

U.S.-RUSSIA RELATIONS FOLLOWING THE 2011 NATO INTERVENTION IN LIBYA

ARI HEISTEIN

Researcher, Institute for National Security Studies (INSS)



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U.S.-Russia Relations Following the 2011 NATO Intervention in Libya

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Abstract

In the first two decades of the post-Cold War era, the U.S.-Russia relationship followed an “ebb and flow” paradigm in which efforts to improve bilateral ties were interspersed with heightened tensions. However, since the decline of the Obama Administration’s “reset” with Russia, the relationship has assumed a fairly consistent negative long-term trajectory and is assessed as unlikely to improve in the near future. The 2011 NATO intervention in Libya is cited by U.S. and Russian officials alike as the turning point which brought about the end of the U.S.-Russia “reset.” Taking into account that the Libyan theater is tangential to both global events and the core interests of Moscow and Washington, this paper aims to examine why it is that developments there in 2011 are ascribed monumental impact upon one of the most important bilateral relationships in the world. It does so based on an assessment of how the U.S. and Russian decision-makers understood the intervention, its aftermath, and what lessons ought to be drawn from it. The paper concludes with recommendations for how to stabilize the bilateral relationship in order to avert the prospect of further decline or even confrontation.

1. Introduction

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the absence of a clear ideological division between the U.S. and the newly formed Russian Federation led some to believe that great power rivalry and the threat of nuclear war would give way to strategic partnership.¹ To that end, members of the George H.W. Bush Administration took great pains to avoid “making a difficult situation humiliating for Russia.”² But this grand realignment failed to materialize; the post-Cold War relationship between the two states was plagued by frictions resulting from divergent interests and worldviews.

Two main points of contention between the U.S. and Russia in the post-Cold War period are as follows.

A. Russia’s Stature: The U.S. understanding was that Moscow lost the Cold War and so it should fall in line with the Washington-led order. This contrasts sharply with Russia’s self-perception as a superpower that experienced momentary weakness but should shape the post-Cold War order together *with* the U.S. This divergence has created fertile ground for disputes regarding U.S. treatment of Russia and the question of what, if any, privileged interests Russia retains from previous eras. The result, in the words of Kremlin-insider Fyodor Lukyanov, is that “one thing that each side feels certain about is that the other side has overstepped.”³

B. Democracy vs. Regime Stability: U.S. efforts to promote its practices of democracy and human rights abroad were a longstanding, if inconsistent, feature of American foreign policy from the Cold War to the Obama era. President Vladimir Putin’s “statist” attitude led him to prioritize stability and conclude that the global promotion of individual political rights is a subversive form of “illegal soft power.”⁴ Beyond that, Putin suspected that such U.S. policies were disingenuous efforts to advance interests cloaked as values.⁵

However, fluctuations in tensions regarding these issues and others only temporarily halted attempts to improve U.S.-Russia relations. Short-lived institutional memory, and perhaps fears of the repercussions of a continuous decline in the relationship, led to the redoubling of efforts to improve relations despite previous attempts stalling. Yet, according to Angela Stent, “each of these resets has ended in disappointment and mutual

¹ Michael Crowley, “Putin’s Revenge,” *Politico*, December 16, 2016, <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-cold-war-revenge-russia-united-states/>; “The United States and Russia: A Strategic Partnership,” Opening statements at a joint press conference between Presidents Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin on September 28, 1994 in Washington, DC, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/dsptch12&div=114&id=&page=>.

² Richard N. Haass, “George H.W. Bush: An Appreciation,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 1, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/article/george-hw-bush-appreciation>.

³ Fyodor Lukyanov, “Putin’s Foreign Policy,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, May 4, 2016, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/redcol/Putins-Foreign-Policy-18133>

⁴ Yulia Kiseleva, “Russia’s Soft Power Discourse: Identity, Status and the Attraction of Power,” *Politics*: 2015 VOL 35(3-4), 324, <https://www.uscpubdiplomacy.org/sites/uscpubdiplomacy.org/files/Kiseleva-2015-Politics.pdf>. Putin also noted in 2012: “People often think proclaiming various freedoms and universal suffrage will in and of itself have some miraculous strength to direct life onto a new course. In actual fact, in such instances in life, what happens usually turns out not to be democracy, but depending on the turn events take, either oligarchy or anarchy” (*Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, Brookings Institution Press (2013), pp. 54).

⁵ Putin would often seek to highlight America’s hypocrisy on this issue by quoting U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt as saying of anti-communist authoritarian leader Anastasio Somoza of Nicaragua, “he may be a son of a bitch, but he is our son of a bitch.” (*All the Kremlin’s Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin*, p. 158).

recriminations because both sides have very different definitions of what a productive relationship would look like.”⁶ These factors helped to crystallize an ebb and flow paradigm,⁷ with periods of increased cooperation interspersed with moments of friction, which has defined U.S.-Russia relations since 1991.

The most recent “reset” in relations was based on renewed hope for cooperation between newly elected Presidents Barack Obama and Dmitri Medvedev in 2009. In his speech at the Munich Security Conference that year, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden suggested that the time had come for Washington and Moscow to “hit the reset button on their relationship.”⁸ One month later, when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gave her Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov a physical model of a reset button as a gesture of goodwill, there was an inauspicious mistranslation of “reset” into the Russian word for “overload.” Nevertheless, efforts to improve cooperation between the two countries endured for several years, resulting in increased cooperation on supply lines for U.S. forces in Afghanistan (2009), a nuclear arms control treaty known as New START (2010), collaboration on sanctions against the Iranian regime regarding issues of nuclear proliferation (2010), and Russia’s accession to the World Trade Organization (2012).

The continuous decline of U.S.-Russia relations that has followed the “reset” fits a recognizable historical pattern wherein efforts to improve cooperation are succeeded by a period of increasing friction. Relations have been strained by issues such as the emergence of a new potential nuclear arms race,⁹ Russian cyber and disinformation attacks on the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections,¹⁰ U.S. imposition of sanctions on Russian elites involved with malign activity,¹¹ and the mutual expulsion of many “diplomats.”¹² All of this has led some experts to assess that the relationship now stands at its “lowest ebb since the early 1980s,”¹³ and is at an even “more dangerous” point than the Cold War.¹⁴ These political developments are reflected in the 2018 Pew public opinion poll below,¹⁵ as the bilateral relationship appears to have achieved its peak of popular support in the 2010-2011 period, followed by a marked decline.

