

**Beyond NATO's Borders:  
The Impact of New US-Russian Relations  
on Eastern Europe,  
the Black Sea Region  
and Central Asia**

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## Introduction

The election of Donald Trump as the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States has undeniably changed the international political configuration, especially the relations between the United States and Russia. The consequences of these changes remain uncertain, particularly regarding areas such as Eastern Europe, the Black Sea region and Central Asia.

Indeed, at first sight, President Donald Trump and his Russian counterpart President Vladimir Putin seem to find common ground on the EU and the need to decrease the US commitments in this area. This convergence of interests can be partially explained by the fact that Donald Trump is not truly willing to re-evaluate issues that have always created tensions in US-Russia relations such as: the violation of democratic processes and human rights, the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the Russian intervention in Syria.<sup>1</sup> Some of these sensitive issues have raised questions about international security, which seems more unpredictable than ever before.

Regarding Eastern Europe, European leaders are still worried about the declarations of the new US President, who stated that in the case of attack from Russia, the United States will defend the Baltic States only if they 'fulfilled their obligations'<sup>2</sup>, meaning financial ones. Moreover, for the troops that were deployed in Eastern Europe under former US President Barack Obama, the new president could decide to withdraw them or eliminate their funding to make deals with Russia, unless European leaders can convince him to do otherwise.<sup>3</sup>

In the Black Sea Region, it initially appeared that President Putin would have the opportunity to continue trying to spread Russian influence in Ukraine and Georgia, as Donald Trump had no particular interest in hindering this activity. However, the Russian President will certainly face some obstacles from the EU, due to the developing partnerships with both Ukraine and Georgia aimed at counterbalancing pressure from Russia. A recent case in point is the undermining of the EU visa-free regime granted to Georgian citizens.<sup>4</sup>

Last but not least, concerning Central Asia, Russia has already had an impact on the perception of international order through media, as many of the inhabitants of this region perceive Russian news as more reliable than Western sources. This could explain why Central

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/11/10/heres-how-trumps-election-will-affect-u-s-russian-relations/?utm\\_term=.544d7e86ba32](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/11/10/heres-how-trumps-election-will-affect-u-s-russian-relations/?utm_term=.544d7e86ba32)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/21/us/politics/donald-trump-issues.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-nato-idUSKBN15L04L>

<sup>4</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/international-affairs/eastern-partnership/visa-liberalisation-moldova-ukraine-and-georgia\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/international-affairs/eastern-partnership/visa-liberalisation-moldova-ukraine-and-georgia_en)

Asia expressed popular support for the Crimean annexation.<sup>5</sup> However, it appears that Russia and the United States can also find common ground in this area, as noted by the President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev, who declared that ‘the fight against terrorism, the Ukrainian crisis settlement and the global nuclear security strengthening’ could be a matter of cooperation between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin. His declaration was positively received by the US President, who expressed being ‘very optimistic’ about this new potential cooperation.<sup>6</sup>

### **Central and Eastern Europe**

Following a short-lived reset of Russian relations at the beginning of the Obama era, the US-Russian relationship has deteriorated and remained consistently tense, especially following the Crimean annexation. As President Donald Trump’s administration begins its third month in office, it is unclear if relations with Russia will improve, although President Trump himself has frequently complimented Russian President Vladimir Putin and expressed the desire to renew relations between the two countries.

In Central and Eastern Europe, however, the tensions between Russia and the West are readily seen, tangibly expressed by the invocation of Article 4 following the Crimean annexation. NATO has been actively building up its presence in the region to reassure Allies and discourage any Russian activity along its borders. In 2017, there are slated to be more than 7,000 troops deployed in countries bordering Russia, namely Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland.<sup>7</sup> There are 800 troops deployed in Estonia in a UK-led battalion, which includes troops from Denmark and France, and is using German Typhoon jets to police the Baltic region. In Latvia, there will be 1,200 troops in a Canadian-led battalion, comprised of soldiers from Albania, Italy, Poland, Spain and Slovenia. In Lithuania, there will also be 1,200 troops in a German-led battalion, including troops from Belgium, Croatia, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Norway, with Baltic air policing using Dutch F-16 jets. In Poland, there are currently 4,000 troops in a US-led battalion that utilises heavy armour such as 250 tanks, Bradley Fighting Vehicles and Paladin howitzers. Russia claims that this is the largest military build-up since World War II and maintains that this is an aggressive action from NATO.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/11/10/heres-how-trumps-election-will-affect-u-s-russian-relations/?utm\\_term=.544d7e86ba32](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/11/10/heres-how-trumps-election-will-affect-u-s-russian-relations/?utm_term=.544d7e86ba32)

<sup>6</sup> <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/12/01/trump-reaches-out-to-central-asia-looking-for-a-backdoor-to-russia-kazakhstan-putin-nazarbayev/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-nato-border-forces-map-where-are-they-positioned-a7562391.html>

In addition to the NATO military build-up in the region, there has also been the creation of a US-NATO ballistic missile defence (BMD) shield,<sup>8</sup> which has been under development since President Obama announced the US's new plan for missile defence in 2009.<sup>9</sup> NATO decided to develop BMD capability at the Lisbon Summit in 2010 and has continued to reaffirm their commitment to this project at subsequent summits.

