After the U.S. Election: Time to Re-Engage Russia?

Ambassador Kurt Volker: [00:01] Thank you very much and good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for coming on a slightly rainy evening. It's the furniture, trust me.

[00:09] [laughter]

Ambassador Volker: [00:10] I want to welcome you to the McCain Institute, and the next in our series of debates on foreign policy issues. My name is Kurt Volker, I have the honor of serving as the Executive Director of the McCain Institute.

[00:24] We were founded in 2012, a ton of a legacy of service to our country of Senator McCain, Mrs. Cindy McCain, and the McCain family, going back generations. I'm very pleased to see some Navy uniforms here in the audience. We focus on promoting character-driven leadership, and we fashion ourselves as a do tank more than a think tank.

[00:47] We like to figure out what we can accomplish and then go out and try to do it. We do that in the areas of promoting character-driven leadership, humanitarian work, human rights, national security and international security, global rule of law and governance.

[01:01] We do love to have a good debate. We structure a series of these. We've done over 20 now on key foreign policy questions that the United States needs to address. Two years ago, we did a debate about Russia and the question at that time was, "Is it time for containment?"

[01:20] Given the discussion that we've had throughout the course of our Presidential campaign about Russia, it seems like the more pertinent question is, "After the US Presidential election, is it time to re-engage with Russia?" That'll be the topic of tonight's debate.

[01:36] Before we move on, let me do a few more housekeeping items. You can learn more about The McCain Institute by going to our brand new refurbished website which is www.mccaininstitute.org. You can even do that from your chair because we do have WiFi here in the Navy Memorial Auditorium.

[01:56] You'll see it on the back page. It's USN001, and the password is there as well. With that, you can log on. We encourage you to tweet, comment, and actively participate in our event this evening. The hashtag is MIDebate. Each of the Twitter handles for our participants is located inside the program. That's all of the housekeeping there.

[02:23] We're delighted to have C-SPAN here with us this evening. Greetings to all the viewers there. We are also live webcasting this debate. We do keep these archives and put them up online on our website and our YouTube channel so you can go back to these.

[02:39] We do try to produce a shorter version, so that if you weren't here tonight, if you want to go back, you can get the short version that crystalizes the points that are made. We have an excellent, excellent panel of people to debate this topic for you, and we follow standard, organized, kind debate rules.
What we will have is a four-minute opening from one side, a four-minute opening from the other side, two minutes to rebut, two minutes to rebut, and then we turn to questions. As your moderator, I will start with some of these questions and give equal time to each side -- two minutes each -- to address those questions.

Then we'll gradually come to you, the audience. Be thinking about what you would like to throw into the debate. Please, when you do, don't make long statements. Please, focus on a question that we can throw back to our debaters and hear their take on that issue.

Tonight, to argue the case that it is time to reengage with Russia after the US presidential election, we have a friend and former colleague, Tom Graham. Tom was a US foreign service officer and political officer in the US Embassy in Moscow in the early and mid-'90s heyday.

Even before that, I should say, even the late '80s as Russia was changing and then again at a second tour in Moscow, was really helping the US government understand what the oligarchic system was that was being created that was going to run Russia.

He later went on to work, as I did, for the Counselor of the State Department at the time, Bob Zoellick. He later went on to serve as Senior Director for Russia at the National Security Council. He's currently managing director at Kissinger Associates.

Joining Tom is Paul Saunders, who is the Executive Director of the Center for the National Interest and is the Associate Editor of their publication, "The National Interest" and runs their Russia program within that center.

On the opposite side, that, no, it is not a good idea to be reengaging Russia right now, we have another friend and former colleague, and current colleague. David Kramer is the Senior Director for Democracy and Human Rights at the McCain Institute.

He is formerly president of Freedom House, former Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, and a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Russia and Ukraine at the same time I had a similar position.

With David this evening is Alina Polyakova, who is the Deputy Director of the Dinu Patriciu Eurasia Center at the Atlantic Council and the senior fellow there. Born in Ukraine. Got her PhD here in the United States and likewise arguing the case that now is not the time to reengage with Russia.

To kick us off, I'm going to pose the question again, which is, "Is it time, after the US Presidential Election, for the United States to reengage with Russia?" I'm going to turn it to Tom Graham to start us off.

Thomas Graham: [05:37] Thank you, Kurt, and thank you to the McCain Institute for hosting this event this evening. Both Paul, and I, and the others, are glad to be here. The eruption of the Ukraine crisis in 2014 marked the end of an era in US-Russian relations.

Our bipartisan effort to integrate Russia into the Euro-Atlantic Community as a free market democracy has failed. Developing a new approach should be one of the priorities of the next administration. You should bear in mind three points.
First, the world today is radically different from the one we faced 25 years ago. The global balance of power is shifting from Europe to Asia, new technologies are diffusing power and changing the way societies interact. In our interconnected world it is beyond us, even in combination with our allies, to isolate another major power.

Second, Russia may be in a prolonged period of stagnation, but for any purpose and time span that makes sense for policy-making it will remain a significant power. It has a world-class diplomat core, a talented scientific community, and a capable military.

Its nuclear arsenal, its vast resources, its location in the heart of Eurasia makes it a major player on the issue of importance to the United State in Europe, in the Middle East, in East Asia, and the Arctic. Third, Russia opposes the United States across a broad front, most notably in Europe, and Asia, and the Middle East.

It is undermining the principles of European order and is seeking to rally countries against US leadership. We cannot ignore these challenges but, that said, dealing with transnational issues of vital interest to the United States.

Such as the strategic balance, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and international terrorism will be considerably more difficult if we do not engage Russia. Moreover, in East Asia it makes no sense to drive Russia into the embrace of China, which is a strategic competitor.

Finally, as a new world order emerges from the current turbulence, we need to include Russia in a way that's consistent with our long-term interest and values. In these circumstances we cannot contain or isolate Russia, nor is it in our interest to do so.

Likewise, we cannot build a partnership, nor is it in our interest to try. Rather, the task is to construct a balance of competition and cooperation that best advance America's national interest. What, then, should be the first steps for the new American administration?

The immediate task is two-fold, to ensure that the current competition in the Middle East and Europe does not spiral out of control, and to prevent the relationship from becoming a reflexively adversarial one in which the primary goal of each side is to thwart the other.

There are three steps we can take almost immediately. First, we open the channels of communication. It's not a reward to talk to Russia. We need to do this so we avoid misunderstandings that lead to uncontrollable crises, and we need to do this so we can elaborate our own policy and implement it effectively.

Second, we need to tone down the rhetoric. Demonizing Putin and Russia does not help us achieve our goals. Third, we need to put in charge of Russia policy and context with Moscow a senior trusted official in order to send a coherent message to Moscow.

Finally, the last thing we need to do is think of Russia in a global context. The crisis in Syria's connected to the crisis in Ukraine in Europe. What we do with Russia and Europe will have consequences for what Russia does with China, which will have consequences for us in East Asia.
In an interconnected world we need to engage Russia and, indeed, keep in mind the proper balance between cooperation and competition.

Ambassador Volker: [10:02] Thank you very much, Tom. We ran a few seconds over. We'll do the same for David and his team. David?

David J. Kramer: [10:11] Kurt, thanks very much, and thanks to Tom and to Paul for joining Alina and me in this debate, and thanks to all of you for coming. What kind of regime would our colleagues have us reengage with?

[10:21] It's critically important to take a look at the record. Let me describe the past 17-plus years that Russia has been ruled by Vladimir Putin. It's a Russia that shares neither our values, to say the least, nor our interest.

