

# Do Not Throw Them in the Same Basket: China and Russia From the Perspective of US Engagement

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**Abstract:** Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has applied a policy of engagement towards China and Russia. During the administration of Barack Obama, this approach led to two different outcomes: while the American relations with Russia reached their lowest point, and international sanctions were imposed on Russia during Obama's term, in the case of China, the US relations with it were better in this period than prior to the election of Barack Obama. The goal of this article is to determine why this occurred. I come to the conclusion that China and Russia adopted different forms of engagement in regard to the US. While China has been working on its power and prestige in close cooperation with the United States, and therefore it should not be labelled as "revisionist power", Russia has tried to re-establish its power potential and international prestige in opposition to the United States. Therefore Russia can be called a "revisionist power".

**Key terms:** US Foreign Policy, Engagement, Revisionism, Barack Obama, China, Russia.

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The American engagement towards China and Russia is a process about which experts conduct debates relatively often, but without any definitive conclusion (Deyermund 2013; Goldberg 2014; Walt 2017). While for some, both of the aforementioned countries represent examples of "revisionist powers" that have become "geopolitical rivals" of the United States (Mead 2014: 69), for others, this is marked as a "colossal misreading of modern power realities" (Ikenberry 2014: 80).

The debate has been revived once again when the new National Security Strategy of the United States (NSS) and the National Defense Strategy (NDS) were released in 2017 and 2018 respectively. According to the NSS, there are three sets of challengers who are actively competing against the United States and its allies and partners: "the revisionist powers of China and Russia, the rogue states of Iran and North Korea, and transnational threat organizations, particularly jihadist terrorist groups". The administration of Donald Trump came to the conclusion that the United States must "rethink the policies of the past two decades – policies based on the assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners" (2017: 3). Also the NDS (2018: 2) confirms that it "is increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their

*authoritarian model – gaining veto authority over other nations’ economic, diplomatic, and security decisions”.*

The main argument of this essay could be summed up in two reciprocal claims. Firstly, we should not put China and Russia into one category, because they do not represent the same challenge for the United States. And secondly, while the policy of engagement may not have produced the results that had been expected, it should not be replaced by a completely new strategy. We may find the reason why when we look at the strategic documents of the previous administration of the United States. Barack Obama declared in his first National Security Strategy (2010) that he would “[deepen the] cooperation with 21st century centers of influence”, including China and Russia, “on the basis of mutual interests and mutual respect”. In the case of China, such cooperation was expected to result in “a positive, constructive and comprehensive relationship”, because the US government at the time welcomed “a China that takes on a responsible leadership role [...] to advance priorities like economic recovery, confronting climate change, and nonproliferation” (NSS 2010: 43). In a similar manner, Obama’s administration sought a “stable, substantive, multidimensional relationship” with Russia, because it had an interest “in [achieving] a strong, peaceful, and prosperous Russia that respects international norms” (NSS 2010: 44).

In the case of China it is a matter of debate to what extent China is integrated within the rules and norms of the international system. However, today it has a far more intense cooperation with the United States than at any previous time since the normalization of their relationship. On the other hand, currently the US-Russian relations are far from where President Obama hoped they would be. They have been all but deepened. Russia has invaded its neighbouring countries and has turned out to be neither peaceful nor prosperous. From these observations, we may conclude that the US engagement toward Beijing has so far been relatively successful, while the US engagement toward Moscow has not been so successful. It is because China has demonstrated its resolve to become a “status quo” power, while Russia has developed characteristics of a revisionist power.

Since the thesis of this paper contradicts the general assessment of the role of China in world affairs in the strategic documents of the United States (NSS 2017, NDS 2018), let us briefly focus on the academic debate on whether China is a revisionist or status quo power. It should not be surprising that there is no consensus on this (Friedberg 2011; Kastner, Saunders 2012; Lind 2017; Legro 2007). To a certain extent this inconclusiveness can be attributed to the fact that “revisionism” and “status quo” are very vague terms. Alastair Johnston (2003: 10) once complained that it is “disturbing how little thought [...] has gone into determining whether a state is status quo or revisionist across the totality of its foreign policy preferences and actions”.

Generally, liberal thinkers and politicians believe that engagement is the right way and the only way to accommodate China within existing rules and norms. Joseph Nye (1996) claimed that China will follow its national interest but the United States “can affect how the Chinese define that interest”. If a policy of engagement is applied in this case, “the prospects for conflict diminish”. In turn, John G. Ikenberry believes that it is the current president of the United States who has been pursuing a revisionist policy and challenging the liberal order of the last 70 years (2017: 1).