⁶ Angela Stent, *Putin's World: Russia Against the West and With the Rest*.

⁷ In an interview conducted with former U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul conducted on June 11, 2019, he characterized them as “an ebb and flow.”

⁸ Mikhail Zygar, “The Russian Reset that Never Was,” *Foreign Policy*, December 9, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/12/09/the-russian-reset-that-never-was-putin-obama-medvedev-libya-mikhail-zygar-all-the-kremlin-men/>.

⁹ “What are hypersonic weapons?” *The Economist*, January 3, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2019/01/03/what-are-hypersonic-weapons>.

¹⁰ “Twelve Russians charged with US 2016 election hack,” *BBC*, July 13, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-44825345>.

¹¹ Anna Andrianova and Ilya Arkhipov, “Russia Admits Toll of Sanctions as Market Turmoil Adds Pain,” *Bloomberg*, August 22, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-08-22/ruble-sinks-most-among-peers-as-traders-brace-for-new-sanctions>.

¹² Angela Dewan, Mary Ilyushina and Sebastian Shukla, “Russia expels US diplomats and shuts consulate in tit-for-tat move,” *CNN*, March 30, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/03/29/europe/russia-expels-us-diplomats-intl/index.html>.

¹³ Thomas Graham Jr., “U.S.-Russian Relations in a New Era,” *National Interest*, January 6, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/us-russian-relations-new-era-40637?page=0%2C4>.

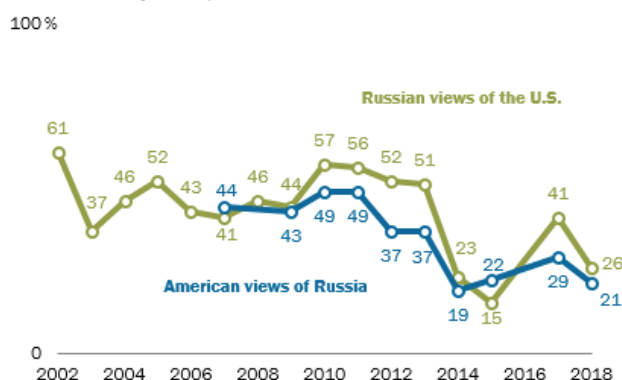
¹⁴ Sergei Karaganov and Dmitry Suslov, “A new world order: A view from Russia,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, October 4, 2018, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/pubcol/A-new-world-order-A-view-from-Russia--19782>.

¹⁵ Jacob Poushter, “6 charts on how Russians and Americans see each other,” October 5, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/04/6-charts-on-how-russians-and-americans-see-each-other/>. The 2017 increase in Russian and U.S. favorable views toward each other can be attributed to the 2016 election of Donald Trump, who spoke favorably about Russia and cooperation with Moscow on a range of issues including counter-terrorism, making the U.S. President briefly popular in Russia and turning Russia into a partisan issue in the U.S.

Figure 1. How Russians and Americans see each other

Russian and American views of the other country have declined in tandem since 2017

Favorable view of Russia/U.S.



Source: Spring 2018 Global Attitudes Survey. Q17a, c.

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Yet a *longue durée* perspective suggests that declarations of the nadir of the U.S.-Russia relationship since the Cold War are not a novel or unique phenomenon; commentators have proclaimed this danger many times in the past, including in 2001,¹⁶ 2006,¹⁷ and 2016 in recent memory.¹⁸ What distinguishes the present moment, however, is the longer period during which relations have foundered, as well as the lack of any clear framework to repair or govern competition while tensions mount and treaties from previous administrations expire. At the time of writing of this report, top analysts from both the U.S. and Russia assessed that no significant improvement of relations was in the offing.¹⁹

In 2014, President Putin reportedly credited the events in Libya in 2011 with ending the Obama era focus on “reset[ting]” relations.²⁰ Similarly, former U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul viewed U.S.-Russia cooperation on Libya as both the acme of the reset era and the beginning of its decline.²¹ This paper aims to explore why the NATO intervention in Libya, despite the fact that it does not appear to directly touch on the vital interests of either country, is ascribed a monumental impact on the relationship between the two states.

¹⁶ Graham Allison, “US-Russian Relations at Lowest Point Since Cold War,” Harvard University Belfer Center, March 30, 2001, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/graham-allison-us-russian-relations-lowest-point-cold-war>.

¹⁷ James Goldgeier, “U.S.-Russia Relations at Lowest Point Since Cold War’s End,” Council on Foreign Relations, July 6, 2016, <https://www.cfr.org/interview/goldgeier-us-russia-relations-lowest-point-cold-wars-end>.

¹⁸ Ken Dilanian, “New Cold War? Russia, U.S. Relations At Lowest Point Since 1970s,” NBC News, October 5, 2016, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/new-cold-war-russia-u-s-relations-lowest-point-1970s-n660126>.

¹⁹ Based on an interview with Ambassador McFaul conducted on June 11, 2019 in which he stated that improvement in ties is unlikely so long as Putin remains in power, as well as Sergei Karaganov and Dmitry Suslov’s 2018 article “A new world order: A view from Russia,” which states that “no major improvement in relations with the United States is in sight, mainly because of the situation within both Western societies and the Western international community itself.”

²⁰ “‘Reset’ With U.S. Ended With Libya, Not Crimea, Putin Says,” *The Moscow Times*, April 17, 2014, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/04/17/reset-with-us-ended-with-libya-not-crimea-putin-says-a34134>.

²¹ Michael McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin’s Russia*, Houghton Mifflin: New York (2018), pp. 227.