[10:36] Let's remember that Putin came to power in 1999 as prime minister, and then president the following year, against the backdrop of mysterious bombings in September of '99 that killed nearly 300 people. He used brutal, indiscriminate force against those living in Chechnya.

[10:54] It sounds familiar today with what Russia's doing in Syria. He's launched the worst crackdown on human rights in Russia since the breakup of the Soviet Union, and created an environment in which government critics, journalists, activists are thrown in jail, harassed, even killed.

[11:09] Hunted down those who oppose the regime, even in the West, like Alexander Litvinenko. Created a massive kleptocracy who's best export to the West is corruption. The cyber attack against Estonia, 2007, and also one against Ukraine, 2014.


[11:45] Has failed to live up to a single condition under the Minsk agreements that have been put forward. Bears responsibility for shoot-down of MH17 that killed 298 people. It's cut off energy to neighbors in the height of winter.

[12:02] Launched a brutal military campaign in Syria in which the targets have not been ISIS, but any opposition to Assad. Deliberately targets hospitals, aid convoys, bakeries, civilian centers in Aleppo, causing unprecedented death and suffering amounting to war crimes.

[12:19] He has no regard for international law or following through on goodwill negotiations, including the ceasefire that US and Russia struck on Syria. Russia has withdrawn from the CFE Treaty, is violating the INF Treaty, positioning nuclear-capable Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad.

[12:35] It's threatened the use of nuclear weapons against states, including those that would host missile defense sites. Engaging in military muscle flexing, including with utterly reckless and dangerous buzzing of NATO ships and aircraft.
Hacking of emails and attempts to discredit, if not influence, the US elections, to say nothing of its efforts to meddle in European politics. Lies and cheats at international sporting events. Demonizes the West, and the US, in particular.

Seeks to block neighbors' aspirations for closer ties to the West, denying them their right to determine their own future, and trampling on basic principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. How many more neighbors does Putin have to invade? How many more Ukrainians and Syrians have to be killed?

How much worse does the crackdown inside Russia have to get before we say enough, before those who would advocate for a reengagement strategy would realize that that would not only be futile, but possibly dangerous?

Alina Polyakova: What David is describing is not a set of random acts. This is a pattern. A pattern of complete disregard for international law, which Russia signs, and then willingly breaks, a pattern of no respect for sovereignty of independent states, and, of course, a brutal disregard for basic human rights.

This pattern clearly shows us that Russia is not a trustworthy partner. Many administrations, both Republican and Democratic, have tried to engage with Russia, and they have failed. That's because Russia is playing the game of smoke and mirrors.

Just this week in the FT, the "Financial Times," Sergei Ivanov said in an interview that Russia's ready to turn a new page. The next day the deputy foreign minister of Russia, Ryabkov, said that the next four years will be very difficult and no change will come. We have seen this movie before, this playing the smoke and mirrors. Let's not fall for it again.

Ambassador Volker: Thank you. What I detect here are two differences. One of them is tone, about how we look at Russia. The other one is tactical, which is Russia's a problem. They're against us, but that's why we need to engage them, versus engaging them that way will only encourage worse behavior in the future. Paul?

Paul Saunders: Let me say several things in response to David and Alina. Russia's an authoritarian country. I don't think we should have any illusions about that. At the same time, I don't think we should have any illusions that the United States deals very regularly with a number of other authoritarian countries.

China would be one. Certainly Saudi Arabia would be another. A number of them are close partners of the United States. We find a way to deal with those governments because we believe that the United States has important interests at stake and we don't have another choice.

Relatedly, can the United States have a meaningful impact on Russia's domestic governance during a policy-relevant time frame? I would argue no. We don't know how quickly the Russian political system may evolve, or if it will at all. We have the Russia that we have. We need to deal with the Russia that we have.

The United States and Russia have different interests in a number of areas. It's not easy to deal with partners who have different interests. There's an issue of trust, absolutely, but, look,
we successfully got rid of most of Syria's chemical weapons without trusting each other. I certainly feel that that was an accomplishment.

[16:36] We don't need to trust Russia in order to be able to accomplish things with Russia. What we need to be able to do is to understand how Russia defines its interests, and to structure our engagement with Russia in a way that creates realistic incentives and penalties that can shape Russian conduct in ways that we believe reflect our own interests.

Ambassador Volker: [17:09] David and Alina, back to you for two minutes.

Alina: [17:12] In response to that, we're not calling for complete isolationism and a cut off of relations. Even during the Cold War, when we faced a much bigger adversary, the Soviet Union, than what Russia is today, we had diplomatic relations and avenues of cooperation.

[17:28] We can still find those areas of cooperation with Russia, and we should -- perhaps in the Arctic, perhaps in non-proliferation -- but diplomacy only works when you know that your partner at the other side of the table will abide with the agreement that you reach.

[17:46] Russia can take steps to show they can still be a trustworthy partner. The door is not closed in any way. Again, this is not about complete polarization of relations or isolationism outright. Russia could take these steps.

[18:01] For example, it could abide by the Minsk Agreement, which it signed, but pulling soldiers out of eastern Ukraine and pulling its weapons out of eastern Ukraine. It could give Crimea back to Ukraine. It could stop ruthlessly murdering civilians in Syria, and propping up a dictator.

[18:17] It could stop threatening the world with a nuclear war. Talk about ramped up rhetoric. It's not us that needs to tone it down, it is Russia. It could do all those things, but the point is that it chooses not to.

Ambassador Volker: [18:32] Let me know pose a few questions, here. Let me take it, first, back to Tom and to Paul. Paul gave an example in his answer about engaging Russia, and well, it got rid of Syrian chemical weapons.

[18:46] I think a lot of us who are looking at Syria would say, "Well, but, yeah, but, they used other chemical weapons against civilian populations, and the war has actually gotten worse." Can give you give me examples of when engaging Russia, and how that engagement worked? Give me examples of when it's actually produced a good result.

Thomas: [19:05] How much time do I have, two minutes?

[19:09] [laughter]

Ambassador Volker: [19:10] Two minutes!

Thomas: [19:10] Look. It's not a matter of trust. It's when interests align. If you go back to the Bush administration, Afghanistan, the first three months against Al-Qaeda and Taliban. We had superb cooperation with the Russians.
The Russians were instrumental in our ability to get to Kabul and overthrow the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in a short period of time that we did. If you look at Non-Proliferation, again during the Bush administration.

We signed a number of agreements with Russia, and how we were going to secure nuclear facilities not only in Russia but globally. We put together a global partnership to combat nuclear terrorism, which now has four or five dozen members.

It's not something that we talk about all the time, but it's still in effect, and still plays a vital role in securing our interests and Russia's interests. People will argue, but we've done with Russia, a number of issues, and the strategic balance.

Whether you agree with [inaudible] or not, I think that's an accomplishment for the Obama administration. We did that with Russia because our interests overlapped, not necessarily because we trust each other. We put in a monitoring mechanism to provide for our ability to monitor where we don't have sufficient trust.

Again, the Iran deal is something that will be as controversial, but yet the two countries came together with four other countries in order to put together something that put off the development of weapons in Iran for at least 10 years if not longer.

When our interests align, there are many things that the United States and Russia can do together that are advantageous to us. If we cut off engagement, if we put on the table that only if you follow this set of rules, if you agree with this, can we work in third areas.

We're going to farm our own interests, we're not going to get what we need in order to make ourselves secure, make our allies secure, and advance prosperity around the globe.

Ambassador Volker: Let me turn it to your team. Go ahead.

David: I agree with a lot of what Tom just said. Both the Bush administration and the Obama administration came into office, eager and interested to work with Russia. Tom cited a number of accomplishments that were done between both countries, and the governments on both sides.

