



# **Russia's Global Reach**

## **A Security and Statecraft Assessment**

*Edited by*  
Graeme P. Herd

# **Russia's Global Reach:**

## **A Security and Statecraft Assessment**

*Edited by*  
**Graeme P. Herd**

## About the Marshall Center

The George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies is one of five U.S. Department of Defense Regional Centers and the only bilateral Center. It is also the only regional center for the Federal Republic of Germany. The mission of the Marshall Center is to enable solutions to regional and transnational security challenges through capacity building, access, and a globally connected network. An instrument of German-American cooperation, the center addresses regional and transnational security issues for the U.S. Department of Defense and German Federal Ministry of Defense, and maintains contact with a vast alumni network of security professionals.

The legacy, goals, and ideals of the Marshall Plan continue through the security education initiatives of the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. The Marshall Center, dedicated in 1993, is a renowned international security and defense studies institute that promotes dialogue and understanding among the nations of North America, Europe and Eurasia. The Marshall Center is committed to carrying Marshall's vision into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Supported bilaterally by the governments of the United States and Germany, the Marshall Center boasts an international faculty and staff with representatives from ten partner nations. In addition to supporting the European theater security cooperation strategies and objectives, the Marshall Center supports five South and Central Asian States: Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The Marshall Center also has a supporting relationship with Mongolia and Afghanistan.

For reprint permissions, contact the editor via [pao@marshallcenter.org](mailto:pao@marshallcenter.org).

### ***For Bibliographical Citation Purposes***

Graeme P. Herd, ed., *Russia's Global Reach: A Security and Statecraft Assessment* (Garmisch-Partenkirchen: George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 2021).

### ***Disclaimer***

*The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, the U.S. Department of Defense, the German Ministry of Defense, or the United States, Germany, or any other governments. This report is approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.*

## Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of **Dr. John Reppert** (September 16, 1941 – October 11, 2019) and **Dr. Robert “Bob” Brannon** (November 13, 1950 – May 22, 2017). John was Dean of the College of International Security Studies at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies (GCMC) twice, from 2003 to 2006 and April 2010 to September 2012. Bob was GCMC Dean from September 2012 to September 2016.

Before joining the GCMC, both served in leadership positions in Moscow, John as U.S. Defense Attaché to the Russian Federation and Bob as Naval Attaché. As Deans, as academics, and as old “Russia hands,” these leaders had the vision to constantly seek ways to further our understanding of Russian strategic behavior, with a view to identifying appropriate policy responses. We remember them with fondness and affection.



## Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>i</i>
<i>List of Contributors</i>	<i>ii</i>
<i>Foreword</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>Executive Summary: U.S. Policy Considerations</i>	<i>iv</i>
<b>Section I: Introduction</b>	
Chapter 1 <b>Understanding Russia’s Global Reach</b> <i>Graeme P. Herd</i>	1
<b>Section II: Regional Case Studies</b>	
Chapter 2 <b>Russia-U.S. Relations: Towards a New Strategic Relationship</b> <i>Suzanne Loftus</i>	9
Chapter 3 <b>Russia and European Great Powers: UK, France, and Germany</b> <i>Pál Dunay</i>	17
Chapter 4 <b>Russia and the Arctic: High Ambitions, Modernized Capabilities, and Risky Setbacks</b> <i>Pavel Baev</i>	25
Chapter 5 <b>Russia and Latin America: Flexible, Pragmatic, and Close</b> <i>Fabiana S. Perera</i>	34
Chapter 6 <b>Russia and China: Putin Turns to the East</b> <i>Wade Turvold, Michael B. Dorschner, and Michael Burgoyne</i>	44
Chapter 7 <b>Russia and Northeast Asia: Unrealized Potential</b> <i>Wade Turvold, Michael B. Dorschner, and Michael Burgoyne</i>	53
Chapter 8 <b>Russia and South Asia: India and Pakistan</b> <i>John H. (Jack) Gill</i>	62
Chapter 9 <b>Russia and the Middle East: Opportunities and Challenges</b> <i>Gawdat Bahgat</i>	72
Chapter 10 <b>Russia and Africa: Expanding Influence and Instability</b> <i>Joseph Siegle</i>	80
<b>Section III: Russian Power Capabilities</b>	
Chapter 11 <b>Russian Nuclear Instruments and Arms Control Approaches</b> <i>Pavel Baev</i>	91
Chapter 12 <b>Russia’s Economic Engagement: Realities, Pitfalls, and Perils</b> <i>Pál Dunay</i>	101
Chapter 13 <b>Russian Diplomacy and Conflict Management</b> <i>David Lewis</i>	109
Chapter 14 <b>Active Measures: Russia’s Covert Global Reach</b> <i>Mark Galeotti</i>	118
Chapter 15 <b>Strategic Messaging: Propaganda and Disinformation Efforts</b> <i>Dmitry Gorenburg</i>	127
<b>Section IV: Conclusions</b>	
Chapter 16 <b>Assessing Russian Statecraft and U.S. Policy Considerations</b> <i>Graeme P. Herd</i>	136

## Acknowledgements

It is a distinct pleasure to take time to acknowledge the efforts of many individuals and teams who worked to see this book project to fruition. My apologies if I have inadvertently overlooked anyone, but know that I and the contributors are grateful nonetheless.

When conceptualizing the book in early 2020, Michael Burgoyne at APCSS and Joseph Siegle at Africa Center, were both present at the creation and my thanks to both for providing constructive feedback on the book's structure and purpose. The Deans of the five regional centers supported this project from the outset, not least by encouraging their faculty to contribute. When COVID-19 hit in March 2020, the planned Workshop in support of this project was cancelled. Thankfully, all contributors continued to work virtually on this project and should be applauded.

In mid-2020, Matt Sousa moderated three virtual presentations by Pavel Baev, David Lewis, and Mark Galeotti for GCMC FAOs and others, and my thanks to him, the presenters and Kailyn Manseau for organizing this *troika*. These presentations then became, respectively, Chapters 4, 13, and 14 of this book.

It is my pleasure to thank Martin Heli, an intern at the GCMC in November-December 2020, for reading through earlier drafts, checking links, and offering comments. Pál Dunay, Mike Burgoyne, Wade Turvold, Joe Siegle, and David Lewis all offered valuable feedback on Chapter 16 and I am indebted to them for this.

On behalf of Suzanne Loftus, Pál Dunay, and myself, let me express our thanks to the superb Research Library here at the GCMC, not least for the responsiveness of its staff to our research needs.

My thanks also to Jeannie Callaghan, Chief, Publications and Evaluations at the Marshall Center, and her team, consisting of Rachel Ager, Missy Odom, and Westin Reuter. Their copy editing, formatting, and working with the contributors to find appropriate images to illustrate the text provided the curriculum user-friendly html version of this research. I am grateful that the DevOps team at the Marshall Center, consisting of Sherry Rivera, Martin Lubos, and Forrest Briggs, created the new section of our webpage that features this volume. Thanks to James Schenk for creating our book cover and Rachel Ager for selecting the appropriate image. Lastly, I appreciate the help of Dr. Kathryn Newton and Anthony Micchelli for supporting the production process of an advanced courtesy copy.

Graeme P. Herd  
Garmisch-Partenkirchen, April 28, 2021

## List of Contributors

**Dr. Pavel K. Baev** is a Research Professor at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). He is also a Senior Non-Resident Scholar at the Brookings Institutions (Washington, DC) and a Senior Research Associate with the French International Affairs Institute (IFRI, Paris). Pavel specializes in Russian military reform; Russian conflict management in the Caucasus and Central Asia; energy interests in Russia's foreign policy; and Russian relations with Europe and NATO.

**Dr. Gawdat Bahgat** is a professor at the Near East-South Asia Center for Strategic Studies (NESA) at the National Defense University in Washington, DC. He is the author of twelve books and more than 200 articles on the Middle East. His areas of expertise include energy security; proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; international political economy; Iran; and U.S. foreign policy.

**Lt. Col. (ret) Michael Burgoyne** joined the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (DKI APCSS) in July 2016 as a military professor, where he currently focuses on Northeast Asian Security, Taiwan, and China. His experience in the Asia-Pacific includes most recently serving as the Army Programs Officer at the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), Taipei. He is co-editor of *China's Global Influence: Perspectives and Recommendations*.

**Lt. Col. Michael Dorschner** joined the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (DKI APCSS) in 2019 as a military faculty member. As a U.S. Army Foreign Area Officer, he brings experience from living, studying, and working in a variety of positions around the Indo-Pacific region, with specific expertise in Northeast Asian security, Chinese relations, and security cooperation throughout Southeast Asia. His recent assignments included postings as the U.S. Defense Attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia and as the Army Liaison Officer at the U.S. Consulate in Hong Kong.

**Dr. Pál Dunay** is Professor of NATO and European Security Issues at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies (GCMC), Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany. Between 1996 and 2004 as well as between 2007 and 2014, he was course director of the nine-month-long International Training Course in Security Policy at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy. Between July 2004 and the beginning of 2007, he was a senior researcher at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). Between May 2014 and June 2015 and then again between January and September 2016, he was Director of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Pál's research interests extend to various issues of European security with an emphasis on East-Central Europe and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the OSCE, the legality of the use of force, and integration and disintegration in the post-Soviet space.

**Dr. Mark Galeotti** is director of the London-based consultancy Mayak Intelligence, an honorary professor at the University College London School of Slavonic and East European Studies, a senior associate fellow at the Royal United Services Institute, and a senior non-resident fellow at the Institute of International Relations Prague. He is an expert and prolific author on transnational crime and Russian security affairs.

**John H. (Jack) Gill** is an adjunct professor affiliated with the NESACenter and an associate fellow with the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). A former U.S. Army South Asia Foreign Area Officer, he has been following South Asia security issues since the mid-1980s in positions at the Pentagon and Pacific Command. His publications on South Asia include the *Atlas of the 1971 India-Pakistan War*, chapters on Indian and Pakistani strategic affairs in the IISS *Strategic Survey*, and the National Bureau of Asian Research annual *Strategic Asia*, as well as chapters on U.S.-India military relations, the 1986-87 India-Pakistan Brasstacks crisis, and the 1999 Kargil War. He is also an internationally recognized military historian and has authored several books and numerous papers on the Napoleonic era.

**Dr. Dmitry Gorenburg** is Senior Research Scientist in the Strategy, Policy, Plans, and Programs division of CNA, where he has worked since 2000. Dmitry is an associate at the Harvard University Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies and previously served as Executive Director of the American Association of the Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS). His research interests include security issues in the former Soviet Union, Russian military reform, Russian foreign policy, and ethnic politics and identity. He currently serves as editor of *Problems of Post-Communism* and was also editor of *Russian Politics and Law* from 2009 to 2016. Dmitry received a B.A. in international relations from Princeton University and holds a Ph.D. in political science from Harvard University. He blogs on issues related to the Russian military at <http://russiamil.wordpress.com>.

**Dr. Graeme P. Herd** is Professor of Transnational Security Studies and Chair of the Research and Policy Analysis Department at the GCMC. Graeme directs a new monthly Russian Hybrid Seminar Series (RHSS), focusing on Russian risk calculus, red lines, and crisis behavior and the implications of this for policy responses. He has published nine books, written over seventy academic papers, and delivered over 100 academic and policy-related presentations in forty-six countries. He is currently writing a manuscript that examines the relationship between Russia's strategic culture and President Putin's operational code on decision-making in Russia today. He is also the editor of this volume.

**Dr. David Lewis** is Associate Professor of International Relations at the University of Exeter. David's research interests include international peace and conflict studies, with a regional focus on Russia and other post-Soviet states. He is the author of numerous articles and books on Russia and Eurasia, including most recently *Russia's New Authoritarianism: Putin and the Politics of Order* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

**Dr. Suzanne Loftus** is currently a Professor of National Security and the Deputy Chair of the Strategic Initiatives Department at the GCMC. Suzanne specializes in Russian foreign and domestic politics and transatlantic security. Prior to turning to academia, Suzanne worked at the United Nations and in the private sector in Geneva, Switzerland, where she also earned her Master's degree in Business Management. She holds a doctorate in international studies from the University of Miami, where she also taught a number of classes in international relations and foreign policy. Along with her native English, she speaks French, Spanish, and Russian.



**Dr. Fabiana S. Perera** is an Assistant Professor at the William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies. Prior to joining the Perry Center, Fabiana was a Rosenthal Fellow at the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Under Secretary for Policy, Western Hemisphere Affairs. Fabiana has experience working in the public and private sectors. She worked as a research associate at Mitsubishi International Corporation focusing on Latin America and the energy and infrastructure sectors. She also has experience serving at the Department of Veterans Affairs and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Her research and analysis have appeared in numerous publications including *The Washington Post*, *CNN.com*, and *War on the Rocks*. Her research has been supported by numerous organizations including Columbia University’s Women in Energy program and George Washington University’s Center for International Business Education.

**Dr. Joseph Siegle** is the Director of Research at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies. His areas of expertise include the role of democratic governance in advancing security and development; strengthening institutions of accountability; stabilizing fragile states; and the role of external actors in Africa. He is the author of “Recommended US Response to Russian Activities in Africa,” part of the “Russia Strategic Intentions White Paper,” *Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA)* publication series, NSI, May 2019.

**Wade Turvold** joined the DKI APCSS in June 2019 after a thirty-year career in the U.S. Navy. He was privileged to serve in two educational assignments during this time, as the U.S. Navy Senior Service Representative and Director National Security Studies at the U.S. Army War College and the U.S. Navy Exchange Directing Staff at the Joint Services Command and Staff College, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom in Shrivenham, England.

*The opinions expressed in this book are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views or policies of the U.S. or any other government.*

## Foreword

When we survey the totality of Russian global activism, what is our assessment of contemporary Russian statecraft? The five U.S. Department of Defense Regional Centers collaborated to engage this strategic theme, resulting in this volume. The Centers are:

[Africa Center for Strategic Studies](#)  
[Daniel K. Inouye Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies](#)  
[George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies](#)  
[Near East and South Asia Center for Strategic Studies](#)  
[William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies](#)

Drawing on their unique perspective of working with partner nations across the globe on a daily basis, these Centers are able to leverage their expertise to provide regionally-specific assessments of how well Russia aligns its ways and means with its strategic ends, when operating outside the borders of its historic 400-year-old empire. From this firm foundation we are well placed to identify policy implications and opportunities for the United States, its friends and allies, to engage Russia more effectively in each region and globally. We present these results in our Executive Summary, which rests on the work of sixteen book chapters.

We very much appreciate the insights and analysis provided by Fabiana S. Perera from Perry Center, Wade Turvold, Michael B. Dorschner, and Michael Burgoyne from DKI APCSS, John H. (Jack) Gill, and Gawdat Bahgat from NESAC, Joseph Siegle from Africa Center and Pal Dunay, Suzanne Loftus and Graeme P. Herd from our GCMC. In addition, we sincerely thank Pavel K. Baev, Mark Galeotti, Dmitry Gorenburg, and David Lewis, each of these distinguished scholars are globally recognized experts on aspects of Russian strategic behavior. Their thematic chapters ably assess Russian strategic behavior in a global context.

This book is available online, including as pdfs that can serve as curriculum in support of Regional Center programs and defense institution courses of friends and allies. Shared research promotes discussion and exchanges of perspectives in teaching and seminars, increases knowledge, and strengthens networks. The Executive Summary provides an active and thoughtful Senior Leadership Seminar agenda. I commend Jeannie Callaghan and her team here at the GCMC for a web design that facilitates such functionality in the service of our mission.

Building on the groundbreaking APCSS-led collaboration that resulted in the excellent assessment of China's global reach and activism, this GCMC-led effort provides a second volume to the series, on Russia. We look forward to subsequent collaborations that draw on regional center expertise to assess other evolving strategic trends in comparative perspective.

It is my pleasure to share this research and policy analysis with you all.

Keith W. Dayton, Lt. Gen, U.S. Army (ret.)  
GCMC Director, March 22, 2021



# Executive Summary: U.S. Policy Considerations

*By Graeme P. Herd*

Given our cross-regional comparative assessment and the stated policy of the new Biden administration, what are the implications of this study for U.S. policy towards Russia and towards Russian global activism? This summary first identifies general considerations in terms of overall approach before examining specific regional considerations. This summary aims to provide opportunities for the United States, as well as its friends and allies, to engage with Russia more effectively in each region and globally.

## **Global**

- The Biden administration has not adopted a new reset with Russia, as since 2012 President Putin embarked on more revisionist and revanchist policies. Although President Putin accuses the Biden administration of having embraced a comprehensive neo-containment policy, this is not the case. Unlike the late 1940s, the world is globalized and increasingly multi-polar. In this context, containment is not possible. In addition, the U.S. realizes that even to attempt such an approach would break transatlantic unity and undercut Euro-Atlantic cooperation with Russian civil society and parts of its private sector. There is a transatlantic consensus for a targeted “pushback” against the Kremlin’s malign activity and influence, especially “active measures” and to build resilience in defense of shared core democratic values and practices. The U.S. and Europe can coordinate approaches to “impose real costs” to reduce Russian military and diplomatic efficacy through disruption. Disruption can cause friction, overextend and unbalance Russia and thereby control Russian escalation and deter further malign activity. The tools at the disposal of the U.S. and its friends and allies that facilitate the imposition of costs are varied and context specific. These tools include:
  - **Diplomatic:** These tools include “attribution diplomacy” (“name and shame”), diplomatic expulsions, and closing diplomatic properties. In public diplomacy terms, the West can restructure the narrative from Putin’s preferred besieged fortress Russia encircled by an aggressive, dysfunctional, and failed West to one about a Russian elite kleptocracy and oligarchy (“Kremlin blacklist”) versus Russian civil society.
  - **Economic:** The expansion of U.S. anti-money laundering regime beyond traditional banks as well as the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, which imposes visa bans and freezes the assets of individuals anywhere in the world who are responsible for committing human rights violations or acts of

significant corruption, is complemented by the European Magnitsky Act, established in December 2020. The Global Fragility Act calls for all parts of the U.S. government to coordinate strategies to prevent violence and extremism and to focus foreign assistance on averting conflict in fragile countries.

- **Cyber:** Cyber tools can be used to reveal or freeze Putin’s secret assets and expose corruption and a policy of “defend forward” or “hack back” can be used.
- The U.S. needs to demonstrate positive world leadership and substantively re-engage globally: redouble its efforts to support and strengthen its existing alliance system beyond military exercises, arms sales, and senior leader dialogues to encompass the diplomatic, economic, and, in some cases, development communities. Partnerships should agree on shared ends but be flexible to allow partners to adopt different ways and means to these ends, allowing a mix of compellence and diplomatic persuasion.
- The U.S. should support the international system it helped create through statements and actions, in both word and deed. Messaging is critical to the success of U.S. efforts to engage with Russia. Partners and allies are important to the success of U.S. national security interests but they may not be as willing to cooperate with the U.S. if they do not understand U.S. objectives. The U.S. needs to improve its external messaging so that it is consistent and unambiguous in order to both reassure partners and allies of U.S. commitment; this helps build the consensus necessary to address large challenges and to provide very clear policy positions to adversaries, which can prevent misunderstandings from spiraling into conflict.
- The U.S. should look to potential cooperation with Russia in areas of mutual interest, including the prevention of further nuclear proliferation, counterterrorism and organized crime, cyber and outer space, and limiting China’s influence, to give some examples. However, as the United States, friends, and allies have little direct leverage over Russian strategic behavior, Russian cooperation will be conditional and transactional. Beyond START III, Russia views indications of cooperation as “concessions,” that is, signs of weaknesses. While Russia backs Assad in Syria, military deconfliction is possible but not cooperation. In Ukraine, where the U.S. is not part of the multilateral framework and where the discord is antagonistic, cooperative potential is very limited.
- U.S. policy responses cannot avoid generating unintended consequences in Russia, such as a rally around the flag effect in Russia. Attribution diplomacy can be ineffective when *siloviki* in Russia have *de facto* immunity from prosecution. Adverse publicity can intimidate opponents, instruct, and educate society into submission and be worn as a badge of loyalty. Russia may well adapt by further fragmenting internally, accepting greater strategic (including potential nuclear) blackmail and not just tactical risk, as well as weaponizing corruption and monetizing its foreign policy, resulting in greater unpredictability and increasing destabilization of its internal order.
- Russian confrontation with the U.S. is the norm; relations with the EU have deteriorated to a record low and will continue to remain there; and offensive cyber operations as well

as active measures are ongoing and unremitting. Offering concessions to Russia or compromising on human rights in the name of pragmatic and flexible cooperation will not alleviate Russia's narrative of western encroachment, encirclement, and containment. The West does not have to confirm Russia's claim to Great Power status as it defines it. Russia's placing of its own interests above the sovereignty of neighboring states is neither aligned with Western national interest nor its democratic norms and values.

## *Regionally*

### *Europe*

- The U.S. should seek to strengthen ties with Europe and Germany in particular, as the Washington-Berlin relationship constitutes the operational center of gravity in the political West. Greater coordination of strategy through National Security Council-*Bundeskanzleramt* working groups can help shape shared NATO approaches and avoid strategic surprises in the relationship.
- Broader burden-sharing ("New Deal") and an Eastern Partnership Security Compact suggest Germany seeks to offset its determination to complete Nord Stream 2. A U.S.-German action plan can mitigate the negative effects by extending the gas transit agreements to increase revenue for Ukraine, increase support for the Three Seas Initiative and work can be done to agree to the regulatory environment once the pipeline is operational.
- Thus, in order to effectively "push back" against Russian malign activity and influence, the U.S. needs to strengthen transatlantic relations. In practice, this entails managing better the differences it has with Europe and recognizing their nature. Differences arise in part from different structural and economic relationships with Russia. Europe in general is more broadly and deeply dependent on and integrated with the Russian economy than is the United States; this includes, for example, the UK (financial services and investments) or Germany (trade and energy). European business interests, subject to Russia's "weaponized corruption," lead to different levels of threat perception and political will.

### *Arctic*

- The U.S. should expand confidence-building measures around common interests and encourage Russia's desire to make a success of its chairmanship in the Arctic Council in order to discourage its military build-up in the High North and prevent further militarization of the Arctic.
- The United States, alongside its Arctic EU allies and with China, should work on dissuading Russia from asserting its sovereignty over the Northern Sea Route and enforcing restrictive regulations on the maritime traffic. For example, the U.S. could leverage China's preference for economic and scientific activities in the Arctic.

- Limited U.S. freedom of navigation operations to the west of the Bering Strait might reinforce the common benefit that flows from denying Russia the exclusive control over this maritime route.
- In general, U.S. Arctic policy should neutralize Russian strengths and pressure its weaknesses and vulnerabilities. For example, Russia is unable to protect its strategic nuclear submarines on the Kamchatka Peninsula, as it cannot organize a “naval bastion” or uses an anti-access/area denial “bubble” in the Sea of Okhotsk.
- Greater U.S. cooperation with NATO partners and Finland and Sweden in the Barents regions allows for asymmetric and smart containment. The U.S. should collaboratively build monitoring and intelligence gathering capabilities that are deployable and train through exercises to signal strategic resolve without triggering an Arctic security dilemma.

### *Latin America*

- Russia’s post-Cold War reengagement with Latin America can leverage a long history of relations in this region, longer than most other U.S. competitors, including China, and it demonstrates it can be flexible and pragmatic.
- Russia’s engagement in Latin America has a regionally specific function: Russia signals it can operate in the United States’ backyard and fundamentally challenges the Monroe Doctrine. Russia also demonstrates that Great Powers can push back, provide an alternative to the United States, and support left-leaning regional groupings. In doing so, Russia imposes costs on the regional hegemon, dilutes its power, and undermines democratic values and practice.
- The U.S. has peaceful and productive relationships with the region and shared cultural capital rooted in democratic values, alliances, and partnerships. Recognizing the importance of these links and continuing to build on them through rhetoric and actions will be crucial in maintaining the U.S. position in the region.
- Although Russia is unconstrained by democratic norms as it engages the region, the U.S. should not abandon democratic principles, values, and norms in the name of Great Power competition. Greater engagement in the region will promote democracy and shut down the space for Russian gray zone activities.
- Geographical proximity to Latin America remains the greatest advantage the U.S. has in the region. However, this advantage is undermined if the United States does not capitalize on it by engaging with all instruments of power.
- While China is also strengthening relationships with Latin America, so far China and Russia have sought engagement in different spheres. Increased Russian ownership of



energy assets and related companies, particularly in Venezuela, could however create new dynamics as China seeks to continue to acquire oil and gas from the region to fuel its own growth.

### *Northeast Asia*

- The U.S. needs to build stronger relationships between its allies with the goal of a true multiparty alliance structure. Stronger relations between allies and partners will minimize Russia's and China's ability to sow dissension or pit one ally against another.
- The U.S. should work across elements of national power to strengthen its relationship with Japan. Particularly, the U.S. should re-enter the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, now retitled the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, which Japan leads.
- The U.S. should encourage Japan to table its desire to settle the Kuril Islands dispute in the near-term.
- Helping Mongolia to maximize its status as a free and independent partner in Northeast Asia can be enabled by the U.S. supporting the Third Neighbor Policy and Mongolian democracy.
- The U.S. needs to consider and be prepared for potential Russian support to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in various forms if the PRC should employ a more coercive approach toward Taiwan.

### *China*

- Splitting the partnership between Russia and the PRC through U.S. actions may not be fully possible in the near term.
- Incentivize Russia to moderate its support of the PRC in the Indo-Pacific through greater economic integration between the Russian Far East and non-PRC partners in Asia. These additional economic considerations could complicate Russian decision-making in a dispute between the PRC and another Russian economic partner or regarding PRC actions that generally affect new Russian economic interests.
- The U.S. needs to effectively use and message the Indo-Pacific Strategy as a model for its engagement in region. This model champions each state's sovereignty, fair trade, and the role of regional institutions. While the strategy is not ostensibly against anything, it does seek to preserve the system that Russia and the PRC are seeking to alter.
- The U.S. should visibly engage partners and allies at all levels and expand engagement with countries beyond the military domain. Russia and the PRC engage where the United States does not—both geographically and in various sectors and domains—and the U.S. should not cede the competition in these areas due to inattention.

### *Middle East*

- Since the “Arab Spring,” some Arab leaders have perceived the U.S. as an unreliable partner. This misperception is based on an incorrect understanding of the “Carter Doctrine.” The doctrine pledged U.S. support to defend Arab countries against foreign threats, not to keep ruling regimes in power against the will of their peoples. Given this misperception, Russia has an opportunity to present itself as a reliable partner.
- The U.S. needs to work closely with European allies to address socio-economic and political challenges in the Middle East. Russia and China will continue to be adversaries. Presenting Middle Eastern leaders with a united Western front against Moscow and Beijing will further strengthen U.S. influence and credibility.
- Iran is a major regional power. Since the 1979 revolution, U.S.-Iranian relations have been poor, leaving Iran with two options: Moscow and Beijing. Reaching an agreement on Iran’s nuclear program and then gradually reducing tensions will reduce incentives for Iran to maintain its strategic partnerships with Russia and China.
- Civil wars in Syria and Libya provide Russia opportunities to intervene. The U.S. needs to work with our European allies to end these civil wars.
- Several Middle Eastern countries, particularly oil producers, are much more interested in economic than political reform. However, consistently low oil prices force producers to diversify their economies by introducing measures to encourage foreign investment and empower the private sector. The U.S. should encourage and support these economic reform efforts, particularly in the IT sector.
- The U.S. enjoys “soft power” advantages in the Middle East as members of the political and economic establishments speak English and American movies, TV, and sport are very popular. Washington should seek to expand this positive influence.
- Russia builds civil nuclear reactors in the region, but several states have expressed an interest in renewable energy. The U.S. can help Middle Eastern countries to “go green,” reduce their reliance on fossil fuels, and utilize the region’s solar and wind potential.

### *South Asia*

- The Soviet Union was a key arms supplier to India, aided its embryonic nuclear power program, and used (and Russia continues to use) its UN veto power to block resolutions critical of India, for example on Kashmir. Although the shared ideological-emotional mindset (loosely “anti-colonialism”) has waned in the post-Cold War period, the Soviet legacy continues to provide substantial leverage for contemporary Russian activism in the region, even in the context of a rising China. Furthermore, in a very pragmatic sense, India today is still heavily dependent on Russia for maintenance of its large arsenal of Soviet-era weaponry, a situation that will remain a constant for many years to come.
- From the mid-2010s, Russia softened its antagonistic Cold War relationship with Pakistan to develop select areas of cooperation, such as Russian-Pakistan support for the Taliban in Afghanistan. Both Moscow and Islamabad see their limited collaboration as a

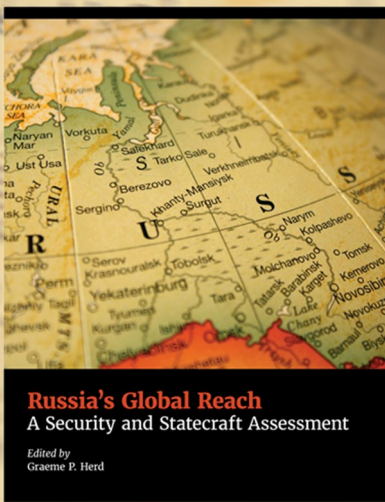
means to reduce American influence in the region while expanding their own, but Pakistan, desperate for outside support, is especially keen to portray any interaction with Russia (even symbolic) as an advantage in its perennial rivalry with India. Russia aims more to depict itself as an alternative to the United States, therefore its growing connections to Pakistan pose challenges to its “traditional” ties with New Delhi.

- Russia resents India’s participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the “Quad”) as Russia understands India’s role as the United States’ “preeminent U.S. partner in the Indo-Pacific” as a dilution of India’s “strategic autonomy” and as shift away from Moscow towards Washington. Close cooperation between India and the U.S. thus represents a potential attack on Russia’s interests and influence. In fact, Indian moves to hedge against or balance China are in some respects a reprise of its role in the Sino-Soviet dynamic during the Cold War, a role that the USSR had endorsed.
- Russia prefers a Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral grouping as it could then hold the balance of power through mediation, promote multi-polarity, and advance non-western if not anti-western global governance norms, institutions, and practices. India, on the other hand, seeks to maintain its policy independence in what it sees as a permanently multipolar world, while finding an equilibrium between the U.S. and Russia that pushes back against China. As part of its hedging against Beijing, New Delhi is thus likely to endeavor to reinforce its ties to Moscow while continuing to expand cooperation with the United States.
- In the current Sino-Indian border confrontation, Russia has pragmatically declined a mediation role due ultimately to its dependence on China, while retaining its position as a key arms supplier to India.
- In South Asia, the breadth and depth of U.S.-India linkages far exceed those of Indo-Russian relations in almost all areas. However, the Russia-India arms relationship will remain in place as a practical lynchpin for the foreseeable future. Moreover, many Indians retain a sentimental attachment to Russia as emblematic of their country’s “strategic autonomy,” while Russia looks to weaken U.S.-India collaboration. Washington will thus continue to face challenges in balancing improving its ties with New Delhi while contending with Russia as a competitor.

### *Africa*

- The United States’ security and economic interests in Africa are best advanced by long-term partnerships with stable, democratic governments. Despite a long history of engagement in Africa, there is a common perception that the United States has not been playing its traditional leadership role on the continent in recent years, creating a vacuum that Russia has tried to fill.
- A first priority is to articulate clearly the shared interests and vision that the United States holds with Africa. In so doing, the United States can underscore that U.S. policy in Africa encompasses far more than simply countering Russia (or China).

- Another priority is to weigh in on Russia’s geo-strategic positioning on the continent, particularly in Libya, where the establishment of a Russian foothold poses a long-term threat to NATO. The U.S. should commit to working with EU and NATO partners to support United Nations-backed stabilization efforts while isolating the influence of rebel warlord, Khalifa Haftar.
- The United States can also enhance its interests by being more diplomatically active in conflict mitigation efforts. By working with host nations and regional bodies, U.S. diplomatic, technical, and financial support can serve as a stabilizing counterweight to Russian destabilization.
- Helping Africa fight Russian disinformation campaigns is another critical vehicle for advancing stability and democracy. These disinformation campaigns aim to foment political and ethnic polarization, distrust, and political instability—to Russia’s advantage. Strengthening the capacity of African governmental and non-governmental fact-checking and digital detective firms to identify fake Russian-sponsored accounts, trolls, and disinformation campaigns can help mitigate these destructive effects.
- U.S. Treasury sanctions on Yevgeny Prigozhin for his destabilizing activities in Sudan and the Central African Republic are useful and should be expanded. The Global Magnitsky Act and the European Magnitsky Act broaden the means to apply such penalties in a coordinated manner in defense of democracy and human rights. The Global Fragility Act includes provisions for punitive actions to be taken against political actors that drive instability. These tools, as well as the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, the Countering American Adversaries through Sanctions Act, and laws pertaining to transnational criminal organizations provide the United States with a menu of legal means of increasing penalties on Russia for its destabilizing activity in Africa.



## Chapter 1

# Understanding Russia's Global Reach

*By Graeme P. Herd*

### *Introduction*

How should we understand Russia's global reach? What are its implications for U.S. interests and those of its friends and allies? Might this understanding translate into effective policy that upholds U.S. interests and values and those of friends and allies, while still avoiding the risks of miscalculation, escalation, and confrontation. If not, which risks are acceptable, when, and why? Russia engages regions differently, with different objectives, approaches, and roles, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. Studying and understanding these differences could provide opportunities for the United States, as well as its friends and allies, to engage with Russia more effectively in each region. Given Russia's official foreign policy narratives justify foreign policy decisions to both domestic and foreign audiences, we should be careful to distinguish between what Russia says, and what Russia does, between words and deeds, rhetoric and reality.

President Barack Obama described Russia as a "regional power in structural decline." Senator John McClain characterized Russia as "a gas station masquerading as a state." As an unevenly developed Great Power, thus far incapable of structural economic reform, Russia aspires to attain more influence internationally than the size its economy suggests is merited. Assessments of Russia's global reach at the start of the Biden administration highlight Russia's global activism and chart its efforts to resist a U.S.-led international order. Assessments of Russian relative strength and traditional measures of power projection also take into account its capacity to build new relations and instruments that damage and dilute the ability of the U.S. to lead a disrupted global order.<sup>1</sup> At best, Russian global activism allows Russia to pose as an alternative partner to the U.S. and balance western influence; at worst, it raises the costs of U.S. leadership. Russia adopts transactional, flexible, adaptable, non-ideological, and asymmetric approaches to Great Power competition: "Moscow boasts an agile and skilled diplomatic establishment and lacks ethical constraints in pursuit of its objectives."<sup>2</sup> For the Biden Administration, and in the context of a Great Power competition, Russia presents a credibility trap: given Russia's combined strengths and fragility, what is the optimum policy balance that upholds the interests and values of the United States and its friends and allies and also constructively shapes Russian strategic behavior, while avoiding the risk of miscalculation and escalation?

---

<sup>1</sup> Kathryn Stoner, "How Much Should We Worry About a Resurrected Russia? More Than You Might Think," *PONARS, Policy Memos*, January 14, 2021, <https://ponarseurasia.org/how-much-should-we-worry-about-a-resurrected-russia-more-than-you-might-think>.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Stronski, "Late to the Party: Russia's Return to Africa," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 16, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/16/late-to-party-russia-s-return-to-africa-pub-80056>.

Though the administration is only months old, certain approaches are already apparent. The Biden administration promises to be more predictable, professional, pragmatic, experienced, and stable than the Trump administration. Atmospherics have certainly changed. The U.S. under President Biden seeks to emphasize multilateral diplomacy (“diplomacy as a tool of first resort”), using force only when counts, and in a sustainable, and proportional way. However, there are continuities between the two administrations. Each prioritize long-term geo-strategic competition with China. Russia, though, is viewed as a major threat, one that seeks to damage U.S. interests and values and that of its friends and allies. Following President Biden’s first phone call to Vladimir Putin, the White House readout reported that President Biden warned that the U.S. would act “firmly in defense of U.S. interests in response to actions by Russia that harm us or our allies.”<sup>3</sup> In President Biden’s first foreign policy speech, he promised to defend and advance democratic values and human rights and to impose costs and consequences on Russian malign activity in defense of U.S. vital interests, in collaboration with friends and allies. William Burns, at his Senate confirmation hearing, noted:

Putin’s Russia continues to demonstrate that declining powers can be just as disruptive as rising ones and can make use of asymmetrical tools, especially cyber tools, to do that. We can’t afford to underestimate them. As long as Vladimir Putin is the leader of Russia, we’re going to be operating within a pretty narrow band of possibilities, from the very sharply competitive to the very nastily adversarial.<sup>4</sup>

How then might we assess the challenge and threat of contemporary Russian statecraft?<sup>5</sup> What is the rationale of Russian actions in a global context? To what extent are the ways and means Russia adopts successfully aligned to achieve its strategic ends? What is the relationship between increased Russian activity and success, between completed actions and outcomes leading to positive impacts that advance Russian national interest? Does increased Russian activity translate into greater influence? Does greater influence enable Russia to achieve its preferred policy outcomes outside the historical perimeter of the 400-year-old Russian empire? Does the external perception of Russian success trump reality or are they aligned?

### ***Going Global: Russia’s “Spatial Imaginaries”***

President Putin has stated that Russian borders do not end anywhere. Russia, though, views and values space, the risks and dangers associated with it, and the functions the different geographies play in Russia’s identity and self-perception. These spatial imaginaries

---

<sup>3</sup> Briefing Room, “Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr., Call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia,” January 26, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/01/26/readout-of-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-call-with-president-vladimir-putin-of-russia/>.

<sup>4</sup> “Biden Nominee to Head CIA Sees Russia as a Potential Threat,” *RFE/RL*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/biden-nominee-to-head-cia-sees-russia-as-potent-threat/31120852.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Mikhail Troitskiy, “Statecraft Overachievement: Sources of Scares in U.S.-Russian Relations,” *PONARS, Policy Memo*, no. 619, October 2019, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/statecraft-overachievement-sources-scares-us-russian-relations>.



provide cognitive frames that filter information and provide meaning for events, while legitimizing particular policy decisions. They play an important role in asserting boundaries between “them” and “us,” and thus constructing and shaping national identities constituted by difference.<sup>6</sup>

The mental maps of Russian elite groups, including strategic decision makers and shapers, increasingly converge, consolidate, and align with Putin’s foreign policy agenda, according to the Survey of Russian Elites (SRE). Influential core makers and shapers of Russian policy and practice ascribe different values, significance, sentiment, emotion, and interest to different strategic spaces. Official narratives and discourses, state-controlled media, and Russian foreign policy doctrines and strategies highlight these differences.

What are these different strategic spaces? Russia constructs and engages with five “spatial imaginaries.” First is Belarus and Ukraine as part of an East Slavic Orthodox foundational core of “one people,” one language, one history, one culture, and one religion. They are “territories of historical Russia,” not independent sovereign states; as such, they constitute the central to core non-negotiable national interest, over which Russia will go to war to prevent loss. Second is the wider hinterland of former Soviet space, over which Russia should have an ordered producing and managerial role, demonstrating that Russia is a center of global power in a multi-polar world order. Hegemonic regionalism reflects Russia’s desire to have a voice and veto in the geographically-contiguous buffer space between Great Powers (Brussels and Beijing) which, more positively, also allows Russia to play the role of “civilizational bridge” through to South and East Asia within the international system. Third, Europe’s function in Russian strategic identity is to validate Russia’s exceptional civilizational identity as a besieged fortress and alternative model. This narrative argues that Europe consists of U.S. vassal states, puppet states incapable of strategic autonomy, and that the puppet master, the United States, is a Great Power. Fourth is the United States. From a Russian perspective, its own nuclear triad gives it parity, equality, and reciprocity with the United States. The U.S. serves as Russia’s strategic benchmark and because of its own Great Power status, the U.S. represents for Russia a “dignified foe.” However, the U.S. economy is twelve times larger than that of Russia; its GDP per capita is five times larger; and it has a larger defense budget and more soft power than Russia. Thus, in reality, Russia is itself too strong to accept U.S. tactical ally status but too weak to be a full-fledged strategic partner. The power-status disparities between Russia and the U.S. and Russia’s perception of the leader-subordinate nature of transatlantic relations makes sense of Russia’s strategic calculus. What then of the fifth imaginary: the wider globe? As only superpowers have global reach, Russian status-based activism and presence evidences its first tier global power.

This book focuses on the last three imaginaries: Europe, the United States, and the wider global context. Russian global activism secures two core foreign policy strategic goals: to be a strategically independent, autonomous actor in the international system and to uphold its exceptional Great Power identity (status, honor, respect, prestige, and equality). Putin came to power in 1999-2000 and assumed a legal-rational (“dictatorship of the rule of law”) legitimation of his political authority. By 2011-2012, a shift was underway, from legal-rational to historical-charismatic (“No Putin, no Russia”) legitimation. By 2020-21, Putin legitimizes his political authority increasingly through national-patriotic mobilization and coercion, and Putin presides over a fully-fledged authoritarian regime and police state.

---

<sup>6</sup> David G. Lewis, “Geopolitical Imaginaries in Russian Foreign Policy: The Evolution of ‘Greater Eurasia,’” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 70:10, (2018): 1612-1637, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09668136.2018.1515348?af=R>.

Core characteristics of the regime can be listed. First is an absence of a rotation of power and lack of any liberal or democratic impulses or even an authoritarian modernization project, i.e., late Putinism lacks a positive agenda. Repression of the opposition and wider civil society is not the same as mobilizing supporters around a compelling vision of the future. Second, the marketing of external and internal threats binds a passive, conformist, indifferent, and apathetic majority of the population to the state to legitimize the regime and keep it safe. Third is the all-pervasive presence of the state, which manifests itself by Praetorian Guard capitalism; an economy marked by low dynamism, reflecting the lack of a law-based state; high levels of raiding; and a disproportionate allocation of resources for prestige state projects.

In an address to a Federal Security Service Board meeting on February 24, 2021, President Putin addressed what he termed the United States’ “so-called containment policy towards Russia.” Attaining these goals—whether in reality or the rhetoric of state-controlled media—legitimizes Russian elite political authority and so justifies their continuity in power. President Putin stated:

This is not competition as a natural part of international relations, but a consistent and highly aggressive policy aimed at disrupting our development, at slowing it down and creating problems along our external perimeter and contour, provoking internal instability, undermining the values that unite Russian society, and ultimately, at weakening Russia and forcing it to accept external management, just as this is happening in some post-Soviet states...<sup>7</sup>

Russia perceives itself as a besieged fortress, surrounded by U.S.-directed external adversaries; those who support the current regime argue that only the continuity of a strong leader in the shape of Putin and the loyalty of a highly professional “new nobility”—the *siloviki*—can protect Russia and safeguard its future. Thus, Russian foreign policy ultimately serves to ensure the continuity of Putin and Putinism.

### ***Five Core Ways and Means***

How does Russia align its ways and means with its strategic goals? What are the principal ways and means? Russia maintains its Great Power strategic relevance through global hotspot engagement. It cultivates the role of neutral mediator and honest power broker, one able to provide a constructive stabilizing presence. It projects itself as alternative partner to the West, the upholder of principles of respect for international law, equality, and non-interference in the internal affairs of states, the peaceful settlement of disputes, and a commitment to multilateral actions. It is a sovereignty and security provider. Russia advances its economic interests to secure political influence. The purpose of the thematic chapters in Section III is to provide a deeper dive on specific tools that Russia can deploy to achieve its strategic ends within a global context.

Russia maintains its Great Power strategic relevance through the exercise of its veto power and spoiler role in global hotspots, leveraging its United Nations Security Council Permanent Five (UNSC P5 status), and on issues of “strategic stability” (nuclear issues) and outer space. Russian interventions project power over choke points in the eastern Mediterranean

---

<sup>7</sup> “Federal Security Service Board meeting,” President of the Russian Federation website, February 24, 2021. Unless otherwise indicated by a web link, all Russian sources are from BBC Monitoring Service.

and Suez (through its new naval base in Sudan) and in Libya and Syria, Russia has the ability to control migration, trafficking, and energy flows. Though Russia is less able to dictate outcomes, it can complicate and threaten the security interests of the U.S. and its friends and allies. Russia demonstrates that direct military intervention to resolve strategic challenges can be swift, effective, and garner international support, not isolation. Russia utilizes force multipliers. It is prepared to take greater risk and this constitutes a strategic advantage over risk-averse adversaries in zero sum contexts. As Putin's political system is highly centralized, this allows for a short and thus fast decision-making cycle; this gives Russia a comparative advantage with adversaries. Proximity to Eurasian hotspots; rapid deployment; UNSC veto; organizational creativity; cheap operational costs; and land grab *fait accompli* with no third-party intervention are also advantages. In purchasing power parity terms, effective military expenditure "is more in the range of \$150–180 billion per year, with a much higher percentage dedicated to procurement, research and development than Western defense budgets.... There is well over 1 trillion rubles of military expenditure in Russia outside of the regular defense budget."<sup>8</sup> Thus, the pursuit of narrow objectives at low cost, utilizing *kompromat* and corruption to suborn politicians, and "active measures" to exert covert influence can make Russia strategically relevant.