2. The Arab Spring and NATO Intervention in Libya, 2010-2011

The Arab Spring began on 17 December 2010 when a Tunisian produce vendor, Mohammed Bouazizi, set himself on fire after his wares were confiscated by a Tunisian government official. Following Bouazizi's self-immolation, anti-government demonstrations erupted and grew increasingly widespread and violent on the part of both police and protestors. Tunisia's President Zine El Abidin Ben Ali initially attempted to reshuffle his government and declared a state of emergency in order to quell the unrest, but when that failed to restore order, he stepped down and fled the country within one month of the initial mid-December incident. Ben Ali became the first of several Arab rulers deposed in the Arab Spring, and his departure was followed by that of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh, as well as by the spread of protests throughout the region.

By February 2011, the protests had reached the Libyan cities of Tripoli and Benghazi and devolved into violent clashes; the country appeared to be moving toward civil war. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sought to pull Libya back from the brink by passing resolution 1970, which imposed an "arms embargo, a travel ban and an assets freeze in connection with the situation in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya."²² But as the situation continued to deteriorate in the weeks that followed, on 17 March 2011 the UNSC passed resolution 1973, which declared the intention to protect Libyan civilians from the regime by establishing a no-fly zone in Libya and re-affirming the arms embargo.²³ A key clause of this resolution, the interpretation of which would later become a point of contention between Russia and the West, is as follows:

Authorizes Member States that have notified the Secretary-General, acting nationally or through regional organizations or arrangements, and acting in cooperation with the Secretary-General, *to take all necessary measures, notwithstanding paragraph 9 of resolution 1970 (2011), to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, including Benghazi*, while excluding a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory, and requests the Member States concerned to inform the Secretary-General immediately of the measures they take pursuant to the authorization conferred by this paragraph which shall be immediately reported to the Security Council.²⁴

Then-President Dmitri Medvedev of Russia surprised experts by opting to abstain rather than vetoing the resolution.²⁵ His decision appears to have conflicted with Putin's preference, leading to a rare public spat between the duo in which Putin criticized the resolution as a "crusade" and Medvedev called that critique "unacceptable."²⁶

²² United Nations Security Council Resolution 1970, 26 February 2011, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/s/res/1970-%282011%29>.

²³ This resolution and the ensuing intervention constitute the first and only invocation of humanitarian intervention to date under the principle of "responsibility to protect." It is believed that the continued lack of popular support for the intervention in Libya contributed to the decision by the U.S. and others opposed to the Assad regime's crimes not to intervene in Syria (Fusun Türkmen, "From Libya to Syria: The Rise and Fall of Humanitarian Intervention?", pp. 22).

²⁴ United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, March 17, 2011, https://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2011_03/20110927_110311-UNSCR-1973.pdf (my emphasis).

²⁵ McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace*, 225.

²⁶ Jill Dougherty, "Putin and Medvedev Spar over Libya," March 23, 2011, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/europe/03/21/russia.leaders.libya/index.html>

French forces initiated the strikes on Libyan regime assets only two days after UNSCR 1973 was passed and provided arms to opposition forces (the latter reportedly done without informing other NATO allies and in contravention of the two UNSCRs). Great Britain, meanwhile, performed about 1/5 of the coalition's total of 8,000 sorties according to then-Prime Minister David Cameron.²⁷ Perhaps more significant than their military contribution to the effort, though, was French and British political pressure on the skeptical U.S. administration to support the campaign through coordination, intelligence-sharing, refueling capabilities, supplying munitions, and even partaking in combat missions.²⁸ It is highly unlikely that Washington's NATO allies would have carried out the operation in Libya known as "Unified Protector" if U.S. support had not been forthcoming.²⁹

Whatever the reasoning behind Medvedev's UNSC abstention, it is a matter of dispute whether the resulting NATO intervention which resulted in the downfall of the Gaddafi regime remained within the confines of the mandate granted. It is true that authorizing "all necessary measures" includes the threat of military force, but the stipulation that it could be used "to protect civilians and civilian populated areas *under threat of attack*" provides an extremely vague definition of circumstances in which force could be used.³⁰ Did Col. Gaddafi's threat of "no mercy"³¹ combined with the mere existence of his military capabilities constitute a threat that had to be eliminated in order to protect the Libyan people and populated areas? If so, then the resolution was framed in a manner that legitimized only two possible outcomes: the Gaddafi regime's surrender or defeat. If not, then it is difficult to understand how certain aspects of the NATO campaign, including providing close air support for a rebel offensive and strikes on command and control structures not directly involved in fighting, might have been justified by the UN mandate.

If Putin was unhappy about the passing of UNSCR 1973, then – as former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Bill Burns writes – the results of the intervention "unnerved [him]; he reportedly watched the grisly video of the demise of the Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi—caught hiding in a drainage pipe and killed by Western-backed rebels—over and over again."³² Moving beyond the incident's personal impact on Putin, the remainder of this paper focuses on how the events in Libya affected one of the world's most important bilateral relationships.

3. Implications for Russia

"Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma," Winston Churchill claimed in 1939, and to a large extent, his words are also true today. The decision-making process in the Kremlin is opaque and is governed more by informal relationships than a formal power structure. However, assessments by leading experts as well as statements from powerful individuals within the Russian governance structure suggest that the country's

²⁷ Hélène Mulholland, "Libya intervention: British forces played key role, says Cameron," *The Guardian*, September 2, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/sep/02/libya-intervention-british-forces-key>.

²⁸ Ted Galen Carpenter, "How NATO Pushed the U.S. Into the Libya Fiasco," *The American Conservative*, February 21, 2019, <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/how-nato-pushed-us-libya-fiasco>.

²⁹ Füsün Türkmen, "From Libya to Syria: The Rise and Fall of Humanitarian Intervention?" pp. 13.

³⁰ Geir Ulfstein and Hege Fossund Christiansen, "The Legality of the NATO bombing in Libya," *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 62, p. 163 (my emphasis).

³¹ Ishaan Tharoor, "Gaddafi Warns Benghazi Rebels: We Are Coming, And There'll Be No Mercy," *Time*, March 17, 2011, <http://world.time.com/2011/03/17/gaddafi-warns-benghazi-rebel-city-we-are-coming-and-therell-be-no-mercy/>.