Yet, at the end of the Bush administration, US-Russian relations were in the worst state since the end of the Cold War. Obama comes in, reset policy, wipes the slate clean, and here we are with Obama's administration winding down. We are in an even worse state of relations with Russia.

What's the common denominator? Vladimir Putin. I understand that we don't want to demonize Putin, and yet at the end of the day let's also remember that Putin's interests don't always coincide with what should be Russia's national interest.

Putin's number one interest is staying in power. His second interest is staying in power, and his third interest is, guess what? Staying in power. He'll do whatever is necessary, including making up these myths that the west is trying to overthrow him.
It's nonsense. He got spooked by the color revolutions, he got spooked by the Arab movements in 2011, and he has to drum up this notion that we're trying to overthrow his regime, when in reality we're not.

Thomas: Can I jump in, here? The first Clinton administration also started trying to cooperate with Russia. When they left office, with Boris Yeltsin, relations were at their worst state since the breakup of the Soviet Union.

It's a cycle. It's not simply Putin. I think there's a larger problem of how we deal with Russia that we haven't come to terms with. Thinking that, if somehow you simply remove Putin, that things get better, that this is a personal issue, that it's about Putin and his desires, I think misses a major point.

We've got a Russia problem that we have to deal with. There's structural aspects to this. Unless we think through those, we're never going to come to a type of engagement or a type of relationship that is going to advance American interests.

Paul: Can I just add to that? Let me just add one point to what Tom's saying. I think we have become accustomed, over the last 20 years, to a form of engagement with other countries in which we tell them what we want them to do, and they do it.

In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, it was understandable why that would work. Russia was a profoundly weak country. It was dependent on the United States and the west for the IMF, the World Bank, for money to keep the economy afloat, and to keep the political system stable.

That's not the case anymore. We cannot realistically hope to work with Russia in a manner that imposes our preferences. It has to be a back and forth. That's the way that international diplomacy has worked. That's the purpose of international diplomacy.

I need to give the other team a chance, here.

David: Just, quickly. We don't have a Russia problem, we have the Putin regime problem. Sure, it's not just one individual, though of course he is the decisive figure in Russian politics. It is a regime. It's corrupted the whole political elite, to a large extent. I wouldn't say we have a Russia problem.

I don't think we have problems with Russians. We actually have a lot in common with Russians, and a lot has been done through exchanges. We do have the problem with the leader of the country, who demonizes the west, belittles us, and threatens our allies.

That's the problem. Similarly, it isn't a lack of communication. How many times has John Kerry met with Sergey Lavrov? If we were to sanction someone, I would sanction the pilot for Kerry's plane, so that he can't go to Moscow anymore.
It is not lack of communication. Chancellor Merkel, how many meetings does she have, phone calls, with Putin? It isn't a lack of understanding of what we're dealing with here. The problem is in the Kremlin.

Ambassador Volker: OK, but let me ask you, David and Alina, what's the alternative universe that you want to create? Tom and Paul are making a case that we have a lot of interests. We may not like everything that Russia does, but we've got to talk to him and get done what we can.

Tom had a list of things which, if those are on your list to do, Russia could play a role. What's the alternative?

Alina: The alternative is that, we have some sort of tougher policy towards Russia. There have to be consequences for what it has done in the international order, for its invasion of sovereign country, its mass murder of civilians in Syria.

That tougher policy will be a mix that includes ramping up sanctions which we already have in place, re-investing in our relationship with our allies, standing up to Russia's human rights abuses, and of course investigating Russia's best export to the west, which is corruption.

Russia needs to clean up its own act, and it's not about telling them what to do, it's our way or the highway. That is absolutely not what this is. The point is that the Russian people, and people in any country, should have the choice as to the path their country takes.

The Russian people currently do not have that choice given the regime they live in. Containment has worked before, and it can work again.

David: I'll just say, because I see we still have a little time, and I know you said don't waste time but let me explain it.

David: I think it's critically important that we bolster Russia's neighbors, that we support democratic, economic security development in all of these countries, whether they are NATO members, with Article Five guarantees, which I think does put them on a different level, or aspiring countries.

In having countries in this gray zone, countries like Ukraine, and Georgia, and Moldova, though not with NATO with Moldova, in this gray zone is incredibly dangerous. What, I think, we would argue is we try to erase this gray zone, make it clear that they are welcome to join our institutions.

I think the other side would argue we should focus on US-Russia relations at the expense of these nations.

Ambassador Volker: Let's hear what the other side argues.

Thomas: With respect to the gray zone, look. I don't want a gray zone, either. The problem is that we, ourselves, created this gray zone, because we declared at the NATO summit
in 2008 that, Ukraine and Georgia would become members of NATO at some unspecified future time.

[28:23] When it was quite clear that there were serious differences within the NATO alliance, about making that happen. We, ourselves, created a situation in which, actually, there was a strong incentive for Russia to take advantage of that gray zone.

[28:41] It was their decision to do it, it wasn't our responsibility that they chose to do it, but we created that situation. I think we have to be honest with ourselves about that.

[28:55] [crosstalk]

**Ambassador Volker:** [28:55] Do you have any?

**Paul:** [28:57] Only that, the only point I would make is, Russia is in the gray zone. The question is, what do we do at this point in order to, in fact, create the opportunities for the types of states that you're talking about in Ukraine and Georgia?

[29:13] Finding a way that you can take this, or minimize the geopolitical competition, and engage with both Ukraine and Georgia, and other countries, is vitally important. That's the challenge today, it's not wishing that we didn't have gray zones. We've got them, and Russia happens to be in them, as we are.

**Alina:** [29:30] I want to take one issue with what Paul said, which is, let's be clear here. We did not create the gray zone. That is just absolutely not true. You have to remember what NATO is, and what the EU is. These are voluntary organizations that countries must petition to join, and must meet certain requirements.

[29:49] Nobody is strong-arming these countries into joining NATO or even the EU. They feel threatened by Russia, and they seek to join these institutions because they feel threatened, and they feel that their security is at risk.

[30:05] The assertion that we, the west, the US, is creating gray zones is not true. It's Russia that seeks to create gray zones, because it seeks a buffer zone to protect itself from what it sees as a threat, but that perception is also a false one.

**Paul:** [30:20] Can I just add, quickly?

**Ambassador Volker:** [30:22] Real quick, because I think...

**Thomas:** [30:23] I'd like to respond to that.


**David:** [30:28] Just picking up on that point. Paul, it was Ukraine and Georgia applied for a Membership Action Plan. We supported it. As we all know, MAP wasn't offered. The language that Chancellor Merkel and President Bush came up with a compromise, a pretty forward-leaning compromise, I'll grant you that.
It was Ukraine's and Georgia's choice, their right to determine their future and their orientation with [inaudible] institutions. In contrast, Russia leaves countries no choice but to join the Eurasian Economic Union. They hold, literally, a gun to their head.

That's why you saw Armenia back out of the EU agreement in September 2013 before Ukraine did and other countries, so there's a huge difference between the way we treat those countries and Russia does.

Ambassador Volker: [31:15] Paul, come back to the point.

Paul: [31:17] I think there are two separate issues here. Look, it's the right of Ukraine, Georgia, or anybody else to decide that they want to be an ally of the United States or that they want to be an ally of NATO.

It's the right of the United States, specifically under our constitution, something that's assigned to the US Senate, to decide whether or not we want a particular country to our ally. Those are two separate decisions.