Although security politics is the ability to manipulate antagonisms, Russia cultivates a perception of itself as a neutral mediator, an honest power broker, and constructive stabilizing presence. For Russia, the greater the number of players or actors in a given conflict, the more violent and chaotic that conflict becomes, and so the greater the need for mediation. In such cases, Russia can leverage its outsider arbitrator status to become the largest external player and so hold the balance of power and use mediation to build a new status quo. Within conflict states, Russia is able to speak to all sides (incumbents and opposition or "equidistance" policy) and is unhampered by colonial legacies. In Yemen, Moscow works with a Saana-based alliance led by Houthis and a UAE-backed separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) Aden-based group. In the Central African Republic (CAR), Russia has ties to the Bangui-based Touadéra government and the Séléka CPSK-CPJP-UFDR alliance rebels militia group (almost entirely Muslim) in the north of the country. Russia is the only power that speaks to all actors in the Middle East, even those regarded as adversaries: Turkey and the Kurds, Hezbollah and Israel, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as well as Palestine, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, and the United States. In practice, Russia's effective use of coercive mediation in the Middle East and North Africa has a constructive impact on Russian-Chinese relations, helping to rebalance it. We can also identify instances where the lack of a mediated agreement with external actors, such as Japan and the Kurile Islands/Northern Territories, can be used to consolidate domestic support, enhance regime security, and signal globally Russia's Great Power status; Great Powers do not trade their own territory to the strategic ally of its main adversary, in this case, the United States. Russia views U.S. security assistance and cooperation in zero sum terms. India's embrace, for example, of the "Indo-Pacific" and joint exercises as part of the Quad, is designed, from Moscow's perspective, to undermine Russian-Indian ties, rather than balance China.

Russia finds new geopolitical partners through its positioning as a predictable hedge and balancing alternative to the U.S. outside of the Asia-Pacific. Within the Asia-Pacific, Russia poses as an alternative to China for Japan, Vietnam, India, and ASEAN states. More generally, Russia argues that the world needs a strong, strategically-relevant Russia as multi-polarity diffuses bipolar U.S.-China tensions. Russia seeks to translate resultant influence into United

---

<sup>8</sup> Michael Kofman, "Russian Defense Spending Is Much Larger, and More Sustainable than It Seems," *Defense News*, May 3, 2019, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2019/05/03/russian-defense-spending-is-much-larger-and-more-sustainable-than-it-seems/>.

Nations General Assembly (UNGA) votes. Russia is able to develop narratives that appeal to societies and elites and tarnish the idea of democracy and the notion of a U.S.-led liberal international order. President Putin, for example, contrasts Russia's approach to cooperation with Africa to the West's desire to "pressure, frighten and blackmail" African leaders in order to "reap super-profits."<sup>9</sup> Russia celebrates ties with Soviet era allies ("traditional relations"), such as Vietnam and Syria. In the Middle East and North Africa, Russia is the key external player in Syria and Libya. Russia is also in negotiations with Iran. Russia is an urbanized, educated, and technologically advanced country but its quality of governance, based on rent-seeking and corruption, is akin to underdeveloped states in Africa and Latin America. Shared and compatible "bad governance" norms enable Russia to interact flexibly with a range of partners and interlocutors in the international system. "Bad governance" is not a hindrance to forging transactional interest-based relations: it provides an ideal operating environment for the promotion of malign influence and activities. Lastly, oil producers with large sovereign wealth funds can look to invest in Russia in order to diversify their investment portfolio away from over-dependence on Western Europe and the United States.

"There can be no security without Russia" is a Lavrovian theme, if not meme. Russia posits itself as a sovereignty and security provider, as a reliable "bulwark against revolutions" and "champion of counter-revolution," ready to share mutual lessons learned on authoritarian controls and anti-protest measures. "Color revolutions" are considered the core threat to regime stability. Russia is able to provide out-sourcing of risk to non-state or quasi-state actors and local partners who are eager to avoid costly military and economic commitments. Russian-Pakistani support for the Taliban in Afghanistan has a direct impact on U.S. interests, as the "Taliban bounties" active measure attests. These proxy forces can create footholds for Russian enterprises (e.g. *Rosoboronexport*, *Rosatom*, *Rostec*), which can follow through and capitalize on any successes. In return for providing security, Russia gains influence and access to resources, from diamond and gold deposits in the case of CAR and infrastructure and energy in the case of Libya. Russia also promotes security cooperation: Russia has, for example, military and technical cooperation agreements with over thirty countries in Africa. It has renewed its presence in unstable countries and is the largest arms supplier to Africa (35 percent of the total),<sup>10</sup> organizing counter-terrorism training with Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Niger, and Rwanda. Russia perceives security provision as a means of mirroring what it understands to be U.S. Great Power behavior and a means to balance: Venezuela plays the same function of Ukraine in the respective backyards. U.S.-Russian nuclear weapons developments and arms control measures do have implications for Chinese, Indian, and Pakistani approaches to these issues.

Lastly, Russia's global reach seeks to advance Russian economic interests, or more precisely, those in Putin's inner circle who dominate state-owned enterprises where they can privatize profit and pass risk onto the state. The business interests of the core Russian political, economic, and military-security elites (e.g. Aleksandr Bortnikov, Sergey Chemezov, Konstantin Malofeev, Nikolay Patrushev, Sergey Naryshkin, Viktor Zolotov, Igor Sechin, Sergey Shoigu, and Vyacheslav Volodin) allow for corruption, ensure loyalty, and shape Russian interventions

---

<sup>9</sup> "Text of the Official English Translation of President Vladimir Putin's Interview with State-Owned TASS News Agency on the Upcoming Russia-Africa Summit to be Held in Sochi on 23-34 October," *Kremlin.ru website*, in English, October 20, 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61858>.

<sup>10</sup> Jakob Hedenskog, "Russia is Stepping Up its Military Cooperation in Africa," *FOI Memo* 6604, December 2018, accessed April 4, 2021, <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI%20MEMO%206604>.

and power projections. Russia's foreign economic policy strengthens oligarchic capitalism at home. It delays the need for structural economic reform and the potential threats this poses to Russia's elite and their desire for continuity in power. Russia seeks to sanction-proof itself and this calls for alternative partners in new non-western markets. Russian exports to the Middle East, for example, include arms sales, machinery, oil and gas, as well as petrochemical, metallurgical, and agricultural products. The Middle East is also a core destination for Russian grain exports. These exports offset the negative effects of Western-imposed sanctions. Growing digital and artificial intelligence collaboration with China allows for the development of non-Western technology and expertise. Russia's integration into the global financial system through the internationalization of the stock market allows Russian elites to raise capital from foreign investors and legitimize their wealth without improving the local business environment (which would entail a rule of law not rule by law and a reduction of levels of corruption).<sup>11</sup> Russia is also a key player in the global energy nuclear market, accounting for 7 percent of the world's uranium production, including "20% conversion and 45% enrichment of this element, as well as for the construction of 25% of nuclear power plants in the world."<sup>12</sup> Russia is adept at monetizing conflict, able to sell weapons to both sides in the same conflict. In Africa, for instance:

Russia primarily exports the Soviet Union's heritage: our officials are travelling to Africa for old time's sake, plus Russian weapons are actively coming there. Our weapons are competitive goods on the continent; they are quite cheap and reliable. And these arms deliveries, unlike those from the United States, are not burdened, for example, by human rights requirements.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Structure of the Book***

Following this short introduction in Section I of the book, Section II proceeds to provide a cross-regional comparison of how Russia aligns its ways and means to achieve its strategic ends. In this section, each regional chapter adopts the same structure: What are Russia's regional goals and the principal ways and means Russia uses regionally to achieve these ends? What are both the opportunities but also limits and challenges that structure Russia engagement with a given region? This can involve identifying perspectives from within the region of Russia's engagement. What are the implications of the pattern, scale, and scope of Russia's presence and actions for the United States, as well as its friends and allies? Lastly, given this, what recommendations do the authors propose? These recommendations aim to uphold U.S. interests and values, avoid escalation and miscalculation, and be cognizant of the wider implications of Great Power Competition with China.

To these ends, in Chapter 2 Suzanne Loftus addresses Russia's relationship with the United States, its main adversary. In Chapter 3, Pál Dunay examines Russia's relationship with European Great Powers: the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. Chapter 4 benefits from

---

<sup>11</sup> Igor Logvinenko, "Local Control and Worldwide Access: How Russian Elites Have Come to Use the Global Financial System to Defend their Wealth," New Voices on Russia, Video Presentation, Youtube, April 17, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVFyxHy8vzA&list=PLnYhtecpqY0hV3gP0l3itQieQLZhkCj4e&index=11>.

<sup>12</sup> Lyubov Glazunova, "Russia's Nuclear Chain Reaction in Africa," *Riddle*, October 21, 2019, <https://www.riddle.io/en/russia-s-nuclear-chain-reaction-in-africa/>.

<sup>13</sup> Arnold Khachaturov, Anastasia Torop, and Maria Yefimova, "They end up in tropics: Russia returns to Africa with pomp to repeat past mistakes," *Novaya Gazeta*, Moscow, in Russian, October 28, 2019.

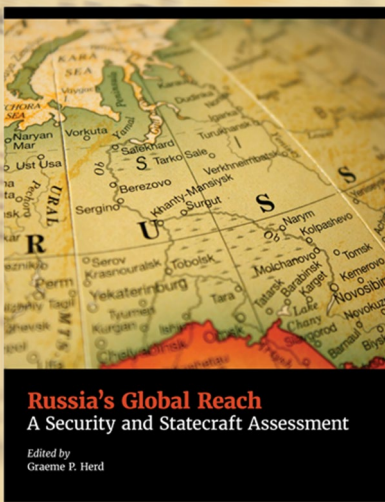
Pavel Baev's insight into Russia's role as a polar Great Power. These three chapters help characterize the nature of Russia's relationship with the institutionalized political West. Fabiana Perera's Chapter 5 examines Russia's relations with Latin and South America. We then leave the Western Hemisphere to enter the Indo-Pacific where Wade Turvold, Michael B. Dorschner, and Michael Burgoyne offer Chapter 6 with its focus on Russia and China, while Chapter 7 addresses Russia and North East Asia, taking into account relations across with the Republic of Korea (Korea), Taiwan, Mongolia, and Japan. Moving westwards, John Gill identifies the core dynamics in Chapter 8 and Russian-South Asia relations, with a focus on Pakistan and India, before Gawdat Bahgat turns our attention in Chapter 9 to Russia and the Middle East. Section II ends with Joseph Siegle's Chapter 10 on Russia in Africa.

Having crossed the globe and compared and contrasted Russian engagement in key regions, we now switch our attention in Section III to analysis of Russia's deployment of power capabilities to achieve its strategic ends. Each of the five chapters in this section demonstrates the utility of the tool and its relationship to Russian strategic goals. We examine how the instrument has evolved over the last two decades—the era of Putin and Putinism—in order to highlight trends. We seek to identify the factors that enable and benefit the use of the tool, and which factors limit its utility, before concluding with recommendations.

In Chapter 11, Pavel Baev addresses the role of Russian nuclear instruments and its approaches to arms control, a dimension of power that places Russia on equal footing with the United States. Pál Dunay proceeds to draw our attention in Chapter 12 to how the structure of Russia's economy shapes Russia's global economic engagement. In Chapter 13, David Lewis highlights Russian diplomacy and its approach to conflict management through its mastery of coercive mediation. The sharp end of coercion is the focus of Chapter 14 by Mark Galeotti. The management of Russia's covert active reach and how such "guerilla geopolitics" supports Russian foreign policy is assessed. The preceding chapters all highlight what Russia does and how it does it. Chapter 15 brings Section III to a close with a survey by Dmitry Gorenburg of Russia's strategic messaging, propaganda, and disinformation efforts.

Section IV consists of one chapter. Chapter 16 takes us back to the introduction and offers a statecraft assessment in light of the findings in the regionally-specific (Sections II) and thematic (Section III) chapters, focusing on the extent to which Russia is able to align its ways and means to best effect to support its strategic goals. In light of this assessment, and given the new administration's unfolding policy toward Russia, what might our collective policy considerations be? These reflections also constitute the Executive Summary.





## Chapter 2

# Russian-U.S. Relations: Towards a New Strategic Relationship

*By Suzanne Loftus*

### **Introduction**

It is impossible to assess the U.S.-Russian relationship without framing it within the current shifts in global power dynamics. Today the balance of military and economic power is shifting to the east in relative terms.<sup>1</sup> For the foreseeable future, China and the United States are likely to remain the global superpowers. However, with a new presidential administration under Joe Biden, some changes can be expected regarding the resurgence of U.S. global leadership and multilateral agreements. The latter includes an extension of the only remaining nuclear arms treaty between the U.S. and Russia which is set to expire in February 2021, which Moscow welcomes. Simultaneously, other power centers will continue to exert influence in specific areas namely the European Union, India, Japan, and Russia and its self-proclaimed sphere of influence. This power balance will mimic a multipolar world order with multiple centers of gravity and balance the formation of any single hegemon from emerging.<sup>2</sup>

As of 2018, the United States National Defense Strategy and National Security Strategy were updated to include Great Power Competition as a priority, listing Russia and China as revisionist actors actively trying to disrupt the U.S.-led international order.<sup>3</sup> After the Russian annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine, and China's island building projects in the South China Sea, U.S. primacy was tested in ways never seen before. For these reasons, the U.S. has had to shift its foreign policy priorities to containing these major powers. Although Russia is not a peer competitor to the United States, it remains of strategic importance due to several reasons. First, it is a nuclear superpower and poses an existential threat. Second, it is endowed with vast natural resources and weaponizes these to achieve political objectives, especially in its near abroad. Third, it has veto power in the United Nations Security Council, which it has not hesitated to exercise when containing U.S. action. Fourth, it possesses a competing vision of global order and due to its military capacity, natural resources, and asymmetric capabilities and strategies, it can project power and influence beyond its border.

Ever since the fall of the Soviet Union, it has been one of Russia's foreign policy priorities to restore itself as a Great Power once it had recovered economically. Russia has had a preoccupation with status ever since the breakup of the USSR. The word used in Russia to describe this phenomenon is *derzhavnost*, "referring to a preoccupation with Great Power status

<sup>1</sup> Gideon Rachman, *Easternization: Asia's Rise and America's Decline from Obama to Trump and Beyond* (New York: Other Press, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Sokolsky and Eugene Rumer, "U.S.-Russian Relations in 2030," *Carnegie Moscow Center*, (June 2020), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/06/15/u.s.-russian-relations-in-2030-pub-82056>.

<sup>3</sup> National Defense Strategy (2017) Washington DC: United States Office of the Secretary of Defense. National Security Strategy (2017) Washington DC: The White House.

regardless of whether it has the military and economic wherewithal.”<sup>4</sup> As part of this sentiment, Russia thus feels entitled to a sphere of influence in its near abroad consisting of the former Soviet states. Russia has repeatedly defended its interests against western efforts at integrating the region into the West exemplified by the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 after it had been made a promise to eventually join NATO at the Bucharest summit that same year. Another example is the Russian annexation of Crimea and support of the separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine in 2014 after the Maidan Revolution broke out because of then President Viktor Yanukovich opting out of an EU trade deal that would have taken the country on a western path. Russia’s actions in these nations demonstrate the length to which it is willing to go to defend its sphere of influence against western incursion due to its self-perception as a sovereign nation with Great Power status.

The relationship between Russia, the United States, and the West at large has been contentious in the last 30 or so years. Many of the issues stem from a fundamental disagreement on the post-Cold War security architecture. After the end of the Cold War, the West expected Russia to join the western community of nations, adopt democratic practices, and take a secondary seat to the U.S. and its allies. Contrarily, Russia sought to “transcend” the existing order and form a new and inclusive security architecture where it would play a primary role alongside the U.S. and its allies.<sup>5</sup> Many defining events took place thereafter, which reinforced Russia’s belief that its voice was not taken into consideration for important security-related decisions. For example, Russia opposed the unilateral U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and disagreed with U.S. support of Color Revolutions in Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005, which was viewed as an American plot to encircle Russia and minimize its influence in its near abroad. Russia was also opposed to any attempt at NATO enlargement to the east. This was especially true when it involved Georgia and Ukraine’s invitations. Though it was part of NATO’s open door policy, Russia saw this as a threat to its national security and to its influence in its near abroad.<sup>6</sup> In addition, NATO membership was not only intended to extend a security umbrella to post-Soviet states, but also to encourage their transition to democracy – which Russia viewed as a threat to its domestic stability. Other foreign policy occurrences that displeased Moscow included the overthrow of the Muammar Qaddafi regime in Libya in 2011. Moscow had abstained from voting in the UNSC resolution understanding that the West only intended to create a no-fly zone in Libya, not engage in regime change. Regime change is Russia’s greatest issue with the U.S. practice of “liberal interventionism” as it trespasses the boundaries of national sovereignty. For those same reasons, it was against Washington’s support for the opposition to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Syria’s ongoing conflict.

When Putin returned to the presidency in 2012 after four years as prime minister, he decided to switch courses and reverse former President Dmitry Medvedev’s efforts to modernize the country, ostensibly to protect the nation against western influence, which according to Putin risked destabilizing the country.<sup>7</sup> Instead, he introduced stricter measures to clamp down on public protests, media freedoms, and NGO activities that rendered the relationship between Russia and the U.S. even more contentious. After the annexation of Crimea and the Russian-

---

<sup>4</sup> Deborah Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, “Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy,” *International Security* 34, (2010): 63-95; 78-79.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Sakwa, *Russia Against the Rest: The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order* (Cambridge: University Press, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> George Robertson, “Secretary General’s Eisenhower Lecture: The Relevance of Atlanticism,” NATO, September 15, 2000, <https://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2000/s000915a.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Suzanne Loftus, *Insecurity and the Rise of Nationalism in Putin’s Russia: Keeper of Traditional Values*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

backed separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine, the relationship plummeted to an all-time low. To make matters worse, Russia was accused of intervening in the U.S. Presidential elections in 2016, supposedly lending a hand to candidate Donald J. Trump.

While there is broad bipartisan consensus and well-documented instances of Russian behavior that sabotaged the U.S.-Russian relationship, there is little chance of improving said relationship without a critical analysis of U.S. behavior towards Russia. For Russia, having NATO as the only legitimate security organization for Europe is a threat to its national security. Similarly, democracy promotion in its near abroad is a threat to its domestic stability. Moreover, western attempts to curb Russian use of energy as a foreign policy tool and limiting its share of the European energy market is a threat to its economic security. To counter these threats, Russia has used aggressive military actions against Georgia and Ukraine, countersanctions against U.S. and European-imposed sanctions, and established alternative institutions to counterbalance the EU and NATO. Russia also employs the use of soft power tactics such as propaganda and disinformation to encourage a pro-Russian perspective around the world. The current confrontation between Russia and the U.S. can be described as a hybrid conflict as it is not a “hot war” but more of an asymmetric war in the realms of information, the economy, finance, and technology. It must be noted however, that over the past five years, Washington has been unsuccessful at forcing Moscow to change its course of action in the desirable direction.<sup>8</sup>

In order to achieve its goals, Russia has: intervened to demonstrate geopolitical centrality in its near abroad, acted as a mediator and arbitrator in the MENA region, established its own “unique form” of governance at home, provided security guarantees to neighboring countries, advanced its economic interests in various parts of the world, and has engaged in malign behavior such as cyber-attacks and the dissemination of propaganda to sow division among western allies. These actions have had repercussions in the transatlantic community and have exacerbated pre-existing divisions and threat perceptions among allies. In addition, western sanctions on Russia have pushed it to partner further with China, which could prove to be a dangerous alliance if it ever comes to fruition. This chapter elaborates on the main points above and concludes with recommendations on how to approach Russia to avoid the further weakening of the West, further relative gains by Russia, and a growing Russo-Chinese relationship.

### ***Ways and Means for Russia to Achieve its Goals***

Russia’s use of soft power has proven to be quite effective at sowing discord in the West. Moscow has substantially invested in its global news agencies RT and Sputnik, both of which have a large international presence and highlight alternative perspectives on international matters. Russia’s message advocates for national, economic, and cultural sovereignty. It is anti-American, anti-NATO, and rejects excessive multilateralism. This is convincing for many anti-globalization movements. RT and Sputnik tend to exhibit western hypocrisies such as instances of racism and social violence, social inequality in the United States, and the failures of the European Union to integrate migrants. In addition, they encourage dissidents of western society that do not have an equal voice to the mainstream narrative to voice their opinions. RT has increased its budget from 30 million USD in 2005 to 300 million USD in 2015, approaching the BBC’s budget of 375 million USD, which is the largest news agency in the world.<sup>9</sup> Sputnik, another Russian news agency, is developing a similar strategy on social media. “Russia Beyond

---

<sup>8</sup> Dmitry Trenin, “U.S. Elections and Russia-U.S. Relations,” *Russia in Global Affairs* no.1, (March 2020), <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/us-elections-russia-us-relations/>.

<sup>9</sup> Simon Shuster, “Inside Putin’s On Air Machine,” *Time*, March 5, 2015, <https://time.com/rt-putin/>.

the Headlines” is now included in many respectable newspapers in more than 20 countries including the *Washington Post*, the *Daily Telegraph*, *Le Figaro*, and *La Repubblica*.

This narrative plays to the populist narrative in Europe by underlining the failures of European integration and the loss of sovereignty that result from supranational institutions as well as a continent too submissive to U.S. interests. Moscow plays on the issues of national identity and immigration by underlining the failures of multiculturalism and calling for the protection of European white and Christian identity against an invasion of migrants. The world is changing as demonstrated by trends in European and American elections and the negative rap that globalization has been receiving. Russia’s message therefore has a significant impact on those that have lost out during the processes of globalization. The U.S. is facing polarizing domestic political problems related to identity and immigration, which Russia uses to its advantage by spreading propaganda and sowing discord. A troll farm in St. Petersburg was accused of collaborating with Cambridge Analytica in the creation of fake social media accounts made for influencing U.S. voters to vote for candidate Donald Trump by emphasizing issues such as immigration, the evils of globalization, and the loss of American identity and values.<sup>10</sup> Robert Mueller, the special counsel investigating Russian interference (“Russiagate”), indicted thirteen Russians and the St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency over that illegal effort.<sup>11</sup>

Russia’s historical business deals with Europe are also one of its greatest strengths and can work as leverage. Europe is known to get much of its energy needs from Russia. One of Russia’s greatest business partners is Germany. The fact that Germany remains willing to go forward with the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline in spite of having imposed sanctions on Russia after its annexation of Crimea demonstrates the importance of energy ties between the two. Many countries in Eastern Europe are also dependent on Russian energy, and though the West has attempted to diversify its energy sources, a large percentage of gas coming into Europe comes from Russia. In 2017, thirty-nine percent of the EU’s total gas imports came from Russia.<sup>12</sup> The construction of Nord Stream 2 will only increase Russian gas exports to Europe. The U.S. issued critical statements against the project and considers it a threat to the market position of American Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG). President Donald Trump approved American sanctions against companies involved with the construction of the pipeline, which led to the Swiss company Allseas, who places the pipes on the seabed, to pull immediately out of the project.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the construction of the pipeline will continue, and Russia hopes to have it running by the end of this year. By reaching bilateral agreements with business and political elites in different European countries, Russia can manage to keep its influence in these regions and possibly influence political decision-making at a higher level. As European countries and Americans disagree on how to deal with Russia, this undermines European solidarity and transatlantic solidarity – which ultimately translates into the weakening of American supremacy over the continent.

Russia’s involvement in Syria has been another occurrence, which undermined U.S. supremacy. The U.S. imposed “red lines” on Bashar al-Assad in 2014 as a warning against the

---

<sup>10</sup> Justin Hendrix, “Did Cambridge Analytica Leverage Russian Disinformation for Trump?” *Just Security*, March 21, 2018, <https://www.justsecurity.org/54142/cambridge-analytica-leverage-russian-disinformation-trump/>.

<sup>11</sup> Adrian Chen, “What Mueller’s Indictment Reveals About Russia’s Internet Research Agency,” February 17, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/what-muellers-indictment-reveals-about-russias-internet-research-agency>.

<sup>12</sup> “EU Imports of Energy Products - Recent Developments,” Eurostat, July 4, 2018, 3–4.

<sup>13</sup> Amund Trellovik, “Russian Gas Increasingly Important to Europe Published,” *High North News*, January 07, 2020, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russian-gas-increasingly-important-europe>.



use of chemical weapons, but even after his use of these on his own citizens, the U.S. did not go through with them. This was a critical moment, as Putin saw an opportunity to support a similar regime and extend Russia's influence. The U.S. was seeking to limit its own involvement in the region due to the unpopularity of interventionism and expected that if Russia got involved it would create an incentive for Moscow to help settle conflict with free elections. What happened instead was the survival of Assad's regime, room for increased Iranian influence, and far more influx of refugees into Jordan, Turkey and Europe.<sup>14</sup> Russia's involvement in this conflict would have been far less pronounced if the U.S. was not looking to decrease its influence in the Middle East – something it has been forced to do due to its domestic constituency and a re-prioritization of its foreign policy. As a nation-state that operates within the Realist framework of International Relations, Russia knew this and seized the opportunity.

The Ukraine Crisis was another very symbolic occurrence. Russia asserted its foreign policy priorities, which include maintaining its sphere of influence outside of western influence and defied international law to ensure it. The interesting point to dissect is the response from the West. Unlike the imposition of sanctions on Iran or North Korea, the West did not impose itself on Russia in the same capacity, leading to the assumption that the outcome may simply have produced too much of a loss for all parties. In addition, the West demonstrated that it was not willing to go to war with Russia over Ukraine, as it similarly demonstrated in Georgia in 2008. Although the western-imposed sanctions against Russia do act as punitive measures, ultimately Russia did not change its behavior, so the desired outcome of the sanctions has not been achieved. In this way, Russia knows what it can and cannot get away with due its Realist thinking of geopolitics. Russia is especially skilled at playing a weak hand in the most effective way possible to achieve gains.

### ***Implications of the U.S.-Russian Relationship for Friends and Allies***

Russia's actions continue to exacerbate pre-existing tensions and differences within the U.S. and between the U.S. and its European allies. In addition, raised tensions between the East and the West are complicating the Western Balkans accession into western institutions. As Chinese and Russian influence increases in the region, Balkan nations are finding themselves more and more disconcerted with what appears to be a lack of western effort to integrate the region.

The United States' unipolar moment is passing as its allies are struggling to maintain cohesion and as the international system has been experiencing a rebalancing of global power distribution. For the United States, Russian activism will continue to represent hostility to the U.S.-led international order and adherence to democratic norms. Russia is likely to continue down its current path in terms of both foreign policy and domestic policy whether or not Putin remains in power.<sup>15</sup> This is primarily due to noticeable post-Cold War domestic and foreign policy trends witnessed in Russia that have gained popular support. The population has generally favored a "special form of democracy" and a foreign policy that asserts Russian interests as a Great Power that balances U.S. hegemony.<sup>16</sup>

The erosion of transatlantic ties and U.S. influence in Europe can be explained through shifting priorities for the United States, an antagonistic relationship between Trump and

---

<sup>14</sup> Victoria Nuland, "Pinning Down Putin: How a Confident America Should Deal with Russia," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August (2020): 93-107.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Goble, "Russia: Analysis From Washington—Primakov's Nineteenth Century Model," *RFE/RL*, August 9, 1998, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1089195.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Balmforth, "Levada Center, Russia's Most Respected Pollster, Fears Closure," *Radio Free Europe*, May 21, 2013, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-levada-center-foreign-agent/24992729.html>.

European leaders based on differences in leadership style and values, as well as changing political dynamics in Europe that Russia has been able to exploit to sow discord. President Trump has recently ordered the removal of 12,000 troops from Germany, which is extremely symbolic as it demonstrates that the U.S. commitment to Germany is not guaranteed unless Germany willingly pays two percent of its GDP towards defense spending, which it does not seem to prioritize either.<sup>17</sup>

After Russia's involvement in the 2016 presidential elections, the U.S. toughened sanctions against Russia. The EU said this move would cause upheaval in Europe's energy market – but the bloc remained divided with central European countries more willing to limit the bloc's dependence on Russian oil and gas. The new sanctions affect Europe because they include sanctions on any company that contributes to the development, maintenance, or modernization of Russia's energy export pipelines. This would affect all those working with the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which will carry another fifty-five billion cubic meters of natural gas per year. The EU expressed frustration that these sanctions did not take EU concerns into account, therefore demonstrating a lack of unity towards Russia and a lack of transatlantic solidarity in this area.

The United States and its Western European allies are experiencing more and more divisions on threat perception and how to look at Russia. The U.S. and Eastern Europe remain on good terms for this reason, namely with Poland. But Poland and the EU are now experiencing more tense relations than ever before due to the disintegration of democratic values in Poland in the judiciary. Eastern Europe tends to view Russia as a potential aggressor and wants reinforcement on the eastern flank for protection. The rest of the continent prioritizes other security matters such as immigration and does not view Russia as a threat, undermining the possibility of a long-term unified policy coordination among allies.

The United States views Russia as revisionist, but the fact that many U.S. allies are inclined to continue to work with Russia shows that there may be some differences in worldviews. In fact, if we look more broadly, internationally an anti-hegemonic alliance supports Russian perceptions. A vast amount of developing countries agree with Russia's and China's views on sovereignty and non-interference in world affairs and have a dislike for the liberal interventionist, often militaristic, approach to U.S. foreign policy.<sup>18</sup> Increasingly, developing countries are doing business with China, as China's approach does not include the need for political or social reforms but a more direct approach to infrastructure development. This in turn increases China's influence in many parts of the world where the West now has to compete for influence. China's Belt and Road Initiative has extended its reach significantly in many parts of the world.<sup>19</sup>

Eastern European nations including the Greater Balkans are unwilling to return to Russia's sphere of influence but unable to integrate into NATO due to vague promises from the former. The cost of opening NATO's door to Europe's East has risen dramatically. With the alliance focused on the adversarial relationship with Russia, the prospects of membership for Georgia and Ukraine appear uncertain at best.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Julian Borger, "US to Pull 12,000 Troops out of Germany as Trump Blasts 'Delinquent' Berlin," *The Guardian*, July 29, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jul/29/us-germany-troop-withdrawal-donald-trump>.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Harris, "Losing the International Order: Westphalia, Liberalism and Current World Crises," *The National Interest*, November 10, 2015, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/losing-the-international-order-westphalia-liberalism-current-14298>.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Chatzky and James McBride, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 28, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

<sup>20</sup> Trenin, "U.S. Elections."



## ***Opportunities, Challenges, and Recommendations***

Preventing a military confrontation between Russia and the United States is obviously the most important consideration for any U.S. administration. More importantly though, a more cooperative relationship between the two would enhance both countries' national security and global security as a whole. Though the two nations fundamentally disagree on important security-related matters, there are many areas of potential cooperation. However, unlike the previous administration, the Biden Administration has affirmed its commitment to stand firmly in defense of its national interests in response to malign actions by Russia that harm the U.S. or its allies.<sup>21</sup>

Preventing further nuclear proliferation is one area in which the U.S. and its allies could resume working together on their Iran and North Korea policies and include Russia to be a constructive contributor. Combating transnational threats from terrorism to criminal organizations is another. In addition, resolving long-standing conflicts on the Korean peninsula, Afghanistan, Syria, and Ukraine would only be possible with U.S. and Russian cooperation and willingness to negotiate. Also, the two can find ways to avoid escalation of tensions in cyberspace and in outer space and together restrain the growth of Chinese influence.<sup>22</sup>

The U.S. and the EU could use the removal of sanctions as leverage for Russia to stop its malign activities. If Russia agrees to end its attacks on democracies and be an honest negotiator in arms control agreements, the Ukraine crisis, and Syria, the West could offer Russia a few attractive exchanges such as an alternative to its growing dependence on China in the form of reduced trade barriers. Also, NATO and Russia could form a new partnership by engaging in joint military exercises for accident prevention and emergency responses.<sup>23</sup>

We are likely to continue seeing a contentious relationship between Russia and the U.S. in the coming decade as both countries will continue to grapple with their profound differences in interests, values, and conceptions of global order. In addition, each of the countries' domestic situation as well as the global geopolitical power dynamics will affect their foreign policy choices. The American public is skeptical of U.S. military interventionism and tired of bearing much of the burden for solving global problems.<sup>24</sup> The U.S. will have to adapt to these important changing realities along with the added geopolitical power distribution, which adds another level of constraint. The U.S. will have to prioritize its security concerns, as it will not be able to extend its presence in areas that are not of vital interest. The U.S. may simply not have the interest nor the resources to lessen Russian influence in many of the countries in Russia's neighborhood.

The same logic applies to Russia. Russia wants to regain Great Power status but is having trouble matching its economic strength with its foreign policy aspirations. Russia will have to re-prioritize the country's internal development on the economic and technological fronts. The collapse of the Soviet Union provides a very valuable lesson for Russia today to focus more on the economy, social policies, and public sentiment.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Kevin Liptak, "Biden confronts Putin over several issues in first call, White House says." *CNN*, January 26, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Eugene Rumer and Richard Sokolsky, "Thirty Years of U.S. Policy Toward Russia: Can the Vicious Circle Be Broken?" *Carnegie Moscow Center*, June 20, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/06/20/thirty-years-of-u-s-policy-toward-russia-can-vicious-circle-be-broken-pub-79323>.

<sup>23</sup> Nuland, "Pinning Down," 93-107.

<sup>24</sup> Mira Rapp-Hooper and Rebecca Friedman Lissner, "The Open World: What America Can Achieve After Trump," *Foreign Affairs*, April 16, (2019), <https://www.cfr.org/node/220394>. "Public Is Narrowly Divided on Whether the U.S. Should Be Active in World Affairs," Pew Research Center, April 2, 2019, [https://www.people-press.org/2019/04/02/large-majorities-in-both-parties-say-nato-is-good-for-the-u-s/pp\\_2019-04-02\\_nato\\_0-02-2/](https://www.people-press.org/2019/04/02/large-majorities-in-both-parties-say-nato-is-good-for-the-u-s/pp_2019-04-02_nato_0-02-2/).

<sup>25</sup> Trenin, "U.S. Elections."

A fundamental distrust in the other continues to shape perceptions and foreign policy decision-making on both sides. While the U.S. views Russia as a “revisionist state” that seeks to change or disrupt the current U.S.-led liberal world order, Russia tends to view the U.S. as being hegemonic and adhering too strictly to one world view while not encouraging a world shared by multiple powers with different world views.<sup>26</sup> It is important to note however, that outside of the Washington political and media circles, the perception of Russia as a hostile country is less poignant. In the U.S. intellectual community, a revision of foreign policy values is well underway. There have been some fundamental critiques of liberal interventionism and militarism as distinguishing features of U.S. foreign policy of the past few decades. The idea behind this research is to pave a new way forward that would match new global realities. However, these tendencies are not yet mainstream – but their existence is telling.<sup>27</sup>

Nation states are gaining more strength amid waning influence of the global institutions created by the U.S.-led *Pax Americana* system. And Russia’s challenge to the U.S. fits in well with this current trend. The U.S. needs to prioritize where it chooses to spend its resources militarily and economically. Washington and Moscow should work on carefully managing their strategic competition, reduce the risk of direct military confrontation, and seek cooperation in areas of mutual interests. Moreover, as global circumstances change, it may be advisable to stay open-minded about the possibility of a rapprochement, so as not to strengthen China too much. Trust is essential to restore the relationship. The U.S. and Russia need to restore strategic high-level dialogue and build mutual security in the Euro-Atlantic region.

---

<sup>26</sup> Harris, “Losing.”

<sup>27</sup> Trenin, “U.S. Elections.”



## Chapter 3

# Russia and European Great Powers: France, Germany, and the United Kingdom

By Pál Dunay

### ***Introduction: Russian Strategic Ends***

Undeniably, the Russian Federation is a Great Power and European in its self-identity. Although the larger part of its territory is in Asia, behind the Ural-mountains, eighty percent of its population lives in Europe; its capital, be it St. Petersburg or Moscow, has always been in Europe. The subjective perception of the Russian people is also European. Hence, Russia is a European Great Power. It is more difficult to tell which other states are Great Powers in Europe. This chapter arbitrarily identifies the other European Great Powers as the so-called Europe of the three, France, Germany, and the UK. It keeps the three other large and influential members of the EU – Italy, Spain, and Poland out of consideration, though we can note that Italy is largely supportive of Russia while Poland is historically hostile.

Russia's strategic objectives are easy to understand with respect to the major western European powers: to create favorable conditions for Russian foreign and economic policy. However, due to the relative and changing distribution of power in the international system, this is achieved by different means. In the 1990s Russia focused more on joint cooperative projects, building on shared interest, but in the 2000s and especially after 2007, Russia undertook concerted and coordinated efforts to weaken these key European states and divide the Euro-Atlantic world while increasing its own power.

### ***Russian Ways and Means to Achieve its Goals***

If pre-1945 history makes limited contribution to understanding the foundations of relations, it is better to focus on post-World War II history. During the Cold War, the mere fact that the three states were democracies and belonged to NATO made them Moscow's adversaries both ideologically, politically, and militarily. However, this varied as time elapsed. France was regarded a country that did not fully integrate in NATO after 1966 and hence could be regarded as a preferred partner, whereas (the Federal Republic of) Germany, following the inception of the Brandt government and the launch of *Ostpolitik* in 1969, was the best of the three in Moscow. The UK always lagged behind the other two.

However, as Russia instrumentalizes history for retroactive legitimization and manipulation more than many other states, it is difficult to regard written history as a reflection of objective reality.<sup>1</sup> The Russian argument that the country is surrounded by adversarial forces that want to undermine it is used for patriotic mobilization. However, the current adversarial

---

<sup>1</sup> Russia is reluctant to face the dark sides of its history and rejects that it ever committed aggression. See "Russia-Poland row over start of WW2 escalates," *BBC News*, December 31, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50955273>.

feelings towards the three western European Great Powers are akin to Soviet levels and compares to attitudes Russia projects towards the United States. When we assess the Soviet legacy, the popular 1990s saying in Moscow that nothing is so uncertain as our past is apposite.

The country, disillusioned by democratic failure, absence of good governance, social tensions, and dismal economic situation was low hanging fruit to grab by forces that were ready to fix some of those problems, or at least promised to. The claim to be recognized as a Great Power did not fit into a concept and were not adequately backed by wide-ranging power.

Vladimir Putin “inherited” a country from Boris Yeltsin with a turbulent decade behind it and a weaker international standing than the new president’s role model, the Soviet Union. It is difficult to accept a new status, be it far more powerful or weaker. The change of status is a challenge in itself. When a state gains in strength it may enjoy popular support for its achievement, however adaptation is challenging as the state may perceive no limit and may not assess its situation realistically.

During the twenty years of the Putin-era the Russian Federation adopted four foreign policy concepts concerning the main western European partners of the country. Even though such public documents have their own limitations, there is one noticeable difference between them. The document adopted in 2000 mentioned four “influential European states”: Britain, Germany, Italy, and France “that represent an important resource for Russia’s defense of its national interests in European and world affairs, and for the stabilization and growth of the Russian economy.”<sup>2</sup> In the next concept of 2008, the number of specifically mentioned European countries increased to eight. The UK no longer appeared among them and got a very reserved note: “Russia would like the potential for interaction with Great Britain to be used along the same lines.”<sup>3</sup> Such a differentiation must have been due to the UK’s generally pro-U.S. stance, its participation in Operation Iraqi Freedom of 2003, and last but not least, the Litvinenko affair in 2006. The two concepts of the 2010s represented some change in the formulation though not in the spirit: “Boosting mutually beneficial bilateral relations with Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and other European states is a considerable resource for advancing Russia’s national interests in European and world affairs, as well as for putting the Russian economy on the innovative development track. Russia would like the potential of interaction with the UK to be used similarly.”<sup>4</sup> The foreign policy concept adopted in 2016 differs from the previous one, stating: “Stepping up mutually beneficial bilateral ties with the Federal Republic of Germany, the French Republic, the Italian Republic, the Kingdom of Spain and other European countries has substantial potential in terms of promoting Russia’s national interests in European and world affairs.”<sup>5</sup> The UK retained its status as a prodigal son in Europe, and was not even mentioned by name.

The relations between some European Great Powers and the Russian Federation continued to oscillate dependent upon a few matters: conflicts over the political status quo in

---

<sup>2</sup> The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, approved, Regional Priorities, accessed July 27, 2020, <https://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/doctrine/econcept.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, January 12, 2008, IV, Regional Priorities, accessed July 27, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/4116>.

<sup>4</sup> Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation approved by President of the Russian Federation V. Putin on 12 February 2013, point 60, accessed July 27, 2020, [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/122186](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/122186).

<sup>5</sup> Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation: approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016, point 66, accessed July 27, 2020, [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248).

Europe, conflicts related to Russia's perceived sphere of influence (originally confined to the area of the former Soviet Union later extended beyond it), and Russian efforts to interfere with developments beyond its sphere of influence, including with effect upon European Great Powers.

The Russian Federation, as long as it did not empower itself and started to influence the political status quo in its own favor, strongly insisted that other players respect the status quo. It presents a problem however, that the status quo changes constantly due to domestic developments, the will of peoples, and states. Until 2013, NATO enlargement was at the center of Russian objections as an adverse change of political status quo. It was only then that Russia hesitantly started to object to EU enlargement at least as far as the aspiration of both former Soviet states and those in the western Balkans. Whereas in case of NATO enlargement, Russia always saw the hands of the United States, in the case of the EU, that would have been impossible to argue. The objection to EU enlargement appeared later and less forcefully. However, there is a fundamental disagreement between the approach of the Russian Federation and that of western countries, including the three European Great Powers. The West attributes such a change to the will and determination of those states that want to join NATO (or the EU) by pointing to their free will and documents in which this is enshrined, which are also signed by Moscow.<sup>6</sup> Russia believes that the member-states of the alliance want to absorb new members in order to change the status quo to the detriment of Russia. Tension and antagonism emerged in 1996 when NATO's enlargement became an agenda item.

Although it is also related to the previous matter, the Russian Federation was always neuralgic whenever any western actor appeared in the so-called post-Soviet space. It regarded the post-Soviet space as an area of privileged interests where other actors should not be actively present. Even so far as steps offering some status in western organizations was objectionable. Memorably, President Putin strongly objected to the involvement of Georgia and Ukraine in the so-called membership action plan at the NATO summit of 2008 in Bucharest.<sup>7</sup> In spite of the fact that the alliance remained divided on the matter, and short of consensus, there was no realistic chance to extend the program to the two former Soviet republics, this was regarded as a direct threat to Russia's *primus inter pares* position.

### ***Perceptions, Opportunities, and Challenges***

Germany, France, and several other NATO member-states did not want to provoke Russia, and so, with some exaggeration, adopted the position of "Russia firsters."<sup>8</sup> The NATO aspiration of Georgia was followed by war between Tbilisi and Moscow and resulted in declaring Abkhazia

---

<sup>6</sup> "We reaffirm the inherent right of each and every participating State to be free to choose or change its security arrangements, including treaties of alliance, as they evolve. Each participating State will respect the rights of all others in this regard." Lisbon Declaration on a common and comprehensive security model for Europe for the twenty-first century, point 7. OSCE Lisbon Summit, 1996, Lisbon Document, accessed July 25 2020, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/1/0/39539.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> The full text of the Russian president's speech at the NATO – Russia Council meeting following the NATO summit meeting in Bucharest in April 2008 is not available. However, a summary by a Ukrainian news agency clearly states: "Russia's pro-Kremlin mass media lauded the recent NATO decision in Bucharest to delay issuing Membership Action Plans (MAPs) to Ukraine and Georgia, hailing it as a victory", Text of Putin's speech at NATO summit (Bucharest, 2 April 2008), April 18, 2008, <https://www.unian.info/world/110340-analysis-russia-prepares-for-lengthy-battle-over-ukraine.html>.

<sup>8</sup> The term "Russia firsters" dates back to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Clinton administration. Following the end of 1991 some experts on the Soviet Union were of the view that the post-Soviet space should be seen through the interests of Moscow. The best-known American who belonged to this category was Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott.



and South Ossetia as independent states. Although the change has only been recognized by a few proxies of Russia, the change of the status quo holds. France, as the EU's presidency country, and Nicolas Sarkozy, the country's president, largely contributed to conflict termination and agreement upon a cease-fire between the parties that was appreciated by Russia. The reaction of the EU remained measured among others due to the so-called Tagliavini report that attributed the beginning of hostilities to Georgia although following massive and serial provocations by Russia. With this, EU Europe returned to engagement with Russia under the assumption that this was a detour rather than the reflection of a new era in Russian politics. This matter also divided the three western European Great Powers. Germany and France were more willing to accept that Russia was provoked by Georgia and its approach to NATO while the UK went with those states, including the U.S. and Poland, that attributed lastingly aggressive intentions to Russia and a strong will to establish itself as a regional hegemon.