³² William J. Burns, "How the U.S.-Russian Relationship Went Bad," *The Atlantic*, April 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/04/william-j-burns-putin-russia/583255/>.

core interests include: (1) upholding its position as a strategically independent great power³³ and (2) maintaining domestic stability.³⁴ Primarily on the basis of research regarding Putin's worldview, the following chapter will assess how the Kremlin's top decisionmaker perceived the events in Libya to touch on these issues.

3.a. U.S.-Russia Bilateral Relations and Russia's Place on the World Stage³⁵

According to President Putin, Russia “was not simply robbed, it was plundered” following the collapse of the Soviet Union.³⁶ Stripped of its status as a great power and many of its valuable territorial possessions almost overnight, Russia limped through much of the 1990s in a state of perpetual crisis that left it unable to assert its interests on the global stage. In fact, it was the diminished status of the Russian Federation that Putin called the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century,” despite the fact that his statement is often misattributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Having assumed the role of acting president in 1999 from Boris Yeltsin and then been elected to office in 2000, Putin sought to change the lopsided dynamic in U.S.-Russia relations. In his “Millennium Message,” published 1 January 2000, he noted:

Russia is in the midst of one of the most difficult periods in its history. For the first time in the past 200-300 years, it is facing a real threat of sliding to the second, and possibly even third, echelon of world states. We are running out of time for removing this threat. We must strain all intellectual, physical and moral forces of the nation. We need coordinated creative work. Nobody will do it for us.³⁷

Initially, Putin appears to have sought cooperation with the West to re-assert Russia's status on the world stage. He believed that a shared struggle against radical Islamic terror, in particular after 9/11, as well as strong personal relationships with President Bush and Prime Minister Blair, could serve as the foundation for a new and equitable partnership.³⁸

In the years that followed Putin's rise to power, global trends that concerned Russian nationalists such as American unilateralism and the expansion of Western influence into what Moscow perceived as its “zone of privileged influence” continued. According to Lukyanov,

The “Rose Revolution” in Georgia in 2003, enthusiastically welcomed and supported by the U.S. administration, and especially the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine one year later, were perceived as proof that the United States was pursuing an expansionist agenda. Putin felt that Russia's overtures of the 1990s had been decisively rebuffed.³⁹

³³ Sarah A. Topol, “What Does Putin Really Want?,” *New York Times*, June 25, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/25/magazine/russia-united-states-world-politics.html>.

³⁴ Lionel Barber, “Transcript: ‘All this fuss about spies ... it is not worth serious interstate relations,’” *Financial Times*, June 26, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/878d2344-98f0-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36>.

³⁵ This section touches upon the point of contention described in section 1A.

³⁶ Fyodor Lukyanov, “Russia: Geopolitics and Identity,” pp. 117.

³⁷ Vladimir Putin, “Russia at the Turn of the Millennium,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, December 31, 1999, <https://pages.uoregon.edu/kimball/Putin.htm>.

³⁸ Angela Stent refers to Putin's aspiration of seeking an “equal partnership of unequals” in her book *Putin's World*.

³⁹ Fyodor Lukyanov, “Russia: Geopolitics and Identity,” pp. 117.

Mistrust toward the West, and the U.S. in particular, has remained ingrained in Russian foreign policy thinking since the Soviet era⁴⁰ and was reinforced by policies that failed to consider Russian interests. For example, one year after asking Russian permission to establish a base in Kyrgyzstan for 12 months to support U.S. operations in Afghanistan after 9/11, then-National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice reportedly said to a Russian counterpart in 2002, “You know what? It turns out we really need this base, like, permanently.”⁴¹

Over time, Western overreach such as the 2003 overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq combined with the rising standard of living in Russia provided Putin with the opportunity to take a more confrontational approach toward the U.S.-led order.⁴² His fiery speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 decrying American hegemony is often considered a turning point in Putin’s presidency,⁴³ and his successor Dmitri Medvedev initially followed that lead by warning of the dangers of an American-led unipolar world.⁴⁴ In fact, when Medvedev received Putin’s endorsement for the presidency in 2008, it was the former’s assertiveness that Putin praised: “He is no less Russian nationalist - in the finest sense of this word - than I am; and working with him will not be easier for our partners.”⁴⁵

Within the context of increasingly aggressive actions to pursue its perceived interests, including its 2008 war against neighboring Georgia, the 2011 Russian abstention on UNSCR 1973 seems curious. A Carnegie Endowment report notes that Russia had billions of dollars invested in the Gaddafi regime, and so its 2011 demise had two negative practical implications: a newly formed government would have “no sense of gratitude toward Moscow for forgiving Libya’s \$4.5 billion debt to Russia in April 2008” and it would “not honor the \$10 billion worth of contracts that Russia had concluded with Qaddafi.”⁴⁶ Perhaps Medvedev abstained to set a new and more cooperative precedent between the U.S. and Russia, meant to ensure that its interests would be respected by Washington whatever should happen with the Libyan regime.⁴⁷ It is also possible that by playing both

⁴⁰ One anecdote from *All the Kremlin’s Men* (p.343-344) which illustrates the level of mistrust: One prominent statesman (not a *silovik* by any means, but rather a liberal) told me a story about the 1972 treaty between the Soviet Union and the United States to ban biological weapons. Despite signing the treaty, the Soviet Union continued to produce biological weapons. At the end of perestroika Gorbachev closed down the programs and gave access to US inspectors. At the same time Russian experts carried out checks in the United States. The Americans immediately discovered that the Soviet Union had violated the treaty, while the Russians found nothing. What was the statesman’s conclusion? “The Americans deceived us,” he stated categorically. “Of course they had biological weapons. It’s just that we didn’t find them.” “How can you be so sure?” I asked. “Can’t we just assume that the Americans were honest and kept to the agreement?” “Of course, not,” he retorted. “If we secretly violated it, they must have done so too. What, you think they’re better than us?”

⁴¹ *All the Kremlin’s Men*, 35.