I fully respect the aspiration of the governments of Ukraine, Georgia, or anyone else to be an American ally, but it's our decision on the basis of our assessment of our interests whether or not we want a particular government to be our ally or not.

Secondly, in this particular case we created, actually, the worst of both worlds because we made a commitment that these governments would become members of NATO in a situation in which it was very apparent, for the reason that you acknowledge, because there were disagreements inside the alliance that it wasn't going to happen any time soon.

We created a situation in which, from Moscow's perspective, there was a danger that in the future Ukraine would become a member of NATO, which they viewed as very threatening, but it isn't now.

Ambassador Volker: [33:04] Can I ask a question? Would you reverse the decades-old policy of NATO to close the door on aspiring states and consign these countries to a Russian sphere of influence?

Paul: [33:16] I am not saying that we should close the door on anyone or consign someone to a Russian sphere of influence. What I'm saying is that it is an American decision who is our ally. What I don't want to do is to outsource to other governments the decision about who gets to be an ally of the United States and when.

Ambassador Volker: [33:40] Let's pause here for a second. Paul, what you're saying, is we created the gray zone because we said they could be members of NATO and we didn't follow through. Now they aspire to that. Russia doesn't like it, and they're just in this limbo.

Underneath that is, I would argue, a question as to whether Russia has a legitimate say or voice as to what these countries ought to do. The only reason it's an issue, the only reason NATO allies are uncomfortable with this, is because of their relationship with Russia. It's giving Russia an assent that says, "Yeah, sure, you can decide what these countries get to do."
**Paul:** [34:22] I would argue that Russia did decide. I would argue that it's not for us to say whether or not Russia has a veto. Russia actually has, in reality, a veto which it exercised. Neither of those countries, Ukraine or Georgia, is a member of NATO.

[34:38] Neither one is likely to make any progress toward becoming a member of NATO in any politically relevant time frame. That's been pushed very far into the future.

[34:53] If you asked me what would I want, I would want a situation in which Russia's concerns are discussed in some kind of a mechanism that allows for the United States and its allies to address them through diplomacy and other kinds of interaction rather than Russia taking unilateral steps, which, from our perspective, I think are much more counterproductive.

**Ambassador Volker:** [35:27] Tom, do you want to jump in on this as well? What Paul is suggesting is the US or NATO and Russia should get together and talk about the fates of other countries. Is that...?

**Paul:** [35:36] That's not what I'm...

[35:37] [laughter]

[35:37] [crosstalk]

**Thomas:** [35:40] Countries talk about the fate of other countries all the time. We talk with our European allies about the fate of Russia. We talk to the Ukrainians about the fate of Russia and so on, that's natural. I think the issue here is what are you trying to achieve and how do you best achieve it.

[35:58] Whether we agree with Russia has legitimate interest or not, the Russians have told us for the past 25 years Ukraine is a red line for them. They would react. They reacted. We weren't prepared to deal with that reaction. That's poor policy making. That's poor statecraft.

[36:15] You need to understand what the other side is doing, how they think about it, how they might react. That needs to be factored into your policy. If we want to bring Ukraine into the West, we don't have to achieve that today or tomorrow.

[36:31] We need to have a real plan that takes into account Russia's attitude, Russia's possible reactions, and put that in place and eventually get there over time. The flaw is that in 2014 we undertook a set of actions. We were unprepared for a Russian response.

[36:52] We got a Russian response, and we were caught flat-footed. That's poor policy making. That's what we need. I think, again, we need to engage Russia, have a better idea of what they're really thinking about, what they're capabilities are, and then fashioning a policy that gets us where we want to get, if not tomorrow, over time.

**Paul:** [37:12] It's been bad for us but also bad for Ukraine, because we're in a situation where we made this commitment that we are likely not going to follow through on any time soon. At the same time, Ukraine has had Crimea taking away, has been subject to this very brutal conflict. It hasn't worked well for either.
**Ambassador Volker:** [37:41] Alina and David, if you would address this point, because this is a very interesting point. Yeah, it might be nice, it might be even right, to say that, yes, if Ukraine wants they can be a member of NATO, if Georgia wants, it can be a member of NATO.

[37:53] If we don't have the stamina to follow through, our allies don't have the stamina to follow through, and we know that Russia is going to react and, in this case, dismembering Ukraine, isn't that getting down a track that isn't going to be productive?

**David:** [38:08] Let's remember what Ukraine was looking at in 2013. It was looking to sign a deep and comprehensive and free trade agreement with the EU and an association agreement with the EU. Nobody, nobody was talking about Ukraine and NATO in 2013.

[38:22] Yanukovych, in fact, had a no alliance or no joining NATO policy. What bugged Putin was a sudden epiphany that having Ukraine sign this deal would be bad for Russia after saying publicly, on the record, he didn't care if the EU signed these deals with his neighbors.

[38:43] He had never viewed, up until 2013, EU deals with Armenia, Ukraine, Georgia, or Moldova as a threat. He has viewed NATO differently. It was a change on Putin's part, not a change on our part. Again, Ukraine and Georgia wanted to sign these agreements. We didn't press them into doing it.

[39:05] There were criteria and conditions they had to fulfill, but this was a choice of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, not something we forced on them.

**Alina:** [39:14] To follow up on that, in Ukraine there was, in 2013, before the revolution, there was very, very low support for joining NATO among the population. Now this situation has changed dramatically, exactly because of Russian aggression against Ukraine and its invasion and takeover of Crimea.

**Paul:** [39:34] The Germans and others are even less inclined to support that.

**Alina:** [39:42] To support...?

**Paul:** [39:43] Ukraine joining NATO, so perhaps there's much greater interest in Ukraine but there's much less interest in many other countries.

**Alina:** [39:50] Actually, the point I'm making is that Putin, from his perspective, was in a better position with Ukraine before he invaded it, because there was almost no support for NATO and there was a very split support for the EU. Those negotiations DCFTA have been going on for quite some time with Yanukovych.

[40:08] Placing the blame on the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Ukraine on the West, on the United States...

**Paul:** [40:16] I'm not doing that.

**Alina:** [40:17] But that's what is implicit in your argument, I think.
Paul: [40:20] Not really, I don't think so. It was a decision of the Russian leadership. I said in my first statement that it was a decision of the Russian leadership to respond in that manner to that.

Alina: [40:35] But that we allowed it to happen.

Ambassador Volker: [40:35] Let's look forward.

[40:36] [ laughter ]

Ambassador Volker: [40:36] Today Russia occupies...

Paul: [40:37] I can see the path so much easier.

David: [40:41] Yeah, right.

Ambassador Volker: [40:42] Today Russia occupies parts of Eastern Ukraine. It occupies two provinces in Georgia. It has annexed Crimea, and it is still actively involved, militarily, in these places. It does take away territorial integrity and sovereignty of these countries.

[41:00] What should be the goal of the United States looking at this? What should our objective be? Paul and Tom?

Paul: [41:09] Do you want to...?

Thomas: [41:11] The first question you have to ask is what time period are you looking at. If you put this in broad terms, obviously, our strategic objection should be to restore the territorial integrity of those states.

[41:26] The question is how do you get there and what time frame. What sequence of steps do we take to get us there or have the best chance of getting us there?

Ambassador Volker: [41:37] You're going to give us the steps. You're saying our goal should be restore territorial integrity given the framing. I don't think you guys would disagree with that.

David: [41:47] No.

Ambassador Volker: [41:47] Tell us your pathway.

Thomas: [41:51] I think the problem that you have with this is that you can't put this simply in the limited context of Ukraine. The problem we have with Russia is that you can't solve these issues in isolation. Everything is linked to Russia. Syria is linked to Ukraine. Europe is linked to what they're doing in East Asia.