Russia's number one trading partner is the European Union and remained so following Brexit. The total value of the trade in goods between the twenty-eight members of the EU and the Russian Federation was €232 billion with a surplus of €57 billion on the side of Russia.<sup>9</sup> The surplus is essential for Russia as this large amount can be used freely according to the country's priorities. Russia is trading overall ten times more with the EU than it does with the United States.<sup>10</sup> It is a high-volume interdependent relationship that maintains Russia's engagement in Europe. Among the EU member-states in 2019, Germany was the number one trade partner of Russia in both imports and exports, whereas France was sixth in Russian imports and fifth in Russian exports, while the UK ranked just ahead of France during its last year in the EU.<sup>11</sup> Total trade is down from 2012 when it reached €322 billion. Russia is glad to portray this as a consequence of western economic sanctions. However, nothing could be further from the truth. First of all, the massive decline of the price of oil plays a much larger role in this. When oil represents a large share in Russian exports it makes a major difference whether a barrel of crude oil is USD \$147, \$35, or \$60. Furthermore, the Russian so-called counter-sanctions reduced trade turn-over significantly. Compared with this, the value of U.S. imports was USD \$22.28 billion and exports USD \$5.79 billion, i.e., the total trade in goods equaled USD \$28.07 billion. If we look at investment, again the high level of interconnection is noticeable between EU Europe and Russia. The number of German, French, and UK companies present in Russia has declined since the beginning of Russian aggression, in the case of Germany from 5,700 in 2013, to a bit more than 4,000 in 2019, while the number of French companies is approximately 500. The contraction of investment (and the accompanying constraints on access to high technology) hurts Russia far more than the trade sanctions.

More recently, the Nord Stream and Nord Stream 2 gas pipelines have created problems in transatlantic relations. It is a sufficiently complex matter with a variety of intersecting economic and political interests. If we create a structure separating various actors and their

---

<sup>9</sup> European Commission, "Countries and Regions: Russia," April 22, 2020, accessed July 24, 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/russia/>.

<sup>10</sup> "Volume of U.S. import of trade goods from Russia from 1992 to 2019," accessed July 25, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/187732/volume-of-us-imports-of-trade-goods-from-russia-since-1992/> and "Volume of U.S. export of trade goods to Russia from 1992 to 2019," accessed July 25, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/186567/volume-of-us-exports-of-trade-goods-to-russia-since-1992/>.

<sup>11</sup> "Eurostat, Russia – EU international trade in goods statistics," March 2020, accessed July 25, 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Russia-EU\\_%E2%80%933\\_international\\_trade\\_in\\_goods\\_statistics#Trade\\_with\\_Russia\\_by\\_Member\\_State](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Russia-EU_%E2%80%933_international_trade_in_goods_statistics#Trade_with_Russia_by_Member_State) and Daniel Workman, "Russia's Top Trading Partners, March 16, 2020," accessed July 25, 2020, <http://www.worldstopexports.com/russias-top-import-partners/>.

interests and also differentiate between genuine interests and discursive messages it may be easier to summarize the complex case.

The main actors are the Russian Federation, which would like to sell more gas to Europe at a competitive price, and Germany, which knows that gas will remain a major component of the so-called energy mirror. (Germany seeks to break its dependence on both coal and nuclear energy in the next decade or two.) Other European states may also benefit from an alternative and complementary source of supply by growing access to gas. This contributes to security of supply.

There are states that have contrary interests, for example states that would like to sell gas from their own territory and have concluded that their gas supply will not be competitive, including, among others, the United States. There are states that do not want to lose (partially or fully) the transit fee they benefit from (irrespective whether they are willing to purchase Russian gas in the future or not). Poland is in the latter category, not wanting to buy Russian gas but glad to realize income from the transit fee and has regularly complained it was too low. The total transit fee following a new agreement between *Gazprom* and Poland in May 2020 is not clear although the capacity of the Yamal pipeline of 32bcm is only partly booked.

When we look beyond the above, we see various attempts to support the counter-interests by ideological consideration, unfounded fear, and so-called “factoids.” Ideological considerations include the securitization of the matter by emphasizing that with growing dependence of Western Europe on Russian, gas supply from the former will depend upon the latter. I do not intend to speculate whether Russia would be willing to create dependency or not. I prefer focusing on facts and raise the question: Can Russia create such dependence or not? My response is in the negative for the following reasons. First, the world’s gas market has changed. It is nearly as global as the oil market. As Europe has an abundant number of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) terminals and an increasingly dense network of so-called interconnectors, it is largely impossible to create a monopolistic dependency that can be used for blackmail. Second, Russia enjoys a significant trade surplus in its relations with the EU, primarily due to oil and gas exports.<sup>12</sup> Third, the share of Russian gas in German imports may create interdependence, but hardly a dependent situation bearing in mind Russia’s import needs, reliance on German investment, and in many areas, access to western technology.

The investment is significantly delayed due to a variety of problems. Legal concerns in the European Union ended up reducing *Gazprom*’s share in the company that realizes the investment to fifty percent so that it would not have majority stake in the company. It took the Danish authorities three years to give permission for the pipeline to cross its territorial waters. The U.S. introduced sanctions against companies that participate in the investment. At that juncture one of the partners, a company registered in Switzerland withdrew from the project due to the following factors: most of its services have already been paid and hence the financial loss it suffered was affordable, it was a publicly-traded company registered on the New York Stock Exchange, and understandably wanted to avoid suffering a decrease in its share value. The technology to fill in the gap thus required further technological development of the Russian pipe-laying ship (*Akademik Cherskiy*). Overall, the delay may be unpredictably long, especially if no company is ready to certify the pipeline when it is completed due to their fear of so-called secondary sanctions.

---

<sup>12</sup> In the value of the total export of goods, Russian oil and gas represent approximately thirty-eight percent (twenty-six and twelve percent, respectively). See TradingEconomics, accessed July 25, 2020, <https://tradingeconomics.com/russia/exports>.



The consequence of this situation means that Russia will have to increase its transit through Ukrainian territory that provides Kyiv with economic benefits under the transit agreement achieved between the two states in the last minutes of 2019 (facilitated by the EU). There is a looming danger that the U.S. would introduce sanctions on anyone buying gas from Nord Stream 2. It remains to be seen whether there is a perceived U.S. interest to further alienate its European allies, (and not only Germany) or if Washington will stop short of such an abrupt step. Germany kept a low profile in the matter waiting for a favorable change in Washington and the EU reforms to norms that do not support secondary sanctions. It is difficult to imagine that Germany and the EU as a whole would support U.S. policies in areas, which are high on the priority list of the latter. The Biden administration continues U.S. opposition to Nord Stream 2, and the Navalny case increases pressure for further sanctions.

Attributing economic problems to western sanctions aims to generate the rally around the flag effect in Russia. In fact, it worked for some time, for around four years, until 2018. It was then that a larger part of the population noticed Russia's "*aggrandizement*" aspirations come with a price tag and that is paid by the people.

The Russian Federation carried out highly objectionable activities that are systematically rejected by western European democracies respectful of a norm-based international order. These activities include spreading fake news about partner-states, interfering in the elections of democratic states, and extra-judicial killings in other countries. These activities have largely contributed to the deterioration of relations and there is no reason to assume that the Russian leadership has drawn the correct conclusion and plans to stop the activities it carried out for decades and most intensively since its self-declared Great Power re-emergence.

Responses need to be timely in order to have an impact among the population, be backed by convincing facts which counter the fake information without compromising the sources when they are not public, and should aim to prevent Russia from adapting its communication strategy to be more effective.

Russia also uses its media as front organizations for carrying out political missions. There were several allegations concerning Russian interference in elections and referenda in major western democracies. Although the U.S. presidential election of 2016 gained the most attention, both the French presidential election and the Brexit referendum in the UK alerted the two countries. In France, the Rally National or *Rassemblement national* (formerly Front National) and its candidate, Marine Le Pen was quite openly supported by Moscow. When Vladimir Putin visited France in 2017, he had to suffer public humiliation. President Macron refused to answer a question from RT, stating that the media outlet was not a news organization and was interfering with the French elections when actively supported Marine Le Pen. Putin stood next to Macron without any facial expression, stone faced in accordance with the experience of a seasoned politician and a KGB officer. In the UK, the question emerged as to whether Russia interfered with the June 2016 Brexit referendum. There is no doubt that Russia has been interested in weakening western unity, including alliances and integrations, like NATO and the EU. The departure of one of the Great Powers from the EU fit into this pattern well. However, motivation cannot be regarded as evidence. The report published by the UK remained vague, at least as far as its publicly available part. It is understandable for a variety of reasons, most importantly the protection of non-public sources but also the counter-interest of Prime Minister Boris Johnson to present an image that Russia influenced the referendum in favor of Brexit. Andrei Kelin, the Russian ambassador to the UK, commented upon the report by saying that the name of Russia could be replaced by that of any other country there. In Germany, Russian interference with elections is indirect as the center of the political spectrum is well-established and the parties on

the flanks can only “color” the political picture. Still, Russia benefits from the sympathy of both the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) and *die Linke* parties that often pronounce views that Russia would share (anti-immigration, countering the increase of military spending, etc.). Overall, Russia alarmed the West with its carrying out such activities in a better organized and more than ever clandestine manner.

The most brutal Russian violation of the sovereignty of states, including in western Europe, is the attempted killing of persons on their territory. Such extra-judicial executions were part of Soviet practice carried out by proxies (Bulgaria and the GDR) in the 1960s and 1970s. Russia returned to it after a long break in the 21st century. The targets have been Russian defectors or people who challenged Russian power previously. Such activities were carried out in the UK in Germany among others. The two highest profile cases occurred in the UK, with the Litvinenko case of 2006 and the Skripal case of 2018. In the former case, a Russian agent named Andrey Lugovoy killed Mr Litvinenko by using polonium-210 (and has been member of the Russian *Duma* since 2007). In the latter an attempt was made to kill Sergey Skripal and his daughter by a chemical, Novichok. In this case, the attempt remained unsuccessful and the three perpetrators of Russian defense intelligence were identified, made public and communicated also through government channels. Memorably, then British prime minister Theresa May informed President Putin at the G-20 summit in Osaka about the name of the third perpetrator. This meant the UK had so solid and unquestionable evidence that it could be officially communicated without a doubt. Both cases gained high profile attention and had chilling effects in the relations between Russia and the UK and beyond. The UK succeeded to generate wide-ranging support, and diplomatic reaction followed, including the closing of consulates, the expulsion of Russian diplomats and lowering the size of the Russian diplomatic mission to NATO.

In 2019, when a Russian agent in Berlin carried out the execution of a Georgian person who had fought against Russian forces in Chechnya, it was managed very differently. The criminal process reached the phase of indictment ten months later; two Russian diplomats faced expulsion, and German foreign minister Heiko Maas vaguely referred to further consequences in the future.<sup>13</sup> It is remarkable how little public attention was paid to this matter, unlike the successful and attempted assassinations carried out in the United Kingdom. It has demonstrated that neither Germany nor Russia was interested in creating a situation where the matter would get politicized on a high level and majorly influence general relations. Germany expelled two Russian diplomats from the country’s embassy in Berlin and the entire matter has been kept out of the attention of the public to the greatest extent possible. One would be tempted to conclude it was managed as a “family affair.” It is important to conclude that even in case of the most appalling violations of non-interference it is up to the parties how they are willing to manage such an affair. Do they intend to burden the relations with high profile, public collision or instead avoid it? There may be reasons for both. The former interferes with the relations and may take the parties (and their allies) hostage to react, but clearly expresses that such actions are found fully unacceptable. The latter affects relations less and hence lets the parties retain their flexibility as far as their relations overall.

---

<sup>13</sup> “Bundesanwaltschaft geht von Auftragsmord der russischen Regierung aus,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 18, 2020, accessed June 18, 2020, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/mordangeorgierbundesanwalt-schaft-geht-von-auftragsmord-aus-16820831.html>.

## ***Implications and Recommendations***

In sum, many activities of the Russian Federation during the last decade contributed to the deterioration of the relations between Moscow and the West. If one tries to play the role of the devil's advocate, the question emerges whether there can be a rational explanation for this and whether a cost-benefit analysis would show it was worth doing. Russian explanations would argue that its readiness to accept the junior partner status in the first half of the 1990s was not honored, its interests were not respected, and the West took advantage of its cooperative attitude. The return to a realist Great Power political agenda is in compensation for the former. Russia is respected internationally, even if not liked. It is back at the table of the high and mighty.

It is important to contemplate the domestic repercussions of Russia's international standing. The Russian leadership used its Great Power standing as a selling point. The population of the country did not become more affluent through those actions but could be proud to live in a state whose views are listened to and respected. What Moscow officials do not mention is the contribution of such "externalization" of Russia's problem to the legitimacy of the Putin regime and postponement of the realization that the sources of shortcomings are domestic at their roots. Russia, without aspiring to be a multi-dimensional Great Power where its strengths extend to more than a few select spheres, will not be able to find the place it aspires in the international system.

The United States has been struggling with its role in the international system in the Post-Cold War era, especially after the unipolar moment ended. Washington tried to combine the role of a "normal" nation-state with that of the beacon of the international system but has rarely succeeded in finding a balance. Most European countries would like to find a partner in Washington that leads by example. With the inauguration of the Biden administration in January 2021, a window of opportunity has opened. The U.S. may return to its leadership role ("America is back"), taking into account the interests of its European partners, but it is unrealistic to expect that the views will be in full concord. The U.S. and western Europe will continue to use a different mix of compellence and diplomatic persuasion with Russia. A tougher Russian response towards western Europe may bring the U.S. and its European partners closer together and this is not in Moscow's interest.

Transatlantic relations survived ups and down in their more than seven decades of history. Its main actors have objective reasons to see their relations with Russia differently. Intensive communication, exchange of views, cooperation, and mutual readiness to understand the views of each other proved essential sources of success most of the time. In the last two decades the insufficient understanding of the complementarity efforts taken by various western actors to find the right balance between containing and accommodating Russia often contributed to troubles. It takes a complex and nuanced understanding of international relations to find common strategic interest in the fog of world politics. The conditionality and power politics of the U.S. can only avoid Scylla and Charybdis if complemented by interaction, cooperation and economic interdependence, and understanding of those interests among their main western European powers. The victory of western politics in the end of the Cold War was preconditioned by the coexistence of those factors. It requires actors and leaders who understand this and are ready to back their actions by mutual concessions.



## Chapter 4

# Russia in the Arctic: High Ambitions, Modernized Capabilities, and Risky Setbacks

By Pavel K. Baev

### *Introduction*

The Arctic region for Russia is crucial in strategic perspective, hugely important economically, and heavily loaded with symbolism as far as the state identity is concerned. Official discourse typically describes this importance in general and exaggerated terms but often mixes various types of interests together, skips significant regional differences, and ignores entirely the aspirations of native peoples. In reality, Russia's strategic interests are heavily concentrated on the Kola peninsula, its most profitable economic assets are located on the Yamal peninsula, the historically most significant center of human capital is Arkhangelsk (just outside the Arctic circle), while many territories and settlements are in a sad neglect. Moscow tends to set ambitious goals for its Arctic policy, which is designed to exemplify Russia's global reach, but the execution of its security, foreign policy, economic and environmental guidelines is under-resourced, poorly coordinated and often works at cross-purposes.<sup>1</sup>

The most profound disagreement exists between Russia's sustained military build-up in the High North and Moscow's efforts at developing international cooperation in the Arctic, and while in the first half of the 2010s it was possible to proceed along both policy tracks, during the second half of the past decade cooperation was seriously derailed, while buildup received a further boost.<sup>2</sup> Curtailing of international cooperation was caused not only by the enforcement of U.S. and Western sanctions, some of which targeted specifically joint projects in the Arctic, but also by the increased awareness in the Nordic states and other potential partners that Russian militarization of the Arctic constitutes a growing security challenge, which needs to be contained and effectively precludes the development of meaningful cross-border ties. The withdrawal of many Western stakeholders, for instance Exxon Mobil, from the project with *Rosneft* on oil exploration in the Kara Sea has left China as the main partner for developing hydrocarbon resources in the Russian Arctic.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Useful analysis of these diverse goals is Heather A. Conley, "The New Ice Curtain: Russia's Strategic Reach to the Arctic," CSIS Report, August 2015, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-ice-curtain>; more academic research can be found in Marlene Laruelle, *Russia's Arctic Strategies and the Future of the Far North* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> My examination of this dynamics is Pavel K. Baev, "Threat Assessments and Strategic Objectives in Russia's Arctic Policy," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 32, no. 1, (2019): 25-40.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Helman, "With a world of options, end of Russia venture is no big loss for ExxonMobil," *Forbes*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/christopherhelman/2018/03/01/with-a-world-of-options-end-of-rosneft-venture-is-no-big-loss-for-exxonmobil/#599787ea26d5>.

The flagship joint venture Yamal LNG has indeed progressed fast and is set to increase further the volumes of gas delivered to the Chinese and European markets; yet, Moscow remains wary of China's plans for expanding its economic activities in the Arctic and seeks to ensure its sovereign control over resources and the maritime domain.<sup>4</sup>

What adds priority to Russia's objectives in the Arctic is the particular personal attention by President Vladimir Putin to this region, which he sees as not only strategically pivotal but also as loaded with symbolism. There is an influential lobby in the Russian leadership, which includes key figures such as Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Secretary of Security Council Nikolai Patrushev, which advocates resource allocation toward the Arctic projects and exploits Putin's interest. Putin's favorite idea presently is to boost the maritime traffic along the Northern Sea Route (*Sevmorput*),<sup>5</sup> and lobbyists demand more funding for military bases that are supposed to protect this transport corridor. Shortage of resources, however, will determine serious downsizing of Russia's Arctic ambitions, and the prevalence of military-security demands will be detrimental for economic and environmental development needs.

### ***Capabilities, Activities, and Interactions***

Russia is able to deploy a wide range of assets and capabilities toward the achievement of its Arctic policy goals, but control over these instruments is fragmented, and so their use is typically uncoordinated both in regional directions and between the civilian and military bureaucracies. The management of the Northern Sea Route was, for example, granted in 2019 to the *Rosatom* state corporation, which tends to put its parochial nuclear-related interests first in the requests for allocation of money from the state budget.<sup>6</sup> The Defense Ministry announced the creation of the Arctic Command in 2015, but in fact, the new military district on the basis of the Northern Fleet will become functional only in 2021.<sup>7</sup> Each agency and command seeks to gain attention and greater share of resources by advertising its pet projects, while the growing needs in modernizing the basic infrastructure are neglected, as the catastrophic leak of diesel fuel in the Norilsk region demonstrated.<sup>8</sup>

The most impactful and valued instrument for Russia's security policy is the triad of land- air- and sea-based strategic nuclear weapons, and the crucial importance of the Kola peninsula is determined by its role as the main base for strategic nuclear submarines. Facing the need to retire and utilize dozens of submarines built in the 1970s, Russia embarked in the late 1990s on the program of building the *Borei*-class nuclear submarines (Project 955) armed with *Bulava* intercontinental missiles. The program was prioritized in the 2020 State Armament Program approved in 2011, and in 2013-2014, three submarines were commissioned, and the

---

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Weidacher Hsiung, "The Emergence of a Sino-Russian Economic Partnership in the Arctic?" *Commentary*, The Arctic Institute, May 19, 2020, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/emergence-sino-russian-economic-partnership-arctic/>.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Digges, "Putin unveils more plans to boost Northern Sea Route," *Maritime Executive*, March 7, 2020, <https://www.maritime-executive.com/editorials/putin-unveils-more-plans-to-boost-northern-sea-route>.

<sup>6</sup> On the over-ambitious plans, see Atle Staalesen, "'We want to change the course of history,' says Northern Sea Route operator," *Barents Observer*, July 10, 2019, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/2019/07/we-want-change-course-history-says-northern-sea-route-operator>.

<sup>7</sup> Dmitry Litovkin, "Arctic fleet will become an independent military-administrative unit," *Nezavisimaya gazeta* (in Russian), June 8, 2020, [https://www.ng.ru/armies/2020-06-08/8\\_7881\\_north.html](https://www.ng.ru/armies/2020-06-08/8_7881_north.html).

<sup>8</sup> Daria Shapovalova, "Oil spill in Siberia: Are we prepared for permafrost thaw?" *Commentary*, The Arctic Institute, June 11, 2020, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/oil-spill-siberia-prepared-permafrost-thaw/>.



fourth one of the modernized *Borei-A* class joined the Northern Fleet in June 2020.<sup>9</sup> Four more submarines are in various stages of construction, and two more keels are due to be laid. The top priority granted to this program (which was upset by the problems with the *Bulava* missile) caused underfunding and delays with advancing the parallel program for building *Yasen*-class nuclear cruise missile submarines, so that the second ship is due to be commissioned in 2020, the third is undergoing sea trials, and four more are in different stages of construction.<sup>10</sup>

Russian command places great emphasis on the task of protecting its strategic assets, and instead of establishing a Soviet-style “naval bastion,” for which the Northern Fleet doesn’t have enough combat ships, it now aims at gaining command over the air by building a multi-layer system of air defense. The deployment of the S-400 surface-to-air missile systems at such forward locations as Novaya Zemlya and modernization of such forward airfields as Nagurskoe on the Franz Josef Land enables the newly-created 45<sup>th</sup> Air Force/Air Defense army to control the airspace over the Eastern part of the Barents Sea and over Eastern Scandinavia as well.<sup>11</sup> This defense-enhancement is supplemented by the upgrade of the power-projecting capabilities of the Northern Fleet, particularly on-shore projection with the deployment of *Kalibr* (SS-N-30A) cruise missiles on smaller naval platforms, as well as by strengthening the 61<sup>st</sup> naval infantry brigade and the newly-created Arctic brigade.<sup>12</sup> This sustained multi-purpose military build-up has secured Russia a position of effective dominance over and beyond the Eastern Part of the Barents region.

The command of the Northern Fleet has set the pattern of a steady increase of the scale and intensity of exercises of its submarines and surface combatants as well as the army and air force units transferred under its command, while the naval infantry has also gained some combat experience in Donbass and Syria. Testing new weapon systems in harsh climate conditions is a key part of these exercises, but their plans often include anti-submarine and amphibious operations as well as mock attacks on military infrastructure in Norway, particularly the U.S. *Globus*-III radar at Vardø.<sup>13</sup> Russia has also made it a matter of principle to interfere with NATO exercises in the region, not only by close monitoring, but also by staging missile launches inside the exercise area and by jamming GPS signals.<sup>14</sup>

A more demanding task for the Northern Fleet, which has traditionally oriented its activities westward, is the protection of the Northern Sea Route, along which several new bases have been constructed. It is not entirely clear what sort of threats these bases are prepared to

---

<sup>9</sup> Maxim Starchak, “The Borei-A SSBN: How effective is Russia’s new nuclear submarine?” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, June 16, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-borei-a-ssbn-how-effective-is-russias-new-nuclear-submarine/>.

<sup>10</sup> Atle Staalesen, “Navy confirms 5 new attack submarines will sail for Northern Fleet,” *Barents Observer*, April 3, 2020, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2020/04/navy-confirms-5-new-attack-submarines-will-sail-northern-fleet>.

<sup>11</sup> Heather A. Conley, Joseph S. Bermudez, Matthew Melino, “Ice Curtain: S-400 Deployments and Enhanced Defense of Russia’s Western Arctic,” *CSIS Brief*, March 30, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/ice-curtain-s-400-deployments-and-enhanced-defense-russias-western-arctic-rogachevo-air>.

<sup>12</sup> Useful assessment can be found in Mathieu Boulegue, “Russia’s Military Posture in the Arctic: Managing Hard Power in a ‘Low Tension’ Environment,” *Chatham House Research Paper*, June 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/russia-s-military-posture-arctic-managing-hard-power-low-tension-environment>.

<sup>13</sup> Tom O’Connor, “Russia will ‘take measures’ against US radar near its border, thought to be part of missile defense,” *Newsweek*, May 23, 2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-us-radar-norway-defense-1434756>.

<sup>14</sup> The first such cyber-attack was registered in 2018; see Brooks Tinger, “Electronic jamming between Russia and NATO is par for the course in the future, but it has its risky limits,” *New Atlanticist*, Atlantic Council, November 15, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/electronic-jamming-between-russia-and-nato-is-par-for-the-course-in-the-future-but-it-has-its-risky-limits/>.

counter, and the once a year cruise along this transport corridor is a challenge because none of the combat ships are designed to perform missions in ice-covered waters. The Northern Fleet now has one diesel-electric icebreaker, *Ilya Muromets*, and a second one of smaller size (Project 21180M) is under construction, but its operations eastward from the ice-free Barents Sea require support from civilian nuclear icebreakers owned by the *Rosatomflot* company.<sup>15</sup> There is plenty of official bragging regarding the expansion of the fleet of nuclear icebreakers, but in fact, the construction of *Arktika* (Project 22220) in St. Petersburg is bedeviled by delays and technical failures, while the plan for building the futuristic *Lider* (Project 10510) at the *Zvezda* shipyard near Vladivostok is at best far-fetched.<sup>16</sup>

The build-up of military infrastructure along the Northern Sea Route not only makes it possible for Moscow to enforce rules and regulations for external parties interested in using it for commercial purposes (including China) but also to demonstrate power behind its claim for extension of its continental shelf in the Arctic. This claim for some 1.2 million square kilometers of seabed between the Lomonosov and Mendeleev underwater ridges goes all the way to, but not beyond, the North Pole; it was first submitted to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (UN CLCS) in 2001, but without success because of insufficient scientific evidence. The substantiation of the claim had continued until February 2016, and the UN CLCS started the review of re-submission in August 2016, while making it clear that it would not be able to produce a recommendation as long as there was an overlap with the claims submitted by Denmark (in December 2014) and Canada (in May 2019).<sup>17</sup> Russian political discourse places strong emphasis on the expected expansion of the continental shelf, presenting it as a major consolidation of Russia's sovereignty over the Arctic, but it is far from certain that demonstrations of military might are helpful for the deliberations in the UN CLCS, which most probably will abstain from making any decision on this controversial issue.<sup>18</sup>

Russia has not taken any steps toward negotiating a compromise shelf deal with Denmark and Canada, as the international norms established by the Convention on the Law of the Sea prescribe, and the problem of the claim is bracketed out of its diplomatic activity in the Arctic region, which has been traditionally active, but increasingly encounters setbacks. Moscow has advocated the proposition that matters pertaining to the Arctic ocean are primarily the responsibility of the five littoral states, but cannot reconcile this stance with the plain fact that four other parties to this "Arctic five" (as well as Iceland) happen to be NATO member-states, since a fundamental principle in its regional policy is that the expansion of NATO activity constitutes a major security threat.<sup>19</sup> These tensions with Arctic neighbors increasingly complicate

---

<sup>15</sup> "One year ago, icebreaker Ilya Muromets joined the Northern Fleet," Press service of the Northern Fleet (in Russian), January 7, 2019, [https://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12211088@egNews](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12211088@egNews).

<sup>16</sup> On the former, see Anastasiya Vedeneva, "Arktika will be ready by the winter," *Kommersant* (in Russian), June 15, 2020, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4378535>; on the latter, see Charles Digges, "Russian official confirms plans for behemoth icebreaker," *Maritime Executive*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.maritime-executive.com/editorials/russian-official-confirms-plans-for-behemoth-icebreaker>.

<sup>17</sup> Russian stance is examined in Jakub Godzimirski and Alexander Sergunin, "Russian formal and practical geopolitics in the Arctic: change and continuity," *Arctic Review on Law and Politics* 11 (2020), <https://arcticreview.no/index.php/arctic/article/view/1350>; on the Canadian claim, see Alina Bykova, "Canada makes substantial step in Arctic territory delimitation, submits claim which includes North Pole," *High North News*, June 4, 2019, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/submits-claim-which-includes-north-pole>.

<sup>18</sup> Alexei Mikhailov, "Northern enlargement: Russian Arctic becomes larger by 1.2 million square kilometers," *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* (in Russian), October 22, 2019, <https://rg.ru/2019/10/22/reg-szfo/rossijskaia-arktika-stala-bolshe-na-12-milliona-kvadratnyh-kilometrov.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Vladimir Muhin, "NATO prepares to attack Russia from the Arctic," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (in Russian), June 7, 2020, [https://www.ng.ru/armies/2020-06-07/2\\_7880\\_nato.html](https://www.ng.ru/armies/2020-06-07/2_7880_nato.html).



the proceedings in the Arctic Council, which has carefully steered its work away from the military-security matters, but presently finds it difficult to preserve the pattern of cooperation, particularly as Russia is due to assume the rotating chairmanship for 2021-2023.<sup>20</sup> Russian diplomacy tries to connect with the Nordic politicians and activists, who are objecting to the deformation and reduction of the cooperative agenda because of escalation of tensions between the U.S. and Russia in the Arctic.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, even Moscow experts admit that the main driver and owner of Russian Arctic policy is the army.<sup>22</sup>

Overall, the extensive and diverse set of assets that Moscow has at its disposal for executing the Arctic policy is significantly incoherent, so much so that the over-development of some military capabilities aggravates the shortage and degradation of many crucial elements of civilian infrastructure. The prioritized military build-up is unhelpful for Russian Arctic diplomacy and hampers the implementation of cooperative economic and human development initiatives. Having invested so many resources in strengthening its military capabilities, Moscow has yet to find a way to make them useful instruments of policy, as options for projecting power in the High North are limited and high-risk. The question of harvesting tangible dividends from sustained investments is particularly acute for the strategic nuclear forces and other heavy-maintenance nuclear assets concentrated on the Kola Peninsula, which require serious efforts for protecting and securing, but give little benefit for reaching the goals of Arctic policy.

### ***Challenges and Opportunities***

The Russian leadership is keen to set ambitious goals for its Arctic policy assuming that the discourse on asserting sovereignty over this symbolically important region resonates positively with the public opinion. The priority of these goals was not significantly diminished in the second half of the 2010s, when the aggression against Ukraine and the intervention in Syria came to dominate Russia's geopolitical agenda. The resource allocation, however, was insufficient in the relatively prosperous years before the recession of 2015-2017, and remained below basic needs during the ensuing stagnation, and presently is set to suffer from deep cuts necessitated by the unfolding economic crisis. Whatever propaganda spin is put on the "Basic Principles of Russian Federation State Policy in the Arctic to 2035" approved by President Putin on March 5, 2020, the reality of severe and increasing lack of funding will undercut all initiatives designed for acting on these principles.<sup>23</sup>

The main opportunity for boosting the development of the Russian Arctic is presently seen in the transport capacity of the Northern Sea Route, while at the start of the 2010s, it was the richness in natural resources, first of all hydrocarbons, that was perceived as the pivotal source of economic development and a major driver of geopolitical competition.<sup>24</sup> Those perceptions are crudely disproven by the deep shift in the global energy markets to renewable

---

<sup>20</sup> A useful summary of these issues is Brian L. Sittlow, "What's at stake with the rising competition in the Arctic?" Council on Foreign Relations, May 1, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/whats-stake-rising-competition-arctic>.

<sup>21</sup> A typical example of this discontent is Timo Koivurova, "Is this the end of the Arctic Council and Arctic governance as we know it?" *The Polar Connection*, December 11, 2019, <http://polarconnection.org/arctic-council-governance-timo-koivurova/>.

<sup>22</sup> Sergei Nikanorov, "Russian army as the Arctic civilization," *Nezavisimaya gazeta* (in Russian), March 17, 2020, [https://www.ng.ru/armies/2020-03-17/100\\_arctic170320.html](https://www.ng.ru/armies/2020-03-17/100_arctic170320.html).

<sup>23</sup> The document is available at the Kremlin website, <http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/62947>; an example of the expert effort to justify these ambitions is Valery Zhuravel, "Hot spots in the Arctic," *Nezavisimaya gazeta* (in Russian), June 28, 2020, [https://www.ng.ru/dipkurer/2020-06-28/9\\_7896\\_arctic.html](https://www.ng.ru/dipkurer/2020-06-28/9_7896_arctic.html).

<sup>24</sup> That perspective is examined in Jonathan N. Markowitz, *Perils of Plenty: Arctic Resource Competition and the Return of the Great Game* (Oxford: OUP, 2020).

sources, even if some remnants of the illusions about the “treasure chest” of available petro-reserves are still discernible in Russian political discourse; the expectations related to the profitability and impact of the *Sevmorput* will quite probably also become disappointing in the very near future. Its presumed attractiveness as a shorter connection between North-Eastern Asia and Europe comparing with the traditional leg across the Indian Ocean is already shown to be non-existent because of the unpredictable navigation conditions and much improved capacity of the Suez Canal.<sup>25</sup> What produces a significant increase of traffic on the *Sevmorput* is the beginning of export shipment (primarily to the European market) of natural gas from the Sabetta terminal of the *Yamal-LNG* project, completed by the privately-owned *Novatek* company with the help of large-scale Chinese investments.<sup>26</sup> The operations require so much additional financing, including the fleet of ice-class LNG tankers, that for the Russian state budget this “strategic” project is a net liability, and the decline of global energy prices guarantees further losses in the years to come.<sup>27</sup>

The lack of infrastructure along the *Sevmorput* cannot be compensated by the new military bases, which have no capacity for search-and-rescue and are difficult to supply, as the interruption of schedules caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic has proven.<sup>28</sup> The Northern Fleet performs only one late-summer cruise along this waterway, and in the new organizational structure, the bases as far east as the New Siberian islands (“Northern Shamrock” on the Kotelny island) are its responsibility, which causes a permanent logistical stretch. The delays in constructing new icebreakers mean that the ships built in the 1980s are kept in service beyond their retirement age and are pushed extra-hard to service the increasing maritime traffic.

Much of the Soviet-era infrastructure in the Russian High North is in a bad state of disrepair, and the collapse of a railway bridge in the Murmansk region has shown that incidents could result in complete breakdown of supply chains for major regions.<sup>29</sup> The military infrastructure also has multiple critical vulnerabilities, and the sinking of the PD-50 floating dock in late 2018 has left the aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov*, as well as other aging major surface combatants, without proper repairs, while the construction of a new dock is plagued by business conflicts.<sup>30</sup> By far, the greatest source of risk are the accidents involving nuclear weapon systems, and the frequency of such disasters grows as the demands for acceleration of new high-profile projects come on top of the orders to demonstrate the readiness of old assets. Two major accidents happened in summer 2019: in the first, an explosion and fire took place on board the nuclear submersible AS-31 (*Lozharik*) during docking with the carrier-submarine BS-136 *Orenburg* (converted *Delta*-III class), fortunately, the reactors were safely shut down, so no

---

<sup>25</sup> Steven Stashwick, “Russia’s Northern Sea Route faces setbacks, low interest,” *The Diplomat*, October 24, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/russias-northern-sea-route-faces-setbacks-low-interest/>.

<sup>26</sup> Malte Humpert, “As Arctic ice melts Russia conducts record-breaking delivery of LNG to China,” *High North News*, June 3, 2020, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/arctic-ice-melts-russia-conducts-record-breaking-delivery-lng-china>.

<sup>27</sup> Atle Staalsen, “Companies build Arctic mega-projects, get billions in tax cuts,” *Barents Observer*, August 29, 2019, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic-industry-and-energy/2019/08/companies-build-arctic-mega-projects-get-billions-tax-cuts>.

<sup>28</sup> Atle Staalsen, “Virus outbreak troubles delivery to Arctic bases,” *Barents Observer*, June 26, 2020, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/life-and-public/2020/06/virus-outbreak-troubles-delivery-arctic-bases>.

<sup>29</sup> Natalya Skorlygina and Olga Mordyushenko, “Murmansk is cut from the net,” *Kommersant* (in Russian), June 2, 2020, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4364852>.

<sup>30</sup> Alina Fadeeva, “Contractor building the dock for Admiral Kuznetsov has complained to the State Prosecution,” *RBC* (in Russian), May 21, 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/business/21/05/2020/5ec285979a794788db079940>.

radiation leaks occurred.<sup>31</sup> In the second instance, an explosion of a prototype nuclear-propelled 9M730 *Burevestnik* cruise missile at the Nyonoksa test range near Severodvinsk revealed serious flaws in the high-profile project, but President Putin promised to continue tests no matter what.<sup>32</sup>

Russian command assumes that its readiness to accept and operate with far higher limits of risk constitutes an important advantage over the risk-averse West, and this assumption involves not only technical accidents but also the character of exercises and the plans for projecting power. Provocative maneuvering at sea and dangerous air intercepts are now routine features of combat training, which also include spectacular but entirely unnecessary performances, such as a high-altitude jump of a group of paratroopers on the Franz Josef Land.<sup>33</sup> Reckless tactical behavior is intended not only to make NATO forces extra cautious during their exercises but also to convey the impression that Moscow may execute equally bold strategic moves. The Svalbard archipelago, which is a sovereign Norwegian territory but has a special status according to the Spitsbergen Treaty (1920), is used by Moscow as a useful pressure point in aggressive diplomatic campaigns.<sup>34</sup> Russia keeps the Barentsburg settlement on the Svalbard, which can serve as a bridgehead for a swift amphibious operation aimed at capturing the nearby Norwegian city Longyearbyen, which is defenseless because the treaty prohibits deployment and basing of troops on the archipelago.<sup>35</sup>

Overall, the infrastructure and environmental problems in the Russian High North are worsening and the strenuously built position of power in the Barents region is eroding, so Moscow needs to make a move soon in order to capitalize on the advantages it still has.

### ***Prospects and Implications***

The arrival of a complex crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has distorted many political plans and strategic assessments in Moscow, and it is in the High North that cuts in funding could expose and aggravate many vulnerabilities in Russia's posture. The Kremlin knows that the particular public attention to the Arctic, which it has deliberately cultivated for years, amplifies the impact of any disaster, as illustrated by the resonance from the diesel fuel spill near Norilsk. For many problems, such as anthrax outbreaks caused by the melting permafrost, international cooperation could have been the best answer, but many useful cross-border ties, particularly involving NGO activities, have been deliberately cut. Strategy-makers in Moscow have scant knowledge about new guidelines for U.S. Arctic policy set by the Biden administration, but they expect stronger commitment to joint efforts with NATO allies and greater resolve to counter Russia's attempts at projecting power.

The only resourceful partner for Russian development projects in the Arctic is China, but Moscow is consistently and increasingly reluctant to let Beijing to establish its own foothold in

---

<sup>31</sup> Despite pledges to rehabilitate the unique submarine, it is probably damaged beyond repair; see Pavel Felgengauer, "Losharik submersible disaster handicaps Russian naval operations," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, July 11, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/losharik-submersible-disaster-handicaps-russian-naval-operations/>.

<sup>32</sup> Many ugly details were revealed by journalist investigations; see Sergei Dobrynin and Mark Krutov, "It was a real panic: Continuation of the Nyonoksa investigation," *Svoboda.org* (in Russian), September 3, 2019, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30144456.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Jan Bratsky, "Historic jump over the Arctic," *TV-Zvezda* (in Russian), April 26, 2020, <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/forces/content/2020426555-NKFML.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Andrei Todorov, "The Spitsbergen Treaty: Colorful mosaic of interpretations," Russian International Affairs Council (in Russian), February 14, 2020, <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/dogovor-o-shpitsbergene-yarkaya-mozaika-interpretatsiy/>.

<sup>35</sup> Pavel K. Baev, "Russia plays hard ball in the High North," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, February 10, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-plays-hard-ball-in-the-high-north/>.

the vast littoral of the Northern seas. Chinese companies comply with the rigid rules for the use of *Sevmorput* enforced by its administration in Moscow, but they are keen to explore every opportunity for expanding their presence. Beijing takes a long term view on the Arctic seeing it as presently unprofitable but a potentially important space for economic activity, complementing the Belt-and-Road initiative, which currently encounters various setbacks. It prefers to define the Arctic as a “global common” rather than an area of exclusive responsibility of the five littoral states and is not interested in securitization and militarization of regional affairs. This position is significantly different from the Russian stance, in which security comes first, and China effectively is the main force checking and restraining Moscow’s military activities.<sup>36</sup>

The strategic situation around Russia’s borders could become dangerously unstable in the course and aftermath of the current crisis, but what makes the Arctic theater unique is that there is no external challenges (except imagined) to Russia’s national interests, while the High Command has at its disposal many combat-ready means of countering such challenges, which can be turned into means of projecting power. Domestic political discontent may produce strong incentives for experimenting with forceful actions, around which popular support can be mobilized. In the absence of the UN CLCS recommendation concerning the claims on expanding the continental shelf, Moscow may resort to a unilateral declaration of its rights, but this will not require any enforcement because the Arctic seabed will remain off-limits, while the navigation is not affected by such stance. What could constitute a more forceful move is a deployment of military forces or para-military units (such as *Rosgvardiya*) on the Spitsbergen, perhaps following a series of deliberately provoked incidents involving fishing and the expansion of settlements. The main goal of such aggressive moves would be to test the NATO resolve (particularly since the Norwegian position on asserting its sovereignty over Svalbard is not universally recognized) in the area where Russia has a significant conventional military superiority.<sup>37</sup>

The most dangerous implications could emerge from Russia’s attempts at increasing the political applicability and strategic impacts of its modernized nuclear arsenal. The option with a first nuclear strike in a spasm of hostilities, as envisaged by the “escalate-to-deescalate” scenario, remains theoretical,<sup>38</sup> but such a crisis could develop from a situation with a catastrophic incident on a Russian nuclear submarine, which Moscow would be inclined to blame on a hostile act from the United States or NATO. New test of nuclear-propelled cruise missiles or underwater drones could involve disintegration of nuclear reactors, and Russian high command may find it necessary to cover up such accidents by blaming NATO and provoking a dangerous crisis. Every reasonable risk assessment and evaluation of consequences would rule out such blame game, but policy choices in Russian high command are shaped by rationale incomprehensible for Western counter-parts. Moscow may also opt for a resumption of nuclear testing on the Novaya Zemlya test site referring to the U.S. (as well as China’s) failure to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (1996) and presenting its act as pre-emption of U.S. preparations.

---

<sup>36</sup> Cautious but still useful analysis of these differences can be found in Dmitri Trenin, “Russia and China in the Arctic: Cooperation, Competition, and Consequences,” Carnegie Moscow Center, March 31, 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81407>.

<sup>37</sup> James K. Wither, “NATO’s Arctic ‘Achilles’ Heel,” *The RUSI Journal*, 163, no. 5 (December 2018), 28-37 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03071847.2018.1552453?src=recsys&journalCode=rusi20>.

<sup>38</sup> Thorough evaluation of such options can be found in Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, Jeffrey Edmonds, et. al, “Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts,” *CNA Report*, April 2020, [https://www.cna.org/CNA\\_files/PDF/DRM-2019-U-022455-1Rev.pdf](https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DRM-2019-U-022455-1Rev.pdf).

International security agenda is profoundly reshaped by the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, but Russia is interested in re-focusing political and public attention on the Arctic matters, assuming that it has a position of power in this region, particularly in the Barents area. This position could acquire the quality of “antifragility,” as it becomes stronger and more operable in the situation of escalating tensions, so that Russia gains more opportunities for proactive moves, intended to assert its role as a pivotal global power.<sup>39</sup>

### ***Recommendations***

Russia’s interest in sustaining and expanding international cooperation in the Arctic is not merely a camouflage for its military build-up, and it can be encouraged for containing its propensity to rely more on military, and particularly nuclear, instruments of policy. Some initiatives on expanding confidence-building measures can be advanced in order to make it possible for Moscow to see its forthcoming chairmanship in the Arctic Council as a success.

Even on the background of general escalation of competition between the United States and China, it is possible to explore common interests in the Arctic, which could include constraining Russia’s military ambitions. Beijing’s pronounced emphasis on economic enterprises and research projects fits well with initiatives on reducing and preventing further militarization of the Arctic. The EU can engage in joint endeavors with China in navigation in the Arctic seas seeking to circumvent Russian restrictive regulations on the maritime traffic on the Northern Sea Route. Limited U.S. Freedom-of-Navigation operations to the west of the Bering Strait might reinforce the common benefit from denying Russia the exclusive control over this maritime route.

Russia’s positions in the vast Arctic theater is very unbalanced, and it is essential to focus on neutralizing its possible pro-active moves in the directions, where it has a position of strength, while putting pressure on weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Among the latter, the unprotected base of strategic nuclear submarines on the Kamchatka Peninsula (which strictly speaking, is not a part of the Arctic theater, but is closely connected with it) is an obvious target. Russia is not able to organize anything resembling a “naval bastion” or an A2/AD “bubble” in the Sea of Okhotsk, so periodic appearances there of U.S. naval and air platforms would send a convincing signal.

In the Barents region, asymmetric and smart containment of Russia’s options for exploiting its dominance must be based on deeper U.S. cooperation with NATO partners (first of all, Norway, which takes the threat very seriously), as well as Sweden and Finland. It is impossible to build in this remote Northern flank a grouping of forces comparable with the forces available for the Russian Arctic command, but capabilities for monitoring and intelligence gathering can be combined with capabilities for rapid deployment and exercised frequently in various non-threatening formats. It is essential to demonstrate strategic resolve and readiness without aggravating tensions and unleashing the whirl of an Arctic version of the security dilemma.

---

<sup>39</sup> This rare quality is explored in Nassim N. Taleb, *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder* (NY: Random House, 2014). I am grateful to Graeme Herd for suggesting this interpretation.





## Chapter 5

# Russia and Latin America: Flexible, Pragmatic, and Close

By Fabiana Sofia Perera

### ***Introduction: Why is the Bear in Latin America?***

Unlike other U.S. competitors, Russia has a long history of engagement with Latin America. Russia first opened an embassy in Brazil in 1828 and in Mexico in 1890, just sixty-five years after the U.S. sent its first envoy to that country. Throughout the Cold War, the U.S. remained concerned that the USSR would gain ground in Latin America leading to U.S. policy responses ranging from President Kennedy's Alliance for Progress to the invasion of Grenada under President Reagan.