⁴² Fyodor Lukyanov, “Interactions between Russian Foreign and Domestic Politics,” *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 19 (2008), pp. 21.

⁴³ Vladimir Putin, “Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy,” February 10, 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

⁴⁴ In 2008, Medvedev said: “Regrettably, making our world a secure place is a task that requires serious intervention from all constructive forces. We cannot have a single-polar world. The world has to have various poles. A polycentric world is the only way of ensuring security for the years ahead.” Via Dmitri Medvedev, “Transcript of the Meeting with the Participants in the International Club Valdai,” September 12, 2008, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/1383>.

⁴⁵ Fyodor Lukyanov, “Interactions between Russian Foreign and Domestic Politics,” 22.

⁴⁶ Alexey Malashenko, “Russia and the Arab Spring,” Carnegie – Moscow Center, April 2013, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/russia_arab_spring2013.pdf.

⁴⁷ This idea of collaborating with U.S. intervention in order to protect interests in the targeted country was raised by exiled Russian businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky in the months preceding the U.S. invasion of Iraq (*All the Kremlin’s Men*, 56). It would not be the first time that Russia’s relations with Gaddafi were bartered for better relations with the U.S., as noted by Former Russian Ambassador to Libya Veniamin Popov, via Samuel Ramami’s article in the Huffington Post entitled “Interview with Former Russian Ambassador to Libya Veniamin Popov on Russia-Libya Relations and Libya’s Political Future.”

proponent and opponent of regime change in Libya, Russia sought to position itself to play the role of honest broker between the rebels, the regime, and NATO – a maneuver that was tried but failed.⁴⁸

The removal of the Gaddafi regime, with assistance from NATO airstrikes and against Putin's objections,⁴⁹ provided an additional data point for Putin's broader strategic assessment that "the West is not to be trusted—once they pocket your concession, they ignore you."⁵⁰ At the same time, the fragmentation of Libya following Gaddafi's demise created a geopolitical opening for an influential player capable of delivering predictable and pragmatic approaches to policy.⁵¹ His experience as a KGB officer in Dresden during the ambiguous period in Soviet history of the late 1980s⁵² prepared Putin to seize the non-ideological pragmatist mantle on the global stage with the understanding that "the imposition of 'universal' values (whether communist, liberal, or any other) has historically led to human tragedies and disastrous political consequences."⁵³

3.b. Regime Stability⁵⁴

Vladimir Putin's "statist" attitude, his focus on collective national interest rather than individual rights, is often attributed to earlier professional experiences. Some analysts claim that Putin's time as a KGB officer in Dresden taught him to fear the breakdown of order, a lesson seared into his mind from an episode after the fall of the Berlin Wall when he narrowly escaped a standoff with an angry mob surrounding the local KGB headquarters.⁵⁵ Others point to the impact of his return to the Soviet Union in its death throes and the misery and turmoil experienced throughout Boris Yeltsin's rule in the 1990s.⁵⁶

It is clear from statements made by Putin and those close to him that he understands the stakes of losing power to be far more perilous than a mere return to boring civilian life. When asked in November 2011 what he would like his legacy to be after leaving power, Putin responded very tellingly, "don't go planning my funeral quite yet!"⁵⁷ Likewise, former Kremlin advisor Gleb Pavlovsky has noted the profound impact that the 1993 confrontation at the Russian Parliament had on the Russian leader, leading Putin to state: "we know that as soon we move aside, [you] will destroy us... [you'll] put us up against the wall and execute us."⁵⁸

⁴⁸"Russia Agrees to Mediate Gaddafi Exit," *Al-Jazeera*, May 27, 2011, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2011/05/2011527114252533477.html>.

⁴⁹ Gleb Bryanski, "Putin: Libya coalition has no right to kill Gaddafi," *Reuters*, April 6, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin-libya/putin-libya-coalition-has-no-right-to-kill-gaddafi-idUSTRE73P4L920110426>

⁵⁰ Dmitri Trenin, *What is Russia Up to in the Middle East?*, Polity Press (2018), pp. 46-47.

⁵¹ Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, 114.

⁵² *Mr. Putin*, 122.

⁵³ Sergei A. Karaganov, Kristina I. Cherniavskaia and Dmitry P. Novikov "Russian Foreign Policy: Risky Successes," *Harvard International Review* 37:3 (Spring 2016), pp. 77

⁵⁴ This section touches upon aspects of the contention introduced in section 1B.

⁵⁵ Chris Bowlby, "Vladimir Putin's formative German years," BBC, March 27, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-32066222>.

⁵⁶ Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, "How the 1980s Explains Vladimir Putin," *The Atlantic*, February 14, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/02/how-the-1980s-explains-vladimir-putin/273135/>.

⁵⁷ *Mr. Putin*, 250.

⁵⁸ Tom Parfitt, "Putin's World Outlook," *New Left Review* 88 (July-August 2014), <https://newleftreview.org/issues/II88/articles/gleb-pavlovsky-putin-s-world-outlook>.

That being said, it is not difficult to see why the Kremlin was wary of unrest roiling the Middle East in 2010-11, which had the potential to serve as an external destabilizing influence inside Russia. The Arab protestors' demand that longstanding rulers step down came at an extremely sensitive time for then-Prime Minister Putin. After two terms as President of Russia, Putin moved to the role of Prime Minister in 2008 rather than seeking a third consecutive term, which would have violated the Russian constitution. Despite his assumption of a more ceremonial post, the former President unofficially remained the most powerful man in Russia. Just before he sought to retake the formal position of power in Russia's 2012 Presidential election, demands for the departure of the *ancien régime* swept through the Middle East and captured the world's attention.