[42:12] I think we need a holistic, a comprehensive approach to Russia. We have to decide how we're going to deal with Russia in various parts of the world, where it's in our advantage to cooperate with them, where we need to push back.
How do we incentivize them to do things that we want? How do we create disincentives for them not to do things that we don't want them to do? I think it's a very complex problem. The problem we have in dealing with the Ukraine issue is we put it isolated inside of Ukraine.

What are we going to do on Ukraine? Then you get all these questions, and it never works. I think you need to think about this holistically. Where you'd want to be, I think, on Ukraine, is where, as I said, you've removed it from geopolitical competition at this point. You've gotten the Russian forces out.

Ukraine itself is undertaking the types of reforms it needs to be a viable, independent state over time. We need to diffuse it in some way. I don't think piling on sanctions gets us there at this point. That's been demonstrated over time.

Holistic and then, I think at this point, diffusing the tensions so that you have space to work out the types of long-term solutions you're looking for.

**Ambassador Volker:** [43:35] To be clear, are you advocating that we should also adopt linkage across issues?

**Thomas:** [43:40] Linkage is a reality. What we do on one issue impacts on how they think about us on another. It's a fact of life. We need to think of all these things and their interconnectedness.

As I said, the real challenge to policy-making is coming up with that balance of competition and cooperation that best advances our interests globally, not necessarily on any specific issue at any specific time, but if we think out of our time horizon, 5 or 10 years, where do we want to be?

[44:14] How do we have to structure the relationship with Russia to give us the best chances of getting there?

**Ambassador Volker:** [44:19] Alina?

**Alina:** [44:21] Just really quickly, I agree with you about Ukraine, as Kurt was pointing out. That is the end goal we should be aiming to affect. However, I do think the sanctions can work. The problem is that our sanctions and our response to Ukraine, and also our policy on Syria, has been very weak.

[44:37] You're absolutely right. The way we act in various global theaters affects how our allies and our enemies perceive us. I think the message we have been sending was a relatively weak sanctions response, there are many other tools we could have used in Ukraine to sanction Russia.

[44:54] We used so much tools against Iran, for example, that were affective at the end to getting them to come to the negotiating table.

[45:02] The way we've acted in Syria, leaving a vacuum open for Russia to engage and to engage in a brutal war sends the message, sends the message to the Russian leadership that the US is not willing to be a global actor, a global leader in the world.
I would pose to you that the way we change this relationship that we change the calculus where we stop reacting to Russian action and start studying the agenda is by taking a stronger leadership role in the world.

Putin, from what we know about him, is going to respect a strong US and be willing to come to the table with a strong US leader much more willingly than he is going to be willing to come to the table with what he perceives to be a weak country.

Paul: Sanctions have had an impact. I think they have kept Russia from going deeper into Ukraine. Tom used the phrase "piling on sanctions." We have not imposed a single sanction on Russia for failure to comply with the Minsk Agreement that was signed in February 2015. There have been additional sanctions related to Crimea, but we haven't been piling on sanctions. To me, that is the mistake. The target of sanctions has to think he's going to get hit with more sanctions if he doesn't change his behavior.

What we've done instead is have this conversation with the Europeans, will they renew current existing sanctions, not will we ramp up sanctions against Russia for its failure to comply with Minsk. The deal should be very simple. Russia, get out of Ukraine. Respect Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

We don't need a bigger discussion and argument about that. We even offered Putin off ramps. The MH17 was an opportunity for him to pull the plug. He's not interested. He wants to stabilize Ukraine so that Ukraine is unattractive and unappealing to the West so that we lose interest and Ukraine is an unstable place, which, by the way, is not in Russia's interest to have a destabilized Ukraine on its border.

Ambassador Volker: Let's hold it there. I'm going to ask one question about Syria, and then I'm going to come to the audience after that. Be thinking about what questions you would like to ask.

About Syria, we have a civil war. We have an ISIS stronghold. We have a regime that has killed a lot of its own people but now a war that is out of control. Russia has come in militarily after taking away some chemical weapons, but they did come in militarily.

They argue that they're going after terrorists inside Syria, and they include in that the opposition to Assad, and that they need to reestablish security as the first priority, and the only way to do that is to work with the government.

That's the Russian argument on this. It's unsavory for those of us who would like to see a better outcome, but there is an element to what Russia is doing aimed, at least, at tackling a real problem.

I want to ask first Tom and Paul to comment on that. I've tried to pitch it in a fair way to you. How would you explain Russia's actions and what we should do about Syria in relationship to Russia? Then I want to pitch it to David and Alina after that.
**Paul:** [48:06] Russia intervened in Syria to protect its national interest, the way they saw those national interests, and protect a regime that they've had long-standing relationships with. That's one.

[48:24] Two, their argument had a certain level of plausibility. If you remove the Assad regime, the most likely replacement at this time was a bunch of really bad guys. We're going to support this regime. We're going to bolster it.

[48:41] Then we're going to try to work to some sort of political transition that will keep this regime in power in some way but allow us to focus the attention on attacking the real nasty people, the Al-Nusra and ISIS, over time, not necessarily immediately.

[48:59] Again, I think you can understand that from Moscow's standpoint. The question for us is one, what are we trying to achieve, over what period of time, and what resources are we, the American people, really prepared to achieve.

[49:15] Russia is there. They're on the ground. You're going to have to deal with them. There's no way around it at this point. There's a humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in Aleppo at this point, but I don't see where we have many better options in trying to deal with the Russians to at least create humanitarian corridors at this point.

[49:34] Do you want to put a lot of troops on the ground? Go ahead and see how much support you have in the American public to do that at this point? It's a difficult situation. We face bad alternatives, but you've got to work with what you have.

[49:50] You've got to understand what the Russian interests are and see whether you can fashion something that stops the bloodshed in and around Aleppo at this point, gets us on the political track where there is some possibility of political transition, and, I think, you need to drop, as a condition or even what you think is a final goal, Assad has to go.

[50:12] That is something you can work out later on. The real challenge now is to get into a political negotiation where you have at least the opportunity of coming to some sort of resolution of the crisis that stops the bloodshed, stops the flow of migrants into Europe, and focuses the real activity against the terrorists.

**Ambassador Volker:** [50:34] What about the argument, to draw that out as well, that Russia is just duping us. We meet in Geneva. We have a talk, and meanwhile they're the ones conducting the bombing against Aleppo. They're the ones helping Assad create this humanitarian catastrophe, and they're doing it for completely different reasons.

[50:51] They're attacking the people that we're arming. They're trying to get their position established in the Middle East. What about that argument?

**Paul:** [51:00] We have a fundamental problem that we understand terrorism in different ways. We think about Al-Qaeda and ISIS as the epitome of terrorists. The Russians, I think, would argue that anybody who is fighting a legitimate government using means that approached terrorist means is a terrorist group and that you can't separate them.
What's their argument about al-Nusra? We all agree al-Nusra is a terrorist organization, but they're intertwined with those so-called moderate opposition figures. We have promised to separate the moderate opposition from al-Nusra. Have we done that? No.

Can we do that? No, because we don't really control the situation on the ground. They're going to continue to attack. I understand where they're coming from. I don't think we have to like that, but that's the reality.

You've got to deal with that reality the best you can under these circumstances with resources that you're prepared to go to the American people and ask for in order to do that.

Ambassador Volker: [52:07] David and Alina, give us your analysis on where we are in Syria and what we should be doing.

Alina: [52:14] I'll jump in.

