia is clearly described as a revisionist power that wants to stop NATO and intervene in the liberal world shaped by the U.S.: "China and Russia want to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests. . . . Russia seeks to restore its great power status and establish spheres of influence near its borders. [It] aims to weaken U.S. influence in the world and divide the U.S. from our allies and partners. Russia views the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union (EU) as threats" (The White House, 2017: 25). For Donald Trump, Russia aims to challenge U.S. American power, interests, security, and prosperity; moreover, the Kremlin seeks to control information and data in order to repress different societies –including U.S. American society– and expand its influence. This document states that the United States has to pay attention to Russia, but the printed strategy differs from reality: at times the U.S. president talks about being hard on Russia and other times his opponents question him for not reacting to situations like the bounties for killing U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan allegedly sponsored by Russia.

After Trump won the elections with his slogan "Make America Great Again," suspicions arose about possible Russian intervention during the presidential election and a connection with Trump's campaign. All these suspicions and thoughts eventually led to a serious intention of impeaching the president. Political figures such as Representative Al Green (D, Texas) asked for Trump's destitution and Special Prosecutor for the U.S. Department of Justice Robert Mueller worked on the investigation (Nieto, 2018; 93-94). Despite the scandal of Russia's intervention in favor of Trump in 2016 and the investigations and trials, the impeachment did not prosper, although Russia is still pointed to as being responsible.

The two countries' bilateral relationship has continued to swing like a pendulum since they both pragmatically defend their national interest –we understand this pragmatism as the adaptability to the context, becoming sensitive to current trends and future possibilities.

In accordance with this, Russia's leadership seeks to maximize a set of geopolitical and geo-economic goals taking advantage of opportunities as they arise on the international stage;<sup>7</sup> for example, looking for new trade partners in Africa, setting up military bases in strategic locations, and supporting friendly governments or governments useful to their interests, like that of Bashar al-Assad. In such cases, the Russians see geo-economic and geopolitical goals as compatible; but even they sometimes find them contradictory. This is the following case involving energy and the revolution in the Ukraine:

The Orange Revolution in Ukraine brought to power a pro-Western government hostile to Russia. No longer wishing to support Ukraine with gas subsidies, Russia's political leadership and Gazprom's managers were in agreement that the time was right to raise prices. When Russia's political and economic goals clash with each other, Russia's policy-makers must make tradeoffs in the way that they use the tools available to them. (Orttung and Overland, 2011: 75)

Nevertheless, it is clear that for the U.S. administration, whether the goal is political or economic, it is still a threat. Therefore, it seems unlikely that Trump's administration would apply a reset button like Obama did for bilateral relations with Russia. They are letting this move freely in the international arena since the U.S. has geopolitically retaliated more under Trump, in complete contrast to government statements that the U.S. feels threatened. Russia appears to be displaying a competitive, threatening, and even "rogue" attitude (Nieto, 2018; 97) due to the fact that both Trump and Putin want to make [U.S.] America and Russia great again. The difference is that Vladimir Putin's foreign policy has been a stable strategy, while the Trump administration's has not.

Regarding the other liberal actors of the U.S.-shaped post-Cold War world, even though Trump has treated NATO members as though he were a landlord charging for his services and not a partner, NATO's expansion has been proactive regarding the neighboring ex-Soviet space, and the European Union has only been reactive to Russia's actions. For instance, we should remember U.S. troop reduction in Germany as part of Trump's

<sup>7</sup> In geopolitics, power is also a key concept, not only for classical theories but also for critical approaches that study power and the agency of decisionmakers and geopoliticians. Geo-economics is one of the factors that geopolitics takes into consideration when analyzing economic power and security. It takes into consideration mainly economic capabilities, like trade, economic unions, economic blocs, and the influence of major economic powers, and studies their geopolitical role as a part of foreign policy and their value for key players. Geo-economics examines the location of strategic resources, strategic spaces, routes, and infrastructure. In short, it is a part of the countries' geopolitical planning (National Research University Higher School of Economics, 2018).

actions or a smaller U.S. presence, giving more space to France and Germany as key actors, thus having them invest more in the protection that the U.S. previously provided.