Components of the BMD shield are located in: Turkey, which hosts a BMD radar at Kürecik; Romania, which accommodates an Aegis Ashore site at Deveselu Air Base, declared operational in May 2016; Germany, which houses the command centre at Ramstein Air Base; Spain, which has four BMD-capable Aegis ships at the naval base in Rota; and Poland, which will be hosting an Aegis Ashore site at the Redzikowo military base, to be completed in 2018.

This BMD shield has continually underlined the strained US-Russia relationship, with Central and Eastern Europe caught in the middle, as Russia has consistently and frequently expressed suspicions that the shield could be used for offensive purposes and is directed towards Russia. However, US and NATO officials have repeatedly emphasised that the shield is not directed towards Russia and is to be used for purely defensive purposes.

### **The Black Sea Region**

The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 has heralded in a new area of uncertainty regarding the interactions between the United States and Russia and has also impacted Russian relations with NATO. This violation of international law and the subsequent incorporation of the peninsula into the Russian Federation have led to serious complications within the international arena.

After the 'illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea' – terms used by the Alliance – by the Russia Federation in March 2014, NATO has become increasingly vigilant when it comes to its relations with Russia. Since April 2014, NATO has reduced cooperation and joint missions planned with Russia. Therefore, although all military and civilian cooperation has been suspended, political cooperation has been maintained to some extent, especially in order to continue a dialogue on the ongoing crisis.<sup>10</sup> Even the NATO-Russia Council (NRC), which is a bilateral mechanism for consultation and cooperation, has seen its collaboration drastically reduced. Some meetings have recently been convened, but only at the ambassadorial

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2016\\_07/20160630\\_1607-factsheet-bmd-en.pdf](http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2016_07/20160630_1607-factsheet-bmd-en.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/fact-sheet-us-missile-defense-policy-a-phased-adaptive-approach-missile-defense-eur>

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_50090.htm#](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50090.htm#)

level.<sup>11</sup> Suspension of NATO-Russia Council talks exemplifies the Alliance's worst relations with Moscow since the Cold War period.

The situation in the Black Sea region remains a controversial topic, and the Allies have agreed on taking some measures in a defence and deterrence posture toward Russia. Therefore, during the NATO Summit held in July 2016 in Warsaw, they decided to implement a new strategy of Tailored Forward Presence. This program allows NATO forces to exercise in the south-eastern part of the Alliance's territory. The training mission is realised under the command of the Headquarters Multinational Division Southeast in Romania. The high-readiness headquarters, located in Bucharest and activated in 2015, is an assurance of increased capability in this particularly tense region.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, NATO is deploying more military personnel in the Black Sea region in order to stabilise the situation, or to at least prevent any further deterioration. Maritime and air presence has been increased, notably after the meeting of defence ministers in October 2016. Maritime presence has been further increased after the February 2017 NATO Defence Ministers Meetings.<sup>13</sup>

During a press conference following the meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the level of Defence Ministers, NATO's Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, said that the troops deployed over the territory 'are a clear demonstration of NATO's transatlantic unity and resolve. And they send a clear message to any potential aggressor.'<sup>14</sup>

The United States followed the same vein of action as NATO regarding the situation in the Black Sea region. Even recently, the US State Department decided to keep the sanctions imposed on Russia after the annexation of Crimea. Deputy spokesman Mark Toner declared: 'Crimea is a part of Ukraine'. The referendum held in Crimea is still a subject of heated discussions, as 16 March 2017 marked its three-year anniversary. In the same address, Toner stated: 'The United States again condemns the Russian occupation of Crimea and calls for its immediate end.' This declaration makes it clear that the United States is still committed to what was decided under the Obama administration, even after the election of President Trump and his pursuance of a possible US-Russia rapprochement.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_50091.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50091.htm)

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_125356.htm?selectedLocale=en](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_125356.htm?selectedLocale=en)

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2017/02/17/510897/NATO-Stoltenberg-Black-Sea-presence>

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_141340.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_141340.htm)

<sup>15</sup> <http://europe.newsweek.com/us-expects-immediate-end-russias-control-crimea-569534?rm=eu>