David: [52:15] When it comes to Syria, both Russia and the United States deserve blame and responsibility but for very different reasons. For the United States it's the decision not to do anything, failure to create a safe zone, safe haven, to save thousands of lives, and leaving the void that Putin came in and filled and not following through on the thread if Assad used chemical weapons.

Let's remember, Assad is one of the bad guys. He's got the blood of hundreds of thousands of people on his hands, and Russia came to his rescue. Assad may have been on his way out, Russia intervened militarily, propped up and kept Assad in power.

For the blame on the Russian side, their conscious decision to target innocent civilians, hospitals, bakeries, civilian centers...Remember the contrast after we hit, accidentally, Syrian forces. We admitted it the very day it happened.

Russia, two days later...Syrian planes with Russian support hit the humanitarian convoy and they still deny any responsibility, so we're talking about countries that have very different interests. I don't see how you bring these together.

I think they're completely incompatible, and it isn't for lack of trying again. How many times did John Kerry talk to Sergey Lavrov about this issue? Russia is not interested in going after the same people that we're interested in.

Alina: [53:40] To add to that, let's not forget who left the negotiating table on the Syria ceasefire. After multiple meetings, multiple conversations, multi-lateral support, it was Russia who broke off those negotiations and then continued its brutal attack on Aleppo.

It's not about definition of terrorism being different. It's about the fact that Russia specifically targets civilian targets and doesn't seem to care if it can separate between civilians or terrorists. This is not in line with our values in the US, our basic understanding of human rights. This is, again, not something that we can find common ground on.

David: [54:23] Putin is a leader who doesn't give a damn about human life.

David: [54:28] Chechnya '99 and on after, he cut off the adoption of Russian orphans by American citizens after the Magnitsky Act was passed. What he's doing in Syria is consistent with this. He doesn't attach any value to human life.

Thomas: [54:40] That's all talk. Blame, blame, blame, but you still haven't saved a life in Syria.

David: [54:45] I would like us to carve out a safe zone.

Thomas: [54:48] How are you going to carve out a safe zone without risking a military conflict with Russia? Are you prepared to do that?

David: [54:55] There are no good options now. I agree, Tom.

Thomas: [54:57] I would argue a military conflict with Russia borders among the worst options at this point.

[55:03] [laughter]

David: [55:04] Look, we may have a military conflict whether we want it or not. If they keep buzzing our planes and our ships, an accident or something intentional is going to happen before too long.

Ambassador Volker: [55:14] Paul, did you want to say a word here?

Paul: [55:16] Yeah, if I may. The real tragedy of this situation is that things that could have been possible in the past are no longer possible now. That really has foreclosed a lot of our opportunities. Look, let's be realistic. When you have a civil war, how do you get a negotiated solution to a civil war?

[55:41] You need all of the parties simultaneously to be strong enough that they're comfortable negotiating, but weak enough that they think they might lose if they don't. That's a very narrow band to be in. You need everybody in that space at the same time.

[55:59] I don't see a situation that's going to get us to that place, largely for the reasons that Tom has described, which David actually you would agree with.

Ambassador Volker: [56:14] Thank you, all of you. Question from the audience. Please, stand and, please, introduce yourself.

Audience Member: [56:18] My name's [inaudible] Institute. Thank you very much, first of all. Thank you very much for a lively and very good discussion. Today, a lot of time has been spent discussing Ukraine, Georgia, Syria, and all of the other parts of the world.

[56:37] But it seems to me the time has come to talk about the things Russia does in our backyard, in Europe, here in the US. My question is to Paul and Tom. What is your red line? What Russia should do in the United States for you to change your attitude of engagement to at least containment and, I would say, maybe self-defense?
Ambassador Volker: [57:06] Please pass the microphone to the right. The question, again, is, "Is there a breaking point to what you're suggesting?"

Paul: [57:14] I think there's certainly a breaking point. Let me be clear about what we're talking about here. We're not talking about unconditionally engaging with Russia. We're not talking about giving away things to Russia.

[57:28] We're talking about defining American national interest and then defining a strategy that we think will be the most effective way to satisfy those interests with respect to Russia. What we're talking about is about the United States of America. I want to make that very clear.

[57:53] Secondly, look, I am entirely supportive of being quite firm in dealing with Moscow. The question is when, on what issue, and with what goal. Is it a goal, realistically, that you can achieve through the means that you have chosen to pursue the goal?

[58:16] I would argue that it's not a good idea to set unachievable goals and then fail to accomplish them. That makes us look ridiculous, and it puts us in a much weaker position to deal with Russia. We're in a much stronger position to deal with Russia when we define clearly what we want.

[58:36] We define what the consequences are if it doesn't happen, and we define what we want and what we're prepared to do about it in realistic ways that they will realistically have an opportunity to live up to and that we will realistically enforce if they don't. I think the problem...

Ambassador Volker: [58:58] Let me just pause there, because I think that's exactly what David and Alina would say, if I'm not mistaken, you just have a more expansive view as to what that ought to be.

David: [59:08] Yeah, and I think we would argue that I'm not sure how much more we need to take the approach that we've argued. As I said at the beginning, how many more countries does Russia have to invade before we adopt the line that we're arguing? How many more people does it have to kill?

[59:24] I think assigning blame is important. I think accountability is important. I think you have to look at what Russia has already done in order to determine trends and patterns and then figure out how to handle it from there.

Alina: [59:39] I would just add to that, that we have offered many, not off-ramps, but areas of cooperation, particularly in Syria. The administration offered negotiations on the cease fire to share intelligence information against the desires of senior military officials in the US government, and Russia turned that down.

[59:58] We have given them ways that we could seek political resolutions and find a real, sustainable peace, potentially, in the Middle East, and Russia has refused to take us up on that offer.

David: [60:10] Just a quick point of agreement with Paul, President Obama in his State of the Union speech in January 2015 bragged about how the US led the isolation of Russia. Four
months later his Secretary of State flew to Sochi and was effusive in his praise for Putin's willingness to meet with him. That, I agree, is ridiculous.

[60:28] [laughter]

**Thomas:** [60:28] Wait a minute. Can I...

**Ambassador Volker:** [60:29] Go ahead, yeah.

**Thomas:** [60:29] We didn't isolate Russia, and you can't isolate Russia.

**David:** [60:33] I didn't say we did. The President bragged that he did.

**Thomas:** [60:37] You're talking about containing Russia and isolating Russia. That's great if you can do it, but China won't let you isolate Russia. India won't let you isolate Russia.

**Alina:** [60:46] It's not about isolationism.

**Thomas:** [60:49] It's not about containment. The problem that we have is that we've got this focused on Europe and what you're going to do in order to prevent Russia from doing things that we don't like in Europe, but the policies that you're proposing will intentionally weaken Russia.

[61:06] They're going to drive Russia, weaken Russia, into China's embrace. China is taking advantage of a weakened Russia at this point, a Russia that doesn't have an option in Europe. China is a strategic competitor.

[61:20] If we're looking at our interests over the next 10, 15, 20 years, East Asia is extremely important. All I'm arguing is that you need to take what you're proposing in Europe and think about what the consequences are in East Asia, and you've got to be able to mitigate those in some way.

[61:40] We continue to take this policy in isolation and we create, perhaps, a better deal in Europe while we create a larger problem for ourselves throughout Asia. That is not good strategy.

**Ambassador Volker:** [61:53] Thank you, and I think we got your point. In the front row, a question.

**Carla Udi:** [61:58] Hi, my name is Carla Udi. I have a question for Paul, and also for David. Obviously, we're going to have a new administration. Mr. Trump has already said if he is elected he will go and meet with Putin before the inauguration.