Some Russian researchers like Dmitri Trenin and Shavkat Kasymov admit that this has been due to Russian foreign policy experiencing “a dramatic influx of state power during Vladimir Putin’s presidency, which resulted in the relative quantitative and qualitative reduction of cooperative initiatives between the United States and Russia” (Kasymov, 2012: 58). Russia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov has also referred on several occasions to the tensions and ambivalence of U.S.-Russia relations as a “post-West world order,” in which Russia is no longer a weak actor and is moving in a multipolar world; this new order does not qualify as a new Cold War, since there is no longer a communist-capitalist ideological confrontation. These countries have both clashed and agreed. For example, Russia did not approve the U.S. giving military supplies to Ukraine, an action sanctioned by the U.S. State Department, or the sale of anti-tank weapons; or the U.S. closure of the Russian consulates in Seattle and San Francisco in 2017 and 2018, as part of the U.S. pressure over Russia because of the Skripal case (Nieto, 2018: 99-100). The Kremlin responded to this episode by expelling U.S. and some European diplomats from Russia.

Another case has been the implementation of sanctions against Russian political figures, entrepreneurs, and companies and the crises generated since 2017 because of the cyber-attacks and cyber interventions in the United Kingdom, Spain, Germany, and the U.S. that have been attributed to Russia. Other topics that have caused conflict have been the stance each has taken regarding North Korea and Iran, and even more so after the U.S.’ withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), in which Russian foreign policy differs from that of the U.S., NATO’s expansion, Syria, Ukraine, and even China. The perception is that, while China is a rival for the U.S. in the economic arena, Russia challenges it by trying to split up its partnerships and alliances.

Nevertheless, there has also been cooperation, since a bilateral relationship like the one studied displays a multi-vector foreign policy. It is important to underline that setting all these differences aside to achieve certain agreements is not the same as resolving them. In cases like Syria, Iran, and the Ukraine, competition has won out over cooperation. In July 2018, Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin met at the Helsinki Conference, their first bilateral summit, where they discussed issues like the international agenda, security, counterterrorism, their commercial interests, arms control, energy, the situation in the Crimea (because of the sanctions imposed on Russia since 2014), the situation in Syria regarding refugees, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Nieto, 2018: 104-105). Another important topic involves nuclear weapons and facilities, since Putin has declared the necessity of extending the START treaty before it

expires in 2021. This is also relevant due to the different stance they have on the defensive missile systems in Europe and Turkey.

Trump is neither a friend nor an enemy of Russia. In the same way that the Russian media covered him positively during the 2016 election and in its immediate aftermath, a vested interest was driving that approach: the sanctions against the Eurasian country. With Donald Trump it would have been easier to further that interest than with Hillary. Nonetheless, as there have been both agreements and disagreements, Trump has also proved to be unpredictable for the Kremlin and the world. Plus, no clear results have materialized for the Kremlin's interests –like lifting the sanctions–, and since 2017 the perception of the U.S. president gradually changed, aggravated by the U.S. military operations in Syria, the U.S. assassination of the Iranian General Soleimani, and new sanctions against Russia. The question remains: how useful is it for Russia to have Trump as president of the U.S.?

## RUSSIA AND THE DEMOCRATIC AND REPUBLICAN AGENDAS

“The United States is an idea” is one of the main phrases in Joe Biden's platform. And he is referring to leadership, to the soul of his nation. For Biden, it is not enough to restore U.S. American leadership, but he actually talks about leadership with dignity domestically and leadership respected internationally.

In a Biden administration, [U.S.] America will lead by example and rally the world to meet our common challenges that no one nation can face on its own, from climate change to nuclear proliferation, from great power aggression to transnational terrorism, from cyberwarfare to mass migration. Donald Trump's erratic policies and failure to uphold basic democratic principles have surrendered our position in the world, undermined our democratic alliances, weakened our ability to mobilize others to meet these challenges, and threatened our security and our future. (Biden, 2020)

In contrast, Donald Trump has acted according to these two guidelines: reinforce democracy in the domestic arena and moral leadership in the international arena.

For Biden, the reinforcement of democracy inside the U.S. is vital since that is the main source of the United States' true power, and, once recovered, it will help the country lead by example abroad. That is the cornerstone of his platform. Biden talks about international challenges like climate change, nuclear conflicts, trade wars, refugee crises, and a human rights agenda, and among all these, he sees Russia as an aggressor. Biden's statement on nuclear weapons is as follows:

I was able to help negotiate a New START agreement with Russia, not because I like Putin. On nonproliferation and nuclear security, the U.S. cannot be a credible voice while it is abandoning the deals it negotiated. From Iran to North Korea, Russia to Saudi Arabia, Trump has made the prospect of nuclear proliferation a new nuclear arms race. . . . I will renew our commitment to arms control for a new era. The Soviets wanted a deal with U.S. not because they trusted us, but because they didn't. It is precisely because we do not trust our adversaries that treaties to constrain the human capacity for destruction are indispensable to the security of the United States of America. (Biden, 2017)

One more thing present in Biden's speech is the word "allies," which is crucial since the Democratic candidate talks about cooperation but with the U.S. at the head of the table, using diplomacy, economics, education, and military power as tools. "We must modernize our armed forces to prepare for tomorrow's wars" (Biden, 2020).