The realist school of international relations tends to be pessimistic about the idea that China might eventually be engaged and become a responsible actor. For this school, a conflict of interests between China and the US seems inevitable. Also in its view, the Chinese ascendance to power has become more challenging for the United States than other threats. For Condoleezza Rice (2000: 56), “China is not a ‘status quo’ power but one that would like to alter Asia’s balance of power in its own favor”. Perhaps the most explicitly pessimistic in this respect is John Mearsheimer. For him, all rising powers are technically revisionist because they want to achieve their regional hegemony. Therefore,

the Chinese rise will not be peaceful (Mearsheimer 2014). Others are not sure about whether a war with China is inevitable, yet they still feel that *“intense security competition is likely to result”* from its rise (Walt 2018; compare with Mead 2014 and Kissinger 2012). Similar assessments of China can be found among neoconservative thinkers. For Robert Kagan (1997) *“Chinese leaders chafe at the constraints on them and worry that they must change the rules of the international system before the international system changes them”*.

In the following passages, I will attempt to assess in what way it has been possible to (un)successfully integrate (engage) China and Russia in the existing structure of the international order, so that they would become standard partners of the USA who would not be interested in a revision of the norms and rules of the current international system (“status quo powers” if you like). This work stems from the assumption that the major qualitative shift in the relations of China and Russia with the United States has occurred during the presidency of Barack Obama (2009–2017): while in the case of China, its relations with the USA remained the same as they were prior to Obama’s election (if they have not actually improved), the US relations with Russia, on the other hand, drastically deteriorated. More precisely stated, the author of this text places emphasis on the question of why the American strategy of engagement towards Russia failed while the US strategy towards China succeeded in reinforcing their mutual relations.

To answer the above question, I will proceed in the following steps: in the theoretical section, I will present the concept of engagement, which I will subsequently apply to the relations of the USA with China and Russia. At the beginning of each of the two following sub-sections, I will then summarize the US-Chinese and the US-Russian mutual relations, respectively. I will observe the engagement at four levels: the diplomatic, military, economic and cultural levels. In conclusion, I will then argue that in one of the two cases the American engagement did not work while in the second case it has hitherto borne “fruit”.

## THE STRATEGY OF ENGAGEMENT

When Barack Obama met with the journalist Thomas L. Friedman in April 2015 and was asked about the US concept of foreign policy, the president responded: *“You asked about an Obama doctrine. The doctrine is: We will engage, but we preserve all our capabilities”* (Friedman 2015). These few words describe the general direction of American foreign policy not only under Barack Obama, but also since the end of the Cold War. Engagement aspires to the creation or maintenance of close relations with former enemies, not their containment. The aim of such a strategy is to incorporate the target countries into the existing structures of the international order and to make them status quo powers.

This shift – from containment to engagement – is well illustrated by the document National Security Strategies of the United States of America (NSS). While in his NSS, George Bush Sr. still only rarely used the term “engagement”, (NSS 1990: 5, 13; 1991: 9, 27; 1993: 3, 6–7, 14) in the NSS created during the government of Bill Clinton, on the other hand, it became one of the most used terms (NSS 2001: Chap. 1; cp. NSS 1996: 40). And this tendency is also repeated in the NSS 2010 from the times of Barack Obama, where “engagement” has become one of the most common words (2010: 11–12, 32–34).

With this, as the framework for discussion regarding American foreign policy has changed after 1989, a very lively debate has developed among experts about the American role in global politics. Its level has been somewhat undermined by the fact that the term “engagement” does not have a clear and coherent definition. According to Robert L. Suettinger (2000: 18, 20), as a result of its overuse or the lack of a definition for it, a fundamental consensus has completely disappeared in regard to how the term itself is understood.

In the most general sense of the word, “engagement” is “*a synonym for involvement overseas, the opposite of disengagement or isolation*” (Rock 2000: 21). The specific instruments of engagement are various: the effort to prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction, the fight against terrorism, measures for the support and stabilization of democratic regimes, environmental protection, the fight against drug smuggling and the drug trade, expansion of the free market or the US’s access to it, and others (NSS 1996; NSS 2010).