[62:11] If you were advising either one of Mr. Trump or Mrs. Clinton, and you were the last person to talk to them before they went into the room with Putin, what was the one thing you would say to them if they could only accomplish one thing, just one?

[62:27] [laughter]

**Carla:** [62:27] What is it that they should say to Putin in their very first meeting?
Paul: [62:32] I think the first thing I would say would be I wouldn't encourage a president-elect of whichever party to have that meeting before coming into office.

[62:42] [laughter]

Paul: [62:43] I'm not sure that that's really a good idea.


Paul: [62:47] No, I understand. That's the first thing. I think that, from my point of view, the most important thing in this relationship right now is not to try to envision all of the great things that we could cooperate on in the future.

[63:03] We don't have a relationship to sustain new cooperation. I think it's very clear. There are a lot of obstacles to that. What we need to do, now, to my mind, as a matter of highest priority in this relationship is to try to prevent it from getting worse.

[63:22] Because if it gets worse, there are some really grave risks to the United States. I was a teenager in the 1980s, I remember what it was like growing up in the early 1980s. That was a time when people really thought about the risk of nuclear war, and it was kind of part of your daily life.

[63:45] It's not something that people think about today. I don't want to live in a world where Americans have to think about that. I think we need to avoid, just try to have some kind of engagement that will try to prevent it from getting worse.

Ambassador Volker: [64:03] David, your response to the same question.

David: [64:06] First, I agree, don't go...

[64:07] [laughter]

David: [64:07] but if you are going to go, deliver the following message. "Get out of Ukraine and respect your neighbors' sovereignty and territorial integrity. Stop bombing in Syria, and stop cracking down on the human rights of your own people. Lastly, don't give any gag gifts."

[64:22] [laughter]

Ambassador Volker: [64:24] Do you think Putin will do any of those things after our president-elect goes and...?

[64:28] [crosstalk]

David: [64:28] If he doesn't, you tell him...look, if he does, "Then you will have a much better relationship with the United States. If you don't, sanctions will stay in place and get ramped up, and you will not have a productive relationship with the United States over the next four years."

Ambassador Volker: [64:42] Can we go to the woman in the back there who's been waiting?
Anastasia Popova: [64:46] Anastasia Popova, Russian political activist, victim of Putin's regime. My question is not about international relations, but about Russian domestic policies. Whether United States going to deal, somehow, with the human rights violations in Russia, with the assassinations of Russian oppositional leaders in Russia or all over the world?

[65:14] Whether United States going to deal, somehow, with the upcoming nuclear war with the United States? Because that's what's are, right now, under discussion in Russian dependent from Kremlin media. Thank you for your answers.

Alina: [65:31] [inaudible] human rights? Look, there's no question that, as we said earlier, what Putin does is not in the national interest of Russian people as a whole. What Putin has established is a system of repression, censorship, and brutal, brutal oppression in Russia, as you well know.

[65:55] I think there have to be consequences. The Kremlin murdered, through polonium poisoning, a critic of the regime in a Western country, in England. It continues to do so, yet we just let it happen, despite overwhelming evidence that this happened at the potentially direct order of Putin himself.

[66:20] Again, what kind of country are we dealing with? We're not dealing with a trustworthy diplomatic partner. We're not dealing with a leader who cares about human life. We're not dealing with somebody who cares about ever seeing democracy or any sort of freedom in his own country. There have to be some consequences for this along the lines of what we've outlined.

Paul: [66:45] Let me broaden the question a little bit, though, because I think from a US policymaker point of view, first off, I don't think anyone here on this stage is going to disagree that Putin has an awful regime, and that he abuses human rights, and he's killed people, and this is awful.

[67:00] The question for the policymaker is how much does that impact your decision making about how you engage Russia on issues of national interest to the United States? That's what I want to ask Alina, and David follow up.

Thomas: [67:18] Can I in a slightly different way? The question is if you care about human rights in Russia, how do you create a situation where it gets better? This is a real conundrum for us. Our ability...

David: [67:27] Could you use your mic?

Thomas: [67:29] Excuse me?


Thomas: [67:31] Excuse me, is it on?

Ambassador Volker: [67:31] Just face this way, it'll be good.

Thomas: [67:34] OK, face this way. This is a real conundrum for the United States, how you do this. Our ability to act successfully inside Russia is limited. We don't understand how Russia
works. We don't understand the complexity of the society. Much of what we've tried to do out of very good intentions, over the past 25 years, has been counterproductive.

[67:57] That's one. Two, I think it's a fact, historical fact, that the room for human rights, democracy building in Russia, for the development of these ideas and the spread of these ideas, is better when US-Russian relations are better. You go back to the Soviet period, as well, for examples of that.

[68:23] We've got on one hand a group that wants to promote and think human rights are valuable, as we do, and wants to do all these nasty things that are going to worsen our relations with Russia. What is Putin's reaction going to be?

[68:37] Is he going to say, "Thank you, I now see the light. I'm going to open up and allow a free press, real debate in this country?" What he's going to do is what he's done over the past four years. He's going to crack down. Now there's a policy question of how we should do that.

[68:54] There's a moral question for all of us. The people who defend human rights in Russia are heroes, because they go out and they risk their lives every day to get it done. The people sitting on this stage who are going to try to help you are not risking a damn thing.

[69:12] Our responsibility here is to try to create a situation that is most conducive to getting done what you want done. I would argue the pressure doesn't get us there. If you're talking about the national interest, again, you've got to take it all together.

**Ambassador Volker:** [69:31] Let's get it to the...

**David:** [69:33] Tom, why is it that human rights activists and people in the opposition supported the Magnitsky Act? Why do they look to the United States for moral support? Why do they hope that we will stand by our principles and our values?

[69:46] Sure, I couldn't do half of what you and your compatriots do, but the least I can do is to be a voice for you and others to try to bring about some sense of accountability for gross human rights abuse, not let rotten people in the Russian officialdom come to the United States, send their kids here to study, invest in whatever properties they want.

[70:14] It is not a right to come to the United States. It is a privilege, and if you abuse human rights in Russia, you shouldn't step foot on US soil. It is critically important that the United States stands by its values and its principles.

[70:29] We've done it for decades, if not centuries, and to abandon Russians like you at the greatest time of need would, I think, be an abomination.

**Ambassador Volker:** [70:39] Alina, quickly.

**Alina:** [70:40] Just very quickly. Paul, you were saying that you grew up in the '80s and you remember living with the threat of nuclear war. I grew up in the '80s on the other side, in the Soviet Union, and I remember living with that threat as well, but one thing was profoundly different.
The difference was that nobody believed in the Soviet System at that time. There was widespread cynicism. Why was that the case? I think the system corrupted internally before it fell apart from the top because the US stood up for its values.

We invested in our public diplomacy. We invested in securing the information space. We had a brand, blue jeans, McDonald's, and all these things, popular culture. This is what everybody in the Soviet Union were looking for. This is what my family was looking for when we came to the United States.

Just to follow up on David, this is where our strength is. It is in our values, in our democracy, in our liberal views, and we need to get back to that as well.

Paul: Just to respond very briefly to that, that policy took 30 to 40 years to work. During the period while we waited for it to work, we regularly engaged with the Soviet government on a variety of different issues.

Ambassador Volker: We have way more questions in the audience than we will ever be able to handle.

David: And I have a flight to catch.

Ambassador Volker: We'll see about that.

Ambassador Volker: I will ask the audience members, keep it brief if you can so we can get back and get another question or two in before we have to go.