Following the end of the Cold War, Russia largely withdrew from the western hemisphere. In the early 1990s, the Russian Federation established diplomatic relations with most countries in Latin America. At the time, Russian foreign policy was weak and trending towards realignment with Washington.<sup>1</sup> Boris Yeltsin, for example, did not visit any Latin American countries in his eight years as president, but he did visit the U.S. four times.

Under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, Russia has shown a desire to build on that long history to strengthen relations with Latin American and Caribbean states. After a decade of underinvestment in the region, Russia reemerged recently in Latin America. The twin goals of the reengagement are first, to boost its credentials as a global power, and second, to maintain a presence close to the U.S. to counter the American presence close to Russia. The National Security Concept of the Russian Federation is clear in stating that “upholding its sovereignty and strengthening its position as a Great Power and as one of the influential centers of a multipolar world” is a chief national interest of Russia,<sup>2</sup> which is consistent with its first goal in Latin America. The same document makes ample references to protection of Russia's border space mentioning “possible appearance of foreign military bases and large troop contingents in direct proximity to Russia's borders,” as a main threat to national security. This concern about border areas maps cleanly on to Russia's second goal in Latin America: countering U.S. presence in Ukraine.

The country's Foreign Policy Concept states Russia's intentions to “consolidate ties with its Latin American partners by working within international and regional forums, expanding cooperation with multilateral associations and Latin American and Caribbean integration structures,” mentioning the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, MERCOSUR,

---

<sup>1</sup> Nikolai Dobronravin and Victor Jefetz, “Beyond the BRICS: Russian-Brazilian Relations since the collapse of the USSR,” *Pensamiento Propio*, no. 49-50 (2019): 199-228, <http://www.cries.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/013-Jefetz.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *National Security Concept of the Russian Federation*, last modified January 10, 2000, (Moscow: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2000), [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/589768](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/589768).

and UNASUR specifically.<sup>3</sup> In addition to these, Russia is an active participant in BRICS, an organization where Brazil is also a member. In 2015, Putin visited Latin America to participate in the BRICS summit in Fortaleza, Brazil. As part of that trip, Putin also visited Argentina, Cuba, and Nicaragua.<sup>4</sup>

The centerpiece of Putin's six-day trip was his participation in the July 15-17 BRICS summit in Fortaleza, Brazil, but the president also made a special effort to warm up relations with Argentina, Cuba, and Nicaragua, the three countries he visited on his way to the summit. Putin's participation in BRICS often highlighted the importance of the organization for the Russian Federation's goal of projecting a global power identity. At the 2014 summit, Putin remarked that contacts with other South American nations "helped increase the prestige" of the organization.<sup>5</sup> A few years later, Putin used the forum to ask for the support of the other member countries in Russia's bid to host EXPO 2025 in Yekaterinburg.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to its activities to bolster its Great Power credentials, Russia engages with Latin America to counter U.S. presence close to its own borders. Though this goal is not as overtly stated as Russia's Great Power ambitions, there is ample evidence that at least Latin American countries have stood with Russia when it has been in perceived confrontation with the United States. Unlike other extra-hemispheric actors involved in the region, Russia appears non-ideological and pragmatic in its dealings with Latin American countries. This practical approach has been effective: not a single Latin American country adopted sanctions against Russia in response to the annexation of Crimea in 2014, even though all of Europe and some Asian countries did. For its part, the U.S. certainly perceives Russian activities in the region as a challenge to its long-standing hegemony in Latin America. Then-Commander of U.S. Southern Command Admiral Kurt Tidd articulated this clearly in 2016 when he conveyed to Congress that "Russian officials' rhetoric, high-level political visits, and military-security engagements are designed to displace the U.S. as the partner of choice in the region."<sup>7</sup> The preceding Commander, Admiral Kelly, had also expressed concern that Russia was "using power projection in an attempt to erode U.S. leadership and challenge U.S. influence in the Western Hemisphere."<sup>8</sup> Mentions of Russia as a challenger to the U.S. occur almost exclusively after the Crimea crisis. Prior to that, Russia was mentioned only as a purveyor of arms.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, last modified December 1, 2016, (Moscow: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016), [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248).

<sup>4</sup> Diana Villiers Negroponce, "What's Putin's Game in the Western Hemisphere?" *Americas Quarterly*, February 3, 2015, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/fulltextarticle/whats-putins-game-in-the-western-hemisphere/>.

<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Speech at BRICS Summit plenary session," July 15, 2014, Presidential Executive Office, transcript, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/46229>.

<sup>6</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Remarks at an expanded BRICS Summit meeting," July 26, 2018, Presidential Executive Office, transcript, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/58105>.

<sup>7</sup> Admiral Kurt W. Tidd, "Posture Statement of Admiral Kurt W. Tidd, Commander, United States Southern Command," before the 114th Congress, Senate Armed Services Committee (March 10, 2016), [https://www.southcom.mil/Portals/7/Documents/Posture%20Statements/SOUTHCOM\\_POSTURE\\_STATEMENT\\_FINAL\\_2016.pdf?ver=2017-01-04-094258-267](https://www.southcom.mil/Portals/7/Documents/Posture%20Statements/SOUTHCOM_POSTURE_STATEMENT_FINAL_2016.pdf?ver=2017-01-04-094258-267).

<sup>8</sup> General John F. Kelly, "Posture Statement of General John F. Kelly, Commander, United States Southern Command," before the 114th Congress, Senate Armed Services Committee (March 12, 2015), [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Kelly\\_03-12-15.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Kelly_03-12-15.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> General Douglas M. Fraser, "Posture Statement of General Douglas M. Fraser, Southern Command," before the 112th Congress, Senate Armed Services Committee (March 6, 2012), <https://www.airforcemag.com/PDF/testimony/Documents/2012/March%202012/031312fraser.pdf>.



## ***Russia is Reaching for its Goals***

Russia has a long history of arms sales to the region. In addition to this role, in Latin America, Russia pursues its goals through a combination of active participation in shared governance issues, gray zone tactics, and economic participation in the energy sector.

Russia has a long record of using arms sales as a tool to achieve its goals in Latin America. Arms sales from the Soviet Union to Latin America occurred only to Cuba, Nicaragua, and Grenada, countries that were denied access to Western materiel.<sup>10</sup> Peru also purchased arms from the USSR because at the time the country had charted a policy of non-alignment that resulted in U.S. refusal to sell arms to Peru, though other Western nations continued to offer armament.<sup>11</sup> Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation has expanded arms sales to the region. In addition to the four countries mentioned above, Russia has sold arms to Mexico and Brazil (both since 1994), Venezuela (since 1996), Colombia and Ecuador (both since 1997), and Uruguay (since 2006).

Despite the growth in markets for Russian arms, sales remain highly concentrated. In the past twenty years Russia has sold \$5.3 billion U.S. dollars' worth of arms to Latin America. Of these, \$3.9 billion (72 percent) were to Venezuela. Venezuela's realignment to Russia was in part a consequence of the 2006 U.S. ban on arms exports to the South American country after democracy deteriorated there.<sup>12</sup> Russia's arms sales to the region and to Venezuela especially help to advance its goals of countering U.S. presence close to its own borders. The U.S. attempted to curb Russian arms sales to its partners through the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) passed in 2017 as a response to the crisis in Ukraine. Yet, in spite of this legislation, as recently as 2020 Russia announced plans to sell eight Sikorsky MH-60R Seahawk helicopters to Mexico. Upon learning of this, the U.S. threatened sanctions under CAATSA. "Have we made our position clear to our Mexican friends?" asked a Congressman when announcing the potential actions.<sup>13</sup>

Russia is at a natural disadvantage as pertains to regional organizations in Latin America, as it's excluded by definition and its closest historic partner, Cuba, is at best sidelined from participation. In addition, power differentials between Russia and most countries in the region preclude Russia from participating as a peer in other institutions with Latin American members.

Nonetheless, Russia has pursued an aggressive agenda for engaging in multilateral fora that include Latin American nations. Less than two years after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation became a permanent observer of the Organization of American States, the premier political forum of the region. As part of this role, the Russian Federation appoints a permanent ambassador to the organization in Washington, DC. As a permanent observer, Russia can attend OAS meetings but cannot vote in proceedings.

To counter perceived U.S. influence in the OAS, a group of twelve left-leaning Latin American governments created the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) through a treaty signed in 2008. Though Russia was again not able to fully participate in the organization

---

<sup>10</sup> Nicola Miller, *Soviet Relations with Latin America, 1959-1987* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 21.

<sup>11</sup> Rubén Berrios and Cole Blasier, "Peru and the Soviet Union (1969-1989): distant partners," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 23, no. 2 (1991): 365-384.

<sup>12</sup> "U.S. Bars Future Arms Sales to Venezuela," Arms Control Association, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2006-06/us-bars-future-arms-sales-venezuela>; Diana Negroponte; "Russo-Latin American Arms Sales." *Americas Quarterly*; New York Vol. 9, Iss. 1, (Winter 2015): 73.

<sup>13</sup> "The US could sanction Mexico if it buys helicopters from Russia, US official says," *Business Insider*, February 17, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/us-could-sanction-mexico-if-it-buys-russian-helicopters-2020-2?r=UK>.

because of its status as an extra-regional state, Russian officials did attend at least some meetings of the organization.<sup>14</sup> In recent years a number of countries have suspended their participation in UNASUR after changes in government brought about a shift from the left-leaning positions that dominated Latin America in the early 2000's. With the decline of UNASUR, the status of OAS as the premier organization in the region is cemented. Interestingly Russia is not a member of the regional development institution, the Inter-American Development Bank, though China, Korea, and sixteen European nations are.<sup>15</sup>

Russia also engages with countries in the Americas in larger international institutions though in these the combination of distance and differences in power and size preclude meaningful collaboration. In the United Nations, for example, Brazil has been seeking a reform that would allow it a permanent seat in the Security Council. Russia, a permanent Security Council member itself, has not endorsed the Brazilian proposal. Russia did, however, support Brazil's bid to serve a term in the Council in 2004. In the International Monetary Fund, Russia has 2.59 percent of the vote. Its executive director also casts the votes of the Syrian Arab Republic but not of any Latin American countries, which are mostly represented by the Brazilian and Spanish executive directors.<sup>16</sup> Russia also participates in the World Bank but declined to participate in the capital increase proposed in 2018, which will erode its voting share.

In the whole region, only Brazil and Mexico are near-peers to Russia in economic size; indeed Brazil's \$1.9 trillion GDP eclipses Russia's \$1.7 trillion, whereas Mexico's \$1.2 trillion economy is smaller than these two but still much closer to Russia's size than Russia is to the U.S. or China. Indeed, Brazil and Russia are both members of BRICS. Although BRIC began as an eye-catching acronym coined by a banker to describe these emerging markets, Russia capitalized on the grouping to start an international organization. Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the president of Brazil, was invited to the first summit in Yekaterinburg along with leaders of the two other countries. The loose grouping of countries has since evolved into an institution that holds regular meetings and seeks to collaborate on issues mostly relating to the economy and energy. BRICS has also given Russia leverage in other international organizations. In 2011, for example, all BRICS countries occupied a seat in the UN Security Council. At the time, the UNSC was debating resolution 1973, which invoked the doctrine of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) to justify military intervention in Libya. Russia did not support the measure, citing a fear that military intervention was becoming a feature of U.S. foreign policy. Putin added that "[the decision to intervene in Libya] confirmed our decisions on strengthening Russia's defense capabilities were correct."<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, Russia abstained from voting on UNSC Resolution 1973 and so did Brazil, China and India. The BRICS came to be united in their opposition to the intervention in Libya in what was perhaps the first major challenge to unipolarity up to that time.<sup>18</sup>

Russia has routinely engaged in operations in the gray zone to advance its goal of establishing itself as a Great Power. While most of these operations are aimed at Russia's immediate surroundings, Latin America has also seen the use of gray zone tactics, and

---

<sup>14</sup> "Russian diplomat to sit in on South American summit," *Russkiy Mir Foundation Information Service*, December 5, 2014, <https://ruskiymir.ru/en/news/158390/>.

<sup>15</sup> "Países miembros no prestatarios," *Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo*, 2020, <https://www.iadb.org/es/acerca-del-bid/paises-miembros-no-prestatarios>.

<sup>16</sup> "IMF Members' Quotas and Voting Power, and IMF Board of Governors," *International Monetary Fund*, accessed December 8, 2020, <https://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/memdir/members.aspx>.

<sup>17</sup> Gleb Bryanski, "Putin likens U.N. resolution to crusades," *Reuters*, March 21, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-russia/putin-likens-u-n-libya-resolution-to-crusades-idUSTRE72K3JR20110321>.

<sup>18</sup> Oliver Stuenkel, *The BRICS and the Future of Global Order* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015).

information operations specifically, to advance its goals in the region. Three clear examples illustrate Russia's use of these tactics in the region: interference in the Mexican presidential election of 2018, the Colombian peace process, and in support of the Maduro regime in Venezuela. In Latin America, Russia faces challenges when attempting to deploy these tactics. First, while English is the third most widely spoken language in the region (after Spanish and Portuguese), there are barely any Russian speakers. Indeed, more people speak Ukrainian in South America than speak Russian.<sup>19</sup> Second, despite high degrees of urbanization, internet penetration rates in the region are lower than in Russia's near-abroad and other parts of the world. About seventy percent of people living in Latin America have access to internet, compared to close to ninety percent in Europe. Seeking to overcome the language and cultural barriers, Russia has embarked on a massive social media campaign such that Spanish is second only to Russian as the largest campaign by volume.<sup>20</sup>

Mexico's 2018 presidential election pitted Andrés Manuel López Obrador (known as "AMLO"), a left-leaning candidate, against Ricardo Anaya, the candidate of the center-right PAN party. In the presidential race, Russia favored AMLO while John Kelly, then U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security, expressed his view that an AMLO victory "would not be good for America or for Mexico."<sup>21</sup> In the run-up to the election, bots and trolls circulated disinformation on social media, including the rumor that Mexican citizens would have to reregister to vote in the elections. In addition, RT, which is available in Mexico, provided extensive coverage to AMLO's English language spokesman.<sup>22</sup>

In Colombia, Russia has engaged through arms sales to its insurgent group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).<sup>23</sup> In addition to using this tool, Russia has recently also turned to gray zone tactics in pursuit of its goals. The peace process in Colombia made this tool obsolete in the new context; however, the divisive nature of the peace process afforded it opportunities to exert leverage. Russia did so by supporting the FARC's political ambitions, providing favorable coverage of FARC candidates in RT and Sputnik, and providing support to remaining subversive groups.<sup>24</sup>

Mexico and Colombia are cases in which Russia has sought to exert influence in the domestic political life of a committed U.S. partner. In addition to this, Russia has also pursued similar tactics in Venezuela, the only other autocracy besides Cuba and decidedly not a U.S. ally. In Venezuela, Russia has engaged in information operations in support of the idea that the U.S. government is actively working to overthrow Nicolás Maduro.<sup>25</sup> Russia also sent military

---

<sup>19</sup> Dylan Lyons, "The 10 Most Spoken Languages in South America," *Babbel Magazine*, February 6, 2019, <https://www.babbel.com/en/magazine/languages-in-south-america>; "Internet Usage in Asia," Internet World Stats, accessed 8 December 2020, <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> "2020 Posture Statement to Congress," U.S. Southern Command, March 11, 2020, video, <https://www.southcom.mil/Media/Special-Coverage/SOUTHCOMs-2020-Posture-Statement-to-Congress/>.

<sup>21</sup> "Mexico urges respect from U.S. for 2018 presidential election," *Reuters*, April 6, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-mexico-election/mexico-urges-respect-from-u-s-for-2018-presidential-election-idUSKBN1782O1>.

<sup>22</sup> Frida Ghitis, "A Mexican presidential candidate is getting an unexpected boost from Trump – and Putin," *Washington Post*, January 11, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2018/01/11/a-mexican-presidential-candidate-is-getting-an-unexpected-boost-from-trump-and-putin/>.

<sup>23</sup> Barnett S. Koven and Abigail C. Kamp, "Divergent Axes of Russian Influence in Colombia and Latin America," in *Age of Disruption: How Power Shifts Create More Conflict*, eds. Gina Ligon and Robert Jones (Arlington, VA: Department of Defense Strategic Multi-layer Assessment Branch, 2019).

<sup>24</sup> Koven and Kamp, "Weaponizing Peace."

<sup>25</sup> Grzegorz Kuczyński, "Kremlin's Bluff or Russian Military Presence in Venezuela," Warsaw Institute, April 15, 2019, <https://warsawinstitute.org/kremlins-bluff-russian-military-presence-venezuela/>.

specialists to Venezuela, ostensibly to service equipment.<sup>26</sup> This form of support was almost outside the murky boundaries of the gray zone. In response to these actions, Elliot Abrams, U.S. Special Envoy for Venezuela, asserted that the U.S. is “closely studying Russia’s role, and we will not allow the level of support we have seen in recent months without responding.”<sup>27</sup>

### ***Challenges and Opportunities***

Russia’s engagement with Latin America creates at least two challenges for the United States, which are derived directly from Russia’s goals in the region. First, Russia’s Great Power ambitions challenge the cost for the U.S. of maintaining its hegemonic position in the region. Second, Russia’s pursuit of a foothold close to the United States to counter its presence in Europe creates challenges for U.S. policy in the western hemisphere at large.

For decades, the U.S. has sought to position itself as the “partner of choice” for Latin American countries. Russia’s recent overtures to the region, unconstrained as they are by democratic norms, challenge the United States’ relationship with the region. While it’s very unlikely that Russia can replace the United States as the hegemon of this part of the western hemisphere, it is certainly true that increasing Russian engagement in Latin America increases the cost to the U.S. of maintaining that position. Navy Adm. Kurt W. Tidd, then Commander of U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), specifically expressed his concern that Russia is “attempting to displace the United States as the partner of choice.”<sup>28</sup>

The United States’ attention is often occupied elsewhere. In his first visit to a foreign country after being elected President of the United States, George W. Bush declared that the “century of the Americas” was beginning.<sup>29</sup> This new century ended seven months later when the U.S. was attacked on September 11, 2001. Since then, the U.S. has been able to maintain its position as the partner of choice in Latin America at a relatively low cost because there were no challengers to its position. SOUTHCOM’s budget for 2019, for example, was just 1/14 of what was spent in Afghanistan, leading a lawmaker to comment that the command responsible for Latin America gets what’s “left over” after other needs have been met.<sup>30</sup> Despite these unfulfilled promises and low investment, the U.S. has been able to maintain its position in the region. The 2019 U.S. SOUTHCOM Strategy is clear in that “without action, the United States will continue to cede influence to Russia and China in the region.”<sup>31</sup>

In contrast, Russia’s presence and investment in the region is growing. Russia’s increased interest in Latin America presents a direct challenge to the United States. Russia has a diplomatic mission in nearly every country in the region except for Belize, El Salvador, Honduras,

---

<sup>26</sup> “Russian military specialists arrive in Venezuela to service equipment: Interfax,” *Reuters*, September 25, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-venezuela-specialists/russian-military-specialists-arrive-in-venezuela-to-service-equipment-interfax-idUSKBN1WA2FJ>.

<sup>27</sup> Nora Gámez Torres and Alex Daugherty, “Abrams: U.S. will respond to Russia’s support of Maduro in Venezuela,” *Miami Herald*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/venezuela/article239014483.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Lisa Ferdinando, “U.S. Wants to Remain ‘Partner of Choice in Latin America,’” *DoD News*, April 6, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/1144536/us-wants-to-remain-partner-of-choice-in-latin-america/>.

<sup>29</sup> “Bush pledges ‘century of the Americas,’” *BBC News*, February 15, 2001, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/1172505.stm>.

<sup>30</sup> “Carla Babb, “Pentagon Deploying More Ships, Forces to Latin America,” *Voice of America*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/usa/pentagon-deploying-more-ships-forces-latin-america>.

<sup>31</sup> United States Southern Command, *United States Southern Command Strategy* (Doral, Florida: U.S. Southern Command, 2019), [https://www.southcom.mil/Portals/7/Documents/SOUTHCOM\\_Strategy\\_2019.pdf?ver=2019-05-15-131647-353](https://www.southcom.mil/Portals/7/Documents/SOUTHCOM_Strategy_2019.pdf?ver=2019-05-15-131647-353).

Dominican Republic, and Haiti. In a further sign that ties are increasing, Putin has visited eight countries in the region, including the longest foreign tour during his third term.<sup>32</sup> This use of soft power combined with the deployment of the tactics outlined in the previous section present a clear, if so far unsuccessful, challenge to the status of the U.S. as a partner of choice in the region: in spite of its efforts, Russia lags behind the U.S. in favorability with only about fifty percent of people in the region having a “good” or “very good” opinion of it, compared to sixty-two percent expressing the same about the United States.<sup>33</sup>

Russia’s goal of countering U.S. presence in Ukraine by establishing a greater presence in Latin America creates the second challenge for the United States. Russian presence close to U.S. borders complicates policy towards Russia. Russian presence in Latin America should not be interpreted to mean that the days of the Cuban missile crisis are returning, but rather that it presents a test to U.S. resolve to support its partners and its commitment to democratic values abroad. In response to the Russian deployment of two military aircraft to Venezuela, U.S. national security adviser John Bolton released a statement that echoed the 1823 Monroe Doctrine as the U.S. “caution[s] actors external to the Western Hemisphere against deploying military assets to Venezuela, or elsewhere in the Hemisphere, with the intent of establishing or expanding military operations,” adding that the United States “will consider such provocative actions as a direct threat to international peace and security in the region.”<sup>34</sup> While the statement clearly expressed commitment to its partners in Latin America, possible future Russian incursions into the region could test U.S. commitment to Latin America and ultimately its resolve. Fiona Hill, Senior Director of the U.S. National Security Council specializing in Russian and European affairs, made a similar point in testimony before Congress in 2019 asserting

the Russians [...] were signaling very strongly that they wanted to somehow make some very strange swap arrangement between Venezuela and Ukraine: [...] You want us out of your backyard [...] We have our own version of this. You're in our backyard in Ukraine. And we were getting that sent to us, kind of informally through channels. It was in the Russian press, various commentators.<sup>35</sup>

The 2018 National Defense Strategy was clear in saying that “inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary security concern in U.S. national security.”<sup>36</sup> While this has been the experience so far, it is clear that Russian involvement in the region presents a growing challenge to the United States. The opportunities for the United States are also clear: by energetically reengaging with partners in the region, the U.S. can successfully counter Russia and other competitors.

---

<sup>32</sup> “Vladimir Putin’s visit to Latin America,” TASS, July 16, 2014, <https://tass.com/world/740909>.

<sup>33</sup> “Latinobarómetro Análisis de datos,” Latinobarómetro Corporation, <http://www.latinobarometro.org/latOnline.jsp>.

<sup>34</sup> “Statement by National Security Advisor Ambassador John Bolton on Venezuela,” Statements & Releases, The White House, March 29, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-national-security-advisor-ambassador-john-bolton-venezuela-2/>.

<sup>35</sup> Jacob Schultz, “Summary of Fiona Hill’s Deposition Testimony,” *Lawfare*, November 11, 2019, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/summary-fiona-hills-deposition-testimony>.

<sup>36</sup> Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2018), <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.



Its long history of engagement with the region and shared democratic values provide the U.S. with an unmistakable advantage in the battle for the hearts and minds of people living in Latin America. U.S. SOUTHCOM Strategy clearly identifies this in asserting that “the strength of U.S. alliances and partnerships provides us with an edge that no competitor can match.”<sup>37</sup>

### ***Implications for the U.S. and its Partners***

Insofar as Russia’s goal in engaging with Latin America is to build an identity as a Great Power and challenge U.S. hegemony in the region and in international institutions, Russia’s engagement directly affects the U.S. and its partners and allies. President Joseph R. Biden has already expressed “concern” about Russia’s behavior, though so far has made no explicit reference to their behavior in Latin America specifically. The implications of this concerning engagement should be analyzed with a consideration for time horizons. In the short term, Russian engagement in Latin America has the potential to create a test of the U.S. government’s credibility. A lack of leadership in a situation, such as the Russian incursion to Venezuela, can create space for U.S. partners and allies to be concerned, as well as potentially create a domestic political crisis if the Commander in Chief miscalculates and escalates the situation or, conversely, underplays it.<sup>38</sup> Gray zone tactics also have short-term implications for the U.S. and its partners. Russian support for non-democratic regimes in the region such as those in power in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, pursued at least in part through gray zone tactics, undermines U.S. efforts to promote democracy in Latin America.

In the long term, Russian engagement in Latin America dilutes U.S. power in the region and potentially in the multilateral organizations that the region is involved in. A diluted U.S. presence in Latin America could create room for a different, stronger competitor such as China to advance more quickly than Russia has been able to. China is certainly in a stronger position to be able to finance investments in the region: its \$13 trillion economy dwarfs Russia’s \$1.7 trillion. Additionally, Russia’s economy, like that of many Latin American countries, is heavily reliant on the export of natural resources, especially energy resources. China, in contrast, lacks these resources, which creates an opportunity for trade with the energy-rich countries of South America specifically. Russia, an oil-exporter, has instead looked at using its expertise in the sector to invest in oil and gas in Latin America. While pragmatic and ingenious, this potentially exacerbates Russia’s exposure to fluctuations in energy prices, highlighting the political nature of the investment. In March 2020, *Rosneft* sold its stake in the Venezuelan state-owned oil company, PDVSA, to *Roszarubezhneft*, a state-owned Russian company. With this move, PDVSA and its deteriorated infrastructure moved from having the financial support of one of the world’s largest oil companies, to being essentially directly under the control of Putin.<sup>39</sup> With this, Russia increased its exposure to the boom-and-bust cycles of oil prices. In the context of the current pandemic, as an oil-exporter Russia is hurt by the bust, whereas China, a net importer, might stand to win.

In addition to creating openings for other competitors, a weakened presence in Latin America could potentially lead to a more vulnerable U.S. at home. It is not a coincidence that until 2014 the Latin American portfolio at the Pentagon was under the Assistant Secretary of

---

<sup>37</sup> U.S. Southern Command, *United States Southern Command Strategy*.

<sup>38</sup> Frederick Kempe, “Russia’s Venezuela challenge,” Atlantic Council, April 7, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/inflection-points/russia-s-venezuela-challenge/>.

<sup>39</sup> Antonio De Le Cruz, “Rosneft’s Withdrawal amid U.S. Sanctions Contributes to Venezuela’s Isolation,” Center for Strategic & International Studies, April 10, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/rosnefts-withdrawal-amid-us-sanctions-contributes-venezuelas-isolation>.

Defense for Homeland Defense and Global Security, and not under the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs like that of most other regions.

Russia's engagement in Latin America has implications outside of the region too. Russian efforts to leverage new relationships with Latin American countries to its advantage in multilateral organizations and debates about existing norms could have an impact in other countries. Specifically, Russia's campaign to dilute R2P doctrine and the Law of the Sea Convention could potentially find sympathetic ears in Latin America, where Brazil has already expressed opposition to R2P, and Venezuela is concerned about U.S. vessels in the Caribbean. Lastly, if Russia's campaign to be seen as a Great Power is successful, its nondemocratic institutions could be seen by lower income countries as an example of an alternative path to development. Ultimately, Russia's success as an economically successful authoritarian capitalist state could challenge liberal democracy elsewhere.<sup>40</sup>

### ***Recommendations***

The U.S. has a long history of engagement in Latin America. The countries in the Americas achieved independence around the same time, and in most cases have had diplomatic relationships for over 200 years. For all its energy in engaging with the region now and in spite of exchanges as the USSR, Russia is a relative newcomer to the region. The U.S. can succeed in maintaining its position as the partner of choice in the region but to do so it must recognize that its position is being challenged by other countries looking to rise in prominence and gain a strategic advantage by positioning themselves closer to the United States.

In engaging with countries in the region, Russia is unconstrained by democratic norms and processes that would preclude it from dealing with less than perfect institutions and leaders. The United States, on the other hand, abides by processes that limit the types of actors it can engage with and delay or prohibit dealing with some of them, such as in the case of vetting required by Leahy Law.<sup>41</sup> While there might be a temptation to argue against some of these checkpoints so that the U.S. can compete on more equal footing against Russia and other authoritarian rising powers, it is important to remember that the universality of values and norms enshrined in laws like Leahy are what the U.S. is looking to achieve at home and abroad. Abandoning these principles to be able to be more efficient would be misguided.

Russia's engagement with Latin America has been made possible by space created in the region by U.S. disengagement. Conflicts elsewhere have turned U.S. attention away from Latin America. Two countries in the region – Cuba and Venezuela – don't have a diplomatic mission at all and many more are missing an ambassador. Still, for every Latin American person named Vladimir, or Carlos Marx Carrasco as was the case of a recent Minister of Labor in Ecuador, or Stalin González, a Venezuelan opposition leader, there are many more named Nixon Moreno (another Venezuelan opposition leader), or Usnavy (after U.S. Navy). This is to say that the U.S. has a long trajectory of peaceful and productive relationships with the region and a shared cultural capital that it can leverage. In other words, the linkage between the U.S. and Latin

---

<sup>40</sup> Azar Gat, "The Return of Authoritarian Great Powers," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 4 (July/August 2007).

<sup>41</sup> "Leahy Law Fact Sheet," U.S. Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, January 22, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/key-topics-bureau-of-democracy-human-rights-and-labor/human-rights/leahy-law-fact-sheet/>.

America is stronger than that between any other country and Latin America save, perhaps, Spain. Recognizing the importance of these links and continuing to build on them through rhetoric and actions will be crucial in maintaining the U.S. position in the region.

Russia has shown true commitment to the twin goals of its engagement in Latin America. It has also shown a willingness to be flexible and pragmatic about the means it pursues to achieve these goals. If the United States shows commitment to its democratic values and a recognition of the value of its partners in the region, it can maintain its position in the region and impede a Russian challenge. To do so, the U.S. must not abandon its democratic norms in pursuit of the use of tactics like those employed by Russia, and must give democratic Latin American partners at least the same attention that is afforded to them by Russia. The U.S. cannot be everything to everybody, but it is important that it be a good neighbor to the countries in its own region, and that it view them as neighbors with whom to pursue collaboration, rather than as a backyard to defend.



## Chapter 6

# Russia-China: Putin Turns to the East

*By Wade Turvold, Michael B. Dorschner,  
and Michael Burgoyne*

### **Introduction**

The Russia-People's Republic of China (PRC) partnership is perhaps the most important relationship of the 21st Century because it multiplies the already formidable threat from two capable strategic competitors and therefore enhances the challenge to the United States. This chapter will seek to outline Russia's objectives for the relationship, means it is using, and how the United States should address this challenge.

Russia pursues various strategic ends in its relationship with the PRC, including goals related to economics and its place in the international system, but Vladimir Putin's primary strategic goal for Russia remains regime survival, which includes maintenance of the oligarchic and elite power capitalism that forms Putin's base of power. Early in his presidency, Putin explored closer relations with the West, but a series of events in the 2000s such as the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, followed closely by color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, EU expansion to Eastern Europe, and NATO overtures to former Soviet states, convinced Putin the West was irrevocably hostile to Russian interests. Western criticism of, and perceived interference in, Putin's disputed 2011 re-election proved a breaking point, convincing Putin the West was committed to Russian regime change.<sup>1</sup> Western liberal values supporting an open political system, active civil society, free media, independent legislature, transparency in governance, and removal of trade and investment barriers became the primary perceived threat to Putin's regime. Russia's corresponding accelerated outreach to the PRC can be viewed through the lens of providing non-Western options to support regime survival.

Russia sees the PRC as key to its ability to achieve its desired economic end state of increasing Gross Domestic Product (GDP), while expanding state influence in the economy and improving prosperity for its citizens. Specifically, Russia announced its near-term economic goals in May 2018 of sustaining a three percent annual GDP growth rate and halving its domestic poverty rate to 6.6 percent by 2024.<sup>2</sup> The validity of using the PRC to help meet these goals is not unfounded, as the PRC was Russia's sixth largest export destination and eighth largest source of imports in the year 2000, and now occupies the top spot in both categories by a fair margin.<sup>3</sup> This growing economic cooperation between Russia and the PRC is partly due to structural reasons.

<sup>1</sup> Eugene B. Rumer, "Russia's China Policy: This Bear Hug is Real," in *Russia-China Relations: Assessing Common Ground and Strategic Fault Lines*, (Seattle: The National Bureau of Asian Research, July 2017), 16-17.

<sup>2</sup> "The World Bank in Russia: Overview," The World Bank, last updated April 16, 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/russia/overview>.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Workman, "Russia's Top Trading Partners," *World's Top Exports*, March 16, 2020, <http://www.worldstopexports.com/russias-top-import-partners/>.

Russia is flush with natural resources and the PRC needs them. Russia's export-driven economy also requires import of finished goods to satisfy consumer demand, and the PRC nicely fills that role. In the whole, the balanced trade arrangement suits both partners. Any ideological socialist underpinnings to this arrangement are probably now historic artifact.

Finally, one of Russia's strategic ends that coincides with aims of the PRC is an overall focus on resisting and reforming the U.S.-led international system, ultimately creating a multi-polar system that advantages Russia as one of several poles in this system. This strategic end both supports other objectives and in some cases encompasses them, whether this includes ensuring regime survival, working around or eliminating debilitating sanctions, or enhancing Russian prestige on the international stage. A perceived threat in the current international system to both Russia and the PRC are the aforementioned liberal values that underlie many of these institutions, especially as they pertain to human rights and transparency. Both Russia and the PRC see these values in particular as pretexts for other countries to criticize or even interfere in their respective domestic affairs. The color revolutions and other perceived Western influences that caused regime change in other countries remain a prime concern, and both countries strive to insulate themselves from such an eventuality.

### ***Russian Ways and Means***

Vladimir Putin intended to use the emerging 21st century Great Power rivalry between the United States and the PRC as an opportunity to extract economic and political benefits from both sides while maintaining an independent Russian foreign policy.<sup>4</sup> However, a decade of deteriorating relations with the West, punctuated by the sharp break after the Crimea crisis in 2014, changed this calculus and prompted Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's "Pivot to Asia" strategy, which forced a closer alignment with the PRC out of necessity to protect Russian interests and regime stability. An examination of Russia's interactions with the PRC provide some insight into the various ways and means being leveraged to achieve Russia's strategic objectives of regime stability, economic advancement, and reform of the international system into a multi-polar structure. Frequently the interests of these two countries align, but Russia has also demonstrated a willingness to subordinate certain matters of greater national economic, security, and political interest in order to establish a higher baseline for the PRC relationship to benefit overall regime stability.

Russia is now bandwagoning with the PRC to demonstrate geopolitical and economic centrality. The PRC is the world's rising economic star and provides a partner of convenience in countering the U.S.-led world order. In economic, military, and political spheres, the relationship is strengthening. Extensive collaboration in technology, telecommunications, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and digital economy is now taking place.<sup>5</sup> The expanding economic partnership enables both states to collectively gain more global market share, and therefore influence, in promoting a model for future growth at the expense of the West, rather than being led by it.

The complementary economic relationship centered on natural resources is a key driver of this relationship, and an exemplar of this is the Power of Siberia natural gas pipeline that opened in December 2019. Connecting gas fields in Siberia to North East China, this pipeline turns Russia into the PRC's largest natural gas supplier. The PRC's interests in this project are

---

<sup>4</sup> Vasily Kashin, "Russia-China Cooperation: A Russian Perspective," in *Sino-Russian Relations: Perspectives from Russia, China, and Japan*, (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, May 2019), 20.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Bendett and Elsa Kania, "A New Sino-Russian High-Tech Partnership," *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, October 29, 2019, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/new-sino-russian-high-tech-partnership>.



clear, which are providing energy for its growing market while diversifying supply away from the Middle East and the Malacca security dilemma.<sup>6</sup> For Russia, as an energy-producing nation, this pipeline represents security of markets and a shift away from its heavy reliance on European sales. A clear win-win scenario between the two neighbors, this pipeline had actually been under discussion since the 1970's without resolution. Distrust between the Russian and Chinese states influenced the business negotiations, and up until 2014 had prevented agreement on a fixed pricing contract. The deal was quickly finalized in May 2014, just months after the Crimea annexation. The exact details of the pricing agreement have not been released and Russian natural gas provider *Gazprom* has publicly stated that the terms are mutually beneficial, but analysts suggest that implied terms give the PRC a fixed gas supply at a reduced price of twenty-five percent and forty percent lower than the cost of importing overseas liquid natural gas.<sup>7</sup> The Power of Siberia pipeline is an example of Russian alignment with the PRC on mostly Chinese terms, and Russian willingness to accept less than maximized economic and political return on investment in order to bolster a relationship that is proving essential for short-term regime stability. However, plans for a Power of Siberia 2 pipeline were announced in March 2020, with a larger throughput, and using Moscow's preferred route through Mongolia to the PRC which affords Russia flexibility between its Asian and European markets. This new deal indicates greater recent leverage on Russia's part due to increasing demand in the PRC.<sup>8</sup>

Implementation of Russia and the PRC's economic engagement plans, the Eurasian Economic Union and the One Belt One Road initiative, is potentially another way Russia can work with the PRC to improve their economies, while also creating economic and political structures that support their objectives. Both of these programs are intended to increase economic activity in areas proximate to Russia and the PRC, among other purposes, and there have been agreements to integrate the two efforts to benefit both parties.<sup>9</sup> Optimally, joint investments into a common region would secure markets, expand infrastructure links, and perhaps even elevate the stature of both currencies, making both parties less vulnerable to sanctions and other outside interference. However, there are significant obstructions to this integration—not even including the current and future effects of COVID-19—and any significant progress is likely to be made in the mid to long-term, if at all.<sup>10</sup>

Arms sales are critically important to the Russian economy and to Russia's ability to maintain its own military capacity at current scale, while also extending Russian influence with

---

<sup>6</sup> Chinese Premier Hu Jintao first used the term Malacca Dilemma in 2003 to describe China's reliance on energy imported by sea through the Strait of Malacca. Eighty percent of China's energy currently passes through that chokepoint in Southeast Asia. China has since been trying to diversify its sources of energy and routes by which energy is shipped, which China perceives as a strategic vulnerability. For more information, see Navya Mudunuri, "The Malacca Dilemma and Chinese Ambitions: Two Sides of a Coin," *Diplomatist*, July 7, 2020, <https://diplomatist.com/2020/07/07/the-malacca-dilemma-and-chinese-ambitions-two-sides-of-a-coin/>.

<sup>7</sup> Brian Spegele, Wayne Ma, and Gregory L. White, "Russia and China Agree on Long-Sought Natural Gas Supply Contract," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 21, 2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-and-china-agree-on-long-sought-natural-gas-agreement-1400683490>.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Buchanan, "There's No (New) China-Russia Alliance," *The Strategist*, June 26, 2020, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/theres-no-new-china-russia-alliance/>.

<sup>9</sup> Oleg Remyga, "Linking the Eurasian Economic Union and China's Belt and Road," *Reconnecting Asia*, November 9, 2018, <https://reconnectingasia.csis.org/analysis/entries/linking-eurasian-economic-union-and-chinas-belt-and-road/>.

<sup>10</sup> Vladislav Inozemtsev, "Integrating the Eurasian Union and China's Belt and Road: A Bridge Too Far," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 16, no. 91, June 21, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/integrating-the-eurasian-union-and-chinas-belt-and-road-a-bridge-too-far/>.

the arms recipients. Russia is the world's second largest arms exporter, after the United States, and South and Southeast Asia are central to Russia's exports. These regions account for sixty percent of Russia's total weapons sales, and by many estimates, Russia is the Indo-Pacific region's largest arms provider.<sup>11</sup> As evidence of the importance of arms sales in the Indo-Pacific, Russia backed India in the days leading up to the fatal clash along the tense Line of Actual Control with the PRC, and quietly worked behind the scenes afterwards to facilitate the release of captured Indian soldiers.<sup>12</sup> The importance of Russia's arms exports, especially in the Indo-Pacific region, shows that Russia will even take some risk with the 'China-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination' to preserve these sales.<sup>13</sup>

Russian arms sales to the PRC itself represent another aspect of this dynamic. Arms sales between the two countries' surged in the 1990s as Russia unloaded surplus Soviet stock to a PRC market restricted by Tiananmen sanctions, but plateaued in the early 2000s and began declining as the PRC's domestic arms industry became more capable, and Russia was stung by intellectual property (IP) theft. The PRC's violation of the 1996 production agreement for the SU-27SK Flanker and IP theft to design the indigenous J-11B was particularly galling, and Russia stopped selling its most advanced technology. After the Crimea crisis, however, Russia reversed course and agreed to sell the PRC more advanced technology, to include the Sukhoi SU-35 aircraft with some of the world's most advanced engines, and the S-400 Triumph air defense system. While Russia received assurances for more robust intellectual property protection prior to these sales, Chinese deficiency in domestic engine technology presents a significant risk for IP theft.<sup>14</sup> Russia's decision to allow these sales suggests a willingness to accept potential future loss in exchange for a short-term financial support and regime stability in a time of need.<sup>15</sup> Other ongoing security cooperation efforts also present a tale of collaboration with caveats. Sino-Russo military engagement has been steadily increasing, both bilateral and multilateral; to now represent Russia's most robust engagement with any foreign country. This includes dialogues, educational exchanges, competitions, and exercises. A maritime cooperation exercise established in 2012 now rotates between Russian and Chinese waters, and Russia has begun inviting PLA participation in national defense exercises, as showcased in the massive *Vostok 2018*.<sup>16</sup> Notably, Putin announced in 2019 that Russia was helping the PRC develop a missile attack early warning system, and furthermore labeled the relationship as, "an allied relationship in the full sense of a multifaceted strategic partnership."<sup>17</sup> While some of this cooperation represents more signaling over substance, it all focuses on challenging the U.S.-led security order. The trust deficit between

---

<sup>11</sup> Matt Bartlett, "Russian Arms Flood Southeast Asia," *The Interpreter by the Lowy Institute*, February 8, 2019, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/russian-arms-flood-southeast-asia>.

<sup>12</sup> Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "Russian Envoy to India Meets Foreign Secretary in Show of Support amid LAC Stand Off," *The Economic Times*, June 4, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/russian-envoy-to-india-meets-foreign-secretary-in-show-of-support-amid-lac-stand-off/articleshow/76162439.cms>; Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "How Russia's 'Quiet Diplomacy' Helped in Reducing Tensions Between India and China," *The Economic Times*, July 6, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/how-russias-quiet-diplomacy-helped-in-reducing-tensions-between-delhi-and-beijing/articleshow/76802915.cms>.

<sup>13</sup> Buchanan, "There's No (New) China-Russia Alliance."

<sup>14</sup> Richard Weitz, "Sino-Russian Security Ties," In *Russia-China Relations: Assessing Common Ground and Strategic Fault Lines*, (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, July 2017), 30-31.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Weitz, "Sino-Russian Security Ties."

<sup>16</sup> Kashin, "Russia-China Cooperation: A Russian Perspective," 10-13.

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan E. Hillman, "China and Russia: Economic Unequals," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, July 15, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-and-russia-economic-unequals>.

the two militaries appears to be narrowing through increasingly substantial engagement but remains an inhibitor to full alignment.

Russia has collaborated with the PRC in various ways to further its goal of reforming the international system to better serve its interests. The two countries have effectively cooperated in a variety of global and regional fora to re-write existing rules and norms and influence emerging global standards. For instance, as with the PRC, Russia also holds one of the five permanent seats on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and thus can veto any proposal that is contrary to its interests.

The United Nations Human Rights Council is another forum where Russia and the PRC have collaborated within the existing system for mutual benefit. From 2009 to present, Russia and the PRC have worked to minimize the Council's impact on their human rights practices, accomplishing this in two ways. First, they have actively tried to dilute the mechanisms available to the Council and its member states to draw attention to human rights abuses. Second, they have tried to redefine human rights to be more in line with how Russia and the PRC define the term, in an effort to systematically remove the possibility of UN criticism of these countries' practices.<sup>18</sup> Removing human rights concerns, or ameliorating their effects, addresses one of the major concerns Russia and the PRC have with the current international system, as it minimizes the potential of human rights abuses to be used as a justification for foreign interference in their domestic affairs, especially if abuses approached a Responsibility to Protect threshold. This is perceived as an effective mechanism for protecting regime stability.

Russia has also been active regionally with the PRC in creating organizations and mechanisms that support their objectives. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization was created in 1996 as the Shanghai Five group, ostensibly to address the terrorism threat in the region. Since its founding, it has grown to eight countries with several observers and has taken on roles outside of counter-terrorism, to include broader security activities, economic cooperation, and cultural events.<sup>19</sup> The SCO represents an alternative to the existing U.S. alliance structure for supporting regional stability.