It is useful to remember that Joe Biden wants to replace the "Make America Great Again" strategy completely, but it is also important to remember that he voted in favor of invading Iraq in 2003, he was a key actor for "Plan Colombia," he supported the drawdown of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, and that he is quite interested in India and Japan as trade partners and resolving the Ukraine issue under the NATO umbrella, which will be difficult to deal with *vis-à-vis* Russia. Biden's platform will not lead to a reset policy, even though he is seen as Obama's successor. He refers to Russia as the opponent and will seek to limit it and make it accountable for the 2016 elections.

For Trump, the key is to fulfill his 2016 promise and "make America great again"; that is the line that symbolizes a continuum in his campaign. For Trump, domestic affairs are the concern and, in his platform, he continues to state his promises of lowering taxes, replacing Obamacare, keeping U.S. jobs for U.S. Americans, and "renegotiating bad trade deals" (Trump, 2020), like the former NAFTA and the Iran Deal.

In the field of foreign affairs, Trump considers his administration has done a decent job protecting the United States and its allies by confronting terrorism and rogue nations—Iran first and foremost. His motto for this is "Restoring [U.S.] America's Foreign Policy." Trump plans to continue strengthening the military and empowering the secretary of defense; the main example of this is the National Defense Authorization Act. Other important moves in this area have been the creation of the U.S. Space Force as a new branch of the military and the elevation of the U.S. Cyber Command into a major combatant command (Trump, 2020).

For Trump, key victories have to be taken into consideration as positive moves (Trump, 2020):

- The hunt for and bringing down of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, former ISIS leader;
- pressing the Taliban regime to reach a peaceful settlement with the Afghan government;
- the pressure on North Korea for denuclearization;
- the withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, or Iran Deal), arguing Iran's aggressive behavior and claiming it supports terrorism;
- his trade war with China regarding steel and aluminum;
- his compromise to increase coordination with Japan, India, and South Korea;
- the intention of solidifying relations in Europe and the Middle East, which included visits to Israel and Saudi Arabia and the plan for NATO to join the coalition to defeat ISIS;
- along these same lines, the development of a Middle East Plan, or "Deal of the Century," in which he suggests redrawing the boundaries to benefit Israel and not the Palestinians, recognizing Israel's sovereignty over the occupied territories –which is illegal–, creating a Palestinian territory spread all over different areas but connected by roads and tunnels, and recognizing the Jordan Valley as part of Israel, a plan that Mahmoud Abbas has rejected (*Al Jazeera News*, 2020);
- the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital city and of the Golan Heights as part of Israel's territory;
- the need to diminish the tensions with Turkey that arose out of the previous administration's alliance with the Kurdish People's Self Defense Groups (groups Ankara considers to be terrorist organizations) in the fight against ISIS;
- the closer bilateral relation the U.S. is building with Poland; and,
- public support to Juan Guaidó as the democratically-elected leader of Venezuela.

All these actions have created more tensions in several regions, not only with Russia. In the words of Fyodor Lukyanov, scholar of the Russian International Affairs Council, "[Trump] has consistency and determination in the implementation of his fixed idea to transform the world governance system. . . . He seeks to transform multilateral systems into a bilateral format, and bilateral systems, such as in the area of arms control, into a unilateral format. The objective is to minimize the concessions the U.S. has to make, even if the range of possibilities is narrowed" (Lukyanov, 2020).

Regarding the Democratic candidate, despite Biden's stance about Russia being the adversary, he knows he will have to negotiate and have an approach for Russia because of the nuclear weapons issue (a *New START*). Joseph Biden wrote in 2018 for *Foreign Affairs* that the U.S. has never sought to remove Putin, that Washington must keep the channels of communication open with Russia as they are both "superpowers with military assets deployed in close proximity in many different parts of the

globe, and they have the mutual obligation to maintain strategic stability” (Biden, Jr. and Carpenter, 2018). In this case, working side by side with Russia is crucial, even though he has issued strong statements about Putin: “Are we a nation that embraces dictators and tyrants like Putin and Kim Jong-un?” (Shapiro, 2020).