It is possible to view engagement from two basic points of view: either at a general level such as that of a *Grand Strategy* – i.e. a synonym for American internationalism (Rock 2000: 21; Terem 2017: 124) – or in a limited concept as a bilateral policy of one state (the *sender*) towards selected countries or groups of countries (the *receivers*, or *target states*) (NSS 2000; NSS 2010). However, this article draws on the concept of engagement as a strategy towards “unsavory regimes” (Resnick 2001: 559; cp. Litwak 2000: the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter) that are not satisfied with the international system. These countries are offered various suggestions (*incentives*) and rewards (*concessions*) so that they may be incorporated into the functioning structure of the world order. Evan Resnick (2001: 559) defines engagement as “*the attempt to influence the political behavior of a target state through the comprehensive establishment and enhancement of contacts with that state across multiple issue-areas (i.e. diplomatic, military, economic and cultural)*”. The opposite of engagement is isolation or disengagement. A government that conducts a policy of isolation could have the same goals as in a case of engagement: namely the reduction/removal of conflicts/tensions. However, it attempts to reach the same goals with different means: a reduction and/or a complete termination of contacts with the target state in the areas of mutual interests. Both engagement and isolation can be complemented by either a policy of containment or a policy of appeasement. By “containment” we mean an attempt to influence the political behavior of a target state by blocking its territorial expansion or the expansion of its sphere of influence into other territories or states, while a policy of appeasement is the opposite: an attempt to influence the target state by ceding territory and/or a geopolitical sphere of influence to it (Resnick 2001: 562).

According to Resnick, the success of an engagement strategy is conditioned by three factors:

- 1) The scope of mutual contacts between the initiator and the recipient must be low at first, so that the beginning of the engagement by the government of the target state is perceived as a positive change. If the level of contacts is already high, then the consequences of the engagement for the recipient are not felt in any way.
- 2) The recipient’s motivation to obtain material or prestige sources must be high because they meet the needs for which the target country has not yet received resources. As a result of this, there is no motivation to return to the *status quo* prior to the engagement or to search for other methods to acquire the lacking prestige and material goods.
- 3) The target state must consider the initiator (the sender) and the international order it represents “*as a potential source of the material or prestige resources it desires*” (2001: 561). This means that the acceptance of the norms of the existing order is considered by the target state as the correct step that would create potential for the anticipated prestige and material resources to continue to flow. Autocratic or totalitarian states (for example, Nazi Germany or the USSR under Stalin), which stand outside the existing order, would not sense the benefits of engagement and would thus not be motivated to accept the existing norms as their own (2001: 561).

Once these three conditions are fulfilled, we may move to specific dimensions of engagement. There is no exact definition of what kinds of indicators represent different levels of engagement. Resnick himself uses a modified version of the list of components drawn up by Dean Guldenhuyes (1990: 17–18). They both distinguish four broad dimensions of engagement: the diplomatic, economic, military and cultural dimensions.

## ANALYSING ENGAGEMENT

Based on the above theoretical discussion of engagement, we may deduce three developmental stages of successful engagement that can be observed in international relations: the initial, intermediate, and final stage. In the idealized initial stage, the target state has a limited number of available contacts with the engaging state, it enjoys only a low international prestige, and it is only minimally integrated in the international order. In the intermediate stage, we can see a gradual establishment of good relations between the two states, the growing international prestige and economic expansion of the receiving state, and its integration with selected elements of the international order. In the final stage, the receiving state enjoys good relations with the engaging state as well as with other major members of the international community, it is established as a relevant power in the existing order, and it is fully identified with the order. The movement from the initial, through the intermediate, and to the final stage means that the strategy of engagement made a (potentially) revisionist state into a status-quo power. The three stages of a successful engagement are summed up in the following table.

*Table 1*  
*The Three Stages of Successful Engagement*

<b>Initial stage</b>	<b>Intermediate stage</b>	<b>Final stage</b>
Low engagement (limited amounts of contacts).	Gradual restoration of standard diplomatic relations.	High engagement (standard relations with all states of the world).
Low international prestige.	Growing prestige in global politics, economic expansion.	Establishment of a power status in the framework of the existing order.
Lack of integration in the international order.	Incorporating selected elements of the existing order.	Identification with the existing order.

Source: Author.