Following the Russian intervention in the peninsula, the United States and the EU responded to this threat by imposing primarily economic sanctions on Russian officials, companies and goods of dual use.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Washington sent navy ships closer the Baltic Sea and deployed fighter jets to Poland and the Baltic states. This containment strategy is similar to actions during the Cold War.<sup>17</sup>

The new US President Donald Trump has an unclear position regarding Russia and Crimea. Even if he is trying to cultivate a closer relationship with the Russian Federation, he recently stated that Crimea was ‘taken’ by Russia, and even suggested that the previous administration was ‘too soft’ when it came to imposing sanctions on Moscow.<sup>18</sup>

In March 2016, two years since the annexation, Human Rights Watch published a report showing an increase in human rights violations, notably against the Crimean Tatar community. Hugh Williamson, Europe and Central Asia director for Human Rights Watch, declared: ‘Russia’s international partners should sustain constant pressure on Russia to stop human rights abuses on the peninsula.’<sup>19</sup> Entering the third year of the occupation of the peninsula, economic sanctions from the United States and the EU are still in place, and NATO military operations have been reinforced in order to deter the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, the factual situation on the ground has not seemed to improve much.

### **Central Asia**

Central Asia is a strategic region for both the United States and Russia. Central Asian countries are former Soviet Republics and have strong ties with Russia. The elites of Central Asian countries mainly speak Russian, and the inhabitants of these countries have wide access to Russian media, which has a strong influence on public opinion in the region. Additionally, all Central Asian countries host Russian minorities. In Kazakhstan, the Russian minority accounts for nearly 30% of the whole population, while in Kyrgyzstan, more than 20% of the population is of Russian origin. Moreover, the Russian Federation operates several military facilities in the region, the most well-known being the Cosmodrome of Baikonur, located in Kazakhstan. This space launch facility, for which Russia pays a yearly fee to Kazakhstan estimated at several million US dollars, has been the site of many ballistic missile tests over the years.

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.dw.com/en/us-condemns-russian-occupation-of-crimea/a-37979485>

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/raeesah-kabir/what-crimea-means-for-us-\\_b\\_5037812.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/raeesah-kabir/what-crimea-means-for-us-_b_5037812.html)

<sup>18</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/02/15/politics/trump-crimea-russia-twitter-obama/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/03/18/ukraine-fear-repression-crimea>

For the United States, Central Asia has played a strategic role in support of the US-led military mission in Afghanistan. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States has been able to increase their presence and influence in the region through the development of aid programmes. In 1993, the US signed a bilateral treaty with Kyrgyzstan that initiated a tariff waiver for goods imported from the US as part of aid programmes. Additionally, this treaty ensured tax exemptions for non-Kyrgyz employees working within the framework of US-led aid projects.<sup>20</sup> According to USAID, the US provided some 49 million dollars of aid to Kyrgyzstan in 2013, with most aid projects focused on improving the Kyrgyz health care system. In 2001, cooperation between the US and Kyrgyzstan increased with the opening of the Manas military base, situated near Bishkek, the Kyrgyz capital. Manas was of strategic importance for the United States, as it was used by the US Air Force during the operation in Afghanistan.

In 2014 however, the Kyrgyz government decided to cancel the 1993 treaty. One of the consequences of this was the departure of US military personnel from Manas, which was handed over back to the Kyrgyz military.<sup>21</sup> This event is one of many that illustrates the decrease of US and NATO influence in the region in recent years. In 2014, NATO opened a liaison office in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, to coordinate the cooperation between NATO and Central Asia.<sup>22</sup> However, it was announced on 17 October 2016 that the liaison office will close in 2017.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, NATO officials stated that despite the closure of the office in Tashkent, cooperation with Central Asia will be carried on.

It is difficult to assess how the new US foreign policy towards Central Asia is going to look under the Trump administration. It appears that Donald Trump is willing to establish closer ties with Russia and Vladimir Putin, and it could be expected that Central Asia will be less of an area of rivalry between the US and Russia than it has been before. However, it should be noted that China has managed to gain a substantial influence in the region through primarily economic cooperation.<sup>24</sup> President Trump is notably opposed to a diplomatically and economically strong People's Republic of China, which he has accused of carrying out unfair

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/74331>

<sup>21</sup> <http://geopolis.francetvinfo.fr/fermeture-dune-base-americaine-au-kirghizstan-la-fin-dune-influence-regionale-72637>

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.nato.int/cps/fr/natohq/topics\\_107902.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/fr/natohq/topics_107902.htm)

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/81336>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.csis.org/programs/freeman-chair-china-studies/past-freeman-chair-projects/chinas-emergence-central-asia>

trade and currency wars against the US on numerous occasions.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, containing the influence of China in Central Asia might become one of the main priorities of the new US foreign policy in the region.