As for Russia's internal dynamics, whether the majority of Russians would accept Putin's rule for another six or even 12 years was hardly certain. Putin's campaign, which seemed to be largely positioning itself against the misery and chaos Russia experienced in the 1990s,⁵⁹ was growing less effective as that memory grew more distant and a new generation of citizens came of voting age. At the same time, the economic growth that fueled Putin's popularity during his reign risked becoming his undoing: the country's urban middle class of professionals grew considerably from 2000 to 2011 and began to consider themselves "European" in many ways.⁶⁰ For some Russians, that included expectations of political rights. Meanwhile the opposition, led by Alexei Navalny, grew more aggressive in its drive against Putin's United Russia party. In February 2011, Navalny went so far as to say that "United Russia is the party of crooks and thieves," a phrase that became an oft-repeated slogan in the protests that rattled the country's leadership later that year. Ultimately, Putin received 64% of the vote in the 2012 presidential election and, although this result would be considered a landslide by the standards of any Western democracy, it was significantly smaller than the margin by which Medvedev won in 2008 (71%) or Putin himself won in 2004 (72%).⁶¹

Even Putin's traditional base of support, the more conservative Russian populace living outside of urban centers, appeared to be growing frustrated with the status quo prior to Putin's return to the presidency. During the summer of 2010, bog fires in Moscow's periphery were supposedly mishandled by the government, resulting in dozens of deaths and the displacement of hundreds of citizens.⁶² During a visit to victims who had lost their homes and neighbors, Putin was berated publicly by members of the crowd screaming: "You wanted us to burn alive! Our administration functions very badly! They should be put on trial and hung up by the balls."⁶³

⁵⁹ *Mr. Putin*, 257.

⁶⁰ *Mr. Putin*, 256.

⁶¹ It is also worth noting that the election results were subject to accusations that they were not free and fair, on the basis of unfair use of state resources to benefit Putin's candidacy and widespread voter fraud.

⁶² Julia Ioffe "Russia on Fire," *The New Yorker*, August 5, 2010, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/russia-on-fire>.

⁶³ *Mr. Putin*, 199. Another public incident from 2011 recorded in John Besemeres's article "Putin's Ceaușescu moment": At a martial arts contest between a Russian champion in indifferent form and an American opponent, who some said had been carefully chosen to give the Russian a certain victory and the Premier another suitably macho electoral photo opportunity, Putin entered the ring to congratulate the burly Russian on his victory. When he began to speak, booing and jeering broke out in the crowd. Putin managed to complete his remarks and beat an orderly retreat, but the damage had been done. His aura of invincibility had suddenly been pierced... He was clearly shaken, and though he is typically now a confident public performer, he began avoiding potentially hazardous public appearances in the run-up to the elections for the Duma (parliament) last weekend.

In parallel, there was growing concern in 2010 regarding ethnic strife within Russia, despite Putin's concerted effort⁶⁴ to create a cohesive multi-ethnic Russian state out of what Vladimir Lenin had called a "prison house of nationalities."⁶⁵ As Warhola and Lehning note in their 2007 paper, "deepening xenophobia in Russia during the Putin years became particularly evident and politically ominous."⁶⁶ The 2010 Moscow Metro bombing that killed 40 people, perpetrated by the "Caucasus Emirate," served as a deadly and worrying sign of deteriorating Russian cohesion.⁶⁷ And racial tensions were further exacerbated by later events surrounding the death of an ethnic Russian soccer fan at the hands of an individual from the Caucasus, leading thousands of protestors to demonstrate in Moscow's Manezh Square.⁶⁸

Taken together, it is not surprising that "we do not need great upheavals, we need a great Russia"⁶⁹ was a common refrain for Putin in 2011. As noted by Dr. Maxim Bratersky, Russia "did not separate its security from the security of other states seeking to ensure reliable guarantees of universal security."⁷⁰ So it is likely that the U.S.-led campaign in Libya exacerbated Putin's sense of precariousness which accompanied rising domestic discontent. Suspicion toward the U.S. was compounded by December 2011 statements from U.S. officials casting aspersions on the integrity of the 2011 Duma elections, after which Moscow accused Washington of "setting the tone" for widespread anti-government demonstrations and "giving a signal" to the protestors.⁷¹ The sense that these steps were not only against Putin but against Russia was likely fueled by those around the President who, dependent on him for access to power and wealth, "tried to convince Putin that he was Atlas: if he walked away, the sky would come crashing to the ground."⁷²

4. Implications for the U.S.

In contrast to the Russian perception of Washington's role in the intervention as part of a systematic attempt to counter Moscow's interests and maybe even destabilize it, for the U.S. it appears to have been a tactical reaction, divorced from a broader strategy, to the unexpected developments of the Arab Spring. Strikingly, Obama later conceded in a 2016 interview with Fox News that the worst mistake of his presidency was "probably failing to plan for the day after"⁷³ the intervention in Libya. In fact, one might even consider the decision an undisciplined moment in which the U.S. President deviated from his broader

⁶⁴ "Vladimir Putin delivered a speech at the Organization of Islamic Conference Summit," October 16, 2003, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/29550>.

⁶⁵ Rob Sewell, "Lenin on the National Question," <https://www.marxist.com/lenin-national-question160604.htm>.

⁶⁶ James W. Warhola and Alex Lehning, "Political Order, Identity, and Security in Multinational, Multi-Religious Russia," *Nationalities Papers* 35:5 (2007), pp. 938.

⁶⁷ According to Alexey Malashenko's "Russia and the Arab Spring": The official line in Moscow is that the Arab Spring—and perhaps also those Western powers that have helped advance it—has stirred up dissent among Russia's own Muslim community. Farid Salman, head of the Council of Ulemas of the Russian Federation, which is loyal to the authorities, said that the "Arab revolutions are having a negative influence on Russia's Islamic community."

⁶⁸ *Mr. Putin*, 99.

⁶⁹ Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, "Vladimir Putin's Risky Ploy to Manufacture History," *The Atlantic*, January 12, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/01/vladimir-putins-risky-ploy-to-manufacture-history/251269/>.

⁷⁰ Maxim Bratersky, "The Evolution of National Security Thinking in Post-Soviet Russia," *Strategic Analysis*, 40:6 (2016), pp. 517.

⁷¹ "Putin lashes out at Clinton over protests," *Euroneus*, December 8, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxmUFTTF9MQ>.

⁷² *All the Kremlin's Men*, 344.