If Biden is elected, he will seek via diplomacy to make the U.S. compromise again with the JCPOA. Biden has emphasized how negative the outcome of withdrawing from the Iran deal has been because, if it continues like that, the U.S. will be isolated with a loss of credibility and leadership. Extending the U.S. interest in this sense, Biden sees Russia and China as threats and not the only ones, but as different types of threats. The first involves different values and the enmity with NATO –Biden is convinced that the Kremlin fears a strong Western alliance–, and the second involves differences in the global economy.

We must keep the alliance’s military capabilities sharp while also expanding its capacity to take on nontraditional threats, such as weaponized corruption, disinformation, and cybertheft. We must impose on Russia real costs for its violations of international norms and stand with Russian civil society, which has bravely stood up time and again against President Putin’s kleptocratic, authoritarian regime. (Shapiro, 2020)

For both Democrats and Republicans, Putin’s ultimate goal is the dissolution of NATO rather than the re-establishment of the Soviet Union. The thing is, for all the U.S. parties, if Russia continues acting like it has so far regarding the Ukraine, NATO will have to deploy troops to Eastern Europe to deter it (Shapiro, 2020).

In contrast with Biden, Trump wants no further military involvement with the U.S. acting as the big umbrella for everybody else. Biden does not want to leave the whole area (Syria, Iran, Afghanistan) to Assad and the Russians (*The Washington Post*, 2019), but Trump has clearly said he believes Putin is not a threat and did not meddle in the elections.

Moscow’s point of view differs widely from both candidates’ perspectives. Actually, for Dmitri Trenin and Andrey Kortunov, Russian scholars from the Carnegie Moscow Center and the Russian International Affairs Council, *the outcome of the election will not bring any fundamental change to U.S.-Russian relations*. According to their statement, Russia will not change its national interest and goals, even if Biden wins. What will change are the effects and how they will have to deal with the president elected. Andrey Kortunov, director general of the Russian International Affairs Council, says this election is key for the world: Germany, Canada, China, Poland, Turkey, Israel, and Mexico, for example. As for Russia, this is up for debate (Kortunov, 2020).

For the Kremlin, if Trump is reelected by a comfortable margin, he will have a free hand to conduct an independent policy, disregarding the Democratic opposition. But, if Biden wins by a big margin, “After one or two years of hatred, such an outcome may tap some opportunities for resuming dialogue on military-political and counter-terrorism-related matters . . . [with] the Democrats’ harsh public criticism of Russia’s domestic and foreign policies in the media” (Trenin, 2020: 147). Even more interestingly, if Trump wins by a narrow margin, Russia will still play the role of Trump’s “string-puller” and the enemy of the Democrats, the media, and most of the Establishment. It is crucial to state that if Trump wins, Russia will have to see to what extent he will continue professing interest in improving relations with Moscow given his unstable policy.

Trump has criticized the United States’ allies and “has caused significant harm to the unity of the West” (Kortunov, 2020). Nevertheless, regarding Russia, the economic sanctions are still there, and for many reasons: the Ukraine, Syria, chemical weapons. Plus, diplomatic tensions exist between these countries’ embassies and pressure against Russia’s allies such as Cuba, Syria, and Venezuela has increased.

For example, it was in the White House, and not on Capitol Hill, that the idea to completely destroy the entire system of strategic arms control between the United States and Russia was dreamt up and took shape. It was the Commander-in-Chief who made the decision, not once but twice, to launch missile attacks on Syria’s infrastructure. It was the President who authorized the liquidation of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani. The list of such “initiatives” of the White House goes on and on. (Kortunov, 2020)

The move on Soleimani was risky. Sergei Lavrov stated that this man’s killing would only bring negative outcomes. For Russian Senate Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Konstantin Kosachev, Trump simply demonstrated that he was not up to the tasks of exercising U.S. foreign policy and of resolving his domestic issues (Suchkov, 2020) –this, in reference to the fact that Congress did not know about this action beforehand. With Soleimani dead, Russia may become more important in the area because since he had been in charge of Iranian military and clandestine operations across the Middle East, and most of the time the coordination on the ground in Syria was between him and the Russian military. Russia is also examining Trump’s inappropriate Middle East Plan, which has no support from Moscow.