The main purpose of engagement is to establish an “*increasingly interdependent relationship between the sender and target state*” (Resnick 2001: 563). Therefore, to infer about the stages of engagement we can draw on quantitative indicators of the contacts between the two countries. For instance, let us look at the diplomatic level. If the number of visits between representatives of the sender and the target state is higher than in the previous period, it indicates that the target state has been successfully engaged. On the other hand, if the number of visits decreases, then the engagement is stagnating. The same can be said about the numbers of contacts in the other dimensions: the economic, military and cultural dimensions.

All the indicators of engagement are not of equal importance. For instance, the amount of foreign trade and investment usually far exceeds the amount of aid from the development assistance and humanitarian aid. Therefore, trade and investments will influence the general level of the mutual relationship more than aid. Similarly, one may also argue that the military dimension will affect the outcome of the engagement more deeply than the cultural dimension.

Finally, we should be aware that the level of engagement may vary from one area to another and from one indicator to another (Guldenhuyes 1990: 18). That means that the target state may in theory be very comfortable in establishing or enhancing the links in

the economic area but still may be – for a number of reasons – far less enthusiastic in the promotion of the cultural dimension of the engagement. If this would be the case, it needs to be explained why the target state is reluctant in one area and not the other one. The indicators of engagement used in this study are summed up in the following table.

**Table 2**  
**Possible Indicators of Engagement**

Diplomatic contacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The numbers of summit meetings with and other visits by the head of state and other senior government officials of the sender state in the target state and vice-versa</li> <li>• Promotion of the target state's potential membership in international institutions and regimes</li> </ul>
Military contacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The numbers of visits of senior military officials of the sender state to the target state and vice-versa</li> <li>• The numbers of military cooperation, exchange and training programs</li> <li>• The existence of confidence- and security-building measures</li> </ul>
Economic contacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The level of trade agreements and investment</li> <li>• The level of development and humanitarian aid</li> </ul>
Cultural contacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The number of travel and tourism links</li> <li>• The number of academic exchanges</li> </ul>

Source: A modified version of tables from Geldenhuys (1990: 17–18) and Resnick (2001: 559–560).

The following part of this paper uses the above introduced conceptualizations of the stages and indicators of engagement to study the recent relations between the USA and China and between the USA and the Russian Federation. The goal is to ascertain the major differences between the two sets of relations and acquire a better understanding of why the engagement of the USA with China was much more successful than its engagement with Russia.

All the data in this paper that are used for its evaluation of engagement are publicly available. Most of them are statistics processed by the government of the United States. They can be found either on the websites of the White House or on the websites of the Executive Departments (particularly those of the State, Defense and Commerce). The other data from the economic or cultural sector come from the US Census Bureau.

### **THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE US ENGAGEMENT WITH CHINA AND RUSSIA**

The cases of the US engagements with China and Russia are very different. China has been expanding its contacts with the USA since the beginning of the 1970s while Russia has done so only since the end of the Cold War. Moreover, the Chinese communists had a very strong motivation to accept the engagement with the USA as their own since it confirmed the principal position of their party but also their long-term position that China is indivisible (i.e. the engagement implied that the USA does not recognize the independence of Taiwan). On the other hand, Russian leaders had to reconcile themselves with the fact that the country they had previously ruled (the USSR) no longer existed, and that the Communist Party was no longer the ruling Party. In the case of China, the changes have been initiated and executed by the political elites without substantial pressure from the public. In the case of Russia, the engagement with the USA was

accepted in a period when there had been a steep decline in the standard of living, an unprecedented rise in crime and an overall loss in Russia's international prestige.

These differences are significant, and we need to bear them in mind when thinking about the US engagement with the two countries. However, both China and Russia represent significant global actors who had been perceived as enemies by the United States in the past. Furthermore, China and Russia had only minimal contacts with the government of the USA before these two countries ceased to be labelled as "enemies" by the US administration. And finally, the degrees of prestige of China and Russia and their integration within the international order had been low and limited in this time period. These qualities allow us to consider that both Sino-American and Russo-American relations had once been in what we conceptualize here as the initial stage of engagement with the USA. In the following two sections, we will look at how the US engagements with China and Russia developed in terms of the stages and indicators of engagement.

### **The US Engagement with China**

The US engagement with China started with the normalization of diplomatic relations between the USA and the People's Republic of China (PRC) during the presidency of Richard Nixon (1969–1974). Nixon considered the PRC as one of the partners of the USA in the policy of containment of Soviet power. Economic and cultural exchanges between the two countries were successfully initiated in this period, although their general impact on the relations was relatively low.