⁷³ Dominic Tierney, "The Legacy of Obama's 'Worst Mistake'," *The Atlantic*, April 15, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/04/obamas-worst-mistake-libya/478461/>.

strategy to reduce U.S. involvement in the Middle East, a strategy to which he would return soon after with greater conviction. Washington's primary lesson related not to great-power competition, but rather to the need for the U.S. to unilaterally exercise greater restraint. In the context of this research paper, which focuses on U.S.-Russian relations, the rationale behind this section's relative brevity (in comparison to the previous) is that the implications for the U.S. do not directly relate to Moscow, despite second-order effects on the bilateral relationship.

U.S. President Barack Obama was not initially inclined to interfere in Libya's domestic affairs and was advised against doing so by his top policy advisors, including Secretary of Defense Bob Gates and Vice President Joe Biden. Ultimately, however, Obama conceded to the advice of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Amb. Susan Rice, Amb. Samantha Power, and pleas from Paris and London,⁷⁴ that the United States had a responsibility to prevent Gaddafi's massacre of Libyan civilians and that doing so would advance U.S. values and interests.⁷⁵

The lesson that Washington learned from the Libyan intervention ought to be contextualized within the broader landscape of U.S. experiences in the Middle East. As former Special Assistant to President Obama Dr. Philip Gordon writes:

When implying the United States can “fix” Middle Eastern problems if only it “gets it right” it is worth considering this: In Iraq, the U.S. intervened and occupied, and the result was a costly disaster. In Libya, the U.S. intervened and did not occupy, and the result was a costly disaster. In Syria, the U.S. neither intervened nor occupied, and the result is a costly disaster.⁷⁶

The conclusion that those in the Obama Administration ultimately drew from U.S. disappointments in the region was that if the outcome of a given situation was disastrous regardless of the steps taken by outside actors, then the U.S. would be better off conserving a great deal of blood and treasure by avoiding such engagements. Obama himself said that “if there had been no Iraq, no Afghanistan, and no Libya...[he] might be more apt to take risks in Syria.”⁷⁷

The result was a reduced appetite in Washington for additional or even existing engagements in the region. That is one of the few planks that President Donald Trump adopted from Obama's platform,⁷⁸ as both presidents sensed that Americans were growing tired of overseas wars which they did not seem to be winning and in which they appeared to have little at stake. As foreign policy expert Shalom Lipner writes:

Trump has certainly been less deliberate and consistent than Obama in his management of global affairs, but this remaking of the Middle East is their shared

⁷⁴ Ted Galen Carpenter, “How NATO Pushed the U.S. Into the Libya Fiasco,” *The American Conservative*, February 21, 2019, <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/how-nato-pushed-us-libya-fiasco>.

⁷⁵ It is worth mentioning that many of the officials in favor of intervention had also been serving when the U.S. failed to act during the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, and were roundly criticized for it. Preventing a second iteration is considered a key motive for their more hawkish stance in Libya.

⁷⁶ Philip Gordon, “The Middle East is Falling Apart,” *Politico*, June 4, 2015, https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/06/america-not-to-blame-for-middle-east-falling-apart-118611_Page3.html.

⁷⁷ Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

⁷⁸ Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine.”

legacy. Their message has been the same: If America's friends in the region aspire for enhanced security, they'd best not wait for the White House to provide it.⁷⁹

Russia has seized on this trend as a window of opportunity to challenge America wherever possible – supporting America's adversaries and presenting itself as a more reliable alternative to America's allies. This is not to say Russia has the capability to replace the U.S. in the Middle East: the former has few allies, let alone an alliance-based security architecture. But as Angela Stent has noted, the Russian approach “as an opponent of regime change and supporter of existing governments endears it to all governments in the area, authoritarian and democratic.”⁸⁰

The convergence of these two trends, the U.S. refocusing its efforts away from the Middle East and Russia adopting a more confrontational stance toward the U.S., likely contributed to the Washington establishment's “return to great power competition” described in the 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy.⁸¹

5. Conclusion⁸²

Since the intervention in Libya, Russia has (thus far) successfully prevented all U.S. efforts to effect regime change or democratization, foiling American strategies in Syria and Venezuela. Even at home, America's democratic institutions appear to be under Russian attack.

On a tactical level, Russia's new approach may allow it to serve as the “spoiler” in order to derive leverage, extract concessions, and gain recognition as a global player. On a strategic level, Moscow may believe that its actions can hasten the decline of the U.S.-led order and help shape a new, ascendant global order.⁸³ Whatever Russia's current intentions, the post-Libya era is characterized by Russia's unwillingness to abide by Western norms and the U.S.'s lack of self-confidence or interest in enforcing them.

The new and more assertive Russian approach to foreign policy has been institutionalized in the 2015 Russian National Security Strategy and the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation. The former notes that “the Russian Federation's implementation of an independent foreign and domestic policy is giving rise to opposition from the United States and its allies, who are seeking to retain their dominance in world affairs.”⁸⁴ While the latter notes that Russian foreign policy aims to “counter attempts to interfere in the domestic affairs of States with the aim of unconstitutional change of regime” and is “guided by the principles of independence and sovereignty, pragmatism, transparency,

⁷⁹ Shalom Lipner, “How Obama and Trump Left a Vacuum in the Middle East,” *Politico*, November 22, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/11/22/obama-trump-middle-east-vacuum-215861>.

⁸⁰ Angela Stent, *Putin's World: Russia Against the West and With the Rest*.

⁸¹ “2017 National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” December 18, 2017, pp. 25, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

⁸² The aim of this paper has been to examine the ways in which the 2011 intervention in Libya influenced the trajectory of U.S.-Russia relations, concluding with realistic recommendations to set the stage for a more productive and less volatile relationship within the constraints of diverging interests and deeply ingrained mutual suspicion. Other dimensions of the 2011 intervention, including its political-economic components, regional considerations, and long-term impact on Libya, are all important and interesting subjects, but are beyond the scope of this paper.

⁸³ Sergei Karaganov and Dmitry Suslov, “A new world order: A view from Russia.”