Another organization that allows Russia to advance its economic and political interests is the BRICS, a dialogue of five large and emerging economies: Brazil, Russia, India, the PRC, and South Africa. Together these states comprise forty-two percent of the world population and twenty-three percent of global GDP. In particular, the PRC and Russia, the world's second and sixth largest economies, respectively, are using this forum to degrade the international institutions that underpin the current U.S.-led world order. Methods such as questioning the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, quarreling over the effectiveness and funding of the World Health Organization, and building alternative financial instruments, including new ways to provide grants and loans during the pandemic, are being used to advance political legitimacy and erode the current multilateral systems.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Geoffrey Roberts, "Russia and China's Assault on the International Human Rights System," *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, February 6, 2020, <http://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/russia-and-chinas-assault-on-the-international-human-rights-system/>.

<sup>19</sup> Shanghai Cooperation Organization, accessed June 12, 2020, <http://eng.sectsc.org/>.

<sup>20</sup> Nazia Hussain, "BRICS in Time of Pandemic: Leadership from Emerging Economies?," *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies Commentary* No. 102/2020, May 22, 2020, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/cms/global-health-security-covid-19-and-its-impacts-brics-in-time-of-pandemic-leadership-from-emerging-economies/>.

### ***Opportunities, Limits, and Challenges***

In 2019, U.S. Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats testified to the Senate that Russia and the PRC are more closely aligned now than at any point since the mid-1950s and the relationship is likely to strengthen in the coming year.<sup>21</sup> Both Russia and the PRC have permanent seats in the UNSC, stature in the UN, and thus are strong partners for each other in international organizations. They also share a concern about the underlying values in these organizations, and how these values could threaten their domestic situation, especially as it affects regime stability. In this sense, they have strong reasons to work together, even if they differ in some of their approaches. In doing so, they are eroding once well-established security norms and increasing the risk of regional conflicts.

Russia has several economic opportunities, especially as it concerns the PRC. In particular, the PRC has incentives to increase its oil, and especially gas, imports from Russia to mitigate its Malacca dilemma, but market access and production infrastructure limits are hampering further development. The opportunity for Russia to exert leverage over a PRC dependent on Russian hydrocarbons would indeed be an appealing prospect for President Putin, as a way to gain some influence in the partnership. As it currently stands, however, collaboration in technology development is a more positive aspect of the relationship. Russia and the PRC are cooperating, through their strategic partnership, in the development of non-Western technology. These technologies, intended to replace Western modernism and particularly American ingenuity, present the prospect for Russia and the PRC to eliminate dependence on external sources of expertise.<sup>22</sup>

While the aforementioned opportunities drive these two countries together, there are factors that limit this association. Both sides studiously refuse to label the relationship an alliance despite the vague verbiage Putin used in 2019; Wang Yi called it a “bilateral strategic cooperation,” and Putin and Xi upgraded the relationship to a “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination” in June 2019.<sup>23</sup> In any case, the relationship is an asymmetric one driven by economic and demographic factors that pre-determines Russia’s role as junior partner in the relationship, though neither side wants this appellation. Taken to its logical conclusion, that role undermines the Putin regime’s ability to rally national pride or stake a role as a global Great Power. In the same vein, while aligning closer with the PRC can help shape global norms to better insulate Russia from threatening Western influence and ideology, it will not moderate other existing friction points in the relationship. Public opinion still reflects a strong historic distrust between the two countries, where according to one 2018 poll sixty percent of Russians in Eastern Siberia consider the PRC’s rise to be a threat, and a popular conspiracy theory whispers that a secret agreement gifts the PRC a small piece of Russian territory annually.<sup>24</sup> For its part, memories linger in the PRC of Russia’s land grab and role in the Unequal Treaties in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, which form the core of the Century of Humiliation narrative the CCP pushes domestically to legitimize its rule.

---

<sup>21</sup> Daniel R. Coats, “Statement for the Record: Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community,” *Senate Select Committee on Intelligence*, January 29, 2019, 4, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/2019-ATA-SFR--SSCI.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> Bendett and Kania, “A New Sino-Russian High-Tech Partnership.”

<sup>23</sup> Buchanan, “There’s No (New) China-Russia Alliance.”

<sup>24</sup> Eugene Chausovsky, “The Ever-Shifting Strategic Triangle Between Russia, China, and the U.S.,” *STRATFOR*, June 4, 2019, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/ever-shifting-strategic-triangle-between-russia-china-and-us>.

Similarly, Russian reluctance to back the PRC's expansive territorial claims in the East and South China Seas for fear of alienating other potential economic and security partners in Asia is mirrored by Chinese reluctance to support Russian sponsored popular uprisings, referendums, and threats to sovereignty in Eastern Europe for fear of losing control in Chinese controlled territories.<sup>25</sup>

There are also limits economically. The Russian economy is overly reliant on hydrocarbon exports, and lack of economic diversification, infrastructure constraints, and internal corruption will leave the Russian economy at the mercy of global oil prices for the foreseeable future. This prospect should be fresh in the memories of Moscow leadership, who saw the market flooded with oil with a simultaneous significant decrease in demand during the beginning of the pandemic, which resulted in extremely low oil prices in the international marketplace for a period. This Russian vulnerability provides an opportunity for the PRC to sign potential long-term deals at extremely low prices at opportune times. While the Russian economy and citizens have been hardened to these economic downturns, this situation does not bode well for long-term economic growth. Moreover, though technology development with the PRC is seemingly a positive step to keep pace with Western innovation, continuous Russian exposure to the PRC's aggressive intellectual property theft scheme may not result in sustained indigenous advancement in technology. These limits, when combined, may see a future Russia reduced to being a resource appendage of the PRC.

COVID-19 has played the role of disruptor across the globe, and its ultimate effects will not be clear for some time. In this sense, opportunities for Russia are potentially balanced with challenges. For instance, global discussions about diversifying supply chains before the pandemic have only been accelerated as countries now see the security implications of this lack of diversification, in addition to the pre-existing business implications. Although it is highly unlikely that globalization would see reverses to the extent of bipolar arrangement as during the Cold War, some movement into separate economic camps is possible which would potentially drive Russia and the PRC closer together.

### ***Implications for United States, Friends, and Allies***

The implications of the Russia-PRC strategic partnership for the United States, and its friends and allies, are significant and varied. Russia and the PRC both place regime stability as their foremost priority, and while both parties will do whatever it takes to ensure regime survival, they both seek economic growth as the most accessible method of pacifying the populace to enable this outcome. Furthermore, providing an alternative to the U.S.-led international order, one in which they are two more poles in a multipolar arrangement, is the desired outcome for both states. Both Russia and the PRC are significant strategic challenges in their own right, and multiply in complexity when paired. Addressing this extraordinary danger will be the strategic challenge of our age.

Russia's complex economic condition, and burgeoning strategic partnership with the PRC, will present equally complex repercussions for the United States and its friends and allies. In particular, the complementary trade relationships, overland energy transfers, and growth of regional trade and security initiatives and organizations will insulate both parties to an extent if faced with future diplomatic actions or economic sanctions from Western countries or intergovernmental organizations.

---

<sup>25</sup> Ian Storey, "Moscow, Beijing and the South China Sea Dispute: Convergence and Divergence," *China US Focus*, October 19, 2017, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/moscow-beijing-and-the-south-china-sea-dispute-convergence-and-divergence>.



Both Russia and the PRC share common interest in weakening the U.S. alliance system to disrupt systemically Western liberal influence. While Russia focuses on disrupting the NATO alliance in Europe, and the PRC prioritizes unsettling the Japan and Korea alliances with the United States in Asia, there is enough overlap in intent to enable both to exert pressure in the opposing regions. The PRC's One Belt One Road economic inroads into Eastern Europe provide a tool for creating dissent within NATO and weakening the consensus against Russia. Likewise, Russia has a role to play in exploiting Korean-Japanese tensions over unsettled historic grievances in a way that splits those alliances in the PRC's favor. The July 2019 joint Russian-Chinese military overflight of the disputed Dokdo islands, which triggered a military response from both Korea and Japan but then devolved into political squabbling between the two over who owned the territory and therefore the right to respond, best exemplifies this capacity. Closer alignment of Russian and Chinese political and security objectives will only continue to increase stress on the U.S. alliance system.<sup>26</sup>

More broadly, Russian and PRC goals to reform the international system have significant implications in multiple theaters. In short, this is the system that the United States, along with its friends and allies, created after World War II. This system reflects the values of its founders and provides significant advantages to the West. While these systems are in many ways meant to be democratic, the changes Russia and the PRC want to make would alter some of the foundational values in these organizations. A related concern is that by changing the system to make it more in line with Russian and PRC values and priorities, it would provide a safe space for other authoritarian governments that would legitimate or at least permit behaviors inconsistent with the current structure. With COVID-19 potentially enabling various countries' leaders to assume more power under the pretext of fighting the virus, it is not unreasonable to assume the world may have more authoritarian governments after COVID-19 has run its course than before, so this is a real concern.

### ***Recommendations***

While initial statements from the Biden administration suggest continuity with the Trump administration's Russia and PRC policy, some evolution of the U.S. strategic approach could affect more positive outcomes in region. These recommendations seek to help that effort.

To provide effective recommendations to the United States and its allies, it is first important to note which actions are unlikely to work. Policy makers must recognize that **splitting the partnership of the two countries through U.S. actions may not be fully possible in the near term**. This recognition follows from acknowledging the vital interests of each regime as they see it. If Russia's alignment with the PRC centers on a shared recognition that regime survival is their top priority, and that it is threatened by Western ideology and color revolutions, then both countries are in agreement that their primary security threat comes from the United States. Unlike during the Cold War, when the toxic relationship between the two countries opened space for Henry Kissinger's realignment of the strategic triangle, today there is far less motivation for Russia and the PRC to readjust as any move toward the West would only heighten the internal threat against the ruling regimes. Only security guarantees to the Putin

---

<sup>26</sup> Brad Lendon, "Why Russia and China Are Wading into a Centuries' Old Dispute over a Tiny Island Cluster," *CNN*, July 27, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/07/26/asia/south-korea-russia-japan-china-warplanes-analysis-intl-hnk/index.html>.

regime and economic relief from Crimea sanctions would yield any impact on Russia's assessment of the Western liberal threat to regime stability. However, this is impossible to do while still upholding U.S. values with regard to Crimea, and it is unlikely that Putin would trust the West after a decade-plus of mistrust in any case.

While it may not be possible to split this partnership, **it may be possible to incentivize Russia to moderate its support of the PRC in the Indo-Pacific.** Economic integration between the Russian Far East and non-PRC partners in Asia that could be accomplished without violating Crimea sanctions would create political and economic considerations that may lead to this effect. In particular, if Japan resolved the Kuril Islands dispute and normalized trade relations with Russia, however unlikely, it could allow Japan to prioritize its defense planning against the PRC threat, while creating ties between Russia and a PRC competitor.

To address the challenge presented by Russia and the PRC, the Biden Administration has proposed that the **United States needs to show positive world leadership and substantively re-engage globally.** A model for this engagement is the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, which is nominally not against anything, but instead champions each states' sovereignty, fair trade, and the role of regional institutions. U.S. government leadership and other figures need to support this positive approach by taking visible action. This is achieved by visibly engaging partners and allies at all levels, and expanding engagement with countries beyond the military domain. This is not only good practice because it has demonstrably been shown to work in the post-World War II era, but also because Russia and the PRC engage where the United States does not. Failing to provide this global leadership opens the door to Russia and the PRC, who are more than willing to lead.

As part of this engagement, **the United States needs to redouble its efforts to support and strengthen its existing alliance system.** Scholars and policymakers wistfully reference the strategic triangle, though with our alliance partners we expand beyond just these three vertices into a different shape that advantages the United States. A multinational approach to Russia and the PRC is more effective than a unilateral response, and regular alliance maintenance will be critical to resisting revisionist pressures. This effort to strengthen the alliance system needs to expand beyond military exercises, arms sales, and senior leader dialogues to encompass the diplomatic, economic, and, in some cases, development communities. The United States and its allies, when appropriate, should also prioritize and increase spending on joint research and development, especially in emerging technologies. A whole of government approach, across the alliance network, will be necessary to address the burgeoning Russia-PRC relationship.

Beyond the U.S. Alliance system, **the United States and its friends and allies need to support the international system they themselves created through statements and actions – both word and deed.** The international system has proven to be resilient, even if it is not perfect. Instead of focusing on negative aspects of the system, the United States and its partners would gain more by continuing to be strong supporters of the system and reminding constituent states why they joined and how it has benefited them. This support of the international system has practical applications during the COVID-19 pandemic, when its members can best observe its utility, and its value can be immeasurable to countries that need its support. All of this can be done while concurrently calling out Russian and PRC efforts to change or circumvent a system that is largely working for its members.

Finally, **the United States needs to improve its external messaging,** both to partners and allies as well as to potential adversaries. Consistent, unambiguous messaging to partners and allies reassures them of U.S. commitment and helps build consensus necessary to address large challenges. Consistent, unambiguous messaging also provides very clear policy positions to adversaries, which prevents misunderstandings from spiraling into conflict.



## Chapter 7

# Russia and Northeast Asia: Unrealized Potential

*By Wade Turvold, Michael B. Dorschner,  
and Michael Burgoyne*

### ***Introduction***

Russia's global interests include sustaining the current regime, developing its economy, and resisting and reforming the U.S.-led international system to establish Russia as one of several global powers. Russia's objectives in Northeast Asia that nest within its global ambitions primarily include expansion of economic relationships as part of its "Turn to the East" policy. Russia's economic relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC) currently dwarfs those with the rest of Northeast Asia, and the "Turn to the East" policy would optimally enhance these relationships in an effort to meaningfully diversify its economic ties. Russia's strategy in Northeast Asia is therefore coherent with its international goals, but more nuanced because of Russia's strategic partnership with the PRC, and because of the unique economic potential of the region. This chapter will address Russia's interactions with the Republic of Korea (Korea), Taiwan, Mongolia, and Japan. It will also complement the Russia-PRC chapter in this book by showing how the Russia-PRC relationship enables and constrains Russia's role in Northeast Asia.

The impetus for Russia's "Turn to the East" policy was to seek new markets before, and especially after, economic sanctions resulting from its unlawful annexation of Crimea reduced the viability of Western economic relationships. Russia also seeks to develop the Russia Far East (RFE) region, which is proximate to many of the larger Asian economies including the PRC, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. Russia hopes that increased economic activity will result in more foreign direct investment, increased trade volume, and a generally better standard of living for its citizens in the region. Russia's strategic approach to Korea includes the possibility that better economic relations with Korea could also include the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), which would ideally lead to a more stable and peaceful Eastern border. Similarly, potential Russian engagement with Taiwan would not be straightforward, and would be influenced by Russia's relationship with the PRC and its "One China" Principle.

Russia's relationship with Mongolia follows a slightly different pattern than its engagement with the rest of Northeast Asia, and encompasses more than economic ties. An early ally of the Soviet Union with cultural and geographic links to the Asian heartland, Mongolia in many ways has closer resemblance to the former Soviet Central Asia republics than to other Northeast Asian states. Mongolia's relationship with Russia today reflects these historical and cultural ties. Despite Mongolia's standing as a vibrant and free democracy, its challenging geography limits its strategic options. Completely surrounded by Russia and the PRC with no land bridge or ports to guarantee third country border or market access, Mongolia has an incentive to maintain good relations with both big neighbors, which remains the principle pillar

of Mongolian foreign policy. Russia's interest in Mongolia is therefore primarily one of preserving influence in Russia's near abroad and maintaining Great Power status in the face of expanding Chinese economic and political influence.

Russia pursues economic ties with Japan, but its relationship is also tinged with historical underpinnings. Russia's experience with Japan dates back to encounters during Russian expansion into East Asia in the mid-19th Century, ultimately clashing in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05. Japan's convincing defeat of Russia in that war shocked most of the world and announced Japan's coming of age as a modern Great Power. Following World War II, however, the tables were turned. The Soviet Union, then part of the Allied powers, declared war on Japan in August 1945, and upon conclusion of the war annexed the Southern Kuril Islands. Japan considers the southern four islands of the chain as its own Northern Territories. Multiple Japanese attempts to recover these islands since then have been unsuccessful. Current efforts by Japan to negotiate a settlement in this dispute will not succeed because Japan and Russia currently have divergent core interests. Japan wants to settle its lingering World War II era conflicts and so settle the dispute, and Russia wants to sustain legitimacy as a Great Power which makes it reluctant to cede any territory under its control.

### ***Russian Ways and Means***

Russia pursues its objectives in this region primarily through economic means, though also in limited ways through governance and providing security. Mongolia, is, in fact, the only nation in Northeast Asia where Russia provides security as a means of influence. However, while Russia has historically been Mongolia's security guarantor, Mongolia carefully maintains an independent foreign policy through a "Third Neighbor Policy" that emphasizes cooperation with international democratic partners in addition to its two large neighbors.<sup>1</sup> Manifested through robust security contributions to UN Peacekeeping and to coalition operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, Mongolia establishes diplomatic flexibility through international relations. Those troop contributions to Iraq and Afghanistan as a NATO partner have generated occasional Russian concern as they threaten Russia's traditional security role with Mongolia. Russia seeks to protect this role using myriad other security cooperation means. For instance, Russia hosts an annual bilateral military exercise with Mongolia and requested Mongolian participation with the PRC in the massive *Vostok* war games in 2018, adding international legitimacy to Russia's security arrangements in the Far East. Russia has also encouraged Mongolia to upgrade from observer status to full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and remains the principle supplier of military equipment to the Mongolian military, maintaining de facto veto power over Mongolian defense acquisitions, guaranteeing continued economic advantage and security influence.

Russia's role as security guarantor notwithstanding, its strongest influence in Mongolia is actually best exercised through lingering cultural soft power. Fiercely proud and independent, Mongolians credit the Soviet Union with protecting their independent state from the PRC in the early 20th century and owe much of the major infrastructure to Soviet investments. Russia enjoys goodwill from the Mongolian people, and public opinion overwhelmingly ranks Russia as its most popular partner.<sup>2</sup> Russia maintains a massive embassy in Ulaanbaatar, supports study and cultural programs, and enjoys support from the older generations that ubiquitously speak

---

<sup>1</sup> Mongolia National Security Council, "National Security Concept of Mongolia," <https://nsc.gov.mn/mn>.

<sup>2</sup> International Republican Institute Center for Insights in Survey Research with Government of Canada, National Survey of Mongolian Public Opinion, March 2016, 53.

Russian as a second language. Russian goodwill is of course only half the story; with two neighbors, each has an impact. Historically, China has always been Mongolia's primary security threat, and though economic ties have dramatically increased, resulting in an overwhelming economic dependency, Mongolian leaders quietly question Chinese intentions, reinforcing the need for strong security relations with Russia.

Russia's potential relationship with Japan is limited by the Kuril Islands dispute, where it administers and exercises sovereignty over islands Japan refers to as the Northern Territories. Japan and the Soviet Union first addressed this disagreement together in 1956, when the Soviet Union offered to return control of the southernmost two islands to Japan in exchange for it renouncing its claim to the northernmost two islands as part of a peace treaty ending World War II. Japan refused the offer, and the dispute over the islands remains, despite numerous failed attempts to rectify the situation. An attendant consequence of this impasse is that World War II remains officially unresolved between Japan and Russia. The world situation has also changed dramatically in the intervening years, and currently Russia is becoming more closely aligned with the PRC, as noted in another chapter of this book. Settling this dispute is important for Japan on many levels, including finally concluding World War II, the historical memory of which still generates much regional animosity toward Japan.

Aside from the obvious fact that Russia has the dominant position in this dispute because it currently administers the islands, Russia's interests are best served by retaining control of its possessions. The islands' Exclusive Economic Zone provides Russia access to rich fisheries, as well as possible oil and gas deposits.<sup>3</sup> Russian military bases on the islands enable it to project power into the North Pacific Ocean. The islands enclose the Sea of Okhotsk, a bastion for Russia's Pacific Fleet ballistic missile submarines, and give Russian vessels unimpeded access to the Pacific Ocean.<sup>4</sup> Russia's sovereignty and security are therefore enhanced by refusing to negotiate these territories away.

Russia retains influence in the SCO, which really only affects Mongolia in Northeast Asia, and in recent years both Russia and the PRC have exerted considerable pressure on Mongolia to upgrade its membership, suggesting that future One Belt One Road and Eurasian Economic Union development projects could be prioritized to SCO full members. While Mongolia has been a SCO observer since 2005, it has consistently resisted invitations to join as a full member in line with its preference for non-alignment. While it may not be in the interest of other Northeast Asia nations to join the SCO, Russia would like to see its former client states join the framework to strengthen SCO legitimacy through broadened international membership.<sup>5</sup>

Though Russia seeks to build influence in the region through aforementioned security relationships, sovereignty, and governance through the SCO, Russian ways and means to achieve its goals in Northeast Asia are primarily through the use of economic tools. Though there are Great Power aspects to its actions, Russia generally behaves well in Northeast Asia in contrast to its misconduct in Europe. In short, Russia is remarkably unremarkable in its approach to achieving its ends in Northeast Asia. There are challenges, however, to Russia's efforts in region.

---

<sup>3</sup> "Japan Objects to Russian Geological Survey Near Disputed Isles," *Intellasia.net*, June 27, 2020, <https://www.intellasia.net/japan-objects-to-russian-geological-survey-near-disputed-isles-790062>.

<sup>4</sup> Tetsuo Kotani, "China and Russia in the Western Pacific: Implications for Japan and the United States," *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, April 18, 2019, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/china-and-russia-in-the-western-pacific-implications-for-japan-and-the-united-states/>.

<sup>5</sup> Sergey Radchenko, "As China and Russia Draw Closer, Mongolia Feels the Squeeze," *The ASAN Forum*, October 2018.



If Russia wants to take advantage of economic opportunities in Northeast Asia more broadly, its main challenge will be balancing its economic priorities with geopolitical considerations of its primary partner in the region, the PRC. The PRC levied informal economic sanctions on Korea over the emplacement of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in 2017, and has taken many actions against Taiwan to show its displeasure since Tsai Ing-Wen became President in 2016.<sup>6</sup> Disagreement between the PRC and these entities could adversely affect Russian economic interests in region. Russia is also at risk of being brought into some undesirable situation, or that Russia would be judged complicit regardless.

Similar to its relationship with the PRC, Russia's economy is mostly complementary to that of both Korea and Taiwan. Russia has found markets for its natural resources, and sees both states as sources of finished goods and higher technology products. Particular to Korea, Russia offers potential transit routes to more distant markets through either its Trans-Siberian Railway, or the nascent Northern Sea Route, both of which are proximate to Korea and could be beneficial to it. However, these potential transit routes are also a limitation, and exemplify a larger issue in the RFE: without significant investment in port, rail, and other infrastructure, these transit routes will remain potential unrealized.<sup>7</sup>

Russian and Korean approaches to trade and investment relations can best be described as making big plans but implementing them slowly. For example, as early as 2008 both sides declared their intention to form a strategic partnership, but concrete action has failed to materialize. Korea has proposed several initiatives to increase the scope and depth of the economic relationship, but these initiatives have been slow to implement. In 2017, President Moon Jae-in proposed his "9-Bridge Strategy" that would focus Russian and Korean trade and investment efforts in nine broad categories including infrastructure, agriculture, and fisheries.<sup>8</sup> While still in the early stages of implementation, there are concerns that only a few of the focus areas are viable in the short term.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, efforts to create a free trade agreement between the Eurasian Economic Union and Korea have stalled because Russia is worried about advantaging Korea, and while Korea would prefer investment protections in place before investing, Russia is hungry to see evidence of investments first.<sup>10</sup>

Russia's desire to increase economic activity with Korea are also hampered by geopolitical hurdles. For instance, Russia aspires to include the DPRK in this economic activity in an effort to stabilize the Korean Peninsula, and this end state is broadly in sync with that of the Moon Jae-in administration, though various trade and investment agreements have been negated by sanctions against the DPRK or undercut by Pyongyang's saber-rattling.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, Russia's efforts to engage Korea must acknowledge the reality that Korea is a treaty ally of the

---

<sup>6</sup> Chun Han Wong, "Taiwan's President Renews Call to Hold Firm Against Chinese Pressure," *Wall Street Journal*, May 20, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/taiwans-president-renews-call-to-hold-firm-against-chinese-pressure-11589977931>.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony V. Rinna, "Moscow's 'Turn to the East' and Challenges to Russia-South Korea Economic Collaboration Under the New Northern Policy," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 10, no. 2 (2019): 165.

<sup>8</sup> Liudmila Zakharova, "Economic Relations Between Russia and South Korea in the New Northern Policy," *Korea Economic Institute of America Academic Paper Series*, December 10, 2019, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Zakharova, "Economic Relations between Russia and South Korea," 6-7.

<sup>10</sup> Zakharova, "Economic Relations between Russia and South Korea," 3-4.

<sup>11</sup> Zakharova, "Economic Relations between Russia and South Korea," 5-6.

United States and thus is more likely to adhere to sanctions regimes and to cooperate with the United States on issues that may be contrary to Russian interests in the region. This dynamic is already at play, and has probably negatively impacted Russian efforts to establish trilateral trade and infrastructure with Korea and the DPRK.

Trade between Russia and Taiwan is surprisingly robust, considering the influence of the PRC on both parties. It is dominated by Russian export of natural resources, including coal, oil, and iron, and import of finished goods such as computers and auto parts. Overall trade has grown over the past decade, with Russia holding a significant trade surplus in the relationship.<sup>12</sup> Notably, Russia and Taiwan have a visa waiver program, with Russian citizens eligible for a stay up to twenty-one days in Taiwan without a visa. This program supplements Taiwan's push for more tourism to make up for decline in tour group numbers from the PRC since 2016. Two-way tourism between Russia and Taiwan has increased, with a seventy percent rise of Russian visits to Taiwan from 2018 to 2019.<sup>13</sup>

While Russia has ceded most economic influence in Mongolia to the PRC, Russia still maintains dominance in key electricity and fuel markets. Mongolia's energy grid maintains necessary connections with Russia to help meet demand, importing power with unfavorable pricing during periods of peak use, which gives Russia economic and political leverage.<sup>14</sup> Russia blocked a 2016 Mongolian government plan to build a hydropower plant along Mongolia's northern Eg River to shore up domestic power production. Funded by a US\$1 billion Chinese development loan, Russia raised concerns over potential environmental impacts on Lake Baikal, causing the PRC to suspend the project despite Mongolian support. Russia in turn offered to export additional electricity to meet Mongolian demand, increasing Mongolian reliance on Russian energy, and resulting in Mongolian politicians railing against unfair dependency conditions.<sup>15</sup>

Russia's proximity to Japan could facilitate economic opportunity across a range of sectors. For instance, Japan currently imports most of its energy through the Strait of Malacca, while its Russian neighbor is rich in hydrocarbon deposits and could potentially mitigate this strategic vulnerability for Japan. Overall, Japan is the world's third largest economy and a source of technology that Russia could use if it were to diversify its economy, as well as a source of high quality manufactured goods for the Russian market. In an attempt to develop a stronger economic relationship, Japan has pressured its corporations to invest in the Russian economy despite Japanese sanctions on Russia following the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea. Japan would benefit economically from closer association with Russia, and these closer ties could also eventually lead to resolution of the Kuril Islands dispute.<sup>16</sup> Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party attempted to woo Russia into resolution of the dispute by offering business deals as late as

---

<sup>12</sup> Ministry of Economic Affairs, Bureau of Foreign Trade, "Taiwan-Russia Economic Relations," December 5, 2018, [https://www.trade.gov.tw/english/Pages/Detail.aspx?nodeID=2912&pid=655091&dl\\_DateRange=all&txt\\_SD=&txt\\_ED=&txt\\_Keyword=&Pageid=0](https://www.trade.gov.tw/english/Pages/Detail.aspx?nodeID=2912&pid=655091&dl_DateRange=all&txt_SD=&txt_ED=&txt_Keyword=&Pageid=0).

<sup>13</sup> Chris Chang, "Rep. Office of the MTC Optimistic About Taiwan-Russia Ties," *Taiwan News*, May 14, 2020, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3933978>.

<sup>14</sup> Energy Charter Secretariat, "In-depth Review of the Investment Climate and Market Structure in the Energy Sector of Mongolia," Brussels (2013): 55-66.

<sup>15</sup> "Russia Stalls China's \$1 Billion Hydropower Loan for Mongolia," *Bloomberg*, July 11, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Linda Sieg and Takashi Umekawa, "Government Lobbies Wary Firms to Invest in Russia in Bid to Resolve Territorial Dispute," *The Japan Times*, November 2, 2016, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/11/02/national/politics-diplomacy/government-lobbies-wary-firms-invest-russia-bid-resolve-territorial-dispute/>.

September 2019, though this is only the latest of numerous attempts by Japan's ruling party to finally resolve the dispute.<sup>17</sup> This is no longer a realistic proposal, though, because the PRC has become Russia's East Asia partner of choice, and because Russia is wary of how United States' influence on its alliance partner could affect Japan's decision-making regarding Russia.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Opportunities, Limits, and, Challenges***

Russia's relationships in Northeast Asia support its strategic goals of developing its economy to sustain the power of the current autocratic regime. Russia's relative lack of bad behavior in the region, as compared to Europe, and Russia's desire to develop the RFE present it opportunities. However, the difficult history and existing relationships within the region, along with Russia's own inability to diversify its economy beyond hydrocarbon sales, is limiting Russia's progress. Additionally, Russia's growing partnership with the PRC will present both challenges and opportunities to Russia and the other stakeholders within the region.

Russia has shown that it pursues a foreign policy sometimes at odds with that of the PRC. If Russia continues to strengthen economic relationships with both Korea and Taiwan, it presumably would be less likely to jeopardize these relationships if it was deriving significant trade and investment benefits from them. An exception would be if the cross-Strait situation worsens significantly, and the PRC applies substantial pressure on Russia to take some sort of action due to Taiwan's status as one of the PRC's core interests. Regarding Taiwan, Russia acts similarly to most countries in its management of relations. Moscow maintains unofficial relations with Taipei, with both capitals hosting unofficial organizations performing traditional embassy functions, though, again, this is contrary to PRC preferences.

Minus the complications a cross-Strait conflict would entail, Russia could integrate well into the Northeast Asia market economy where sometimes the only connection bringing countries together is tightly joined trade and investment relationships. And while these close economic relationships can enable countries to use them coercively, such as the PRC did to express its displeasure with THAAD in Korea, Russia would be less likely to use coercive economic tools in its Far East region because this region is already among Russia's poorest, and thus less resilient to economic shocks. However, this could change if the RFE gained significant leverage by becoming the region's primary oil supplier. In the long term, stronger economic relations between Russia and other countries in Northeast Asia could provide some level of diversification Russia needs, and have a moderating effect on Russian behavior regarding the need to support the PRC.

While the PRC's rising economic clout has displaced Russia as the dominant market for Mongolian goods and services, accounting now for nearly ninety percent of Mongolian exports, Russia still maintains some of its traditional political and security sphere of influence in Mongolia.<sup>19</sup> Despite laudable efforts to generate strategic options through its Third Neighbor Policy, Mongolia remains physically isolated between Russia and the PRC, and this curse of geography impacts all decisions and limits Mongolia's options. When Mongolians are asked who

---

<sup>17</sup> "Putin Rebuffs Call by Japan's Abe to Sign WWII Peace Treaty," *The Moscow Times*, September 5, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/09/05/putin-rebuffs-call-by-japans-abe-to-sign-world-war-two-peace-treaty-a67162>.

<sup>18</sup> James D.J. Brown, "Time for Japan to Reassess its Russia Policy," *The Japan Times*, July 27, 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2019/07/26/commentary/japan-commentary/time-japan-reassess-russia-policy/>.

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, "Mongolia—Market Overview," *Export.gov*, August 8, 2017, <https://www.export.gov/apex/article2?id=Mongolia-Market-Overview>.

they trust more between neighbors, historical precedent always weighs in Russia's favor. Despite this advantage, Mongolian independence and its vibrant democracy present challenges to Russia's efforts to maintain strong influence in its near-abroad. While Russian media permeates the Mongolian market, younger generations of Mongolians increasingly choose English as a second language, opting to engage with the West.<sup>20</sup> Russian economic weakness and global overreach also leave little remaining capital for economic or security investments in Mongolia. Mongolia's development needs are vast, and tangible improvements are national priorities, so while Mongolia welcomes offers from both neighbors' Eurasian Economic Union and One Belt One Road initiatives, follow-through and groundbreaking takes priority over empty promises.

Partnership with Japan would undoubtedly multiply Russia's economic potential, but Russia sees the PRC as increasingly able to fulfill that role as the two co-develop their technology sectors. President Putin can also use the Kuril Islands dispute to demonstrate authority to his domestic audience and play to his populist base, enhancing his ability to maintain, and to extend, his grip on governance. Russia sees itself as a global Great Power, including and increasingly in the Indo-Pacific region, and Great Powers do not cede territory to partners of a strategic competitor. Russia therefore maintains its legitimacy by refusing to seriously negotiate the Kuril Islands dispute with Japan.<sup>21</sup>

COVID-19 has perhaps accentuated the core dynamic of the Russia-PRC relationship and at the same time limited the opportunity for the states of Northeast Asia to respond. The PRC has become very aggressive in its geopolitical dealing and simultaneously very heavy handed in domestic policy since the onset of the pandemic. The PRC's forceful actions in the South China Sea and on the Himalayan border with India, as well as its suppression of Hong Kong and mistreatment of its Uighur population provide an incentive for Northeast Asia to balance against it. Cooperating with Russia would be one way to do so, but Russia's weaker position as a result of COVID-19, its desire to maintain Great Power status, and its growing dependence on the PRC, will all conspire to decrease what is possible for Northeast Asian states to accomplish with Russia.

### ***Implications for United States, Friends, and Allies***

The implications of Russia's involvement with Northeast Asia cannot be evaluated by simply considering Russia and the region. In many cases, one must include Russia's relationship with the PRC to obtain a more complete understanding of the regional dynamics, similar to how U.S. relationships with each country factor into how they interact with Russia. Considering how Japan and the Republic of Korea are treaty allies of the United States, and how the Biden administration has prioritized rebuilding bilateral relations with both of them, this perspective is particularly relevant. The growing Russia-PRC partnership also complicates U.S. decision-making in this region, and impacts each of the countries in Northeast Asia as depicted in subsequent paragraphs.

Increased Russian economic interaction with Korea has the potential to make Korea's relationships in the region even more complex. Seoul already balances between its relationship

---

<sup>20</sup> Battulga Khaltmaagiin, Remarks at Youth for English Program, August 2019, <https://president.mn/en/2019/08/22/remarks-by-president-khaltmaagiin-battulga-at-the-closing-of-the-youth-for-english-program/>.

<sup>21</sup> Dmitry Streltsov, "Why Russia and Japan Can't Solve the Kuril Islands Dispute," *The Moscow Times*, January 24, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/01/24/why-russia-and-japan-cant-solve-the-kuril-islands-dispute-op-ed-a64277>.

with the PRC, its alliance with the United States, and its position as a “spoke” relative to Japan instead of existing in a multilateral relationship with other U.S. allies. Considering these factors, Korea will pursue economic benefits with Russia if it is in its interest, but will continuously hedge and be more deliberate in its decision-making if that economic relationship has the potential to adversely impact other, more important relationships with the United States, the PRC, and Japan.

The U.S. has a strong unofficial relationship with Taiwan, and this relationship necessitates U.S. understanding of how enhanced ties between Taiwan and Russia, a strategic partner of the PRC, would affect cross-Strait dynamics if Russia played a larger role in Taiwan or in the region more broadly in peacetime. The U.S. would also need to consider and be prepared for potential Russian support in various forms if the PRC employed a more coercive approach toward Taiwan.

The current trend of growing cooperation between Russia and the PRC is challenging for Mongolia. Mongolia’s historical approach to international relations is through balancing its neighbors against each other, but increased Sino-Russian cooperation limits space for an independent Mongolian policy. That cooperation may yield benefits through regional investment and infrastructure projects, though, and Mongolia has been excited by the prospects of hosting future oil pipelines to the PRC and establishment of a greater North East Asia energy grid.<sup>22</sup> From a political and security perspective however, that cooperation risks increased pressure on Mongolian liberal institutions and further isolation of the lone democracy in an authoritarian neighborhood. Increased pressure from a Russia-PRC united front could practically limit Mongolia’s freedom to support its preferred Western agenda.

In addition to its concern about Great Power status, Russia will not resolve the Kuril Islands dispute with Japan because doing so would decrease its national security. The unfortunate implication for Japan is that one of its significant territorial disputes, and the associated reminder of World War II, will linger. Because the Northern Territories are not and were not under Japanese administration at the time the treaty was ratified, the U.S. is not obligated under the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty to involve itself in this dispute. But while not engaged directly with this dispute, there are implications for United States. This unresolved issue between Japan and Russia complicates Japan’s political and military decision-making, and thus affects unity of effort with its treaty ally, the United States, as it pursues joint objectives in the region.

### ***Recommendations***

The Biden administration’s initial foreign policy leanings portend a significant focus on Northeast Asia. This focus centers on competing with the PRC and Russia, and reinvigorating relationships with treaty allies and regional partners. These recommendations are offered with this thinking in mind.

**The U.S. should work to build stronger relationships between its allies with the goal of a true multiparty alliance structure.** The U.S. should encourage allies Japan and Korea to explore additional multilateral defense arrangements such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. Diplomatically, the U.S. should reassure Japan and Korea that the alliances are more viable than ever to prevent them from seeking to hedge with other powers. Russia has already shown it is willing to test the strength of the hub and spokes system by challenging the airspace over

---

<sup>22</sup> Bolor Lkhaajav, “Mongolia Securing an Energy Alliance with Russia and China,” *The Diplomat*, July 02, 2020.



Dokdo/Takeshima in a joint patrol with the PLA. Stronger relations between allies and partners will minimize Russian, and PRC, ability to sow dissension or pit one ally against another.

**The U.S. should work across elements of national power to strengthen its relationship with Japan.** Economically, the U.S. should re-enter the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, now retitled the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and led by Japan. Japan and the U.S. could also work together to diversify supply chains after the COVID-19 pandemic exposed uncomfortable reliance on the PRC. Militarily, the U.S. should quickly settle its debate with Japan over alliance funding and recognize the value Japan brings to the alliance by providing access and basing, and through its geography. The U.S. could also support Japan's efforts to expand military activities consistent with its Constitution, and to further explore collective defense arrangements. These efforts will enable Japan to better manage the growing threat of the Russia-PRC partnership.

**The U.S. should encourage Japan to table its desire to settle the Kuril Islands dispute in the near-term.** Russia will likely become increasingly frustrated with the PRC after its partnership enables the PRC to steal Russian technology, devour Russian resources, and dictate terms to Russia as the PRC has done in all of its relationships. This will take time, but Japan will eventually be in better position to negotiate with Russia by taking the extended view. In the interim, strengthening the Japan-U.S. alliance and exercising strategic patience will ultimately lead to the best outcome.

**The U.S. should focus on two areas to help Mongolia maximize its status as a free and independent partner in Northeast Asia: support for the Third Neighbor Policy, and support for Mongolian democracy.** The geographic factor is unavoidable, and significant Russian influence over this partner is an enduring fact. Trying to eliminate that influence would prove impossible, but support for Mongolian institutions and independent foreign policy can help moderate the worst impacts. The U.S. should continue to provide training and equipment for Mongolia's global peacekeepers and encourage Mongolia's free vote in all UN forums. Whether Mongolia eventually joins the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or not should be a Mongolian choice made on Mongolian terms. With Mongolia effectively a lone island of democracy surrounded by authoritarian states, the U.S. has every interest in supporting Mongolian democratic institutions and sustaining soft power engagement to insulate Mongolia's freedom of decision-making.



## Chapter 8

# Russia and South Asia: India and Pakistan

*By John H. (Jack) Gill*

### *Introduction*

Russia or the threat of Russia has been a factor in South Asian security since the mid-1800s and was the origin of the so-called “Great Game” of British-Russian imperial rivalry.<sup>1</sup> During the Cold War, Russia’s involvement in the region was largely a function of its global confrontation with the United States. Though usually a secondary theater of Cold War competition, South Asia was occasionally catapulted into prominence as during the 1965 and 1971 India-Pakistan Wars or in the decade following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. The drama and dominance of superpower politics during the Cold War often obscured China’s importance but Beijing has always been a significant consideration, not only for Washington and Moscow, but crucially for regional countries as well. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR, however, brought paradigm-shifting changes to South Asia’s relations with Russia, none more so than India and Pakistan, generally diminishing Russia’s significance for regional countries while raising that of China. As for the United States, though always a central concern from the perspective of regional countries, Washington paid only episodic attention to South Asia during the Cold War; but the end of that long and absorbing contest with the USSR cleared the way for greater and more realistic U.S. engagement, especially with India. Nonetheless, the historical background of the Cold War era remains essential to understanding the practical, material, and even emotional elements that underpin how New Delhi and Islamabad interact with Moscow today. This section will focus on India and Pakistan, examining their responses to Russia’s role in South Asia within the context of a more powerful and assertive China to offer suggestions for United States policy in this season of revived Great Power competition.<sup>2</sup>

### *India: History, Pragmatism, and Arms*

To a surprising degree, Indian perceptions of Russia today remain shaped by the Fabian socialist worldview that India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, shared with much of the Indian political elite in the years before and after independence in 1947. This worldview, rooted in strong anti-colonialist themes and deep skepticism of the capitalist West as exemplified by the United States, led many Indians to see the Soviet Union as a force to oppose imperialism and to promote the welfare of common people. Combined with practical geopolitical reasons, this skewed image of the USSR contributed to India generally adopting pro-Soviet policy lines

---

<sup>1</sup> It is useful to remind ourselves that Chinese and Tibetan authorities were also involved in this “game” with enduring consequences for future Sino-Indian relations.

<sup>2</sup> The author wishes to thank Ms. Meg Atkins for her invaluable research assistance for this essay as well as Minister Ali Jalali, Dr. Hassan Abbas, Dr. Roger Kangas, and Dr. Ashely J. Tellis for their helpful comments.

during much of the Cold War, especially following the signature of the Indo-Soviet “Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Co-operation” in August 1971. Though never a client state of the USSR, India’s “non-alignment” tilted decidedly towards Moscow in the wake of this agreement. New Delhi thus raised few objections to and often seemed to make excuses for Soviet actions such as the 1956 intervention in Hungary, the 1968 suppression of Czechoslovakia, or the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan. The rosy image of the old USSR has certainly faded since the high days of the Cold War, but echoes of this romantic vision persist and have been partly transferred to the Russian Federation. India’s reactions to Russian involvement in Syria, the chemical attack in the United Kingdom, its intervention in the Ukraine, and its annexation of the Crimea, for example, have been muted and equivocal. Despite the fact that the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has repudiated and even castigated Nehru’s policies, therefore, Indian perceptions of Russia remain colored by the “residual diplomatic empathy” of the past<sup>3</sup> and Russia is still broadly seen as a “time-tested partner” that has stood by India through thick and thin.<sup>4</sup>

Historical and sentimental attachments, however, are insufficient to sustain a bilateral relationship, and hard geopolitical calculations have always been present in India’s view of Russia. Two areas have traditionally been of especial importance from New Delhi’s perspective: Kashmir and China. On the former, extremely sensitive topic for India, Russia’s permanent seat on the UN Security Council has been seen as a guarantee against any consequential UN action on or discussion of Kashmir since the 1950s. Likewise, Nikita Khrushchev’s description of Kashmir as part of India during a 1955 visit to the state has been recorded with special satisfaction.<sup>5</sup> More broadly, the relationship with Russia was viewed as a balance to what Indians perceived as an inimical U.S. embrace of Pakistan. For much of India’s independent history, Moscow has also been viewed as a reliable counterweight to China, a means to keep Beijing’s ambitions in check along the 3,400 kilometer disputed border India shares with its northern neighbor.<sup>6</sup> Beyond these two core issues, Indian leaders often regarded Russia as a “balance” vis-à-vis the United States. This perception was initially a component of Nehru’s Cold War non-alignment policy, but threads of it have lingered to the present, now recast as evidence of India’s determination to maintain “strategic autonomy” in today’s multipolar or “plurilateral” world.<sup>7</sup> This aspect of the Indo-Russian relationship is occasionally manifested in descriptions of Indian defense acquisitions. Although price, technology-transfer, and co-production are the most important factors in New Delhi’s calculus, some Indians still perceive purchases from U.S. companies as more palatable if matched by acquisitions from Russia sources. On the wider global stage, Moscow and New Delhi generally support one another in multilateral forums such as the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) grouping, the Shanghai Cooperation

---

<sup>3</sup> Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, “India-Russia Defence Ties Amid COVID-19,” *The Diplomat*, May 1, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Nirupama Rao in Wilson Center webinar, “From Summitry to Standoff: What’s Next for India-China Relations?” June 25, 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/summitry-standoff-whats-next-india-china-relations>. Russia’s support for India during the 1971 India-Pakistan War is an especially important touchstone for most Indians (whereas the Nixon Administration sided both openly and covertly with Pakistan).

<sup>5</sup> J. A. Naik, “Soviet Policy on Kashmir,” *India Quarterly*, 24, no. 1 (January–March 1968): 55–6; Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “Russian Support to India on Kashmir Is Rooted in History,” *Economic Times*, January 20, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> India was disappointed, however, in the USSR’s ambivalent stance during the 1962 Sino-Indian war.

