

# The Tillerson Framework for U.S.-Russia Relations: Workable?

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## ***EXECUTIVE SUMMARY***

Earlier this week, American media had reported that U.S. Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, had led the creation of a new framework to guide U.S.-Russian relations during the Trump administration. Although the document remains classified, it is comprised of three narrow pillars intended to foster a constructive relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin on a limited set of issues. The hope is that the document will contribute to reversing the precipitous decline in U.S.-Russian relations. However, the reception of Tillerson's effort to date both in Washington and Moscow has been lukewarm at best, possibly highlighting the measure's impermanence.

**Keywords:** Russia; United States

## ***Introduction***

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Since at least 2014, beginning with Moscow's annexation of Crimea, U.S.-Russia ties have suffered several significant setbacks. More recently, the decline has been precipitated by allegations that Moscow colluded with high-level members of President Donald Trump's campaign to influence the outcome of the 2016 presidential election, Moscow's continued financial and military support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and "malicious cyber activity on behalf of the Russian government." In response, Washington has implemented several rounds of sanctions, beginning under the Barack Obama administration, among other measures. These have been unsuccessful in changing Moscow's positions on the above-listed issues, leading Secretary Tillerson to declare that the U.S. relationship with Russia is at an **all-time low and deteriorating further**. Prompted in part by this assessment, Tillerson led the development of a new framework document to guide the re-stabilisation of the U.S.-Russian partnership.

### ***The Tillerson Framework Outlined***

Overall, the Tillerson framework emphasises **strategic stability and flexibility** by engaging on issues of mutual concern while repudiating Russian actions perceived contrary to U.S. interests. The first pillar of the document seeks to convey to Moscow that aggression against the U.S. is counterproductive, and will prompt Washington to retaliate. The second pillar aims to engage Moscow on issues of strategic importance to the U.S. This prong includes attempting to resolve; the Syrian conflict,

North Korea's nuclear weapons program, and the deployment of increasingly complex cyber-attacks against key American targets, including **efforts to disrupt the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, directed by Russian President Vladimir Putin**. The third pillar emphasises "strategic stability", a broad term which encompasses a range of mutual geopolitical aims. While at first glance the effort appears reasonable, potential stumbling blocks lurk beneath the surface.

### ***Concerns with the Tillerson Framework***

Several unresolved issues potentially could impede the implementation of each of the three pillars of the framework. It is easy to see how the confrontational posture implied in the first pillar could irk Moscow, making it a less than enthusiastic partner. Common views on key concepts necessary to realise the second pillar of the framework are missing. For instance, it is unclear how the U.S. administration seeks to achieve improved coordination with Moscow regarding Syria since the two sides diverge greatly on this issue. Moreover, in the sphere of cyber espionage Washington and Moscow "lack a mutual understanding of what's fair game and what isn't." Strategic stability, the cornerstone of the framework's third pillar, is an "ambiguous umbrella term." Given these potential pitfalls, will the framework be a useful guide for U.S.-Russian relations?

### ***The Future of the Tillerson Framework***

Domestic and international factors currently limit the likelihood that the Tillerson

framework will have a tangible effect on U.S.-Russian relations. Perhaps most consequentially, in the former category, “the president could **throw it out** at any moment.” Operationally, the U.S. administration lacks Russia experts at the Department of State, outside of Tillerson. Key posts remain vacant, a situation the Secretary has blamed on the “**extraordinarily burdensome**” process of filing the relevant paperwork. In the latter category, Moscow’s response to the document has been even more

problematic. Specifically, Russian Presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov claimed that “we are **unaware** of [the Tillerson framework] yet”, and referred the query to the Russian Foreign Ministry. Further, according to Peskov, Moscow is not considering any counter-demands to the U.S. in return for normalising relations under the framework. Therefore, it seems unlikely that the document will have a chance to contribute to normalising U.S.-Russia ties.

### ***Conclusion and policy recommendations***

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At first glance the still-classified Tillerson framework offers a reasonable set of guidelines for righting the U.S.-Russian relationship. However, several unresolved issues plague the internal logic of the document. These, coupled with external domestic and international factors, make it unlikely that the Tillerson framework will be used to guide America's Russia policy. If anything, the attempt will allow the Secretary of State to show President Trump the limits of engagement with President Putin, and to demonstrate that he had made an effort.

### ***Policy recommendations***

- Ensure that the premises of any guiding policy document are acceptable to all parties foreign and domestic.
- Avoid over-reliance on select top subject matter experts. Instead, recruit such experts at all levels of government.

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