After the end of the Cold War, the significance of the PRC for American foreign policy declined. Not only did the United States remain the sole superpower, but the Chinese leadership itself plunged into international isolation to a marked degree. This isolation was largely caused by, firstly, the Chinese government violently ending the anti-government demonstrations on Tiananmen Square and, secondly, by the Chinese military threatening the government in Taiwan (Saunders, Bowie 2016: 664). In this period, an often-contentious debate ensued between American political elites about what position to adopt towards China. Regardless of whether the debate was in the White House or the Capitol, or whether the politicians were from the Republican or the Democratic Party, a pragmatic approach always predominated in the end, according to which the best method for approaching the PRC was engagement and the development of greater contacts (Christensen 2015: 30). Thus, despite all the disagreements, the contacts between the two countries have slowly but continuously increased after the end of the Cold War. The positive shift in the mutual relations is well illustrated by the terms used to describe China in the American political discourse. The relations with China shifted from being a "*close, friendly, and cooperative relationship*" (NSS 1987: 15) under Ronald Reagan to being a "*strategic partnership*" (Clinton 1998) during the presidency of Bill Clinton. This reversal was initially criticized by George Bush Jr., who, while still the Governor of Texas, proposed labelling China as a "*competitor, not a strategic partner*" (Bush 1999). However, insofar as China was accepted into the WTO (2001) – because of which it had to open its market and accept the principles of the free market – it became a "*responsible stakeholder*" (NSS 2006: 41) even during the George Bush Jr. presidency (Chu 2001; Rabin 2010).

A very dynamic period in the Sino-American relations started with the election of Barack Obama. At that point, the US relations with China were already markedly defined and institutionalized. Thus Obama cannot be labelled as the initiator of the American policy of engagement with China. However, he continued in the established trend and brought the relations to a new level. Obama became the first president of the USA to visit China in the first year of his presidency. During this trip to Asia in November 2009, Obama declared his intention "*to make clear that the United States is a Pacific nation*" and that he would be deepening the US's "*engagement in this part of the world*" (Obama 2009).

However, in several speeches in the Fall of 2011, Obama declared the so-called “*Pivot to Asia*”, which was later referred to as the “*rebalance*” (Obama 2011); it was one of the most ambitious changes in American foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. According to the plan for it, the United States – after completing the mission in Afghanistan and Iraq – decided to focus its attention and resources primarily on the Asia-Pacific region in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Clinton 2010, 2011). The “*Pivot to Asia*”, however, was not only about reinforcing existing relations, but also about limiting China’s efforts to expand its sphere of influence. Various statements of President Obama mentioned that in future years, the United States would strengthen its bilateral relations with American allies and increase the American military presence in the Asia-Pacific region in such a way that 60% (up from 50%) of the American navy and air force would be concentrated in this region (Christensen 2015; Canrong 2016).

Obama repeatedly assured other politicians that the “*rebalance*” is not directed against any specific countries, although his initiative arrived at a time when there was an increase in the number of armed incidents between China and its neighbors in the South China Sea (e.g. Vietnam, Malaysia or the Philippines) as well as in the number of armed incidents between China and the USA (Goh 2016). Therefore, we may interpret the “*Pivot*” as a form of containment linked to Chinese power, and as an “*attempt to warn China away from using heavy-handed tactics against its neighbors and provide confidence to other Asia-Pacific countries that want to resist pressure from Beijing now and in the future*” (Lieberthal 2011). Reciprocally, the Chinese elite perceived the American “*Pivot to Asia*” negatively, as in their opinion it contrasts with the conciliatory tone that Obama presented during his visits to Beijing (Saunders, Bowie 2016: 667–668).

However, despite the occasional disputes, the governments in Washington and Beijing have never indicated that they would like to restrict their mutual contacts. In the military dimension, for instance, in 2015 alone there were 7 high level engagements, 16 recurrent, academic and functional exchanges and 3 joint and multi-lateral exercises between the two countries (Annual Report to Congress 2016). The reasons for this phenomenon are not entirely clear. However, according to some, the representatives of the People’s Army of China support the cooperation with their American counterparts because they have learned many things from it, particularly in the areas of anti-piracy activities, humanitarian operations, and non-military evacuation operations (Saunders, Bowie 2016: 667–668; Green 2016, Kan 2014).