<sup>7</sup> “Plurilateral” is a neologism coined by India’s Minister of External Affairs, S. Jaishankar. See Nayanima Basu, “US-Taliban deal was like watching ‘Pakeezah’ after a long wait, says Jaishankar,” *The Print*, March 2, 2020: “‘As players behave more nationally and agendas become more complex, plurilaterals have emerged as the mechanism to fill the gap left by weaker multilateralism and eroding alliance cultures. Convergence emerges as an adequacy standard for nations to work together,’ he said, even as he highlighted that India should emerge as an industry leader in this through the RIC (Russia-India-China), SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation), Quad (Quadrilateral) and/or JAI (Japan-USA-India).”

Organization (SCO), and the Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral. Both regard these as useful venues to formulate shared positions on global issues, but India, unlike other members, does not use the manifold meetings as platforms to inveigh against the West.<sup>8</sup>

Defense sales have been the cornerstone of Indo-Russian relations since their inception and will remain a crucial consideration for New Delhi for the foreseeable future.<sup>9</sup> India has invested heavily in Soviet/Russian equipment across all three services for decades for several reasons. From a political perspective, India sought to diversify its sources of arms and the USSR was considered “reliable” as compared to other potential suppliers. The United States, in particular, initially limited its offers to India out of consideration for Pakistan, and Indian leaders soon came to worry that Washington might impose embargos or sanctions in moments of crisis. The Soviet Union also offered far easier terms in most cases and its sales came without onerous conditions (such as American end-use monitoring).<sup>10</sup> In recent years, China has been another factor in Indian decision-making. By remaining closely engaged in an arms relationship with Moscow, New Delhi hopes to prevent Russia from tilting too far towards Beijing. The Indian armed services often grumbled that these political factors saddled them with lower quality weapons that had high life-cycle costs and often suffered from low operational readiness rates. On the practical side, however, Soviet/Russian arms were generally less costly in upfront price and eventually came to include manufacture in India and some co-production as well as technology transfer and joint development.<sup>11</sup> New Delhi especially values these technology transfer agreements as it hopes they will promote the establishment of indigenous Indian defense industries. Highlights have included joint development of the BrahMos cruise missile, Soviet/Russian willingness to lease nuclear-powered attack submarines to India, and apparently some Russian technical assistance in the design of the reactor for India’s nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine.<sup>12</sup> Today, although some of India’s Soviet/Russian systems are modern, much is legacy gear dating from the 1970s or early 1980s. India thus finds itself burdened with an enormous stock of aging if not obsolescent hardware with concomitant requirements for spares, repairs, and upgrades.<sup>13</sup> In addition to the appeal of co-production and the perceived political compulsion to sustain diversity in its list of arms suppliers, India will thus be tied to Russian arms manufacturers for the foreseeable future simply to keep its existing stocks of tanks, artillery, aircraft, and vessels functioning.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Aleksei Zakharov, “Friends in Need: Whither the Russia-India Partnership?” *Russie.Nei Visions* 116, Ifri, October 2019, 10–15.

<sup>9</sup> Harsh V. Pant, “India and Russia: Ties in Transition,” *Mail Today*, September 5, 2019; Rajagopalan, “India-Russia Defence Ties,” *Diplomat*, May 1, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Up until the 2010s, Russia’s share in Indian defense purchases was approximately 70 percent, but this had declined to around 58 percent by 2018; from Russia’s perspective, India accounted for almost one third of all Russian arms sales (Zakharov, “Friends in Need,” 19–20).

<sup>11</sup> Despite the dominance of Soviet/Russian hardware in the Indian inventory, Russia has never been the source of Indian military doctrine and military exchanges or training exercises outside of technical assistance have been limited. A possible exception is what seems India’s inclination towards a “bastion strategy” for deployment of its future SSBNs, see Vipin Narang, “Russian Influence on India’s Military Doctrines,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 4, no. 1 (January 2021): 70–72.

<sup>12</sup> Yogesh Joshi, “*Samudra*: India’s Convoluted Path to Undersea Nuclear Weapons.” *Nonproliferation Review*, 26, nos. 5–6 (2019): 486–7; Manu Pubby, “Russia Offers to Jointly Design, Build Submarines,” *Economic Times*, 6 July 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Sanjib K. R. Baruah, “68 Per Cent of Weapons Outdated: Army Vice-Chief,” *Deccan Chronicle*, March 14, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> For a comprehensive overview, see Sameer Lalwani, Frank O’Donnell, Tyler Sagerstrom, and Akriti Vasudeva, “The Influence of Arms: Explaining the Durability of India-Russia Alignment,” Stimson Working Paper, Stimson Center, April 2020; subsequently published under the same title in the *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 4, no. 1

Notwithstanding the importance of arms supplies, claims of shared “civilizational values,” and official platitudes about the “Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership,” the Indo-Russian relationship has stagnated in recent years.<sup>15</sup> Other than the energy sector (especially in nuclear power projects), the economic component has been especially weak, with bilateral trade of only some \$11bn compared to nearly \$88bn in goods alone with the U.S. and more than \$95bn with China in 2018.<sup>16</sup> Even the defense arrangements have had problems with disagreements over pricing, maintenance difficulties with Russian equipment, and tardy deliveries, especially of spare parts (during his June 2020 visit to Moscow, the Indian defense minister had to make a personal plea for accelerated delivery of select key components owing to the ongoing border crisis with China).<sup>17</sup>

In the political realm, India worries about Russian attitudes towards the Taliban and the future of Afghanistan as it fears a repeat of the 1990s when the Taliban regime had allowed Pakistan to base anti-Indian terrorist training camps on Afghan soil. The two are continuing a bilateral dialogue on Afghanistan and both participate in several multilateral interactions, but it is not clear how close their positions are. Beyond counterterrorism and a broad desire for regional stability, underlying differences persist regarding the future of the Taliban, the possibility of an extremist-friendly regime dominating in Kabul and Pakistan’s role in the country.<sup>18</sup> Moscow’s recent approaches to Islamabad, albeit limited, are also unsettling for New Delhi, which has relied on Russia as a staunch advocate in its perdurable rivalry with Pakistan.<sup>19</sup> Recent Russian statements that its relations with Pakistan are “independent” of its ties to India and that Moscow intends to “develop this relationship further” are more likely to generate suspicion than reassurance in India. New Delhi’s sensitivities regarding Pakistan thus provide Russia with leverage if it wants to curb Indian tendencies Moscow finds objectionable.<sup>20</sup>

---

(January 2021): 2–41. See also Yogesh Joshi, “Indo-Russian Defense Relationship Will Continue to Withstand Washington’s Displeasure,” Center for the Advanced Study of India, July 1, 2019, <https://casi.sas.upenn.edu/iit/yjoshi>.

<sup>15</sup> “India-Russia Joint Statement during visit of Prime Minister to Vladivostok,” September 5, 2019, [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateraldocuments.htm?dtl/31795/India\\_Russia\\_Joint\\_Statement\\_during\\_visit\\_of\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_to\\_Vladivostok](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateraldocuments.htm?dtl/31795/India_Russia_Joint_Statement_during_visit_of_Prime_Minister_to_Vladivostok); “In Moscow, Rajnath Hails India-Russia Ties,” Press Trust of India, June 23, 2020; Dmitri Trenin in Carnegie Moscow Center webinar, “India-Russia Strategic Partnership: Ready for an Upgrade?” June 26, 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/2020/06/26/india-russia-strategic-partnership-ready-for-upgrade-event-7372>.

<sup>16</sup> Nivedita Kapoor in Carnegie Moscow Center webinar, “India-Russia Strategic Partnership: Ready for an Upgrade?” June 26, 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/2020/06/26/india-russia-strategic-partnership-ready-for-upgrade-event-7372>. India-Russia energy interactions have been focused on nuclear power (including joint assistance to a power reactor in Bangladesh) and mutual investments, but liquefied natural gas is emerging as a new possibility and both have expressed interest in exploiting resources in the Russian Far East (Zakharov, “Friends in Need,” 26–8).

<sup>17</sup> Manu Pubby, “Russia Assures Early Delivery of Weapon Systems: Rajnath Singh,” *Economic Times*, June 24, 2020; “India to Seek Russia’s Help for Urgent Supply of Spares for Fighter Aircraft Fleet, Submarines, Tanks,” *India Today*, June 22, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Rudra Chaudhuri and Shreyvas Shende, “Dealing with the Taliban: India’s Strategy in Afghanistan after U.S. Withdrawal,” Carnegie India, June 2, 2020; Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “Foreign Secretary Visit: India, Russia Explore Cooperation in War-Ravaged Afghanistan,” *Economic Times*, February 19, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Curiously, Indian and Pakistani army teams have attended SCO-sponsored counter-terrorism training in Russia and have participated in Russia’s International Army Games.

<sup>20</sup> Nayanima Basu, “Moscow’s Relationship with China, Pakistan Independent of Ties with India—Russian Envoy,” *The Print*, December 21, 2020; Abhijnan Rej, “India’s Foreign Secretary in Russia to Keep Marriage of Necessity on Track,” *The Diplomat*, February 17, 2021.



India-Russia differences are also evident in the larger Asian context. Although both espouse “multipolarity and multilateralism in the world,”<sup>21</sup> additional differences have arisen over ties to the United States and India’s embrace of the “Indo-Pacific,” a concept Russia rejects as a divisive American construct. Russia has been particularly and pointedly critical of the “Quad” grouping of the United States, India, Australia, and Japan. The Quad has become an increasingly important component of Indian foreign policy, but Moscow has condemned it as a “persistent, aggressive and devious policy” through which “the West is attempting to undermine our close partnership and privileged relations with India.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, many in India speculate that the annual Russia-India summit slated for December 2020 was postponed for the first time since its inception in 2000 owing to differences over the Quad and U.S.-India relations.<sup>23</sup>

The China factor is especially problematic for India and Russia.<sup>24</sup> Moscow may view India as a tool to diversify its Asian ties (such as countering Chinese dominance in the SCO), but Russian sales of sophisticated weapons to China in recent years have generated doubts in New Delhi about Moscow’s reliability as a bulwark against India’s Asian competitor.<sup>25</sup> The current Sino-Indian border confrontation places the Kremlin in a particularly awkward position between the two antagonists. Russia declined to “impose its services on India and China” in the wake of the 2020 skirmishes, but such incidents are likely to bedevil relations among the three countries far into the future.<sup>26</sup> While “the past suggests India has a special claim to Russian affections,” notes one insightful commentator, “How Russia responds to India’s request for support in this confrontation with China will, of course, have a major bearing on the future evolution of Delhi’s ties with Moscow.”<sup>27</sup>

The “special and privileged” relationship with Russia will remain a pillar of Indian foreign policy for the sentimental, geopolitical, and defense considerations outlined above. Modi and Putin seem to enjoy a personal rapport and the annual summit reportedly has been rescheduled for early 2021 with a Putin visit to India. The current global health crisis has also provided scope for cooperation in vaccine research and production. It is far from clear, however,

---

<sup>21</sup> Prime Minister Modi after the 2018 Indo-Russian Summit as quoted in Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “Russia and India Agree on Multipolarity: PM Modi,” *Economic Times*, October 6, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Geeta Mohan, “Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov Calls Indo-Pacific Concept Divisive,” *India Today*, January 15, 2020; Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, “India-Russia Relations Face More Trouble,” *The Diplomat*, December 31, 2020; Rajorshi Roy, “India, Russia and the Indo-Pacific: A Search for Congruence,” IDSA Comment, February 3, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Nayanima Basu, “Indo-Russia Annual Summit Postponed for 1st Time in Two Decades Amid Moscow’s Unease with Quad,” *The Print*, December 23, 2020. The Indian and Russian governments have both cited the global health crisis as the rationale for delay.

<sup>24</sup> Nivedita Kapoor, “India-Russia Relations: Beyond Energy and Defence,” Observer Research Foundation Issue Brief 327, December 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Nivedita Kapoor, “India-Russia Ties in a Changing World Order: In Pursuit of a ‘Special Strategic Partnership,’” Observer Research Foundation Occasional Paper 218, October 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov quoted in “At Russia-India-China Meet, India Talks of Need to Respect Legitimate Interest of Partners,” *The Wire*, June 23, 2020. Beijing, on the other hand, can be pleased that the Kremlin has chosen a more or less neutral stance in 2020 as compared to the 2017 Sino-Indian Doklam crisis when Moscow clearly sided with India.

<sup>27</sup> C. Raja Mohan, “Indian Resistance to China’s Expansionism Would Be a Definitive Moment in Asia’s Geopolitical Evolution,” *Indian Express*, June 30, 2020. See also Jyoti Malhotra, “How India Lined Up US, Russia on Its Side of LAC and China Was Forced to Return Friendless,” *The Print*, July 7, 2020; Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, “The Sino-Indian Clash: Russia in the Middle,” *The Diplomat*, June 25, 2020.

that the two countries will be able to move beyond the narrow confines of arms sales to triple bilateral trade by 2025, expand investment, and create new energy corridors as announced during the 20th annual Indo-Russian summit at Vladivostok in September 2019.<sup>28</sup> India's economic downturn and the world health crisis render such goals questionable at the very least. Moreover, New Delhi and Moscow are likely to find themselves increasingly challenged to maintain, let alone expand, their traditional bilateral ties while simultaneously navigating between Beijing and Washington in a period of global tensions and an evolving international order.

### ***Pakistan: A Limited Engagement***

Pakistan's relations with Russia are also encrusted with history, but neither country has ever viewed the other as a top priority on its foreign policy agenda. Pakistan was conditionally aligned with the United States during most of the Cold War, providing a base for U.S. intelligence collection against the Soviet Union until 1970 and joining both the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO).<sup>29</sup> Unsurprisingly, Moscow viewed Islamabad with suspicion and enmity. Following a brief Russo-Pakistani dalliance in the 1960s, Russia decidedly cast its lot with India and relations with Pakistan escalated to hostility during the Soviet war in Afghanistan when Pakistan hosted the array of anti-Soviet mujahedin groups. With the dissolution of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, ties between Moscow and Islamabad lapsed into a phase of mutual caution with both parties focused on other aspects of their international portfolios.

Starting in the mid-2010s, however, Russia opened closer contact with Pakistan, evidently as a part of the Kremlin's broader outreach to Eurasia and its concerns about terrorism emanating from the situation in Afghanistan. Although Pakistan was disappointed when a rumored 2012 visit by Russian President Putin was postponed indefinitely, the number of senior Russian officials traveling to Islamabad grew slowly but significantly and Moscow devoted an increased amount of policy attention to Pakistan. As with India, most of the concrete steps occurred in the defense arena. In 2014, the two sides initiated a series of small-scale maritime counter-narcotics drills and Russia lifted an old arms embargo to permit the sale of military helicopters and other defense items. Small army training exchanges followed in 2016 and the Russian defense minister visited Pakistan four times between 2015 and 2018. Russia is also scheduled to participate in the Pakistan Navy's annual "Aman" exercise in 2021.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> "India and Russia Target \$30 Billion in Trade by 2025, Announce New Energy Deals," Reuters, September 4, 2019; Sudha Ramachandran, "What's India Doing in Russia's Far East?" *The Diplomat*, October 9, 2019; Mihir Bhonsale, "India's Look Far East: Strengthening Indo-Russian Relations or Something More?" Observer Research Foundation, January 18, 2020; Hari Vasudevan, "India's 'Look Far East': The Vladivostok Moment in Indo-Russian Relations," Observer Research Foundation Occasional Paper 249, May 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Pakistanis routinely highlight membership in these two Cold War entities as hallmarks of their alignment with the United States (as a prelude to accusations of American "betrayal"), but, in fact, signing on cost Pakistan very little (Pakistan, for instance, did not send even a symbolic troop contingent to Vietnam as other SEATO members did).

<sup>30</sup> While it seems highly unlikely that Pakistani nuclear doctrine is drawn from recent Russian thinking, one experienced analyst highlights some similarities, even if coincidental, between the two, such as the threat of battlefield nuclear weapons to deter or deescalate limited conventional war. See: Feroz Hassan Khan, "Russia-Pakistan Relations: An Emerging Entente Cordiale," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 4, no. 1 (January 2021): 53–54.

Coming in the wake of nearly fifty years since the previous Soviet arms transfers to Pakistan, these developments seem dramatic, but the scale is very small and their significance is largely symbolic. Only four Mi-35 attack helicopters and a few Mi-17 transport variants have been sold, for instance, while the number of Russian soldiers training with the Pakistan army has amounted to no more than 200 or so in one event each year. Notably, the equipment and training thus far also seem consistent with Russian claims that its defense relationship with Pakistan is limited to building counter-terrorism capabilities. For both countries, these minor weapons sales are useful as snubs to the U.S. and, for Russia, yet another way to undermine the American role in the region at low cost.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, the Kremlin may see its outreach to Islamabad as a means to warn New Delhi not to stray too far towards Washington. For Pakistan, however, India is the key target and any point scored against its archrival in their zero-sum dynamic is touted as a win, howsoever symbolic and insubstantial it may be. The likelihood of future major Russian transfers of offensive weaponry to Pakistan is low. Despite a flurry of excited news stories in spring 2019, cash-strapped Pakistan lacks the funds to support serious purchases and Russia is unlikely to offer the sorts of easy loans and low prices Pakistan routinely receives from China for equivalent hardware.<sup>32</sup> Pakistan also recognizes that “the primacy of India and Russia’s investment in India is incomparable to what Pakistan can offer.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Pakistanis are deeply alarmed by the prospect of India fielding S-400 SAMs and BrahMos cruise missiles, which are seen in Pakistan as underwriting India’s nuclear capabilities and allegedly aggressive intentions. At the same time, some in Islamabad and Rawalpindi (i.e., Army headquarters) may calculate that the steady if incremental normalization of relations with Moscow and occasional bursts of rhetorical bonhomie serve their interests in their interactions with Beijing by demonstrating that Pakistan is not an entirely unquestioning client and that it may have alternative sources of outside support against India.

Other areas of the Russo-Pakistani relationship are nearly devoid of content. Russia has promised assistance to Pakistan’s torpid steel industry and investment in a large internal pipeline project, but bilateral trade has hovered between \$440M and \$660M over the past several years and greater growth seems improbable in the near term.<sup>34</sup> Both countries, however, can be satisfied with an improved but limited relationship. Sharing an antipathy towards the United States, they will continue to pursue narrow common objectives in Afghanistan: combating Daesh/ISIS, supporting the Taliban, and diminishing the American presence.<sup>35</sup> Russia will continue its small-scale military exchanges with Pakistan but is unlikely to present major

---

<sup>31</sup> Ayaz Gul, “Pakistan, Russia Sign Rare Military Cooperation Pact,” *Voice of America*, August 8, 2018.

<sup>32</sup> “Pakistan-Russia to Sign \$9 Billion Arms Deal,” *Dunya News*, April 22, 2019; Krzysztof Iwanek, “Russia’s Looming Arms Sale to Pakistan Sets Up a Dangerous Game,” *The Diplomat*, May 16, 2019; “Pakistan Eyes Russian Weapons...and Here’s What Moscow Has in Store,” *Russia Today*, June 14, 2019; Suhasini Haider and Dinakar Peri, “Russian Military Relations with Pakistan Very Minimal, Says Russian Envoy Nikolay Kudashev,” *The Hindu*, February 9, 2018; Snehes Alex Philip, “Russia ‘Won’t Sell War Equipment to Pakistan,’ Ties Limited to Fighting Terrorism,” *The Print*, May 10, 2019. For an enthusiastically far-reaching alternative view, see Andrew Korybko, “Why Is Russia Participating in the AMAN-2021 Naval Drills?” *Express Tribune*, December 11, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Khan, “Russia-Pakistan Relations,” 57.

<sup>34</sup> Faseeh Mangi. “Pakistan to Start Building Gas Pipeline with Russia,” *Express Tribune*, December 16, 2020; Zafar Bhutta, “Challenges Abound in Trade with Russia,” *Express Tribune*, October 4, 2019; Mati-Ullah, “Bilateral Trade between Pakistan and Russia,” Dispatch News Desk, February 6, 2020. The two sides inked new agreements in December 2019, but it remains to be seen if these will bear fruit.

<sup>35</sup> Farhad Ramezani Bonesh, “Pakistan Hoping for Stronger Russian Ties,” *Asia Times*, June 22 2020; Ayaz Gul, “Taliban, Russia Demand Foreign Troops Leave Afghanistan,” *Voice of America*, May 28, 2019; Robyn Dixon, “What’s Behind Russia’s Growing Ties to the Taliban?” *Washington Post*, July 1, 2020; Alan Cullison, “U.S.-Russia Rift Kills Afghan Goal,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 7, 2020.

hardware offers given the overriding importance of India in its calculus and Pakistan's inability to pay. Pakistan will be content to showcase any military purchases, training exercises or commercial interaction with Russia to score points against India, but it will remain tied closely to China as its principal arms supplier and geopolitical supporter.

### ***Policy Implications for the U.S.***

Russian interactions with Pakistan, with one significant exception, do not present a challenge to U.S. interests. Indeed, though Russia's minor hardware transfers and limited military training exchanges are much less substantive than U.S.-Pakistan counter-terrorism cooperation, U.S. regional goals would benefit if Russian interactions enhance Pakistan's capabilities in this area. Likewise, the economic boost that could come if Russian investments in Pakistani steel mills and pipelines succeed, can be welcomed as helping to make Pakistan more stable and prosperous. The significant exception is Russo-Pakistani collaboration regarding Afghanistan and the Taliban.<sup>36</sup> Both evince no little *Schadenfreude* at the difficulties the U.S. and NATO are experiencing, and in their eagerness to see an early U.S. exit, their pro-Taliban inclinations and, in Pakistan's case, the priority it accords to excluding India at any cost, both could create serious obstacles to the establishment of a genuine peace process. Similarly, both governments have periodically espoused unhelpful conspiracy theories about the United States (such as the U.S. being the "hidden hand" behind Daesh) and their continued promotion of these suspicions could reinforce erroneous narratives in both capitals hindering Washington's ability to conduct fact-based dialogue. Although Secretary Blinken highlighted "the importance of continued U.S.-Pakistan cooperation" on Afghanistan in his initial call with his Pakistani counterpart, therefore, these factors could lead Russia and Pakistan, separately and together, to persist as spoilers on the painful road to peaceful resolution of the Afghan conflict.<sup>37</sup>

Russia poses a greater challenge to U.S.-India relations, especially in arms transfers, the traditional centerpiece of Indo-Russian ties. Since the passage of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) in 2017, the U.S. has sought ways to adhere to the law and punish Russia without harming friends such as India. New Delhi's subsequent decision to buy five sets of S-400 air defense systems from Moscow at an estimated cost of close to \$6bn is the most prominent case to fall under U.S. sanctions legislation so far and has already occasioned intricate negotiations between Washington and New Delhi.<sup>38</sup> The S-400 sale, however, is not the only major defense purchase from Russia under consideration in India and, given India's enormous inventory of Soviet/Russian equipment; it will not be the last. Indeed, the 2020 Himalayan skirmishes with China have spurred new Indian requests to Russia while visuals of U.S. fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft flying near the disputed border have become standard fare in Indian media.<sup>39</sup> Major Russia-India arms deals already proposed include, for example, purchase or construction of four stealth frigates, projects to manufacture AK-203 assault rifles and KA-226 helicopters in India and a long-term military technical cooperation program for

---

<sup>36</sup> India, understandably, is deeply suspicious of Russia's stance vis-à-vis the Taliban.

<sup>37</sup> "Secretary Blinken's Call with Pakistani Foreign Minister Qureshi," January 29, 2021 at [www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov).

<sup>38</sup> Ashley J. Tellis, "How Can U.S.-India Relations Survive the S-400 Deal?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 8 August 2018; "India Can't Wish Away Defence Ties with Russia," Press Trust of India, June 25, 2019; Carnegie India webinar: "The Sino-Indian Border: Escalation & Disengagement," June 24, 2020, <https://carnegieindia.org/2020/06/24/sino-indian-border-escalation-disengagement-event-7369>.

<sup>39</sup> Sabir Hussain, "Defence Ministry Approves Purchase of 33 New Fighter Jets including MiG-29s from Russia," *Hindustan Times*, July 2, 2020. Though often tendentious, interesting insights appear in Liu Zhen, "Russia and US Jostle for Arms Sales to India after Tensions with China over Border," *South China Morning Post*, July 11, 2020.

2021–2030.<sup>40</sup> Part of the challenge in arms transfers’ lies on the U.S. side, but part also falls to India. Even if India were to make the improbable decision to reduce its path dependency in Russia for weapons, the process would take many years, likely decades.<sup>41</sup> Washington, as one observer suggests, will therefore have to “develop some ‘second-best’ frameworks” to leverage greater Indian cooperation in the Indo-Pacific while simultaneously blunting Russian destabilizing tendencies.<sup>42</sup> This implies flexibility and creativity not only in U.S. arms sales or transfers to India, but also in wider defense, intelligence, and foreign policy coordination inside Washington and with American allies. Such a holistic approach will be particularly important as India copes with the strategic conundrum of protecting its lengthy land borders—a traditional inclination reinforced by the 2020 crisis—while not losing sight of the growing threats to its maritime interests. For its part, New Delhi must decide whether political considerations (ties with Russia) outweigh operational effectiveness (the ability to integrate incompatible foreign systems) and whether some acquisitions from Russia might ultimately preclude purchases from the United States or others in the West who fear their technology will be compromised if India pairs it with Russian equipment. Whatever the evolution of the U.S.-India hardware relationship, important U.S. interests would be served by widening outreach to the Indian armed forces. As the global health situation permits, for instance, the United States could expand military training and educational opportunities for Indian officers on American soil to increase mutual familiarity and interoperability while building on a broad foundation of Indian-American cultural affinities.

In the larger geopolitical relationship, Modi’s government will continue to pursue its cherished “strategic autonomy,” seeking to benefit from all while antagonizing none. Although India is a key member of BRICS, RIC, and the SCO, New Delhi has no interest in “opposing the West” per se. Washington can thus remain focused on common U.S.-India interests in themes such as a rules-based international order, the U.S.-Australia-Japan-India “Quad,” and the Indo-Pacific concept (which has Prime Minister Modi’s imprimatur) despite Moscow’s opposition. Secretary Blinken spoke with his Indian counterpart shortly after being confirmed to underscore “India’s role as a preeminent U.S. partner in the Indo-Pacific and the importance of working together to expand regional cooperation, including through the Quad.” He reinforced this message in a call with all four Quad foreign ministers in mid-February, stressing the centrality of addressing the world health crisis and climate change as part of the Quad’s agenda and reiterating the commitment to holding ministerial meetings at least annually. Similar messages have been conveyed by Secretary Austin and National Security Advisor Sullivan in early calls with their Indian counterparts.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the breadth and depth of U.S.-India linkages far

---

<sup>40</sup> Ajai Malhotra, “India-Russia Strategic Partnership Is Special and Privileged,” *Economic Times*, February 15, 2021.

<sup>41</sup> For rationale supporting such a move see Sumit Ganguly, “To Fight China, India Needs to Forget Russia,” *Foreign Policy*, July 16, 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Sameer Lalwani, “Revelations and Opportunities: What the United States Can Learn from the Sino-Indian Crisis,” *War on the Rocks*, July 10, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/07/revelations-and-opportunities-what-the-united-states-can-learn-from-the-sino-indian-crisis/>; John H. Gill, “Challenges for India’s Military Strategy: Matching Capabilities to Ambitions?” in *Strategic Asia 2017–18: Power, Ideas, and Military Strategy*, ed. Ashley J. Tellis, Alison Szalwinski, and Michael Wills (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017), 140–72. The effect of the 2020 Sino-Indian crisis on U.S.-India relations is outside the remit of this essay but see Lalwani’s essay for an excellent introduction. Though rather narrowly focused, some commentators argue that the supply of Russian weapons to India is in America’s interest to help counter China (Salvatore Babones, “America’s India Problem Is All about Russia,” *Foreign Policy*, February 16, 2021).

<sup>43</sup> “Secretary Blinken’s Call with Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar,” January 29, 2021 and “Secretary Blinken’s Call with Quad Ministers,” February 18, 2021 at <http://www.state.gov>; readouts of Secretary Austin’s call with Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh and National Security Advisor Sullivan’s call with Ajit Doval, both



exceeds what is evident within the relatively confined spaces of the Indo-Russian relationship (there are, for instance, more than 200,000 Indian students in the U.S. compared to some 11,000 in Russia). Sustaining and promoting ties in all areas of endeavor—science, technology, climate, health, education, agriculture, and especially trade—will maintain the favorable momentum of the U.S.-India partnership and offer expanded opportunities well into the future.<sup>44</sup> Just as important as material actions will be the new U.S. Administration’s emphasis on buttressing American credibility and predictability through “the power of our example.”<sup>45</sup> As always, however, Washington will have to use a measured approach to avoid exciting the reflexively skeptical voices still tenaciously prevalent in the Indian political elite.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, it is important to highlight the relevance of U.S.-Russian nuclear weapons developments and arms control measures in relation to India and Pakistan. It is difficult to overemphasize the impact of U.S. and Russian behavior for Indian and Pakistani thinking in these areas.<sup>47</sup> Pakistan’s nuclear strategists, for example, regard Russian nuclear weapons trends and, most particularly, the 2018 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review as validating and legitimating Pakistan’s deployment of tactical or battlefield nuclear weapons systems.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, both New Delhi and Islamabad see little reason to pursue regional arms limitation arrangements when, from their viewpoints, the network of larger U.S.-Russian agreements is collapsing with stunning rapidity.<sup>49</sup> This is not to argue that a robust series of treaties between Washington and Moscow (with or without Beijing) would automatically transfer in some beneficent way to the India-Pakistan dynamic or that U.S. and Russian policy should be dictated by perceptions from Islamabad and New Delhi. It is to suggest, however, that the United States and Russia consider stability in South Asia in the formulation and promulgation of their own nuclear policies.

---

January 27, 2021 at [defense.gov](https://www.defense.gov) and [www.whitehouse.gov](https://www.whitehouse.gov) respectively. For different perspectives on the Quad, see the *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, Special Issue 2020, “Quad Plus: Form versus Substance,” 3, no. 5, especially Anna Kireeva and Alexei Kupriyanov, “Russia and the Quad Plus: Is there a Way Forward?” 210–228.

<sup>44</sup> These aspects of the relationship, of course, involve such thorny issues as visa and tariff policies that are beyond the scope of this study.

<sup>45</sup> “Inaugural Address by President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.,” January 20, 2021 at [http://www.whitehouse.gov](https://www.whitehouse.gov).

<sup>46</sup> M. K. Narayanan, “Remaining Non-Aligned Is Good Advice,” *The Hindu*, June 16, 2020; Prem Shankar Jha, “Don’t Blame Modi for ‘No Intrusion’ Claim, Blame Him for Dramatic Shift in China Policy,” *The Wire*, June 26, 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Author’s personal observations from ten years of participation in India-Pakistan, U.S.-Pakistan and multilateral nuclear dialogues under various Track-2 auspices.

<sup>48</sup> Specifically, the Hatf-IX Nasr system. Pakistan prefers the term “short-range/low-yield” for such weapons.

<sup>49</sup> It is too soon to assess how the extension of the “New START” treaty will influence thinking in India and Pakistan (“New START Treaty” Fact Sheet, February 18, 2021 at [http://www.state.gov](https://www.state.gov)).



## Chapter 9

# Russia and the Middle East: Opportunities and Challenges

*By Gawdat Bahgat*

### ***Introduction***

Russian influence and presence in the broad Middle East (North Africa, the Levant, and Persian Gulf) have significantly fluctuated over the last several decades.<sup>1</sup> In the 1960s and early 1970s the Soviet Union established strong ties with Egypt, Iraq, Syria and South Yemen. Since the late 1970s, Egypt, a leader of the Arab World, has changed sides and became a close U.S. ally. In the 2020s, Iraq is a very different country than it was in 1970s. The war with Iran (1980-88), occupation of Kuwait (1990-91), toppling of the Saddam Hussein regime (2003), and finally the fighting with the Islamic State, (ISIS) have eroded both economic development and political stability. More or less, the civil war in Syria since 2011 has left the country in a similar dire position like Iraq. South Yemen ceased to exist in May 1990 when it was officially united with its northern neighbor. The devastating war since 2015 means the future of the country is very uncertain.

On the other side, the Soviet Union was dissolved in late 1990 and the emerging Russia needed some time to reorganize and stabilize in order to establish itself both economically and politically. Predicting Russia's behavior has always been difficult, but it has become even more so over the past several years. The 2008 war with Georgia, the 2014 intervention in Ukraine, and the 2015 Syrian campaign caught policymakers and analysts off guard. The Kremlin has made an art out of surprising the world with audacious gambits on the global stage.<sup>2</sup> It is clear that Russia has embarked on a more assertive and militaristic foreign policy in the Middle East and elsewhere. Behind this assertiveness is a desire to re-establish Russia as a global power.

Russia's approach to the Middle East may appear to be a winning strategy that is presently reaping dividends. However, the approach is not without significant challenges and risks. This chapter briefly highlights Moscow's main interest in the region and how it has pursued these interests since the early 2000s. The analysis focuses on the major economic and political drivers of both Russia and Middle East powers in forging strong ties and how they perceive each other. The essay examines how the two sides have utilized energy deals and arms sales to achieve their strategic objectives. Finally, the paper discusses how the growing Russian presence in the Middle East is likely to impact the United States' strategic interests in the region.

---

<sup>1</sup> John Raine, "Russia in the Middle East: Hard Power, Hard Fact," *IJSS*, last modified October 25, 2018, <https://www.ijss.org/blogs/analysis/2018/10/russia-middle-east-hard-power>.

<sup>2</sup> Fredrik Wesslau and Andrew Wilson, "Russia 2030: A Story of Great Power Dreams and Small Victorious Wars," Report, European Council on Foreign Relations, 2016, accessed December 17, 2020, [doi:10.2307/resrep21534](https://doi.org/10.2307/resrep21534).

## ***Russia and the Middle East – Background***

Initially, the Soviet Union rhetoric against imperialism and the West appealed to a number of Arab governments who championed independence from colonial powers and embraced a state-led economy: Libya, Egypt, Syria and Iraq. Generally, the Soviet model failed to meet the aspirations of the Arab and Persian peoples and governments while the Soviet Union adopted a less confrontational approach toward the West and the United States in the decade prior to its disintegration. In the 1990s, under Boris Yeltsin, Russia needed a space to re-group and re-consider its foreign and domestic priorities. The nation lacked the resources and even the will to be an active player in the Middle East. President Vladimir Putin (in power since 1999) has played a key role in bringing a sense of political stability to his country. His efforts were boosted by high oil prices since 2014.

## ***Drivers of Russian policy in the Middle East***

Moscow's assertive approach to the Middle East since the early 2000s has been largely driven by strategic and economic concerns. Similarly, regional powers have their own reasons to engage with Russia. First, in 2005 President Putin described the breakup of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geo-political catastrophe of the twentieth century."<sup>3</sup> He has never hidden his ambition to "restore" Russia to the status of global power. The days when Moscow could entice allies through ideology are over. Instead of attraction and persuasion, Russia has pursued hard diplomacy, economic inducements, military force, and other coercive measures. Thus, Russia has been able to demonstrate to the U.S. and the EU that it plays a crucial role in ongoing international conflicts. The country has established itself as a key player in Syria, Libya, and negotiations with Iran as well as having extensive ties with Turkey and Israel. The so-called "Arab Spring" since 2011 has presented Russia with both significant security risks and geo-political opportunities. The Kremlin has viewed the uprisings in several Arab countries as a replay of the so-called "color revolutions," i.e., the toppling of pro-Moscow governments in Eastern Europe. Russian leaders have sought to block this bitter experience and stop what they consider a "Western plot" against Russia's national interests. A close examination of the Russian role in regional conflicts suggests that Moscow might not be able to force particular outcomes, but it is likely to be able to raise the cost to the West of pursuing specific policy options that are not in line with its wishes.

Adapting an assertive foreign policy approach can serve to boost stability and legitimacy at home. In the last several years, Russia has been subject to European and American sanctions. Close cooperation with Middle Eastern countries can serve to offset the negative effects of these Western-imposed sanctions. Russia has a large Muslim minority and several Islamic countries in its near abroad, i.e., the Caucasus and Central Asia, are predominantly Muslim. Accordingly, Russian leaders have long perceived Islamic ideology and Islamists as significant threats. Within this context, warm relations with Muslim countries in the Middle East and elsewhere would enhance the Russian government's image among its Muslim population and would enable Moscow to contribute and shape the war against extremist groups in Syria and other Middle Eastern countries.

---

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Osborn, "Putin: Collapse of the Soviet Union Was Catastrophe of the Century," *Independent*, October 6, 2011, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/putin-collapse-of-the-soviet-union-was-catastrophe-of-the-century-521064.html>.

Economic interests are also a major driver of Russian foreign policy. Although the volume of trade between the two sides is relatively low, particularly in comparison with other global powers such as the United States, the European Union, and China, economic ties between Moscow and several regional powers have expanded since the early 2000s. Russia's major exports to the Middle East include military equipment, machinery, oil and gas, petrochemical, metallurgical, and agricultural products. The Middle East is the main destination for exports of Russian grains. In order to further boost trade relations, Moscow has occasionally offered to use national currencies as a legal tender in bilateral trade instead of euros and U.S. dollars and has invited its Middle East trade partners to form a free trade zone with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Investment is another major area of on-going cooperation between the two sides. Middle East oil producers own some of the largest sovereign wealth funds in the world. They want to diversify their investment portfolio to include other major markets in addition to those of Western Europe and the United States. Moscow seeks to attract some of these investments.

Both Russia and several Middle Eastern countries are major oil and gas producers and exporters. A long time ago, the two sides decided that cooperation, rather than confrontation, would serve their mutual interests. Major Russian energy companies, such as *Rosneft*, *Lukoil*, *Gazprom*, *Surgutneftegaz*, and *Tatneft*, have made substantial investments in oil and gas sector in the Middle East. Russia is not a member in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) but for several years has coordinated its production policy with the Vienna-based organization. Generally, the two sides (Russia and OPEC) seek to maintain oil price stability and offset the growing volume of US oil production. Similarly, Russia, along with several Middle Eastern countries, is a founding member in the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF), which has similar goals to those of OPEC.

Arms deals have always been the cornerstone of Moscow-Middle Eastern relations since the time of the Soviet Union. Most regional powers prefer Western over Russian arms. However, at least two challenges have always complicated arms supplies from the United States and Europe: A) concern about human rights and B) maintaining Israel's qualitative military edge. As a result, some Middle Eastern countries perceive Western governments as unreliable source of weapons. Russia, on the other hand, does not impose such restraints on its arms deals. In the late 2010s, Russia has been able to secure a major arms deal with Turkey, a NATO member, by selling it the SAM-400 air defense system, despite strong opposition from the United States and the threat of sanctions, which were eventually imposed in December 2020.

The growing relations between Russia and Middle Eastern countries reflect perceived benefits by the two sides. Leaders with regional influence, based on cost-benefit analysis, are generally eager to do business with Moscow. At the end of the day, they do not want to be taken for granted by Washington; Russia is seen as an alternative to the United States. Similarly, presenting Russia as an option can be used to pressure the United States to adopt a desired course by Middle Eastern countries. Moscow promotes its approach to the Middle East as secular, transactional, and non-ideological.<sup>4</sup> When Middle Eastern leaders doubt Washington's commitment and obligations, they find a partner in Russia. This was clear under the Obama Administration, and more recently, when Congress denounced the killing of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2019.

---

<sup>4</sup> Becca Wasser, *The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019). <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE340.html>.



### ***Limitations on Russian Middle East Policy***

Undoubtedly, Russia has many ways it can benefit from involvement in the Middle East. As the previous analysis shows, the two sides can provide each other with strategic and economic opportunities. However, this ambitious desire to deepen mutual engagement confronts serious challenges. First, there is a huge mismatch between Moscow's strategic objectives and its economic resources. Unlike Middle Eastern oil exporters, the Russian economy is not deeply dependent on oil and gas revenues, though these revenues do represent a large proportion of state budget. Low oil prices since 2014, and European and American sanctions, have limited Russia's capacity to exercise influence abroad. Arab Gulf states have identified Russia's current economic need as a weakness that they can exploit for their own political gain. Currently, Russia's financial and economic capabilities do not match those of the U.S. and EU and are not likely to do so in the foreseeable future.

Second, Russia's efforts to expand its influence in the Middle East pose another major challenge. In 2007 the state television channel Russia Today (RT) launched its Arabic service, which covers not only the Middle East but also Europe. These efforts were supported by the Russian federal agency *Rosstrudnichestvo*, whose official aim is to develop the country's cultural presence abroad. By 2014, it had created a network of missions in the capitals of Syria, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt.<sup>5</sup> These efforts, however, have only made incremental gains in altering narratives in the region. Russia's soft power still has a long way to develop in order to be able to compete with that of the United States and Europe. British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), France 24, and Voice of America hold more resources and enjoy more credibility than RT.

Third, despite limited economic resources and soft power, Russia has managed to establish and maintain relations with almost all major regional powers including Egypt, Syria, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Israel, and Hamas. Indeed, President Putin is one of the few world leaders who has met with the Ayatollah Khamenei of Iran, Crown Prince Mohammad bin-Salman of Saudi Arabia, and Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel. The Russian president also maintains close ties with both the Turkish President Erdogan and his Syrian neighbor Assad. These relations with states and non-state actors who are at odds with each other have their own limitations. Russia finds itself walking a tightrope to balance all these regional powers. For example, Moscow has had a hard time balancing its close ties with Israel, Iran, and Assad in the on-going fighting in Syria. Another challenge is that this impartiality limits the depth of Russia's bilateral relations. Finally, if the hostility further intensifies between these regional powers, Russia might be forced to choose sides.

Fourth, Russia does not only compete with the United States and Europe over influence in the Middle East, it competes with China as well. Unlike Moscow, Beijing has so far chosen to avoid any security role similar to the Russian presence in the Syrian civil war and more recently in the Libyan civil war. But, China enjoys key advantages over Russia. It controls substantial economic and financial resources and in recent years has become the main trade partner to several Middle Eastern states. Equally important, China is the main consumer of oil and gas exports from the Persian Gulf. On the other hand, Middle Eastern leaders have been using close ties with Beijing to show Washington, Brussels, and Moscow that they have other options.

---

<sup>5</sup> Nikolay Kozhanov, "Russian Policy across the Middle East: Motivations and Methods," Chatham House, February 21, 2018, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/russian-policy-across-middle-east-motivations-and-methods>.



### ***Case Study 1: Syrian Civil War***

The Assad regime's close relations with Moscow are the oldest in the Middle East. When he was Defense Minister, Hafez Al-Assad established warm ties with the Soviet Union, which he maintained and further strengthened after he became president and his son Bashar followed suit. Given this history, Moscow has three strategic goals in the Syrian civil war:

- To preserve the Assad regime as a major ally and maintain Russia's air base in the western province of Latakia and its naval base in the port of Tartus (Russia's direct access to the Mediterranean Sea);
- To defeat Islamic extremist groups, which are, in Moscow's eyes, an extension of the terrorist groups it fights in Chechnya, Dagestan, and other parts of the country;
- To use Damascus as a springboard to expand its influence in the Middle East, project power, and challenge U.S. regional and global dominance.

In pursuing these objectives, Russia started a massive military intervention in Syria, the first outside of Europe since the end of the Cold War. Starting in October 2015, Russia has provided significant military and political support to President Assad. Russian air strikes against his opponents have turned the tide of the war in favor of the Syrian government and established Moscow as the main global military power in the country. By deploying the S-400 cutting-edge air-defense system, Moscow controls most of the air space in Western Syria.

Russia's relations with Iran and its perception of Tehran's role in the Syrian war are complicated. Relations between the two are driven more by shared geopolitical considerations than by economic interests. Arms sales and political support are major drivers of the alliance between the two nations, whereas economic ties are anemic; Tehran has a much larger volume of trade with Asian powers, particularly China, and with the EU. Moscow and Tehran are simultaneously allies and competitors. In the Syrian war the two nations need each other, but their strategic objectives are not identical. They both fight against Sunni rebel groups supported by regional and Western powers. Both Russian air power and Iranian influenced Shia militia ground forces are essential to win this fight, but Tehran insists on a military victory and wants to establish a permanent presence along Israel's borders. Moscow, on the other hand, is more open to a political compromise; after securing its military bases, it wants to bring its troops home. A decisive victory by President Assad and his Iranian, Hezbollah, and other allies might not be the outcome Russia would like to see in Syria. Moscow seeks to balance its strategic relations with Tehran with those of other regional powers. Specifically, Russia has adopted an accommodative approach to Israel's security concerns.

Since the beginning of the Syrian war, Prime Minister Netanyahu has met with President Putin more often than he has met with American presidents. The two countries have a de-confliction mechanism in place, allowing Israeli jets to strike Iranian targets in Syria without simultaneously hitting Russian forces. Meanwhile, Russia has not used its advanced anti-aircraft batteries to stop the Israeli attacks. This suggests that Moscow has either given Jerusalem a green light or is turning a blind eye to air strikes against Iran/Hezbollah targets. Russian officials have been calling for restraint from all parties, but Moscow's reluctance to take a strong stand against Israeli air strikes indicates a desire to avoid confrontation with Jerusalem and a willingness to tolerate some degradation of Iran's capabilities in Syria.