In his attempt to do so, Trump may imitate China's foreign policy towards Central Asia, which is based on economic interests and does not emphasise human rights or democratisation in the region. During a visit to Moscow in December 2016, Carter Page, a former foreign policy advisor to Donald Trump during the presidential campaign, stated that the US had had an 'often-hypocritical focus on democratisation, inequality, corruption and regime change',<sup>26</sup> when dealing with Russia, China and Central Asia. One can thus assume that President Trump's foreign policy in Central Asia will not aspire to bring democracy to the region, though most Central Asian countries have remained authoritarian regimes since the collapse of the Soviet Union 25 years ago. However, this policy is less likely to fail than previous ones, as it has very low expectations regarding the democratisation of Central Asia. Such a policy fails to assess the strategic importance of Central Asia in combating ISIS and jihadist movements. Indeed, most Central Asian countries conduct rather brutal policies towards the expression of Islamic faith, such as Tajikistan, where the government forced many men to shave their beards.<sup>27</sup> Many foreign policy observers fear that by doing so, Central Asian countries are only feeding Islamist radicalisation and ISIS.<sup>28</sup> If Trump does not advocate for more democracy in the region, the recruitment of Central Asian nationals by jihadist groups is likely to increase, and the new US President will most likely fail to 'wipe ISIS from the face of the Earth'.<sup>29</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Three months have already passed since the inauguration of Donald J. Trump as the 45<sup>th</sup> US President. However, the international community has not been able to learn the new US foreign policy towards Central and Eastern Europe, the Black Sea region or Central Asia. The initial prediction that the US is going to 'reset' relations with the Russian Federation, as attempted under past US administrations, has not been fulfilled. This is clearly visible from statements by both the US President and the US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley, whose first speech at the UN Security Council was dedicated to criticism of Russia's behaviour in the

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danikenson/2017/02/06/not-much-left-stopping-trumps-trade-war-with-china/#68dc996e4d1c>

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.atimes.com/article/central-asias-dictators-feel-comfortable-trump/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/07/tajikistans-beard-ban-facial-hair-emomali-rahmon>

<sup>28</sup> <http://thediplomat.com/2017/02/us-security-stakes-in-central-asia/>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2017/mar/05/trump-promised-to-wipe-out-isis-perhaps-he-already-has->



international arena.<sup>30</sup> It seems that even if the Trump administration is willing to cooperate with Russia on issues of mutual interest, this is practically impossible due to Russia's aggressive foreign policy not only in its neighbourhood, but also in Syria. On the other hand, this does not mean that US foreign policy would stop being volatile and unpredictable in concrete measures, which should be of concern to the states in CEE and the EU's neighbourhood.<sup>31</sup>

For the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, it is of the utmost importance that the US does not cancel the sanctions towards Russian officials, companies and other entities involved in the illegal annexation of Crimea and the aggression in Donbas.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the US under Trump appears to be continuing with previous policies pursued by Barack Obama when it comes to US deployment in Poland and the Baltic (NATO's policy of Enhanced Forward Presence) and the ballistic missile defence shield in Poland and Romania. In the Black Sea region, the US, along with the EU and NATO, seems to be maintaining the same position since March 2014, when the Crimean Peninsula and the City of Sevastopol were *de facto* illegally annexed by the Russian Federation. To strengthen the position of NATO in the area, the NATO Summit in Warsaw decided to implement the so-called Enhanced Tailored Presence and improve the Allied capacities in the region, primarily on Romanian soil. The Trump administration appears to be proceeding with these measures as well. Finally, the situation in Central Asia is the most uncertain and ambiguous. From what was observed earlier, the previous US pressure on human rights and democratisation in the region is likely to decrease at the expense of economic relations and potential positions in the region that have been lost over the last few years. While dealing with Central Asian regimes, Trump's business approach might prove more successful than the value-based strategy of the previous administration. However, this would mean the loss of credibility and the previously-cultivated reputation of the US and its agencies in exchange for only short-term benefits.

In conclusion, for the states in CEE and the post-Soviet space, it will remain important to observe and analyse the next foreign policy steps of the Trump administration carefully and persuade the US President to keep his commitments to Allies. This was the case with Angela Merkel and the sanctions on Russia, which could serve as a positive example of guiding the

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<sup>30</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/02/02/politics/haley-russia-un/>

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-39339431>

<sup>32</sup> Edward Fishman writes for The Wall Street Journal that Angela Merkel managed to persuade the US President to continue with the sanction regime against Putin's regime: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/we-built-the-russia-sanctions-to-last-1490050833>

US President on relations with Russia. The US President cannot be given the opportunity to negotiate with his Russian counterpart at the expense of the CEE states and Russia's neighbours, as this would only further destabilise the Euro-Atlantic area and cause severe harm to the Transatlantic bond.