⁸⁴ “Russian National Security Strategy,” December 2015, <https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/jaro2016/POL361/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.txt>.

predictability, a multidirectional approach and the commitment to pursue national priorities on a non-confrontational basis.”⁸⁵

However, Putin’s desire for an “equal partnership” with the U.S. may have been doomed to fail from the outset simply because that would not have been reflective of Russia’s actual stature vis-à-vis the U.S. by any metric except for its nuclear arsenal. A psychological profile of Putin from 2000 provides little hope for improvement in the near future by explaining the Russian president’s behavior as “characterized by a belief in reciprocity in following norms and rules... [such that] a breakdown in cooperation will likely be bitter and long-lived.”⁸⁶

Nevertheless, it is worth considering what might be done to limit the risks to global security posed by an acrimonious U.S.-Russia relationship. While it is unlikely that hostility between the two countries would lead to direct confrontation or nuclear war, presuming that the strategic logic behind the Cold War concept of mutually assured destruction (MAD) still holds, proxy wars and other forms of escalation can have unforeseen and unintended consequences.

The following recommendations do not represent a panacea for the challenges facing the U.S.-Russia relationship and seek to manage rather than resolve key points of friction, including divergences over Russia’s role in the world and matters of governance (as discussed in Section I). Yet, they could lay the groundwork for important conversations about what is realistically achievable, after which decision-makers will be able to make clear-eyed determinations about what course of action is desirable. With that in mind, the author proposes the following principles:

A. Outlining the limits within which the relationship could feasibly and acceptably fluctuate in order to enable pragmatic calculations. Mapping this out could help to disabuse decision-makers of the notion that an entirely negative or positive relationship between the two states is realistic or desirable, while at the same time concentrating the expenditure of limited resources and efforts on vital interests that require bilateral cooperation.

B. Framing bilateral disagreements or disputes in the context of compartmentalized issues rather than existential struggles. For this to happen, the U.S. might declare that it will refrain from intervening in Russia’s domestic affairs on the condition it receives a similar guarantee from Russia vis-à-vis U.S. domestic affairs. Of course, such a policy shift will present its own set of difficulties for the U.S., as the line between non-interference and complicity in Russian activities such as domestic repression could present ethical and moral challenges in the future.

C. Arranging for a high-level track two dialogue between U.S. and Russian foreign policy experts to meet regularly in order to consider areas of potential cooperation, sources of potential friction and mechanisms to manage them, and contingency plans in the event of major escalations. Presumably, this could serve as an unofficial channel to deliver and receive messages between governments.

⁸⁵ “Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation,” November 30, 2016, <http://interkomitet.com/foreign-policy/basic-documents/foreign-policy-concept-of-the-russian-federation-approved-by-president-of-the-russian-federation-vladimir-putin-on-november-30-2016/>.

⁸⁶ Stephen Benedict Dyson, “Drawing Policy Implications from the ‘Operational Code’ of a ‘New’ Political Actor: Russian President Vladimir Putin”, *Policy Sciences* 34:3-4 (2001), pp. 344.

D. An agreement to seek a mutual and voluntary reduction in the hostile and inflammatory rhetoric⁸⁷ directed by government officials at their counterparts. Leaders' incitement of their own domestic populations could make cooperation more politically difficult in the future, even in instances when it would yield mutually beneficial results.

⁸⁷ David Rohde and Arshad Mohammed, "Special Report: How the U.S. made its Putin problem worse," *Reuters*, April 18, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-putin-diplomacy-special-repor/special-report-how-the-u-s-made-its-putin-problem-worse-idUSBREA3H0OQ20140418>; Nina Khrushcheva, "Putin's anti-American rhetoric now persuades his harshest critics," *Reuters*, July 29, 2014, <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2014/07/29/putins-anti-american-rhetoric-now-persuades-his-harshest-critics/>.

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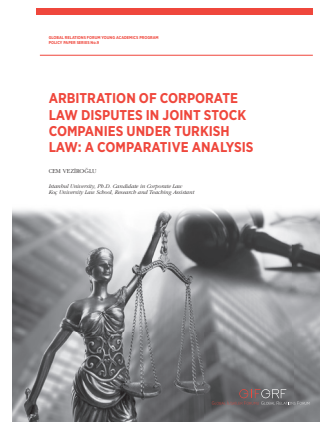
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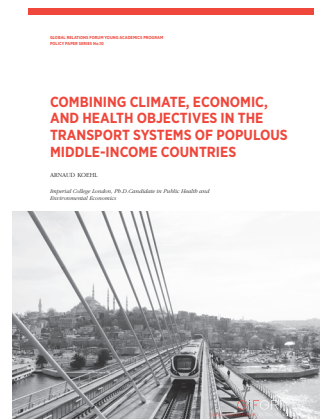
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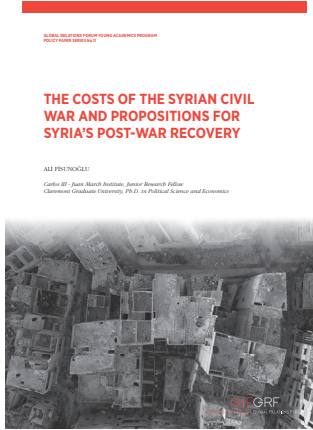
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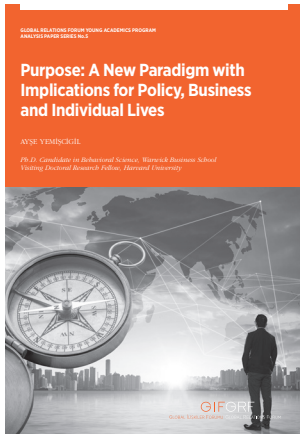


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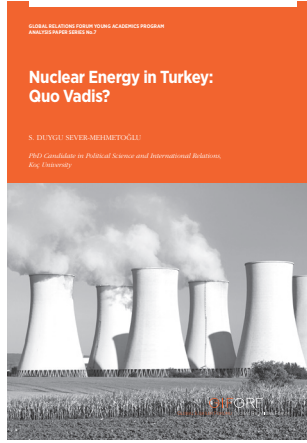
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