It does not really make any difference what Trump thinks of Putin. What is important is that relations between the United States and Russia have not improved in any area during his time as president. Quite to the contrary, they have continued to deteriorate on all

fronts. . . . Only a strong president can win over Congress, shut down his opponents at home, and take full responsibility for the commitments made. Donald Trump turned out to be a weak president. The [U.S.] American elite has remained divided these three and a half years. . . . Unfortunately, there is every reason to believe that Joe Biden will be another weak president. (Kortunov, 2020)

For the Russians, both governments' pragmatism will be the strongest factor in this bilateral relationship. According to the Kremlin, White House decision-making has projected a weak international exercise of power. While Biden says that Russia is in severe decline and a second-rate military power, Russian researchers and politicians see the U.S. as a vulnerable place for the spread of radical left-wing ideas since the riots against racism have increased this year (Kravchenko, 2020). While the Kremlin sees Trump and Biden as weak leaders, the U.S. states that it is impossible to tell where the decisions of Putin's government end and the interests of Putin and his circle of oligarchs begin because they operate as one unit.

In this sense, the U.S. elections will show fundamentally that the bilateral relationship will continue to be built on the basis of the lowest common denominator, regardless of whether Biden or Trump wins. The difference will depend upon their actions and the level of geopolitical tension they arrive at. Plus, Biden, unlike Trump, will have a more constructive position on arms control (the low common denominator needed), but will have a hard line regarding the Ukraine and the human rights discourse, as well as being more consistent and predictable.

In summary, in pragmatic terms of power and balance in the international system, Russia will move forward with the project of a Greater Russia and a revisionist multipolar world. Nevertheless, a geopolitical role is not the only item on its agenda. Russian foreign policy includes extending its partnerships around the world, not only in the post-Soviet space or with the European Union –talking about the immediate West— and Asia. From a geopolitical point of view, Russia projects –and will continue to project— its spatial and territorial identity as a source of power linked to foreign policy objectives and the defense of its interests, not only in Eurasia but also beyond the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans, reinforcing an independent foreign policy.

As mentioned above, Sergei Lavrov has referred to a post-West world order, in which Russia is no longer a weak actor and is moving in a multipolar world that does not qualify as a new Cold War. Russia has faced the sanctions because of Crimea in 2014; it has dealt with the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and NATO's expansion; plus, more economic sanctions against political figures, entrepreneurs, and companies since 2017 because of the alleged cyber interventions in the U.S., the United Kingdom, and Germany.

In terms of power, Russia has started to work on Nye's solution of projecting its soft power to counteract the allegations against it. This includes the display of a multi-vector foreign policy based on smart power, like in Syria, or with China. Sergei Lavrov saw the projection of soft power as an area of opportunity since 2014, when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs opted for a strategy regarding humanitarian action as a tool to counteract international discrediting of its policies. This turned into the Concept of the Russian Federation's State Policy in the Area of International Development Assistance, approved in 2014, and the Foreign Policy Activity state program starting in 2020.

For Russia, an even more crucial question exists than who is their best option in the White House: What comes next in the U.S. political system and its stability? Decision-makers and think-tanks in Russia are alarmed by the growth of tension and disturbances. Moscow's self-interest regarding the U.S. is to maintain a dialogue with a president who can obtain support from the Congress and has a clear foreign policy.

It would be wrong to assume that the current U.S. crisis is beneficial to Russia. A nuclear and economically global U.S. in crisis or chaos poses a security threat to many countries of the world. Russia is not the exception here. Any kind of collapse of the U.S. would absolutely be the worst scenario for Russia and for the international structure. However, U.S. federal and local authorities still have enough time and competence to overcome the crisis or to transform it into an atmosphere of free and secure 2020 presidential elections.

Therefore, Trump's nationalistic U.S. America and Biden's aggressive stance pose a serious, long-term challenge to Russian foreign policy and geopolitical strategy. To clarify, on the one hand, a Trump victory would bring more uncertainty to Russian-U.S. relations regarding security, but at the same time, some positive outcomes could be expected when it comes to business deals and counter-terrorism warfare. On the other hand, a potential Biden victory could bring more predictability into complex international affairs that Russia and the United States have to deal with. The protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the future of the Iranian atomic deal, strategic arms control and disarmament, relations with China, and other important issues can be named here. However, a new U.S. administration under Biden will become more rigid and unyielding when it comes to affairs with the Russian Federation. Only time will show if Moscow and Washington benefit from this.

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