Perhaps the best example of how contacts between the two countries have been growing and deepening is the economic exchange between them. In the early 1980s there was almost no exchange between them. But in 2015, the United States was the largest trading partner of China, and China the second largest trading partner of the United States (after Canada). The mutual trade increased from \$33 billion in 1992 to over \$659 billion in 2013. China has also gradually worked itself into the position of the largest exporter to the USA, and the United States is currently the second largest exporter to China (after South Korea) (US Census Bureau 2016).

Finally, the numbers related to the cultural exchange (be they in the areas of education, research or tourism) also show a significant expansion of mutual contacts. Let’s point out just a few facts: in 2015 Chinese students formed the largest foreign student community in the USA (approximately one third of all foreign students there). There has also been a steep increase in the number of Chinese tourists in the United States. In the period of Barack Obama’s election in the USA, approximately 650 thousand Chinese visited the USA, but about five years later this figure already reached 1.8 million. Also, while in 2000, slightly less than 60 thousand Chinese studied in the USA, about 14 years later the numbers of Chinese students grew by more than 400% (i.e. to 305 thousand) (Open Door Report 2014, 2016). The deepening of the cooperation between the USA and China is apparent at all the monitored levels. At the same time, it is apparent that the power



potential of China has grown, and the United States also aims to contain the Chinese ambition to expand its sphere of influence. The “Pivot to Asia” shows an exemplary demonstration of the fact that Washington is threatened by the effort of China to shift the border of its island territory in the East China and South China Seas.

Thus, we can conclude that the US engagement with China moved from the initial stage, which occurred at the beginning of the 1970s, to its intermediary state in the 1990s. This is evident both from the steady growth in all possible indicators of engagement and from the active participation of China in the institutions of the current international order, such as the WTO. It is remarkable that the values of the quantifiable indicators of the US engagement with China have not stopped growing despite the simultaneous strategy of the US to contain the growth of China’s geopolitical influence. This suggests that the engagement between the two countries is well established in the intermediary stage without any signs of regress in terms of mutual contacts.

### **The US Engagement with Russia**

During the presidency of Boris Yeltsin (1991–1999), the United State of America formally terminated the policy of containment, while Russia experienced a loss of the international prestige it had in the period of the Cold War. A former enemy of the West (the USSR) ceased to exist and its successor state, the Russian Federation, declared its willingness to establish good relations with Western states. Despite the difficulties Russia had been then undergoing, this period appears as relatively conflict-free. This mode of relations seemed to occur also at the beginning of Vladimir Putin’s presidency. It is interesting to note that George Bush Jr. invited President Putin to the White House as early as in November 2001 and took him to his Texas ranch during this visit. Also, in 2001, Russia was among the first states to express their support for the US-led war against terror.

However, the post-Yeltsin era has been marked by a gradual increase in the economic power of Russia, but also in security tensions with Western states. Russia profited financially from the steep growth in the price of oil, which made oil a key item of Russian exports. Russia also began reacting negatively to the expansion of NATO in Europe and the series of so-called “colour revolutions” in the countries of the former USSR. Also, for Russia, the building of American missile defense bases in Poland and the Czech Republic remained unacceptable, while American diplomacy harshly judged the Russian participation in the conflict in Georgia (2008). In 2009, after both Vladimir Putin and George W. Bush ended their presidencies, the relations between the USA and Russia moved into one of the worst moments since the end of the Cold War. Edward Lucas, the British correspondent for Eastern Europe of the magazine *The Economist*, thus began to speak of a “*new cold war*” (Lucas 2008).

When Barack Obama became the president of the USA in 2009, his initial steps towards Russia have been very similar to those made by his predecessor. Obama believed that it would be possible to conduct a “*Russian reset*”, i.e. to forget about the tensions and return to the relations of the period before the election of George W. Bush (Shuster 2010). Indeed, initially, the military cooperation between Russia and the US at this time developed at several levels: those of common military exercises, bilateral meetings of army representatives, intelligence sharing, port visits and conferences organized by special interest groups (e.g. universities and military academies) (Nichol 2014; Sonenshine 2014). However, all these contacts ended in the spring of 2014 because of the two countries’ diametrically opposed understandings of the security situation and the role of NATO in Europe. For Russia, NATO has become a threat, which is obvious in the latest National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation (RFNSS 2015).