Alec Nikova: I'll try to keep this brief. Alec Nikova from "Business in Bosnia," the media group from Riga, Latvia. The relationship between Baltic States and Russian Federation directly depends on the relationship between United States and the Russian Federation, and it is not good at the moment.

Right now Latvia and all Baltic States, but Latvia particularly, loses hundreds of million dollars because of our economic sanctions. In effect, Baltic States became a target, from military point of view, for Russian rockets.

Ambassador Volker: Question?

Alec: The question is what benefit would a regular Latvian citizen get out of de-engagement with Russia?

Ambassador Volker: That's to you, David and Alina. What's the benefit to the citizens of the Baltic States if the US takes a much harsher line, like you're suggesting?
David: [73:10] For a Baltic citizen you have Article 5 guarantees. I am not complacent about Baltic security, but Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania are in a much better position than Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, other countries that aren't members of NATO.

[73:26] If you follow our recommendation, you will still have Article 5 security guarantees. That doesn't change at all. I actually think Putin does respect Article 5 security guarantees, and that's why I don't think a military move against your country is likely.

Alina: [73:42] Again, we're not arguing for isolationism. Containment and isolationism are not the same thing. Even if you may want to equate them, they're simply not. It's not about de-engagement. In fact, the Baltic States are, themselves, consistently asking for permanent battalions and troops to be stationed within Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia for a reason.

[74:04] It's not that the Baltics are being strong-armed and bullied into having permanent troops on their land. It's that they are asking for it. Your governments are asking for it all the time in Washington, DC. I think that signals to the fact that NATO actually works.

Ambassador Volker: [74:23] Can we take another question from the audience, maybe one aimed at Tom and Paul? But there's another gentleman who's been waiting.

Audience Member: [74:28] In terms of after the US election, time to reengage, I see where the red line is drawn is there. My question is directed at sanctions. In terms of reengagement, on one side, would you lift certain sanctions?

[74:44] On the other side, would you impose more? Having seen the sanctions' effect on Cuba since 1960, I wonder what additional sanctions might be added that would impact on Russia.

Ambassador Volker: [74:56] Would more sanctions really make a difference? Tom and Paul, do you want to start with that?

Thomas: [75:02] I'll start with that. I think we don't need more sanctions at this point. I think we need a policy now or an agreement now that will ease sanctions in return for certain steps by Russia. I think the problem that we're in now is we've got the sanctions, at least as they refer to the [inaudible], the full implementation of the Minsk Agreement.

[75:24] That isn't going to happen anytime soon, and I think more sanctions aren't going to make the Russians change their behavior. In easing sanction linked to specific steps, again, within a broader, overall policy toward Russia has a chance of getting us where we want in both Ukraine and a broader relationship with Russia.

Ambassador Volker: [75:46] Alina?

Alina: [75:47] I don't think that's the answer here. First of all, there are more sanctions that we can impose like dual financial sanctions on a broader swath of the Russian financial section. Those are the ones that are going to hurt in the long term as Russia faces its own economic decline.

[76:04] Easing sanctions that are tied to concessions is not going to work. Let me quote not me but the Prime Minister of Georgia who just recently said Russia never appreciates when you
concede, or make a step forward, or compromise. They always take it for granted, and Georgia knows this very well.

[76:22] If we start talking about weakening sanctions rather than adding sanctions, when Russia violates on a daily basis the Minsk Agreement, we're sending the wrong message.

**Ambassador Volker:** [76:33] We have another question in the back there.

**Ben Perkins:** [76:35] Hi, Ben Perkins. My question is how do countries that are not directly engaged in what the US and Russia are doing, how do they view this stalemate that we've had with not really any movement in the last three years? My worry is that people like the Chinese look at this, and we just look like morons. That's my question.

**Ambassador Volker:** [76:56] [laughs] David and Alina, let me turn to you first and phrase the question this way. Other countries are getting on with business. Isn't that leaving us out? Isn't an approach where we say we're containing but we're really just keeping ourselves out actually going to help Russia and make the problem worse?

**David:** [77:21] It depends on which countries we're talking about. I don't think a lot of countries like the idea that the United States and Russia are in the state of relations that we are right now. I don't like the fact that we're in the state of relations we are in right now.

[77:44] I think a lot of countries want the United States to show spine and solidarity with countries that are coming under attack and threat. China, Tom mentioned driving Russia into China's hands, I've been hearing that for a long time. I don't buy it.

[77:52] There's so much distrust between the two, and that would be the end of Putin, I think, if Russia became part of China Inc.

[78:01] [laughter]

**David:** [78:02] I don't really worry that we're going to cause all these problems elsewhere in the world. Of course it would be nice if we got along. I wish the Red Sox were in the World Series, but that didn't happen either.

[78:15] [laughter]

**Paul:** [78:16] Let me just respond very quickly to David. The Russians are selling weapon systems to the Chinese that they were never prepared to sell in the past. They're selling them much more advanced technology including the S-400 missiles that they have in Syria, and that's something that they were never willing to sell before.

[78:35] That has real consequences for the United States and, actually, particularly for our young naval officers here if China has those systems. It makes a difference. Secondly, look, Hitler and Stalin didn't trust each other. Germany and the Soviet Union could not have any kind of long-term, sustained alliance.

[78:59] For two years, from 1939 to 1941, they kind of cooperated. It created a lot of problems for other people.
Ambassador Volker: [79:13] We are going to start moving to our final phase here, which is a rapid fire set of recommendations. As we had in earlier question, one minute or less, just give us your one policy recommendation. What do you think the United States should do right now? Let's start with Tom.

Thomas: [79:34] Already done it. I think you open up the channels of communication. Then I think you take a holistic look at Russia policy and at Russia.

[79:45] The questions are what is it we want to achieve, what do we absolutely have to have on any given issue, what is Russia's role, what role do we want Russia to play, and how do we construct a policy that gets us to where we want Russia to be.

Ambassador Volker: [80:04] Very good. Paul?

Paul: [80:03] I'm very concerned about the breakdown in military-to-military communication, the impact that that could have in a crisis situation. I think that's where I'd like to start so that, if we get into a bad situation, we've got a channel to try to deescalate before it gets worse.

Ambassador Volker: [80:21] Very interesting. David?

David: [80:22] I would make it clear that pressure on Russia will be ramped up if it doesn't get out of Ukraine, if it doesn't respect its neighbors sovereignty and territorial integrity, if it doesn't stop what it's doing in Syria, but also make clear that if Russia were to change on these things the United States is prepared to partner with Russia on a range of issues.

[80:40] Until Putin changes his behavior, and the track record is very long of bad behavior, there are no bright prospects between the US and Russia.

Ambassador Volker: [80:52] Alina, you have the final word.

Alina: [80:54] Just to go back to what I think I opened with, there are many things that Russia could do and Putin could do to prove their trustworthiness. As long as he chooses not to do them, in regards to Ukraine, in regards to Syria, then I think our policy has to be what it is now.

[81:12] In fact, I think we should ramp up sanctions. I think we should have sanctions related to what Russia has done in Syria specifically. There is no way forward if we start giving concessions. That's a slippery slope.

Ambassador Volker: [81:25] Very good. Thank you. I think if there's one takeaway we can all come away from here, this is complicated and hard.

[81:31] [laughter]

Ambassador Volker: [81:31] Our next president, whoever he or she may be, is going to have to deal with this. We certainly hope they do it the best way possible. Join me, please, in thanking our debaters.

[81:41] [applause]
Ambassador Volker:  [81:42] Please, tell your friends and colleagues about the McCain Institute, about our McCain Institute debates. Check us out online at McCainInstitute.org. We'll see you at our next event. Thank you.