

New Sanctions Against Russia - A Failure of U.S. Strategy

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Recently the U.S. congress legislated sanctions against the Russian Federation over alleged, but completely unproven, interference in the U.S. presidential elections. The vote was nearly unanimous.

President Trump signed these sanctions into law. This was a huge and stupid mistake. He should have vetoed them, even as a veto would likely be overturned. With his signing of the law Trump gave up the ability to stay on somewhat neutral grounds towards Russia. This for no gain to him at all.

Sanctions by Congress are quasi eternal. The 1974 [Jackson-Vanik amendment](#) restricted trade with the then “Communist block”. It was supposed to press for Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union to Israel. But even after the Soviet Union broke down in the early 1990s, after the “communist block” had disappeared and long after any limits on emigrations had been lifted, the law and its economic sanctions stayed in place. It was only lifted in 2012 and only to be immediately replaced by the ludicrous [Magnitsky act](#) which immediately established a new set of sanctions against the Russian Federation and its interests.

The new additional sanctions, like the Jackson-Vanik amendment and the Magnitsky act, were shaped by domestic U.S. policy issues. There is nothing Russia could have done to avoid them and there is nothing it can do to have them lifted.

The new U.S. sanctions are not only directed against Russia but [against](#) any company and nation that cooperates with Russia over energy. This a little disguised attempt to press European countries into buying expensive U.S. liquefied natural gas instead of cheap Russian gas delivered by pipelines. The immediate target is the Nord Stream 2 pipeline between Russia and Germany which passes through the Baltic Sea to avoid potential conflict points in east Europe. The sanctions are a threat to an independent German energy policy. (Additional partners in the pipeline are Austria, France and the Netherlands.) Consequently 35% of Germans name the U.S. as a “major threat to the country”. Russia is seen as such by only 33%. This view is consistent with the [global perception](#).



Medvedev with Vladimir Putin (Source: [Kremlin.ru](https://www.kremlin.ru/) / [Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/))

These sanctions will shape U.S.-Russian relation for the next 30 plus years. On August 2 the Russian **Prime Minister Medvedev** [pointed](#) to the weakness of President Trump as the main reason for these [sanctions](#):

The US President's signing of the package of new sanctions against Russia will have a few consequences. First, it **ends hopes for improving our relations** with the new US administration. Second, **it is a declaration of a full-fledged economic war on Russia**. Third, **the Trump administration has shown its total weakness** by handing over executive power to Congress in the most humiliating way. This changes the power balance in US political circles. What does it mean for them? **The US establishment fully outwitted Trump**; the President is not happy about the new sanctions, yet he could not but sign the bill. The issue of new sanctions came about, primarily, as another way to knock Trump down a peg. **New steps are to come, and they will ultimately aim to remove him from power. A non-systemic player has to be removed.** Meanwhile, the interests of the US business community are all but ignored, with politics chosen over a pragmatic approach. Anti-Russian hysteria has become a key part of both US foreign policy (which has occurred many times) and domestic policy (which is a novelty).

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Remember that Medvedev as Russian leader was, for a long time, the "hope" of the U.S. establishment. He was perceived as more amenable than the Russian **President Putin**. Medvedev may well become president again. But no U.S. media except the [New York Post](#) took notice of his statement. That in itself is astonishing and frightening. Can no one in the U.S. see where this will lead to? Medvedev predicts:

The sanctions regime has been codified and **will remain in effect** for decades unless a miracle happens. [...] [R]elations between Russia and the United States **are going to be extremely tense** regardless of Congress' makeup and regardless of who is president. Lengthy arguments in international bodies and courts are ahead, as well as **rising international tensions and refusal to settle major international issues**.

Economically and politically Russia can and will cope with these sanctions, says Medvedev. But can the U.S.?

The supreme global role of the U.S. depends on preventing a Euro-Asian alliance between, mainly, Russia and China. In his latest “grand chessboard” piece [Toward a Global Realignment](#) the U.S. strategist **Zbigniew Brzezinski** - ruthless, amoral and capable - asserts:

[I]t behooves the United States to fashion **a policy in which at least one of the two potentially threatening states becomes a partner** in the quest for regional and then wider global stability, and thus in **containing the least predictable but potentially the most likely rival** to overreach. Currently, the more likely to overreach is Russia, but in the longer run it could be China.

The U.S. foreign policy establishment has declared war on Russia. The confrontational position towards China, which was en vogue under Obama, has noticeably changed. The **Hillary Clinton/Barack Obama** “pivot to Asia” was cancelled. The anti-Chinese Trans Pacific Partnership Agreement has been called off. Military provocations of China in the South Chinese Sea have been reduced and replaced by [continuous provocations](#) against Russia in eastern Europe. These steps follow the strategy Brzezinski laid out.

Russia has historically proven to be resourceful in its policies. It is extremely resistant to pressure. With the U.S. in a less hostile position against China, the behemoth will relentlessly press its own advantage. Russia will soon be one of China’s main sources of fossil energy and other commodities. There is no major reason for China and Russia to disagree with each other. Under these circumstances the hoped for Russian-Chinese split will not happen. Core European countries will resist pressures that endanger their economies.

The Brzezinski strategy is clouded by a personal hate against Russia. (He is descendant of minor noble [Galician-Polish family](#).) It is flawed as it enables China to establish its primacy. Even under Brzezinski’s framework a Russian-European-U.S. alliance against Chinese pursuit of hegemony would have been the more logical way to go.

Hillary Clinton’s strategy [to blame Russia](#) for her lack of likability and her failure in the election now results in a major failure of U.S. grand strategy. An organized White House policy could have prevented that but there is no such thing (yet) under Trump.

I fail to see how the current strategy, now enshrined by congressional sanctions, could ever end up in an overall advantage for the United States.

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