The development of the American relationship with Russia during Barack Obama’s administration is well illustrated by the two National Security Strategies of the USA from

this time period (NSS 2010; NSS 2015). In the first of these documents, Russia is marked as an important partner with which the United States has an interest in cooperating in four areas: maintaining the system of nuclear non-proliferation, the fight against violent extremists in Afghanistan, a deepening of trade and investment, and promotion of the rule of law, accountable government and universal values (NSS 2010). Also, the National Military Strategy of the United States of America from 2011 confirmed that the government of Barack Obama intended to increase the dialogue and military-to-military relations with Russia, especially in the areas of “*strategic arms reduction [...] counter-terrorism, counter-proliferation, space, and Ballistic Missile Defense,*” and finally it also welcomed Russia’s “*more active role in preserving security and stability in Asia*” (NMS 2011: 13).

Nonetheless, in the NSS from 2015, Russia is spoken of the most often in connection with the aggression of Russian units in Ukraine (2014) and the necessity to impose and uphold diplomatic and economic sanctions against Russia (NSS 2015: 25). The document also mentioned that Russia “*has repeatedly demonstrated that it does not respect the sovereignty of its neighbors and it is willing to use force to achieve its goals*” (NMS 2015: 2). It is evident that in the period after the publication of the NSS 2010, a fundamental re-evaluation took place. The Russian annexation of Crimea and support for the rebels in eastern Ukraine (the regions of Donbas and Luhansk) (2014), as well as the two countries’ different positions on the ongoing conflict in Syria, have been only the apex of the long-term stagnation of the mutual relations.

Also, the economic exchange between the two economies remained very limited during the Obama presidencies – in terms of both commercial exchange and foreign investments. Prior to the introduction of the sanctions, Russia was (in 2013) the 23<sup>rd</sup> largest trading partner of the United States. On the other hand, the United States was among the ten largest trading partners of Russia, but it was still far behind the Netherlands, Germany and Italy, China, and even Turkey in this respect. Expressed in terms of numbers, only 0.71% of the total American exports were directed to Russia (in 2013) and only 2.74% of the Russian exports travelled in the other direction (Office of the U.S. Trade Representatives 2012). It has been anticipated that once Russia would enter the WTO, it would significantly contribute to the growth in foreign investments in Russia, particularly in Russian services and telecommunications. Nevertheless, whether the Russian membership in the WTO had positive effects cannot be evaluated because of the sanctions on Russia since 2014 (Belton 2012).

The stagnation of the Russo-American relations is well illustrated by tourism. The numbers of Russian citizens who visited the United States of America each year were never breath-taking. The numbers reached their maximum in 2014 (about 343 thousand) and then fell sharply by 24% in the following year (261 thousand). Such numbers placed Russians in 32<sup>nd</sup> place on the ranked list of nationalities visiting the US as tourists – ahead of Peruvians, but behind Jamaicans and Filipinos (Office of Travel and Tourism Industries, 2011, 2014, 2015; Powell 2015). The situation is similar with academic exchange. The largest number of Russian students came to the United States in the academic year 1999–2000. Since then, the in-flow of Russian students has been slowly decreasing. Prior to the sanctions, Russian students did not even reach the level of the 25 nationalities with the largest numbers of foreign students in the USA (Open Doors Report 2016; IIE 2013, 2016).

Thus, during the Obama presidencies, the ability of the USA to engage Russia deteriorated. Soon it was apparent that the attempt to “reset” the relations was unsuccessful. The series of disputes peaked following the Russian aggression toward Ukraine (in 2014), against which the government of the USA protested, and which it refused to recognize. In this period, the US administration abandoned its policy of engagement in regard to Russia, moved toward a policy of isolation (disengagement) in regard to it and began to limit the mutual contacts at all the aforementioned levels: the

diplomatic, military, economic and cultural levels. This means that the US strategy of engagement with Russia has failed; it was on the move from the initial to the intermediary stage in the 1990s, but then it was put in question during the 2000s, and finally completely abandoned after 2014.