The rising tension between Tehran and Jerusalem has put more pressure on Moscow to find a balance that will accommodate their opposing strategic objectives. Iran and its Shiite-militia allies want to maintain a military presence in Syria to deter potential Israeli aggression against the Islamic Republic. Jerusalem rejects such a scenario and has launched military

operations to prevent it. Given its heavy military involvement in the Syrian war and its close relations with both Iran and Israel, Moscow is well-positioned to negotiate a compromise. Russia does not want the fighting between these sworn enemies to escalate and further destabilize Syria (and the entire region), delaying the withdrawal of Russian troops. Against this background, President Putin stated that foreign armed forces will withdraw from Syria.

There is a problem, however: it is not clear whether the Assad regime is strong enough to survive without Russian and Iranian support. A premature withdrawal might force Assad to give up some of the gains he has recently won from opposition groups. Furthermore, it is not clear that Tehran will accept the Russian proposal. President Putin's call was followed by a modification from Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who said that only Syrian forces should be stationed on the country's southern border, implying that Iranian and Hezbollah forces should be ruled out. This modified proposal amounts to the creation of a buffer zone along the Israeli-Syrian borders. Iranian-allied Shiite forces would not be allowed in this zone, so the launching of short-range missile attacks on Israel would diminish.

### ***Case Study 2: Nuclear Power***

One of the growing areas of expanding Russia influence in the Middle East is the construction of nuclear power plants. Russian leaders see the transfer of civilian nuclear technology as an important tool for projecting influence overseas. In 2014 Russia signed a package of agreements for the construction of up to eight new nuclear reactors in Iran. The first two are expected to be built in Bushehr, which Russian engineers had already built and handed over to national authorities in 2013. During Putin's February 2015 visit to Egypt, *Rosatom* signed a contract for the construction of Egypt's first nuclear power plant. In March 2015, Russia and Jordan signed a \$10 billion agreement allowing *Rosatom* to build and operate two nuclear reactors with a total capacity of 2,000 megawatts. In September 2019, Russia signed a \$20 billion agreement to build four nuclear power reactors in Akkuyu, Turkey, one of the largest nuclear deals in the world.

Russia is boosting its dominance in new nuclear sales. Currently, it leads the pool of global suppliers, accounting for two-thirds of the globally exported nuclear power plants under construction.<sup>6</sup> Since the 1950s, global powers have been interested in exporting nuclear power for a number of strategic benefits, including securing a source of domestic power generation, the ability to establish nuclear safety and nonproliferation standards around the world, enforcing a vibrant nuclear innovation ecosystem, and some degree of geopolitical influence with other nations. These strategic benefits, along with the value of nuclear power as a source of low greenhouse gas-emitting energy in the fight against climate change, become important to understanding the dynamics of Great Power Competition and Moscow's growing role in the Middle East. Nuclear commerce entails not only a multi-year effort for reactor construction but also an ongoing relationship between a supplier country and a recipient one regarding fuel supplies and reactor maintenance. As such, nuclear commerce serves to create or maintain diplomatic, commercial, and institutional relationship. This is where the link between nuclear commerce and geopolitics exists on multiple levels.

Russia's nuclear energy sector is organized under a single player, *Rosatom* (established in 2007). It serves as the direct arm of the state for both civilian and military nuclear energy work. The corporation is entirely under the control of the Russia state, with its strategic objectives

---

<sup>6</sup> "Performance in 2018," Rosatom, accessed April 5, 2020, [https://www.report.rosatom.ru/go\\_eng/go\\_rosatom\\_eng\\_2018/go\\_eng\\_2018.pdf](https://www.report.rosatom.ru/go_eng/go_rosatom_eng_2018/go_eng_2018.pdf).

being set by President Putin.<sup>7</sup> Russia's rise as the dominant reactor technology supplier can be explained by its ability to adapt its business model to a changing market. *Rosatom* is both vertically and horizontally integrated, providing reactor technology, plant construction, fuel, operational capability (including training), maintenance services, decommissioning, spent nuclear fuel reprocessing and regulatory support, as well as generous financing (debt and equity) to both established markets and newcomers. This integrated structure gives Russia the ability to engage a foreign client through a single point of contact in contractual engagements. The one-stop-shop approach has a particular appeal to newcomer countries (such as those in the Middle East) that lack adequate experience in developing such complex projects.<sup>8</sup>

*Rosatom*'s nuclear project at Akkuyu in Turkey added a strategic value to Russia by further complicating relations between Ankara and Washington. Although Turkey has had a bilateral nuclear cooperation agreement with the United States since 1955, political instability and economic crises combined with Ankara's insistence on commercially difficult terms have confounded the Turkish government's efforts to sign a nuclear deal with an American company. The agreement with *Rosatom* aims to build the country's first nuclear reactor on the build-own-operate (BOO) model by the early 2020s. Under such a model, Russia would not only build but also own and operate the plant, thereby bearing all the financial, construction, operating and country risks. This arrangement aims to remove many technical and regulatory barriers a nuclear newcomer may encounter in introducing nuclear energy and has likely reduced a significant level of financial barriers for Turkey. Meanwhile, these close ties between Ankara and Moscow have further complicated relations with Washington and other European powers.

### ***Implications for the United States and Recommendations***

Two weeks after inauguration, President Biden visited the Department of State and gave his first foreign policy speech. The president said, "The days of the United States rolling over in the face of Russia's aggressive actions are over. We will not hesitate to raise the cost on Russia and defend our vital interests. We will be more effective in dealing with Russia when we work in coalition and coordination with other like-minded partners."<sup>9</sup> This statement from President Biden indicates that his Administration plans to reach out to European allies to confront Moscow around the world.

Russia has always sought to export a different worldview to Middle Eastern countries than Western powers have projected. This model has always reflected ideological orientation and perceived national interests. Moscow has never shown interest in supporting transparency and democratic values and has always endorsed authoritarian leaders. Like the Chinese model, it focuses more on transaction and less on transparency and rule of law. As such, it appeals to many Middle Eastern governments. Within this context, several points should be highlighted:

---

<sup>7</sup> Nevine Schepers, "Russia's nuclear energy exports: status, prospects and implications," EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Consortium, February, 2019, [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-2/eunpdc\\_no\\_61\\_final.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-2/eunpdc_no_61_final.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Jane Nakano, "The changing geopolitics of nuclear energy," Report, CSIS, March 12, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/changing-geopolitics-nuclear-energy-look-united-states-russia-and-china>.

<sup>9</sup> President Joseph Biden (2021) Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-america-s-place-in-the-world/>. Accessed February 4, 2021.

- Despite lucrative energy and arms deals, Russia's priorities are closer to home, i.e., Europe and Asia.
- Russia's growing role in the Middle East is guided by pragmatism and opportunism and not driven by any ideological orientation. Authoritarianism and totalitarianism are the form of ideology Russia tolerates and promotes in the Middle East and elsewhere.
- There is no doubt Moscow has expanded its influence in the Middle East since the early 2000s. However, one can argue, Russian rising role is unsustainable given the nation's limited hard and soft resources.
- Middle Eastern leaders have always sought to play Russia off the United States. This is not likely to change. However, they perceive Washington as their primary security, economic, and strategic choice.
- Russia has demonstrated capabilities less to dictate outcomes and more to complicate American policies. This is likely to continue in the foreseeable future.
- Leaders and policymakers should understand that Russia both considers the Middle East a secondary priority and cannot sustain continued growth in influence. Therefore, what it offers the ME is short-term opportunity rather than long-term security, and the U.S. and its allies can bring something to the negotiating table that Russia cannot.
- Russian-Middle Eastern ties will continue focusing on arms sales and energy. The two sides need each other. Most Middle Eastern countries prefer to buy American weapons, but when Washington imposes political restrictions on arms sales, Russia is seen as an option. For several years, major oil producing countries have coordinated their production policies with Russia in what is known as OPEC +. The two sides both seek to prevent oil prices from declining and to undercut U.S. fracking efforts. The Biden Administration's focus on climate change and its support to clean energy is likely to weaken the OPEC-Russia partnership. The global demand for oil will continue, but is projected to decline in the coming years.
- Understanding this, the U.S. should seek to provide a steadfast presence that promotes rule of law – countering the short-term disruptive acts of Russia.



## Chapter 10

# Russia and Africa: Expanding Influence and Instability

*By Joseph Siegle*

### *Russia's Strategic Goals in Africa*

After a year-long siege of Tripoli in western Libya, warlord Khalifa Haftar and his forces beat a hasty retreat in mid-2020 from their collapsing front lines to territory controlled by his proxy coalition of tribal groups and militias in central and eastern Libya. Along with them were an estimated 1,200 Russian mercenaries with the Wagner Group. They were in Libya as part of a Russian gambit to carve out a zone of influence in this geographically strategic territory linking Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. Russia has been supporting Haftar's forces with snipers, Mig-29 and Su-24 fighter jets, SA-22 surface-to-air missile, anti-aircraft systems, and hundreds of flights delivering military logistics since 2019.<sup>1</sup> Despite the military setback, and subsequent ceasefire and formation of a fragile Government of National Unity, Russia is on track to achieve its key objectives including gaining revenues from oil fields in eastern Libya, naval access to deep-water ports in the eastern Mediterranean, and establishing itself as a powerbroker in a region bordering NATO's southern flank.

Libya provides a vignette of how Russia pursues its strategic goals in Africa: expanding geopolitical influence through low cost ventures that hold economic windfalls for Moscow and President Vladimir Putin's close associates.<sup>2</sup> In this way, Russia's strategy in Africa is both opportunistic and calculating. It is opportunistic in that it is willing to take risks and quickly deploy mercenary forces to crisis contexts when the opening presents itself, similar to what Moscow did in Syria. It is calculating in that it aims to expand Russia's power projection including over strategic chokeholds in the eastern Mediterranean and Suez Canal that could affect NATO force deployments in times of crisis.

It is further calculating in that it sees Africa as a way to balance Western influence through what amounts to asymmetric tactics. Moscow's forays into Africa extend the geostrategic playing field. Russia has similarly recognized the polarizing effect that large inflows of Syrian refugees have had on European politics. Keeping a hand on the spigot regulating refugee flows from Africa, therefore, provides Russia further leverage over Europe.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Russia, Wagner Group Continue Military Involvement in Libya," *Defense News*, July 24, 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2287821/russia-wagner-group-continue-military-involvement-in-libya/>.

<sup>2</sup> Kimberly Marten, "Russia's Back in Africa: Is the Cold War Returning?" *The Washington Quarterly*, December 2019, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0163660X.2019.1693105?journalCode=rwaq20>.



Russia's interest in Africa, triggered by Moscow's isolation following its annexation of Crimea and ventures into eastern Ukraine, also provides an opportunity to advance Putin's vision of a post-liberal international world order.<sup>3</sup> This takes the form of challenging democratic norms and the principles of a rules-based international system. Rather than offering an alternative model, as does Chinese authoritarianism, the Russian strategy appears to be aimed at smearing the perception that democracy offers a more effective, equitable, transparent, or inclusive form of governance. This worldview, in which all political systems hold moral and governance equivalence, plays to the advantage of Moscow's elite-focused, transactional, and unregulated model.

The practical application of this worldview in Africa is inherently destabilizing. The undermining of legitimate governments, fomenting social polarization through disinformation campaigns in fragile states, and propping up unconstitutional claims on power tears at the thin social fabric of many African societies. Coupled with the reported cooption of at least eight African leaders, Russian actions are sidelining the many African voices calling for reform and greater popular participation. The effect is a stymieing of African agency.

Africa, with its weak governments, abundant natural resources, colonial legacies, proximity to Europe, and 54 votes at the United Nations General Assembly, provides Russia an easy and attractive theater where it can advance its interests with limited financial or political costs.

Russia's approach to expanding its influence in Africa stands in stark contrast to the Biden Administration's emphasis on democracy as a foundational platform for international security, cooperation on transnational challenges, and development.<sup>4</sup> Defending freedom, supporting a free press, upholding universal rights, and respecting the rule of law are all central elements of the administration's strategy to contain and reverse advancing authoritarianism globally. The new administration's pledge that the United States will be present and reengage on global governance issues is perhaps most relevant in Africa as it represents an opportunity to fill a void that has been created by the U.S.'s relative absence in recent years. It is in this vacuum that Russia and other external actors have sought to advance a very different agenda for Africa.

### ***Primary Means by which Russia Seeks to Achieve Goals in Africa***

With an economy the size of South Korea or Spain, and little in the way of manufacturing products that are appealing to African markets, Russia manages a modest level of trade with Africa, amounting to roughly \$20 billion per year (about one-tenth that of China). Nor does it offer compelling ideological, social, or cultural resonance for many in Africa. Despite this, Russia has gained outsized influence in Africa in recent years by playing the cards it has well. Where it has realized most influence – Libya, Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Mali – Russia has agilely employed a combination of mercenary and disinformation interventions in support of isolated leaders or proxies. This is the pointy spear of a more conventional set of engagements that aim to foster a positive Russian image while providing a platform to advance its elite-based diplomacy.

---

<sup>3</sup> Lionel Barber, Henry Foy, and Alex Barker, "Vladimir Putin Says Liberalism has Become 'Obsolete,'" *Financial Times*, June 27, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/670039ec-98f3-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36>.

<sup>4</sup> "Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World," speech by President Joseph Biden at the U.S. Department of State Headquarters, Washington, D.C., February 4, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>.

## ***The Wagner Group***

Mercenaries from the Wagner Group (closely tied to Russia's military intelligence agency, GRU) have been deployed in Libya, CAR, Sudan, and Mozambique. In each case, following the Syrian model, the Russians supported a beleaguered leader facing a security challenge in a geographically strategic country with mineral or hydrocarbon assets.

In addition to its Libya intervention, Russia struck a deal with the elected president of CAR, Faustin-Archange Touadéra in 2018, to help stave off a threat from the Islamist Seleka militia groups. An estimated 400 Wagner troops were deployed to northern CAR. A Russian, Valery Zakharov, became Touadéra's national security advisor and Minister of Foreign Affairs. Charles-Arnel Doubane was subsequently sacked for voicing disapproval of undue Russian influence. Reports suggest Wagner simultaneously negotiated a revenue-sharing deal with the rebels while gaining control of lucrative gold and diamond mines in the north.<sup>5</sup> Wagner was also involved in repelling a separate rebel offensive on Bangui following flawed elections in December 2020 that kept Touadéra in power with active Russian backing. Reliant on the Russians for his security, Touadéra's policy options and the sovereignty of CAR itself are compromised.

In Sudan, Russia was a backer of longtime dictator Omer al-Bashir. This included the deployment of Wagner forces to support the Sudanese military while gaining access to gold mines in the west of the country. When Bashir was faced with nationwide protests in 2019, the Wagner Group reportedly advised Bashir to crack down harshly on the protesters. Russia appears to have maintained influence with the military leaders who ultimately toppled Bashir, including maintaining previously negotiated mining agreements.

There are also reports of Wagner having deployed to assist the Mozambican government respond to the rapidly expanding militant Islamist group threat in the north. Non-coincidentally, the region is home to a multibillion-dollar gem mining operation and liquefied national gas reserves.

In each case, Russia has officially denied a role or even the presence of Russian mercenaries in these contexts. Typically involving a few hundred forces, the deployments are relatively low-cost, which are likely more than compensated by the fees paid and mineral revenues gained. In the process, Russia gains greater influence in a region where it had little previous presence.

## ***Disinformation Campaigns to Undermine Support for Democracy***

In the aftermath of the August 18, 2020 coup in Mali, jubilant supporters of the military's action came onto the streets in Bamako to celebrate. Curiously, some of those celebrating were waving Russian flags. Many others were holding identical pre-printed posters celebrating Malian-Russian cooperation, photos of Vladimir Putin, and messages thanking Russia for its support. The scene was remarkable in that Russia does not have strong bilateral, cultural, or historical ties with Mali.

While seemingly incongruent, the pro-Russian sentiments were consistent with a line of messaging that began in Bamako a year earlier following the signing of a fuzzy security cooperation agreement between Mali and Russia. Social media sites blamed the former colonial

---

<sup>5</sup> Kimberly Marten, "Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces: The Case of the Wagner Group," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 35, Issue 3 (2019): 181-204, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1060586X.2019.1591142?journalCode=rpsa20&>.

power, France, for Mali’s militant Islamist insurgency in the north and called for France to pull out the 5,000 troops it had deployed to help combat the jihadists. These themes were subsequently picked up in protests organized by opposition groups in the months leading to the coup.

While the details behind the sudden pro-Russian messaging in Mali remain to be fully understood, the experience parallels other Russian-sponsored disinformation campaigns in Africa. These began in 2018 with clunky efforts to influence the presidential election in Madagascar. These were followed by anti-French messaging on social media in CAR subsequent to the signing of a security cooperation agreement with Russia.

The most well-documented instance of Russian disinformation in Africa is in Libya. Starting in January 2019, criticisms of the West, the United Nations, and the UN-backed Government of National Accord became common on Libyan social media networks. The same pages and users praised Russia’s role as a stabilizing actor. The messaging in Libya also seemed aimed at obscuring the truth and sowing confusion – for both domestic and international audiences. While mainstream news outlets drew attention to the allegations of systematic human rights violations by Haftar’s forces including the targeting of hospitals and migration centers, the pro-Russian social media platforms contended that all sides were responsible for human rights abuses. Investigative analysis by Stanford’s Internet Observatory working with Facebook and Twitter was able to identify dozens of social media accounts with hundreds of thousands of followers that presented themselves as authentic domestic voices, but were actually based outside of Libya.<sup>6</sup> As a result of this investigative work, these fake accounts and pages were eventually shut down.

Russia’s disinformation efforts have begun “franchising” their model by creating or sponsoring African hosts for the pro-Russian and anti-West messaging. This approach gives the disinformation campaign more cultural context while making it more difficult for ordinary readers to identify inauthentic accounts. Disinformation operations linked to Yevgeny Prigozhin have now been seen in Angola, the DRC, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.<sup>7</sup> In one model, Russian operatives posing as a fictional news organization, Peace Data, were able to contract unsuspecting journalists in foreign countries to submit content on polarizing topics.<sup>8</sup> With so many African journalists relying on small paid jobs, this approach is likely a highly effective recruitment method. In another instance, a Russian-sponsored Ghanaian troll factory was used to foment social polarization.<sup>9</sup> In South Africa, Russian-sponsored messaging has attempted to inflame racial tensions.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Africa Center for Strategic Studies, “Russian Disinformation Campaigns Target Africa: An Interview with Dr. Shelby Grossman,” *Spotlight*, February 18, 2020, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/russian-disinformation-campaigns-target-africa-interview-shelby-grossman/>.

<sup>7</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, “The ‘Hybrid’ Role of Russian Mercenaries, PMCs, and Irregulars in Moscow’s Scramble for Africa,” The Jamestown Foundation, January 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-hybrid-role-of-russian-mercenaries-pmc-and-irregulars-in-moscows-scramble-for-africa/>.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Dwoskin and Craig Timberg, “Facebook Takes Down Russian Operation that Recruited U.S. Journalists, amid Rising Concerns about Election Misinformation,” *Washington Post*, September 1, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/09/01/facebook-disinformation-takedown/>.

<sup>9</sup> Clarissa Ward, Katie Polglase et. al., “Russian Election Meddling is Back – Via Ghana and Nigeria – and in Your Feeds,” *CNN*, April 11, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/12/world/russia-ghana-troll-farms-2020-ward/index.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Sukhankin, “The ‘Hybrid’ Role of Russian Mercenaries.”

Disinformation messaging is, at times, linked to broader diplomatic support to help friendly African regimes remain in power. As Guinean President Alpha Conde was seeking an unconstitutional third term, Russian Ambassador Alexander Bregadze said on national television in 2019 that rotating leaders was not necessarily a good thing and that “Constitutions are no dogma, Bible, or Koran...It’s constitutions that adapt to reality, not reality to constitutions.”<sup>11</sup> Russia’s biggest aluminum producer, *Rusal*, has expansive bauxite mining interests in Guinea.

### ***UN Voting***

The ties between Russia’s influence campaigns in Africa and Moscow’s broader anti-democratic ideological agenda is seen in the courting of African members of the United Nations Security Council.<sup>12</sup> Africa has three rotating seats (the “A3”) on the 15-member Security Council. By wooing these members, Russia has been able to marshal these votes in support of Russian interests. In January 2019, when the Security Council considered a request from opposition figures in the Democratic Republic of Congo to conduct an investigation into the widely viewed fraudulent presidential election, the A3 (Côte d’Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, and South Africa, at the time) sided with Russia in blocking the initiative. Similarly, in April 2019, the A3 supported Russian efforts to block a statement condemning the coup in Sudan invoking the principle of non-intervention. In that same month, the A3 voted with Russia to block a UK-sponsored resolution calling for a ceasefire in Libya and condemning the actions of Libyan warlord, Khalifa Haftar. Paradoxically, Russia has thus been able to use African votes at the Security Council to undermine African agency and democratic voices of reform on the continent.

### ***Conventional Engagements***

Russia also maintains a series of conventional security, economic, and cultural initiatives in Africa. The most high-profile of these was the Russia-Africa Summit of October 2019 where Vladimir Putin hosted forty-three African heads of state in Sochi. At the Summit, Putin promised debt forgiveness and to double trade with Africa over the next five years. Russia has also realized some soft power gains by promising millions of doses of COVID-19 vaccines to African countries. Despite these instances of high-profile outreach, conventional engagements do not appear to be where Moscow derives the greatest geopolitical benefit in Africa, at least in the short-term.

### ***Security Cooperation***

Russia has signed roughly two dozen security cooperation agreements in Africa in recent years, a significant expansion from the limited security ties it maintained on the continent over the previous two decades. One tangible aspect of these agreements has been an attempt by Russia to secure port and base access to support naval operations in the Red Sea and Mediterranean. Particular attention has been given to the ports of Berbera (Somaliland), Massawa and Assab (Eritrea), Port Sudan (Sudan), and various facilities in Libya. This suggests an interest to project force along the strategic maritime chokeholds of the Bab-el-Mandeb strait (Djibouti-Yemen), the Suez Canal, and the eastern Mediterranean. Russia has also explored port access in southern Africa with Mozambique and has conducted joint naval exercises with South Africa.

---

<sup>11</sup> “Russian Ambassador Sparks Backlash with Suggestion Guinea Change Constitution,” *Reuters*, January 11, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-guinea-russia/russian-ambassador-sparks-backlash-with-suggestion-guinea-change-constitution-idUSKCN1P51SO>.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Stronski, “Late to the Party: Russia’s Return to Africa,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 16, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/16/late-to-party-russia-s-return-to-africa-pub-80056>.

Russia maintains a modest professional military education program for African military personnel, training roughly 500 African service members per year. While limited in numbers, these programs provide Russia a platform to impart its interpretation of civil-military relations within the continent. Emblematic of this potential influence is the link made in the press that several of the senior officers involved in the August 2020 coup in Mali had recently returned from training in Russia. At the least, these professional military education opportunities provide Russia ongoing access to mid- and senior-level African military officers over the course of their careers.

### ***Economics***

Russia's \$20 billion in trade in Africa, is heavily imbalanced toward Russian exports of arms and grain to Africa. Mineral, diamond, and oil contracts are typically negotiated by Russian parastatals such as *Rosneft* and *Lukoil*. This is a sector in which Russia brings technical expertise and financing. The details surrounding these contracts, however, are nearly always shrouded in secrecy, making it difficult to assess their true value or the contributions they may bring to African treasuries. Russia has natural resource deals with roughly twenty African countries.

Russia is the leading exporter of arms to Africa controlling forty-nine percent of the overall arms market in Africa.<sup>13</sup> Algeria, Angola, Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria, Sudan, Senegal, and Zambia are the leading customers of Russian arms in Africa. Russian arms are seen as affordable, easy to maintain, and reliable. African customers are increasingly willing to purchase more sophisticated weaponry from Russia, including fighter aircraft, helicopters, tanks, and air defense systems.<sup>14</sup> It is not uncommon for Russia to leverage its arms as part of an "arms-for-resources" deal.

Russia has also attempted to negotiate nuclear power deals on the continent. In 2020, Russia's State Atomic Energy Corporation, *Rosatom*, provided a \$25 billion loan to begin construction of Egypt's first nuclear power plant – a \$60 billion facility. The hefty price tag and limited technical capacity would seemingly make this a less viable industry for Africa. Nonetheless, Russia is at varying stages of negotiation with seventeen African countries and has preliminary nuclear project deals in Ethiopia, Rwanda, Sudan, and Zambia.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Education***

Russia maintains a series of educational and cultural exchanges with Africa. An estimated 15,000 Africans study at Russian universities mainly from Nigeria, Angola, Morocco, Namibia, and Tunisia.<sup>16</sup> This represents a steady growth that Moscow says will continue. Given the limited opportunities for tertiary education for many Africans, these scholarships are highly welcomed by the recipients. They also facilitate loyal and long-term ties to these individuals, who often go on to senior roles in government.

---

<sup>13</sup> Dr Aude Fleurant, Alexandra Kuimova, Dr. Diego Lopes da Silva, Dr. Nan Tian, Siemon T. Wezeman, and Pieter Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2019," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), March 2020, [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/fs\\_2003\\_at\\_2019.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/fs_2003_at_2019.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Sukhankin, "The 'Hybrid' Role of Russian Mercenaries."

<sup>15</sup> Sukhankin, "The 'Hybrid' Role of Russian Mercenaries."

<sup>16</sup> Maina Waruru, "Russia: Ambitious Plans to Grow African Numbers," PIE News, October 3, 2019, <https://thepienews.com/news/russia-ambitious-plans-grow-african-student-numbers/>.



### ***Opportunities, Limits, and Challenges to Russian Engagement in Africa***

Russia has been able to quickly expand its presence in Africa precisely because Africa represents a highly permissive environment for Russia's malign engagements. The weak legal and regulatory environment in much of Africa means Russia – through Wagner, disinformation, or elite-based diplomacy – largely has free reign in its operations. This is even more the case since it is the isolated and often authoritarian African governments that welcome Wagner's interventions. The reliance on private military contractors means that the financial costs to Moscow are limited. While Wagner does occasionally incur casualties, these setbacks are not widely reported in Russia and do not trigger popular pressure to curtail Russia's forays into Africa.

Russia also bears few reputational costs for its interventions. By design, there remains a high level of opacity surrounding the deployment of Russian mercenaries and disinformation campaigns. Russia's elite-based diplomacy, moreover, is aimed at coopting and sustaining friendly regimes. Therefore, information of Russia's meddling in Africa is partial and difficult to substantiate. Criticism from official African sources is rare. The fact that much of this malign behavior is conducted by third-party actors, furthermore, provides Russia an arms-length posture from which it can deny any knowledge or support for these actions. This dampens the collective outrage and coordinated action that could constrain further Russian interventions in African affairs.

At the same time, the primary exports that Russia has to offer Africa – mercenaries, arms, and disinformation – are inherently destabilizing. This is a weak basis on which to build long-term relationships. While this does not appear to be a concern for Moscow or the African interlocutors who seek Russia's aid, the reputational costs of being perceived as a spoiler and solely pursuing transactional interests will over time undercut Russia's credibility. Rather, Russia is perceived as a partner of last resort – one in which you turn to in times of desperation or when interested in skirting financial or human rights norms.

### ***Implications for Africa and the West***

A common assessment of Russia's engagement in Africa is that since Moscow is not spending that much on these initiatives, the havoc it can create is marginal. That is, Russia may be a nuisance but not a priority concern. That assessment, however, overlooks the level of instability that can be created in Africa with a relatively small level of resources. Given Africa's generally underfunded governments, weak states, and lax oversight capacity, Russia's pursuit of low-cost narrow objectives – coopting political leaders and accessing resources – can have profound impacts on the politics, sovereignty, and stability of the continent. Leaders in CAR, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea, Congo, Madagascar, Mozambique, South Sudan, Sudan, and Zimbabwe are all seen as being in some way compromised by Moscow. Disinformation campaigns in other African countries are adding further strains to already fragile political systems.

Ironically, in instances where Wagner has deployed troops to quell instability, instability is likely to persist. Being a profit-seeking entity, Wagner has a strong incentive to see a manageable level of instability persist, thereby justifying Wagner's perpetuation. Since these arrangements often also entail Russian access to resources, arms sales, and heightened political leverage, Russian interests in Africa, cynically, are advanced by ongoing instability.

African leaders who have embraced Russia's "mercenary diplomacy" have effectively ceded a degree of African sovereignty to Russia, much as has happened in Syria. As in other instances where vassal states are created, this arrangement is likely to endure for a long time as these African leaders and countries will find it difficult to extricate themselves from their reliance on Moscow.

Geo-strategically, if Russia becomes established as a key power broker in Libya with unfettered naval and air base access in the eastern Mediterranean it is in a stronger position to threaten Europe's southern borders and disrupt NATO maritime movements in times of crisis. Sirte is only 700 miles from Rome. Russia is already staking its claim for untapped oil and gas reserves off the Libyan coast. Russia's interest in securing port access in the Red Sea expands its capacity to be a disruptive force for naval and maritime passage along Africa's east coast, as well.

Russian influence in Libya and the Sahel provides Russia access to key nodes of African migration and human trafficking routes. Russia thus has the ability to provoke humanitarian and political crises for Europe while challenging spheres of historically European (primarily French) influence in Africa.

Another strategic implication of Russian engagement in Africa is the weakening of democracy. This is partly an instrumental outcome of Russia's clientelistic model of coopting African leaders through opaque agreements disadvantageous to African countries. In the process, popular participation and African agency more generally, are sidelined. This is reinforced by an ideological message from Russian representatives and disinformation that presidential term limits need not be respected, truth is irrelevant, and democracy affords no advantages over authoritarianism.

A deterioration in democratic norms has direct implications for African security and development. Nearly all of Africa's conflicts and forcibly displaced populations originate in authoritarian governments.<sup>17</sup> Since the continent's democracies have realized substantially higher levels of stability, sustained growth, rule of law, control of corruption, and living conditions, Russian efforts to roll back democratic governance norms will have far-reaching second and third-order effects.

## ***Recommendations***

In Russia's dual-pronged official/unofficial strategy in Africa, it is the unofficial mercenary diplomacy strategy that is of most concern. This approach, which draws on Russia's "comparative advantages" in Africa – the willingness to deploy mercenaries, disinformation, arms sales, and natural resource extraction through opaque compacts – is inherently destabilizing for the continent. In short, African stability is not a priority for Russia. As it is largely pursued on a patron-client basis with compromised African leaders, moreover, Russia's unofficial strategy runs counter to the interests of the vast majority of African citizens.

The United States' security and economic interests in Africa are advanced by long-term partnerships with stable, democratic governments committed to the rule of law. It is these contexts that are most conducive to domestic security, private sector investments that generate jobs and profits, and cooperation against threats to the international order. There is, accordingly, a high level of overlap between African and American interests.

---

<sup>17</sup> Wendy Williams, "Shifting Borders: Africa's Displacement Crisis and Its Security Implications," *Africa Center Research Paper*, No. 8, October 2019, <https://africacenter.org/publication/shifting-borders-africas-displacement-crisis-and-its-security-implications/>.

This point was noted by President Biden in his inaugural foreign policy address, “[America’s global power and abiding advantage is rooted in advancing] democratic values: defending freedom, championing opportunity, upholding universal rights, respecting the rule of law, and treating every person with dignity.”<sup>18</sup>

With broad diplomatic, foreign direct investment (\$45 billion), trade (\$65 billion), development (\$10 billion), security (\$600 million), and cultural ties with Africa, U.S. engagement on the continent is an order of magnitude greater than that of Russia.

Despite these extensive initiatives, there is a common perception that the United States has not been playing its historical leadership role in recent years, creating a power vacuum on the continent that Russia has tried to fill. A first priority for U.S. engagement in Africa, therefore, is to clearly articulate the shared interests and vision that the United States holds with Africa. In so doing, the United States can underscore that U.S. policy in Africa encompasses far more than simply countering Russia (or China).

A second priority is for the U.S. to weigh-in on Russia’s geo-strategic positioning on the continent, particularly in Libya where the establishment of a Russian foothold poses a long-term threat to NATO. This does not mean that the U.S. should deploy forces to what is already a highly complex theater.<sup>19</sup> However, it should commit to supporting United Nations-backed stabilization efforts, while further isolating the influence of rebel warlord, Khalifa. Most pertinently, the United States is needed to help unify the efforts of European and NATO allies in this context. The lack of a cohesive European response has enabled Russia to expand its leverage in this strategic region.

A third priority is for the United States, working with African and international partners, to be more diplomatically active in conflict mitigation efforts. Countries such as CAR, Mali, Mozambique, and Sudan face genuine security challenges. If these countries perceive their security threats as spinning out of control and that they lack other options, they may be inclined to strike a deal with Moscow to send Wagner. These deals almost inevitably compromise the sovereignty of the African host and are difficult to terminate. It is in the interest of the United States and African stability to find options other than Russian mercenaries. To be clear, the United State should not be drawn directly into these conflicts. By working with host nations and regional bodies, though, U.S. diplomatic, technical, and financial support can serve as a stabilizing counterweight to Russian destabilization.

The U.S. must not solely play the role of firefighter to Russia’s arson in Africa. The United States should help by exposing and confronting Russian misbehavior. Yet, it is African governmental, media, civil society, and business leaders that must ultimately defend African interests against external spoilers. Similarly, the U.S. must work more closely with African members of the UN Security Council so that shared interests of security and development are advanced at these international fora.

A fourth priority is to help Africa fight Russian disinformation campaigns, which aim to foment political and ethnic polarization, distrust, and instability. Best practices from the Baltics, which have developed sophisticated counter-Russian disinformation methods, have relied on

---

<sup>18</sup> “Remarks by President Biden on America’s Place in the World.”

<sup>19</sup> Tarek Megeresi, “[Geostrategic Dimensions of Libya’s Civil War](#),” *Africa Security Brief No. 37*, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, May 18, 2020.

coordinated efforts between commercial technology companies, news services, social media platforms, and government agencies.<sup>20</sup> Some of these efforts tap networks of citizen volunteers to seek out and counter fake news.<sup>21</sup>

Africa is starting from a much lower institutional capacity to combat these influences. Yet, young Africans have demonstrated great talent and innovation in adapting new digital technologies for the public good. U.S. support can strengthen the capacity of African governmental and non-governmental fact-checking and digital detective firms to identify fake Russian-sponsored accounts, trolls, and disinformation campaigns. In Africa, with ruling parties often the direct beneficiaries of Russian disinformation campaigns, such efforts may need to be organized via regional hubs rather than on a country-by-country basis.

A focal point for U.S. efforts to counter disinformation is the interagency Global Engagement Center based in the State Department. Established in 2016, the Center has mostly focused on countering terrorist messaging. These efforts need to be further developed to respond to Russian disinformation globally, especially in Africa.

The United States also needs stronger outreach to social media firms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to elevate their efforts in exposing and taking down disinformation campaigns using their platforms in Africa. Facebook, in particular, has deemphasized mitigation efforts in countries outside North America and Europe.<sup>22</sup> The destabilizing effects of Russian disinformation in Africa, however, are amplified given the high starting levels of fragility.

The upshot is that if there is to be a change in Russian support for disinformation campaigns in Africa, Russia must bear greater reputational and financial costs.<sup>23</sup> Responses to Russian disinformation, thus far, have not nearly been proportionate to the damages exacted by Russian actions, which include election meddling, subverting democracy, propping up illegitimate leaders, and inflaming tensions in already fragile countries. All of these destabilizing actions have real and long-lasting political, economic, and human costs.

U.S. Treasury sanctions on Yevgeny Prigozhin for his destabilizing activities in Sudan and CAR are useful and should be expanded. While such sanctions may not immediately curtail Prigozhin and his allies, they serve an important purpose of signaling the criminal nature of Prigozhin's activities on the continent to African governments and media. Not only does this raise awareness but it demonstrates to African interlocutors that there are potentially crippling costs tied to these engagements. To reinforce this point, U.S. sanctions should also extend to the networks of Russian banks and natural resource parastatals as well as African beneficiaries who are enabling this malignant behavior. Denying these firms access to international financial markets will increase the tangible costs to Russia and create stronger incentives to change course.

---

<sup>20</sup> Edward Lucas and Peter Pomeranzen, "Winning the Information War: Techniques and Counter Strategies to Russian Propaganda in Central and Eastern Europe," Center for European Policy Analysis and the Legatum Institute, August 2016, [https://cepa.ecms.pl/files/?id\\_plik=2715](https://cepa.ecms.pl/files/?id_plik=2715).

<sup>21</sup> Ken Sengupta, "Meet the Elves, Lithuania's Digital Citizen Army Confronting Russian Trolls," *The Independent*, July 17, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/lithuania-elves-russia-election-tampering-online-cyber-crime-hackers-kremlin-a9008931.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Craig Silverman, Ryan Mac, and Pranav Dixit, "I Have Blood on My Hands," *BuzzFeed*, September 14, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/facebook-ignore-political-manipulation-whistleblower-memo>.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Siegle, "Recommended US Response to Russian Activities in Africa," May, 2019, <https://africacenter.org/experts/joseph-siegle/recommended-us-response-to-russian-activities-in-africa/>; this article originally appeared as a chapter in "Russia Strategic Intentions White Paper," *Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA)* publication series, NSI, May 2019, <https://nsiteam.com/sma-white-paper-russian-strategic-intentions/>.

In recent years, the United States has passed legislation that creates a stronger legal platform from which to pursue legal and financial remedies for destabilizing activity sponsored by Russia or other international actors. The Global Magnitsky Act allows the executive branch to impose visa bans and freeze the assets on individuals anywhere in the world responsible for committing human rights violations or acts of significant corruption. The passing of the European Magnitsky Act established in December 2020 broadens the means to apply such penalties in a coordinated manner in defense of democracy and human rights.

The Global Fragility Act calls for all parts of the U.S. government to coordinate strategies to prevent violence and extremism and to focus foreign assistance on averting conflict in fragile countries. The Act includes provisions for punitive actions to be taken against political actors that drive instability. These tools as well as the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, the Countering American Adversaries through Sanctions Act and laws pertaining to transnational criminal organizations provide the United States with a menu of legal means of increasing penalties on Russia for its destabilizing activity in Africa.

In this way, the United States can help Africa become less of a permissive environment for Russia and other external actors seeking to exploit Africa's vulnerabilities at the expense of African stability, sovereignty, and democracy. This is in both African and U.S. interests.





## Chapter 11

# Russian Nuclear Instruments and Arms Control Approaches

*By Pavel K. Baev*

### ***Introduction***

Russia's claims for a "Great Power" status and ambitions to emerge as a key power center in the presumed "multi-polar world" are not just underpinned but also shaped and driven by its possession of an arsenal of nuclear weapons, which quite probably is the largest in the world. Huge amounts of scarce resources are channeled into modernization of this arsenal, but Moscow finds it increasingly difficult to harvest political dividends from these investments. Upholding numerical parity with the USA, which has long been a fundamental principle of strategic stability, is unproblematic, but the high number of warheads does not translate into authority on the international arena or ability to influence global developments.<sup>1</sup> In the new geopolitical configuration, shaped by the global consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia may find greater need to rely on its superior nuclear potential because other elements of its power, particularly the economy, are weakened and compromised; however, the applicability of nuclear instruments might diminish even further.

One of the most effective ways of capitalizing on the modern and diverse nuclear capabilities has traditionally been engagement in complicated arms control talks and agreements, first of all with the United States, which secured for the Soviet Union, and since the start of the 1990s – for Russia, the symbolic position of the second most powerful state in the world. This well-traveled avenue has, nevertheless, arrived to an apparent dead-end at the beginning of the 2020s. The breakdown of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, signed by presidents Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in December 1987 and signifying the end of the Cold War, is the most apparent manifestation of the crisis in arms control, even if Russia is inclined to backdate the arrival of this crisis to the U.S. decision to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in December 2001.<sup>2</sup>

President Donald Trump's announcement in May 2020 on U.S. withdrawal from the Treaty on Open Skies (though it doesn't specifically concern nuclear matters) is another step along this track, and the expiration of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) in February 2021 was set to bring this crisis to a logical conclusion. The extension of the New

---

<sup>1</sup> Strategic weapon systems are reasonably accounted for in the long-established patterns of data exchange and verification, but the stockpile of non-strategic nuclear warheads have always been covered by secrecy, so the current estimates giving Russia the total number of 6,500 and USA – 6,185, cannot be reliably confirmed. See for instance, Shannon N. Kile and Hans M. Kristensen, "World Nuclear Forces," in *SIPRI Yearbook 2019* (Oxford: OUP, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> One balanced and knowledgeable presentation of Russian perspectives is Alexei Arbatov, "A New Era of Arms Control: Myths, Realities and Options," Carnegie Moscow Center Report, October 24, 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80172>.

START by the Biden administration avoids an unlimited arms race and legally enshrines Russia's position as equal partner of the United States, but it does not necessarily pave the way to new talks on strategic stability matters. Russia declares its strong dissatisfaction with this dismantlement of key structures of arms control and puts the blame squarely on the United States, denying its own systematic violations of many key provisions and ignoring the fact that its massive nuclear modernization programs have made the old agreements irrelevant and ineffectual. This posturing provides some justification for sustaining the priority investments in upgrading the nuclear arsenal, but it does not help with turning nuclear weapons into a useful and impactful instrument of policy, so Moscow will keep experimenting.

### ***Achievements and Setbacks in Nuclear Modernization***

It was at the start of the 2010s that Vladimir Putin – then prime minister and planning to reclaim the position of the president – set the course on modernization of Russia's nuclear arsenal; this task was elevated to the top priority in the 2020 State Armament Program (SAP) approved in December 2010. What is remarkable, and in hindsight fallacious, about that plan was its ambition to upgrade all strategic capabilities and to develop a set of new non-strategic nuclear-capable weapon systems, which inevitably resulted in advancement on some directions and setbacks on others, making the structure of strategic nuclear forces seriously unbalanced. The 2027 SAP approved in December 2017, after a delay caused by the economic crisis of 2014-2017, acknowledged the imperative to cut down the scale of expenditures, but again prescribed modernization of the whole range of capabilities, failing to set meaningful priorities and to choose between building on the successes or addressing the failures.<sup>3</sup>

In the strategic triad, the naval section receives the bulk of funding, and the introduction of the new generation of *Borei*-class strategic submarines is the single most expensive project in both the 2020 and 2027 SAPs. The implementation was not without delays, caused primarily by failed tests of its main weapon system – the *Bulava* (SS-N-32) intercontinental missile – but in mid-2020, the fourth submarine of this class, K-548 *Knyaz Vladimir*, joined the Northern Fleet. The program progresses steadily, with four hulls in different stages of construction, and two more in planning, while the *Borei-B* modification was cancelled as it proved to be too expensive.<sup>4</sup> Concentration of efforts on this project caused serious delays with the second high-priority project – the *Yasen*-class cruise missile nuclear submarines – so that only the pilot vessel (K-560 *Severodvinsk*) is commissioned, while the second sub (K-561 *Kazan*) is still undergoing trials, and five more hulls are under construction.<sup>5</sup>

Traditionally, the strongest (in the number of delivery vehicles) element of nuclear forces – the land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles – has progressed smoothly with the replacement of *Topol* (SS-25) missiles with the *Topol-M* (SS-27 Mod 1) and the *Yars* (SS-27 Mod 2) missiles, but the plan for deploying a new heavy liquid-fueled *Sarmat* (SS-X-30) missile has encountered unspecified technical issues, so by early-2021 not a single test has been

---

<sup>3</sup> A sound analysis of the 2027 SAP guidelines is Richard Connolly and Mathieu Boulegue, "Russia's New State Armament Programme," *RIIA Research Paper*, (London: Chatham House, May 2018), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/russia-s-new-state-armament-programme-implications-russian-armed-forces-and-military>. For an in-depth assessment of nuclear programs, see Julian Cooper, "The funding of nuclear weapons in the Russian Federation," Changing Character of War Centre Report, October 2018, <http://www.ccw.ox.ac.uk/blog/2018/10/1/the-funding-of-nuclear-weapons-in-the-russian-federation-by-julian-cooper>.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Manaranche, "Russian Navy likely to have 12 Borei-class SSBN," *Naval News*, April 27, 2020, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2020/04/russian-navy-likely-to-have-12-borei-class-ssbn-part-1/>.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Beckhusen, "Russia's Navy is having a submarine problem," *National Interest*, January 22, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/russias-navy-having-submarine-problem-and-there-no-easy-solution-115886>.

performed. Lacking *Sarmat*, the newly-developed hypersonic glide vehicle, *Avangard* is combined with the SS-19 missile, which should have been retired by 2020.<sup>6</sup> Long-range aviation is the most useful type of strategic weapon for demonstrations of power, but the production base has crumbled, so the proposition for developing a new generation PAK DA bomber is postponed into indefinite mid-term.<sup>7</sup> The plan for resuming serial production of the Tu-160 bomber has also run into trouble, so Russia has to rely on the legacy Tu-95 and Tu-22M3 airframes, which are prone to technical failures.<sup>8</sup>

Significant success has been achieved in developing a remarkable variety of air-launched and ship/submarine-launched nuclear-capable missiles, as well as surface-to-air missile systems with anti-missile and anti-satellite characteristics. The long-range *Kalibr* (SS-N-27) cruise missile was tested in combat operations in Syria and is now fitted on various naval platforms, including low-displacement corvettes, as key means of projecting firepower on-shore. The hypersonic air-launched ballistic missile *Kinzhal* is entering service with the MiG-31K fighter as a key platform, though the strategic rationale for this unconventional design is dubious.<sup>9</sup> The anti-ship hypersonic cruise missile *Tsirkon* (SS-N-33) is yet to complete its program of tests, but potentially, this application of hypersonic technologies could constitute a game changer in modern naval warfare.<sup>10</sup>

As impressive as these high-tech weapon systems appear to be, they require corresponding upgrades in command and control systems, real-time intelligence gathering, target acquisition, etc., and the Russian armed forces cannot hope to meet many of these requirements. One particular weakness is the insufficient capacity of satellite communications and monitoring, which may increase further due to the mounting problems in the Russian space program.<sup>11</sup> The strategic early warning system, for that matter, relies more on the modern phased-array *Voronezh-M/DM/VP* radars, seven of which have become operational since 2012 and two more are under construction (including one in Crimea), than on the reduced grouping of satellites. Another essential consideration is that in order to make non-strategic nuclear-capable weapon systems into useful instruments of nuclear policy, they need to be connected with nuclear warheads but there are few signs of such interoperability. The openly available data on non-strategic nuclear munitions is no better than anecdotal, but it can be established for fact that they are safely locked in the central storage facilities.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Michael Kofman, "Beyond the hype of Russia's hypersonic weapons," *Moscow Times*, January 16, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/01/15/russias-hypersonic-weapons-a68907>.