### **Successes and Failures of the US Engagement**

We have two former enemies of the United States who have been engaged by it, yet these engagements came to different outcomes. The US engagement towards China has functioned because it has paid off in the long term for the Chinese. Since the time when the Chinese government normalized its relations with the USA, no one (or almost no one) doubted that the PRC is the sole representative of the Chinese people. The close relationship with the USA has contributed to the fact that this has successfully started the economic growth in China, restoring the country's prestige and material resources. In other words, China has gained its great power status precisely because of the fact that it began to connect to the existing structures of the international order. It would be too idealistic to assert that the US engagement with China has led to China's identification with the norms and rules of the current international system. China has not become a status quo power. Essentially the military activities of China in the South China and East China Seas, just like the unfriendly relations between Beijing and Taipei, or China's disagreements with the United States in the economic dimension of the engagement, have invoked a serious and justified dissatisfaction with the further developments in the region. One might justly claim that there have been outward differences between the first and second terms of President Obama, and also that Obama's personal relations with Chinese representatives (the presidents Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping) have evolved (Li 2016). Nonetheless, nothing changes the fact that the American engagement in the years 2009–2017 has enriched China at all the verified levels: it has been enriched politically and economically, the US improved the equipment and the level of experience of its army, and China continuously sent more of its people to the USA (whether as tourists or students). Disagreements between the two countries exist, but both governments see more benefits in the high levels of engagement.

The Russo-American relations are a completely different story. The two countries' diplomatic contacts have always been relatively numerous, but their economic, military and cultural cooperation after 1991 has never reached its full potential. Precisely during the 1990s, when Russia was the most inclined toward cooperation with the USA, we have seen the fall in the standard of living and the rise in crime in Russia. Over the course of the 1990s, Resnick's second condition for a successful strategy of engagement was not present in this case, because the contacts with the USA did not fulfil their promise to meet the material needs and the lust for international prestige in Russia (compare with Resnick 2001: 561). Russia, however, has gradually restored much of its international prestige and increased its standard of living approximately after 2000 with the ascendancy of Vladimir Putin. Be it for this or some other reason, the Russians have perceived their rise as progress despite rather than thanks to the cooperation with the USA. This sentiment is in conflict with Resnick's third condition for a successful strategy of engagement, according to which the target state must perceive the engager and the international order it represents as a potential source of material or prestige resources (Ibid.).

The above mentioned difference is essential for our understanding of why the US engagement towards Russia has failed. The more Russia has been emancipated in international politics, the more it has replaced the foreign policy of the USA with its own policy (see, for example, the war against Georgia). And this has been precisely understood by the Russian political elites as well as the greater public as evidence of Russia's success. Obama's "reset" could not succeed because its intent was to return the Russo-American relations to the period prior to the election of President Bush, i.e. to the era when the

mutual relations were significantly asymmetrical and not in the interest of Russia. The Russian government's restoration of Russia's international prestige and the growth in the standard of living have not contributed to the expansion of Russia's contacts with American politicians, business people, soldiers or "common" citizens, but by demonstrating Russia's own ability to stand in competition with them. Therefore, Russia and China should not be put into the same basket. Although both represent potential challenges for the United States and its role in world politics, the ways they responded to the US strategy of engagement were different. While China has been working on its power and prestige in close cooperation with the United States, Russia has tried to re-establish its power potential and international prestige in opposition to the United States. This makes the term *revisionist power* much more appropriate for Russia than for China.

## CONCLUSION

Many scholars, pundits, and policymakers have argued in the recent years about the successes and failures of the American foreign policy towards the "rival powers" of China and Russia. In the previous lines and paragraphs, I have indicated that it would be a simplification to label both of them as "revisionist" and to say that previous efforts to engage them that were embodied in the US strategy of engagement have failed. The argument of this article might be situated somewhere between the position of the "pessimists" (Mead 2014; Mearsheimer 2014; Walt 2018) – who expect an inevitable revival of power politics and a rise of illiberal powers – and that of the "optimists" (Ikenberry 2014; Nye 1996), who believe that former enemies can be fully integrated within the international order, and that conflicts between great powers can be avoided.

My approach, adopted from Evan Resnick's framework, assumes that if there is a willingness to deepen the cooperation and the number of contacts is on the rise, the target country moves away from "revisionism" and to the "status quo". This approach sees engagement as a process that has no predestined or irreversible outcomes. Such an approach is simple in its design but measurable, and its most important characteristic is that it enables one to make clear distinctions between the US relations with China and Russia respectively.

However, such an approach is not without possible objections to it. As has been said in the article, Resnick does not consider the "time factor" in his calculations; nor does he consider the differences in the initial stages of engagement. Furthermore, there are no exact criteria to determine the exact stage of engagement, which leaves quite a large space for interpretation. Finally, I would also suggest that indicators of engagement could also be questioned. For instance, the whole framework could be enlarged so as to include data stemming from other fields of cooperation. That would probably not change the general idea presented in this paper. But it might bring new "light" on particular issues of engagement.

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