<sup>7</sup> One optimistic Russian description is Anton Lavrov, Roman Kretsul, and Alexei Ramm, "The PAK-agreement: Newest bomber is scheduled for serial production," *Izvestiya* (in Russian), January 14, 2020, <https://iz.ru/963694/anton-lavrov-roman-kretsul-aleksei-ramm/paketnoe-soglashenie-noveishemu-bombardirovshchiku-naznachili-sroki-vykhoda-v-seriiu>.

<sup>8</sup> Detailed analysis can be found in Mark B. Schneider, "Russia's modernization programs for strategic nuclear bombers," *RealClearDefense*, March 24, 2020, [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2020/03/24/russias-modernization\\_programs\\_for\\_strategic\\_nuclear\\_bombers\\_115141.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2020/03/24/russias-modernization_programs_for_strategic_nuclear_bombers_115141.html).

<sup>9</sup> Roger McDermott, "Russia's Airspace forces prepare training for Kinzhal hypersonic missiles," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, May 13, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-aerospace-forces-prepare-training-for-kinzhal-hypersonic-missiles/>.

<sup>10</sup> A useful overview of hypersonic missile developments is Kelley M. Saylor, "Hypersonic Weapons: Background and Issues for Congress," *CRS Report*, March 17, 2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/R45811.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Informed and updated evaluation of these problems can be found in Pavel Lugin, "Price and prospects of the military space program," *Riddle*, May 22, 2020, <https://www.ridl.io/en/price-and-prospects-of-the-military-space-programme/>.

<sup>12</sup> Detailed examination of these facilities can be found in Pavel Podvig and Javier Serrat, "Lock them up: Zero-deployed non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe," *UNIDIR Resources*, 2017, <http://www.unidir.org/files/publications/pdfs/lock-them-up-zero-deployed-non-strategic-nuclear-weapons-in-europe-en-675.pdf>.

Perhaps the most serious risk related to the execution of nuclear modernization plans concern the high probability of accidents. At least three such setbacks happened in 2019, one involving a case of a deadly shooting, allegedly caused by bullying (*dedovshchina*), in the military unit servicing nuclear munitions.<sup>13</sup> A fire on board the nuclear-powered submersible AS-31 (nicknamed *Losharik*), resulted in an explosion claiming the lives of fourteen officers, but a greater disaster was averted by the closure of its connection with the transport vessel – nuclear submarine *Podmoskovye* (converted *Delta IV*-class).<sup>14</sup> It took great effort by investigative journalists to breach the wall of secrecy around the explosion of a nuclear-propelled missile after a failed test near Severodvinsk, Arkhangelsk region, with seven lives lost and a widespread panic about radioactive contamination.<sup>15</sup> President Putin asserted that tests would continue “no matter what,” but in fact no new advances in this program have been reported.<sup>16</sup>

Russia’s efforts at modernizing its nuclear capabilities have involved remarkably wide range of projects, which follows the Soviet pattern of developing and deploying multiple weapon systems of similar kind and putting the interests of defense-industrial complex ahead of requests from the military. This desire to get ahead of competitors on every direction in the arms race is incompatible with Russia’s deteriorating industrial base, and in the situation of a severe economic recession, painful choices on cutting funding for newly-launched and half-implemented programs will result in debilitating disruptions and conflicts.

### ***Opportunities and Limitations in Wielding Nuclear Instruments***

The scale of effort directed into upgrading and diversifying the nuclear arsenal implies the desire in the Russian leadership to use it for achieving more ambitious goals than merely deterrence, which could be secured with much more modest means. What has constituted a tricky problem for Moscow is the parallel desire to uphold the system of international norms and regulations, which grants it tangible privileges, such as the permanent seat at the UN Security Council table. This political proposition of having it both ways – making nuclear weapons into more applicable instruments of policy and presenting itself as an adherent of the arms control system – became clear in Putin’s 2018 address to the Federal Assembly, more than half of which was rather unexpectedly devoted to nuclear rearmament.<sup>17</sup> The animated presentation of a set on new weapon systems impressed not only his excitable audience but also Western policy-planners, and

---

<sup>13</sup> Irek Murtazin, “He finished them with single shots,” *Novaya gazeta* (in Russian), October 26, 2019, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2019/10/26/82511-i-dobival-odinochnymi-vystrelami>.

<sup>14</sup> Initial reports described the damage as insignificant, but later it became clear that the AS-31, the only submarine of its type, was damaged beyond repair; see Pavel Baev, “Another Russian sea tragedy: unlearned lessons obscured by secrecy,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, July 8, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/another-russian-sea-tragedy-unlearned-lessons-obscured-by-secrecy/>.

<sup>15</sup> Crucial information was uncovered in Sergei Dobrynin and Mark Krutov, “The water column raised to about 100 meters,” *Radio Liberty* (in Russian), August 29, 2019, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/30135210.html>.

<sup>16</sup> On Putin’s ambivalent stance regarding this tragedy, see Alexander Golts, “In the race for super-weapons,” *Republic.ru* (in Russian), November 26, 2019, <https://republic.ru/posts/95309>.

<sup>17</sup> My detailed examination of the guidelines set in that address are in Pavel K. Baev, “Russian nuclear modernization and Putin’s wonder-missiles: real issues and false posturing,” *Russie.Nei.Visions* Report 115, IFRI: Paris, August 2019, <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/notes-de-lifri/russieneivisions/russian-nuclear-modernization-and-putins-wonder>.



Putin sought to reinforce the impact by adding new emphasis in the 2019 address.<sup>18</sup> He did not return to this theme, however, in the 2020 address, focusing instead on his domestic agenda, and this may reflect the recognition that the course of travelling along two diverging tracks has arrived at dead-ends on both.

Key targets for Putin's virtual application of "wonder-missiles" were European NATO member-states, where anti-nuclear feelings are reinvigorated with the campaign to promote the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW, 2017).<sup>19</sup> The clear intent was to deepen and exploit the split between USA and its European allies, much the same way as with the previous efforts to block and compromise the NATO commitment to building the European missile defense system. At present, those efforts are largely abandoned as Russia deploys the S-400 surface-to-air missile systems from Syria to Kaliningrad and tests several advanced anti-missile weapons from the A-235 *Nudol* interceptor to the S-500 *Prometheus*.<sup>20</sup> The new push also failed to convert nuclear fears into opposition to U.S. policies, and NATO was able to make a firm collective stance on holding Russia responsible for violating the INF Treaty and on justifying the U.S. withdrawal.<sup>21</sup> Putin's bragging about new missiles has made it apparent that the framework of the INF Treaty became irrelevant for monitoring the arms race and convinced key European states to rethink the parameters of deterrence and the scope of their defense efforts.<sup>22</sup> Even the states that initiated and promoted the work on the TPNW, such as Norway and Sweden, have opted not to join it because the nuclear threat from Russia is seen as compelling new investments in containment.

Another key aim of Russia's nuclear build-up is to deter the threat of revolutions, which might appear to stretch the borders of common strategic sense, particularly since it marks a radical departure from the Leninist doctrine of revolutions, which focuses on internal political crises maturing into revolutionary situations. Current obsession in the Kremlin with exorcising the specter of "color revolutions" is caused by the inherent instability of Putin's autocratic regime, with its spectacular corruption and hostility to reforms, and it is the preoccupation with the perceived Western sponsorship and manipulation of protests that underpins the idea of deterring this interference with nuclear instruments.<sup>23</sup> In Russian strategic thinking, "color

---

<sup>18</sup> Pavel Felgengauer, "Putin promises Russians prosperity while challenging the West with nuclear super-weapons," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, February 21, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/putin-promises-russians-prosperity-while-challenging-the-west-with-nuclear-superweapons/>.

<sup>19</sup> A good overview can be found in Daryl Kimball, "The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons at a glance," *Fact Sheets and Briefs*, Arms Control Association, March 2020, (<https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/nuclearprohibition>).

<sup>20</sup> On the latter, see Mark Episkopos, "How worried should the Air Force be about Russia's S-500 missile defense system?" *National Interest*, March 2, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/how-worried-should-air-force-be-about-russias-s-500-missile-defense-system-128927>.

<sup>21</sup> This stance is elaborated in Rose Gottemoeller, NATO Deputy Secretary General, presentation at the University of Oslo; see "NATO nuclear policy in post-INF world," *NATO Newsroom*, September 10, 2019, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_168602.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_168602.htm).

<sup>22</sup> Manuel Lafont Rapnouil, Tara Varma, and Nick Witney, "Eyes tight shut: European attitudes towards nuclear deterrence," *ECFR Report*, December 2018, [https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/scorecard/eyes\\_tight\\_shut\\_european\\_attitudes\\_towards\\_nuclear\\_deterrence](https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/scorecard/eyes_tight_shut_european_attitudes_towards_nuclear_deterrence).

<sup>23</sup> My research on this counter-revolutionary policy can be found in Pavel K. Baev, "Revisiting the problem of post-Soviet revolutions," *International Relations and Diplomacy* 7, no. 8 (August 2019): 363-369.



revolutions” are now defined as a new form of warfare, in which Western incitement of unrest is combined with U.S. high-precision strikes, so that Russia’s possession of a versatile arsenal of nuclear weapons makes the former too risky and the latter – not only rendered ineffectual by missile defense system but also punishable by retaliatory strikes.<sup>24</sup>

The risks are rather too obvious, not least because of the accidents, which are presented as heroic encounters with unpredictable dangers, but the credibility of the implicit rather than openly declared threat of resorting to nuclear strikes needs to be constantly re-established. Russian high command has resolutely denied that any strategic proposition resembling the much-debated “escalate to de-escalate” concept ever existed, and Putin in his capacity as the commander-in-chief has ruled out planning for a first nuclear strike, while making plenty of vague pronouncements about a nuclear catastrophe.<sup>25</sup> In-depth research into new features in Russian strategic thinking and their manifestations in military preparations and training reveals, nevertheless, that a nuclear strike in the course of conventional war aimed at securing a victory (or at least an agreeable outcome) for Russia is perceived as a feasible and justifiable option.<sup>26</sup> The question about whether the Kremlin might resort to such option not only *in bello* but also in the course of a domestic unrest threatening to dislodge the ruling regime (and perceived as a hostile action directed from abroad) does not amount to an exercise in thinking about the unthinkable.<sup>27</sup> Persistent recycling by the Russian elites of the mind-boggling thesis “*Нет Путина – Нет России*” (If there is no Putin – there is no Russia) indicates that this question cannot be answered in the negative.<sup>28</sup>

This strategic messaging – loaded with heavy hints – is aimed not only at Western adversaries but also at China, which is a crucially important “strategic partner” for Russia, and certainly a very difficult one. Some mainstream analysis in Moscow argue that the steady upgrading of security ties since mid-2014 amounts to emergence of a military alliance, even if formally undeclared, while others keep reminding about security threats emanating from the rising power in Russia’s far neighborhood.<sup>29</sup> For the Kremlin, the obvious power inequality in the highly-valued partnership and Russia’s deepening dependency upon the economic ties with China constitute a source of grave concern, and greater political reliance on its strategic nuclear arsenal, which is far superior to China’s capabilities, makes it possible to alleviate those. For that

---

<sup>24</sup> In-depth analysis on the shifts in Russian strategic thinking is presented in Oscar Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring Lines Between War and Peace* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019). On the imaginary U.S. “Trojan horse” strategy, see Roger McDermott, “Gerasimov unveils Russia’s ‘strategy of limited actions,’” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 6, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/gerasimov-unveils-russias-strategy-of-limited-actions/>.

<sup>25</sup> One useful evaluation of this discourse is Kevin Ryan, “Is ‘Escalate to De-Escalate’ Part of Russia’s Nuclear Toolbox?” *Russia Matters*, Belfer Center, Harvard Kennedy School, January 8, 2020, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/escalate-deescalate-part-russias-nuclear-toolbox>.

<sup>26</sup> Perhaps the best openly available research of this kind is Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, and Jeffrey Edmonds, “Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts,” *CNA Report*, April 2020, <https://russianmilitaryanalysis.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/russian-strategy-for-escalation-management-main-concepts.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> One sober evaluation is Olga Oliker, “Moscow’s Nuclear Enigma: What Is Russia’s Arsenal Really For?” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December (2018), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2018-10-15/moscows-nuclear-enigma>.

<sup>28</sup> A sharp recent take on this thesis is Sergei Guriev, “Putin’s senseless coup,” *Vedomosti* (in Russian), January 21, 2020, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2020/01/21/821172-perevorot-putina>.

<sup>29</sup> For the former point of view, see Vassily Kashin, “Tacit Alliance: Russia and China Take Military Partnership to a New Level,” *Commentary*, Carnegie Moscow Center, October 22, 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80136>. For the latter, see Aleksandr Khramchihin, “Why it is necessary to secure Russia’s eastern borders,” *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie* (in Russian), February 9, 2018, [http://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2018-02-09/1\\_983\\_why.html](http://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2018-02-09/1_983_why.html).

matter, the one-off joint patrol by two Russian and two Chinese strategic bombers over the Sea of Japan in July 2019, had little real significance (yet caused a serious military incident involving South Korea) and was intended as a demonstration of the greater reach of Russian long-range aviation when compared to Chinese capabilities.<sup>30</sup>

Putin's announcement (which remains unsubstantiated) that Russia is providing support to China in building a modern early warning system is much more a sign of intentions to bring this superiority into the context of mutual geo-strategic posturing than a real step in upgrading strategic ties.<sup>31</sup> What the Kremlin cannot possibly deliver is a Chinese engagement in, not to say commitment to, arms control negotiations in a new tri-lateral setting, on which the Trump administration firmly insisted, and it appears possible to assume that this insistence will only increase in the coming years, as the Biden administration charts a steady course of countering China's rising aggressiveness.<sup>32</sup> There is scant information in Moscow on the guidelines and parameters of the Chinese nuclear modernization program – but a fairly clear understanding that Beijing is not interested in adjusting these guidelines according to any newly-agreed ceilings or exposing these parameters to external monitoring. There is also a clear impression that China would much prefer to see Russia go an extra diplomatic mile toward preserving the remaining structures of arms control and avoid blatant violations of old commitments.

The region where Russian nuclear build-up produces the heaviest security implications – and where China gradually advances its interests – is in the Arctic. The Kola Peninsula, with its extraordinary concentration of nuclear submarines, warheads, and waste, is by far the most nuclearized area in the world, and Russian high command executes a complex program of military build-up aimed at protecting these assets.<sup>33</sup> This sustained militarization undercuts efforts at promoting international cooperation in the High North (as described in Chapter 4) and interferes with Chinese interests in the Arctic, focused on economic and commercial expansion, which defines the security perspective.<sup>34</sup> Russia's Nordic neighbors are greatly concerned about the nuclear risks, but China is also perfectly aware that the tests of nuclear-propelled cruise missiles and underwater drones advertised by President Putin can only be performed in Northern test sites – and involve high probability of radioactive contamination.<sup>35</sup> Many policy analyses

---

<sup>30</sup> Michael Kofman, "Russia-China bomber patrol shows stronger alignment between the two," *Russia Matters*, Harvard Kennedy School, July 26, 2019, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/russia-china-bomber-patrol-shows-stronger-alignment-between-two>.

<sup>31</sup> An example of over-estimation of this step is Stephen Blank, "China and Russia: A Burgeoning Alliance," *US Naval Institute Proceedings*, March 2020, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2020/march/china-and-russia-burgeoning-alliance>.

<sup>32</sup> One insightful perspective is Steven Pifer, "Russia's shifting views of multilateral arms control with China," *Order from Chaos*, Brookings Institution, February 19, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/02/19/russias-shifting-views-of-multilateral-nuclear-arms-control-with-china/>.

<sup>33</sup> A balanced assessment can be found in Mathieu Boulegue, "Russia's Military Posture in the Arctic," *Chatham House Research Paper*, June 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/06/russias-military-posture-arctic>.

<sup>34</sup> One useful analysis is Heljar Havnes and Johan M. Seland, "The increasing security focus in China's Arctic policy," *The Arctic Institute Article*, July 16, 2019, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/increasing-security-focus-china-arctic-policy/>.

<sup>35</sup> Dave Makichuk, "Russia to test 'Doomsday Drone' in the high Arctic," *Asia Times*, May 26, 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/05/russia-set-to-test-doomsday-drone-in-high-arctic/>.

tend to mix together Russian and Chinese ambitions and military preparations in the High North.<sup>36</sup> In fact, however, China explicitly disapproves of the militarization of the Arctic and constitutes to all intents and purposes the most significant influence which persuades Russia to move with extra care when implementing its nuclear plans in the region.

Overall, Moscow's track record in using nuclear weapons as instruments of policy is mixed at best, and the breakdown of the key structures of arms control – caused in a large measure by these experiments in wielding nuclear instruments – is a serious setback for the policy of upholding Russia's international status. In the situation of fast-shifting global geopolitical interactions and Russia's eroding economic strength and political stability, its anxious autocratic regime may see greater need in relying upon its upgraded but under-utilized nuclear assets.

### ***Prospects and Implications***

Russia has every reason to suspect that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic would be seriously detrimental to its global positions and prestige. The whole scope of this impact cannot presently be judged even approximately, but it stands to reason to expect that international status of major powers would be determined by their economic resurgence, dynamism, capacity for innovations, and efficiency of health care systems – and not by the size of their nuclear arsenals. In all these components of state strength, Russia was lagging before the coronavirus outbreak and is set to fall further behind due to its mismanagement. Seeking to regain domestic support, Putin's elites need to return nuclear problems to the center of global affairs, but they are aware that the US under the Biden administration would aim at de-escalating and de-prioritizing these problems.

The decree on the Fundamentals of Russia's Nuclear Deterrence State Policy (a first ever document of its kind) signed by President Putin on June 2, 2020, signifies a step in uplifting nuclear matters.<sup>37</sup> The swift extension of the New START intended by the Biden team as means to solve and close a major problem, can provide for Moscow a convenient moment for launching a new pro-active nuclear maneuvering, beyond the specific area covered by the treaty, which is seen by Russian experts as relatively stable.<sup>38</sup> The easiest moves could be the transfer of non-strategic nuclear munitions to storage in newly-secured "fortresses" of Crimea and Kaliningrad, which have so far remained nuclear weapons-free, while deploying such delivery systems as *Iskander-M* mobile ballistic/cruise missile launchers. After assessing European reactions, Moscow can follow-up with the cancellation of the Presidential Nuclear Initiative (PNI) – a unilateral decision on keeping all non-strategic nuclear warheads in central storage made in 1991 by President Mikhail Gorbachev in response to the similar decision by U.S. President George H.W. Bush.<sup>39</sup> The U.S. government may not have plans for altering the arrangement for non-deployment of such munitions, but it might find it impossible to sustain the unverifiable trust-based PNI deal.

---

<sup>36</sup> "US warns of Russian Arctic military build-up," *High North News*, May 25, 2020 <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/us-warns-russian-arctic-military-buildup-who-puts-missiles-icebreakers>.

<sup>37</sup> The text of the document is available at the Kremlin website, <http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/63447>.

<sup>38</sup> Andrey Baklitsky, Evgeny Buzhinsky, Vladimir Orlov, and Sergey Semyonov, "If the New START Treaty expires with no extension: Scenarios for Russia," *PIR Center Policy Memo*, May 26, 2020, <http://www.pircenter.org/en/articles/2218-3795646>.

<sup>39</sup> In depth research on that episode is Susan J. Koch, "The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991-1992," *Case Study 5*, Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction, NDU, September 2012, [https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/casestudies/CSWMD\\_CaseStudy-5.pdf](https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/casestudies/CSWMD_CaseStudy-5.pdf).

Russia may seek opportunities to re-focus attention to nuclear matters in the run-up to the NPT Review Conference, which was postponed from 2020 to 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>40</sup> This delay grants Moscow extra space for exploring and exploiting disagreements in the non-proliferation movement caused in a large measure by its own massive nuclear modernization program, which clearly contradicts the commitment to progressing to full nuclear disarmament made in the NPT. So far, Russia has not found useful opportunities to engage with two of the most urgent problems in the non-proliferation domain: the development of nuclear weapons by North Korea and the U.S.-initiated breakdown of the 2015 international deal (known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) on the Iranian nuclear program. Regarding the former, Moscow defers to China's leadership in managing the crisis (even if it resents being cut out of the China-U.S. deliberations), but Putin ventures persistently an opinion that North Korea would never give up its nuclear capabilities.<sup>41</sup> As for the latter, Moscow is reluctant to openly support Iranian resumption of the uranium enrichment projects, seeking to avoid damage to its already complicated relations with Saudi Arabia, as well as Israel. Its formal support for restoring the JCPOA is underpinned by the assumption that the Biden administration would aim at revising it, but in probable new multilateral talks, it might take a less constructive position than it did in 2013-2015.<sup>42</sup> Portraying itself as a staunch supporter of the non-proliferation regime, Russia in fact stands to benefit from its erosion, since the size of its nuclear arsenal would grant it superiority over any newly-nuclearized state, while relevance of this instrument would increase.

Moscow might also take steps toward withdrawing from the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CNTB), which it signed in September 1996 and ratified in June 2000, citing U.S. failure to ratify it (after signing in September 1996) and preparations for conducting a test.<sup>43</sup> In fact, Russia itself has been preparing the Novaya Zemlya test site for more serious experiments than subcritical of very low-yield tests.<sup>44</sup> This would generate hard pressure on European NATO member-states, particularly Norway, while the associated risks would be in the opinion of Russian high command, entirely acceptable and even lower than those produced by testing of nuclear-propelled missiles.

---

<sup>40</sup> The argument for postponing the event further is presented in Tariq Rauf, "The postponed 2020 NPT Review Conference: A modest proposal," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, June 2, 2020, <https://thebulletin.org/2020/06/the-postponed-2020-npt-review-conference-a-modest-proposal/>.

<sup>41</sup> An insightful view is Andrei Lankov, "The fourth in the queue: Why Kim needs the meeting with Putin," *Commentary* (in Russian), Carnegie Moscow Center, April 26, 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/79007>.

<sup>42</sup> One sign of this change is noted in Michael Lipin, "Russia upsets efforts to save 2015 Iran nuclear deal," *Voice of America*, December 6, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/voa-news-iran/russia-upsets-effort-save-2015-iran-nuclear-deal>.

<sup>43</sup> David Axe, "Donald Trump's nuke-testing idea is 'Catastrophically Stupid,'" *Forbes*, May 29, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2020/05/29/donald-trumps-nuke-testing-idea-is-catastrophically-stupid/#62cbbaae5c11>.

<sup>44</sup> Mark B. Schneider, "Yes, the Russians are testing nuclear weapons and it is very important," *Real Clear Defense*, August 8, 2019, [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/08/08/yes\\_the\\_russians\\_are\\_testing\\_nuclear\\_weapons\\_and\\_it\\_is\\_very\\_important\\_114651.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/08/08/yes_the_russians_are_testing_nuclear_weapons_and_it_is_very_important_114651.html).

Russia will eagerly engage in new talks on strategic stability with the USA, presenting them as a recognition of its unique global status, but it will try to load the agenda with so many arduous issues (like missile defense or de-militarization of space activities) that a protracted deadlock is guaranteed, while its own projects (for instance, on anti-satellite weapons) would proceed unhampered. This bilateral nuclear diplomacy will also aim at aggravating concerns among the Europeans and compromising the intention of rehabilitating the trans-Atlantic solidarity proclaimed by President Biden. The only real limitation for Russian nuclear modernization will be the shortage of resources aggravated by economic recession, and Moscow is unlikely to find a way out.





## Chapter 12

# Russia's Economic Engagement: Realities, Pitfalls, and Perils

*By Pál Dunay*

### ***Introduction: Russian Strategic Economic Ends***

The Russian Federation is an unevenly developed Great Power. Russia has the world's largest nuclear weapons arsenal with the size of its armed forces and the world's largest arsenal, a well-educated diplomatic corps, well-staffed intelligence and associated services, and most recently it has developed its public communication apparatus. But Russia also experiences significant weaknesses, including a relatively small and declining population unevenly distributed across its vast territory, and a small economy, including the very limited production of internationally marketable and competitive consumer goods. Countries that have such a large gap between their strengths and weaknesses usually reallocate resources to address the shortcomings in order to have a broader-ranging and more diverse power base (horizontal strengthening). When states have abundant resources they also address sources of power where they are strong (vertical strengthening). It is an open question to what extent Russia follows this pattern, and it seems horizontal strengthening left the economy largely unaffected.

The total nominal gross domestic product (GDP) of Russia is somewhat less than two per cent of the world's, and it is less than three per cent in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP), leaving Russia's economy as the eleventh largest in the world, the sixth in PPP terms. Russia's aspiration to be among the five largest economies of the world in PPP terms is realistic, although current trends do not move in this direction.

Given its weak economic foundations and the importance Russia attaches to its prestige and status as Great Power, Russia needs to "punch above its weight" in the international system, that is, attain more influence internationally than the size its economy suggests is merited. President Putin managed to achieve this from 2000-2012. However, since 2012 the Russian economy has stagnated and currently its primary commodities face shrinking markets and falling (or at least not increasing) prices. We can identify those factors that indicate how the economic performance will contribute or hinder Russia from acquiring the status it aspires to have in the international system.

Lilia Shevtsova identified a central shortcoming: "The Russian economy is not diversified and is built on the commodity market Russia's economy is over dependent upon the production and export of natural resources and energy and other primary commodities. German Gref, the CEO of *Sberbank*, noted: "Russia has failed to adapt to economic and technological change and has fallen into the ranks of 'downshifter' countries that will catastrophically lag behind their more advanced rivals ... We must honestly admit that we have lost to competitors, ... the era of oil [is] over and ... in the new technology-driven world the difference between the

leaders and losers [will] be ‘larger than during the industrial revolution.’”<sup>1</sup> Russia’s current political leadership that is strongly stability-orientated and risk-averse and views potential structural economic reform as a threat to political stability, as well as in opposition to their interest in continuing to reap the benefits of a corrupt system they control. Stability for the elite has greater currency than a modernization agenda, competitiveness and the well-being of the people. The absence of change also reflects a strong preference for stability shared by a large part of the population that in light of the economic liberalization of the 1990s and to the fact the Russian economy is prone to crisis.<sup>2</sup> While the Russian economy stagnates, macro-economic stability, large currency reserves and little external debt suggests that such stagnation is sustainable. Indeed, Russia’s economy contracted less in 2020 (4.0-4.1%) than many western countries and the Russian economy can bounce back in 2021, registering as it does a higher than usual estimated growth rate of 2.8 percent.

The awareness of the problem occasionally results in nervous reaction. For instance, President Putin, when responding to a question at his annual press conference in December 2020 emphasized “Seventy percent of the Russian federal budget comes from non-oil and gas revenues now.”<sup>3</sup> The answer prompts follow on questions: What is the long-term role of the production of natural resources in the Russian economy? What is and what should be the share of the production of energy bearers and natural resources in the Russian GDP overall? What should be the share of those commodities in the export of the country?

### ***The Russian Economy in the Great Power Competition***

The Russian Federation faces a number of problems that it will have to address if it wants to have better economic foundations making it more competitive overall: demography, state influence in the economy based on ownership or other channels, and corruption. Russia’s demographic situation presents challenges that the country’s leadership recognizes. The worst years of the 1990s when the population shrank fast are behind it. Life expectancy fell by approximately five years between 1990 and 1995 (from 69.2 to 64.5 years) and in this decade in some years the population fell by close to one million (in 2000 it was 958.5 thousand). Immigration partly compensated the loss, reaching four million between 1997 and 2016 (6.5 million immigrants and 2.6 million emigrants). According to a UN average estimate, Russia will be the 13th most populous country by 2050 with approximately 135 million people.<sup>4</sup> This entails a loss of about ten million people in three decades (if the population of Crimea is not included). The sources of potential immigrants “depleted” and may be confined to three Central Asian states (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan) from where labor migrants may lastingly settle in Russia.

---

<sup>1</sup> German Gref spoke at the Gajdar Forum in January 2016 and the full text of his presentation “disappeared” from the web not much later. Interestingly, the reaction was classic: Instead of seriously contemplating the weight of Gref’s words, a vice-speaker of the Duma called on Gref to be dismissed for his views. Now only a few excerpts of the speech are available in some western media reports. See Michelle A. Berdy, “Shifting Gears, Russian-Style,” *The Moscow Times*, January 21, 2016, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2016/01/21/shifting-gears-russian-style-a51510>.

<sup>2</sup> Anders Aslund and Leonid Gozman, “Russia After Putin: How to Rebuild the State,” Atlantic Council of the United States, February 24, 2021, in particular pp. 10-13, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/russia-after-putin-report/> and Anders Aslund, *Russia’s Crony Capitalism: The Path from Market Economy to Kleptocracy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019), 69.

<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Putin’s Annual News Conference 17 December 2020, [http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/press\\_conferences/64671](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/press_conferences/64671).

<sup>4</sup> See UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Population Prospects 2019* (New York: United Nations, 2019).

This will reduce the available labor force and the size of the internal market, two factors usually associated with a state's competitive advantage. To increase the share of the working population, in 2018, the age of retirement was raised. Cash payments to boost fertility from current levels of 1.6 children per family to a reproduction rate of 2.1 have not resulted in a breakthrough. Personal satisfaction levels and expectation of good life prospects is also important. The Russian national census, postponed in 2020 due to the Coronavirus, takes place in April 2021 and will provide a clearer picture of trend lines.

Given that the Russian state has significant influence on the economy, it is surprising that only approximately thirty-five percent of the GDP runs through the budget. Understandably, the share increased in 2020 (to 37.3 percent) when the state had to take more responsibility and contribute to social stability in the context of COVID-19.<sup>5</sup> Other estimates calculate that the share of the state is actually approximately twice as high, as the revenue of the twenty-six largest state owned companies are included. The state fully owns companies, like *Rosatom*, *Rostec*, *Rusnano*, the Russian Post, the Russian Railways and *Vneshekonombank*. It has a majority share in *Aeroflot*, *Gazprom*, *Rostelekom*, *RusHydro*, *Sberbank*, *VTB Bank*, and a few other major enterprises, and fifty percent share in *Rosneft*.<sup>6</sup> In some cases, the state owns companies indirectly, via intermediaries.<sup>7</sup>

Unceasingly high levels of corruption characterize Russia. Transparency International's corruption perception index usually evaluates Russia with the lowest or one of the lowest standings in Europe. However, this does not prevent the Russian media from regularly pointing to the high level of corruption in Ukraine without mentioning that in the last five years Russia was lagging behind its south-western neighbor. On a scale that rates approximately 180 states over the last five years, Russia was either the worst-performing European state (with a rank between 129 and 145, twice in a tie with Azerbaijan or Ukraine respectively) or—in 2017—followed only by Azerbaijan. In the preceding five years (2011-6), the “competition” for the lowest position in Europe was won by Ukraine; this was an “achievement” of President Yanukovich's regime.

Due to various factors, first and foremost its natural resources, Russia will always attract foreign direct investment (FDI). However, investment in the manufacturing industry remains volatile and oscillates significantly. Foreign direct investment reached USD \$13 bn in 2018, 31.7 bn in 2019 and de facto collapsed in 2020, equaling US\$ 1.1 bn. When taking a closer look at the pros and cons for investment, a complex picture emerges. Abundant natural resources, political stability, skilled labor, relatively low labor costs are positive factors. Among the weaknesses, we can list: over-dependence on the prices of hydrocarbons and raw materials, the presence of economic sanctions, the low level of confidence in the legal system, infringements of intellectual property rights and a number of strategic sectors closed to FDI.

The Russian state accounts for a large number of economic shortcomings. Given a large portion of profit related to the export of natural resources disappears in the system, or is used to maintain some level of social cohesion, capitalization requires boosting FDI. This in turn requires reform, with elites reluctant to change the status quo. Current FDI into Russia comes from Cyprus, the Netherlands, Bermuda, Luxembourg, the UK, and Ireland. At least in three cases, if not more, we observe primarily the reinvestment of Russian capital that had left the

---

<sup>5</sup> Russia: Ratio of government expenditure to gross domestic product (GDP) from 2015 to 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/275349/government-expenditure-as-share-of-the-gross-domestic-product-gdp-in-russia/>.

<sup>6</sup> World Bank Group, *State-Owned Enterprises in the Russian Federation: Employment Practices, Labor Markets, and Firm Performance*. June 2019, <https://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/abs/10.1596/32098>.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Abramov, Alexander Radygin, and Maria Chernova, “State-owned enterprises in the Russian market: Ownership structure and their role in the economy,” *Russian Journal of Economics*, vol. 3, no. 1, (2017): 1-23, [www.rujec.org](http://www.rujec.org).

country. Russia systematically resisted erecting administrative barriers against capital flight even in 2014-5 when there was external expectation that it would introduce such measures. It did not and now it partially benefits from the reinvestment of escaped capital.

### ***Some Elements of the Energy Sector***

Russia is a major natural resources and energy producer and exporter. Its economy benefits from high energy prices and is disadvantaged when prices drop. It would be wrong, however, to assume that the Russian Federation is amongst those states that most heavily depend on oil rent (rent is the difference between the market price and the production costs). Russia, compared to some other oil producing and exporting countries has a large population and a developed economy that reduces the share of rent, which has never exceeded thirteen percent of the GDP and recently it was ten percent.<sup>8</sup> In this respect, Russia lags behind another twelve oil-producing countries, including Kuwait, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan. Additional rent is derived from selling gas, although there the rent due to the larger production costs and the more sophisticated technology applied is smaller than in the oil sector.

The Russian Federation followed the Soviet Union in compensating for the fall in oil prices by increasing exploitation and export. However, in recent times Russia coordinates its position with Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) generally and with a few of its large members, specifically. Russia is aware that it is part of a risk-sharing community and with its high exploitation costs (compared to Saudi Arabia and a few other states) it is in its best interest to behave as a responsible stake-holder. In a “free” competition, Russia would lose against countries that have more favorable production conditions. Moreover, Russia’s oil reserves are slowly running out, production costs in the new (replacement) fields soar and oil demand is in lasting decline. Russia gradually focuses on gas, a commodity where its reserves are far more significant. This is indicated by the construction of modern gas infrastructure, including new pipelines across the Black Sea (Turkish Stream) and further to south-eastern Europe, as well across the Baltic Sea, where Nord Stream 2 will complement the also modern Nord Stream 1 pipeline in operation since late 2011.

The pipelines have generated heated debates relating to broader strategic issues and are characterized by limited information and political prejudice. For some, the pipelines are viewed as instruments of leverage which Moscow can use to make states strategically dependent on it, reducing their political choices, and opening them to blackmail. As the Russian Federation has serially violated international law since 2014 and also committed highly objectionable actions, including the carrying out or attempting of extra-judicial killings (Nemtsov, the Skripals, Kangoshvili, and Navalny), a business as usual approach to Moscow has been stressed. For others, the pipelines are simply business ventures. In the case of Nord Stream 2, it is also emphasized that there is not a single penny of government funding involved. Russia also regularly claims that U.S. opposition serves its own self-interest, as the U.S. wants to sell Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) in Europe at a price higher than the Russian gas supplied via pipelines.

Could Russia blackmail its partners by cutting or disrupting the supply? As the gas market has become global and Europe can receive alternative LNG, the blackmailing potential no longer applies. Indeed, European LNG terminals are not used to capacity and hence the supply of LNG can be quickly increased. Following disruptions to gas supply in 2006-9, European consumers remain suspicious of Russia and a repeat performance would seriously undermine Russian interests. In addition, the capitalization of the largest Russian gas company,

---

<sup>8</sup> World Bank, Oil rents (percent of GDP), <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PETR.RT.ZS>.



*Gazprom*, a major contributor to the Russian budget, has shrunk and gas income cuts would lead to further economic deterioration. These factors mitigate against the risk of blackmail, though the West may seek to stop Nord Stream 2 as a sanction against Russia for its regular illegal actions.

The Russian Federation also builds nuclear power plants abroad. One of its modern reactors began generating power in the summer of 2020 in Belarus. It had to be temporarily switched off on a number of occasions. Other reactors are being built in Finland, Hungary, and Uzbekistan. The one built in Finland suffers massive delays as it does not meet some of the safety requirements. In other cases, delays are due to other factors, including the meeting of EU safety requirements and also the translation of the full package of Russian documents into one of the EU's official languages. However, the performance of *Rosatom* is not reassuring – potential partners choose not to opt for Russian reactors.

### ***Russian Arms Industry***

The Russian Federation as well as its predecessor, the Soviet Union, has been a major arms producer and exporter. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian armed forces did not represent a priority as many other matters were more urgent and given higher priority. Russia did not modernize its armed forces and consequently did not buy the products of its own arms industry. Times have changed. Although Russia's arms export data are still not particularly impressive, the occasions when its import partners occasionally returned armaments and equipment, as Algeria did in 2008 (MiG-29 aircraft) or expressed dissatisfaction with timely delivery, as India did in 2007 (T-90 battle tanks) are gone.

The fact Russia did not buy its own weapons resulted in a major loss of economy of scale and a challenge for arms export. With the relatively fast increase of GDP at the beginning of the 21st century, the country boosted its defense budget and also launched an ambitious defense modernization program, to the value of USD\$ 700 bn in a ten-year period. The ten-year State Armament Plan of 2011-20 focused on the modernization of the navy and aerospace forces. Although not completed fully, it gave way to a less ambitious plan of USD\$ 330 bn for the period between 2018 and 2027. It prioritizes Russia's ground forces and improving its rapid reaction forces, including elite Spetsnaz, Naval Infantry, Airborne, and Air Assault Troops (VDV). In particular, strengthening mobility and command and control remains a focus, as well as implementing lessons learned from Russian interventions in Ukraine and Syria—such as the importance of reconnaissance and heavy artillery.<sup>9</sup> Due to the resources allocated to the programs, Russia modernized its armed forces, purchased armaments and equipment and also used them in operations in Syria, Libya, and (of course) in Ukraine. The Russian arms industry increased its competitiveness and a growing volume of exports followed. However, the value of arms export did not exceed USD\$ 13 bn (that was once already reached in 2012) and Russia struggles, China has become a competitor and ceased to be a major market. A pragmatic armament export policy is Russia's attempt to compensate for that loss, selling some of the competitive pieces of armaments and equipment ranging from S-400 surface-to-air missiles to Sukhoi and MiG aircraft and many other items in countries, like Algeria, Egypt, India and many others.

---

<sup>9</sup> Congressional Research Service, "Russian Armed Forces: Military Modernization and Reforms," *In Focus*, July 20, 2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF11603.pdf>.



## ***Economic Sanctions***

Coercion is not alien to international economic relations and the Russian Federation (and its predecessor the Soviet Union) was at both ends of the application of sanctions. Russia applied sanctions through interrupting gas supply to East-central European and South-east European states and stopping gas transit through Ukraine (and once also through Belarus) between 2005-2010 and so-called counter-sanctions since 2014. The west applied sanctions against the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation under the Jackson-Vanik amendment to the trade act of 1974, and the so-called Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act of 2012 and in reaction to the annexation of Crimea and support to Ukrainian separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk areas. Whereas the two former applications were related to human rights enforcement, the sanctions in force since 2014 have been introduced due to a fundamental violation of the prohibition of the use of force, including the violation of the territorial integrity and the political independence of another sovereign state.

The variety of enforcement measures is limited. They usually include the following: travel bans for ranking officials, including commanders of law enforcement agencies and certain entities (companies); diplomatic measures, such as the suspension of Russia's participation in the G-8 and returning to the G-7 format, the suspension of the accession talks of Russia with the OECD and the International Energy Agency (IEA). The EU also stopped holding bilateral summits with Russia. Export and import bans, banning or at least limiting investment, including the access to technologies, and limiting financial relations, including the providing of credits, are also notable. It is always a delicate political decision to put together an adequate package that fulfills a variety of objectives from enforcing compliance (reversal of the illegal acts), deterring from further violation, subversion, international and domestic signaling. In the last few decades, it was increasingly important not to hurt the population of the country under sanctions severely and thus apply sanctions that primarily hurt the interests of the leadership.

In case of the sanctions related to Russia's actions in Ukraine, a fairly limited package was put together very quickly following the occupation of Crimea, including a general import ban from Crimea, a partial export ban in the opposite direction, and a prohibition to supply services, including tourism. In addition, a general import and export ban was introduced for arms and an export ban for dual-use goods. The access to certain technologies that can be used in oil production and exploration has been curtailed.

The value of trade between the U.S. and Russia is relatively small. In 2019, the total trade in goods and services was USD\$ 34.9 bn (10.9 bn export and 24 bn import) indicating significant trade deficit on the U.S. side.<sup>10</sup> The value of trade between the EU and Russia equals € 270.7 bn, approximately 8.5 times more.<sup>11</sup> This means curtailing trade relations between the U.S. and Russia would not hurt either party very much, whereas the damage would be much greater for the EU and Russia. As the U.S. has significant influence on other western actors, it may influence European partners to reduce economic interaction to change Russian strategic behavior, though the political will in European capitals to accept economic costs is questionable. Several state owned Russian banks *Sberbank*, *VTB*, *Gazprombank*, *Rosselkhozbank* (Russian agricultural bank), and *VEB* (Russia's state-owned development bank) no longer could receive long-term financing under the sanction regime. The EBRD suspended development loans to Russia as well. The net result is that credits become more expensive for those Russian banks and their customers. Bearing in mind, interest rates have been low in the international markets for a

---

<sup>10</sup> Office of the United State Trade Representative, U.S. – Russia Trade Facts. <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/europe-middle-east/russia-and-eurasia/russia>.

<sup>11</sup> European Commission, "Countries and Regions: Russia," <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/russia/>.

long time, Russia, has not experienced particular difficulties in this area. The U.S. has tightened its sanctions during the last few years, in particular with the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) adopted in 2017. This sanctioned any actor that knowingly engaged in a "significant transaction" with Russia's security sector.<sup>12</sup> U.S. secondary sanctions applied against western entities appeared ambiguous and were not welcomed in Europe.

Nevertheless, the unity of the West was preserved as far as the application of sanctions. The U.S. introduced more severe sanctions than the EU, in particular those that were energy-related (this is fully understandable as the U.S. has become a gas and more recently a petroleum exporter), and the U.S. support for secondary sanctions (applying sanctions against companies doing business with Russia) outstripped that of the EU, relatively insignificant economic relations between the U.S. and Russia, compared to the EU.

The Russian Federation, in the name of "reciprocity," responded with counter-sanctions even in areas where it suffered losses. In light of the economic power difference between Russia and the West, counter sanctions did not cause lasting and systemic difficulties. But the sanctions had an important domestic function: they provided a signal to the population that the leadership would not let Russia be humiliated. It was also important for the protection of domestic production in certain sectors, first and foremost in agriculture. The agricultural sector realizes somewhat less than USD\$ 30 bn export revenue and with this more than twice that of the defense industry. It negotiated a certain "guarantee" with then-Prime Minister Medvedev so that the Russian counter-sanctions would not be unexpectedly lifted, i.e., the domestic agricultural market could be protected from external competition. It is of course open to question to what extent Russia lost on responding if not retaliating by counter-sanctions.

The economic sanctions resulted in some GDP loss to Russia. In the beginning, it was assumed to be between 0.5 to 1.0 percent that increased later to approximately 1.2 percent annually. Other estimates show a 1.5 percent annual loss between 2014 and 2017.<sup>13</sup> Since 2017 two tendencies have been noticeable. First, further sanctions complemented the earlier ones and this resulted in more severe consequences. Second, Russia became accustomed primarily to the trade sanctions and could mitigate their effects. Unlike in the case of Iran and North Korea, the sanctions never sought to break the back of the Russian economy. It was more important to signal western dissatisfaction with Russia's malign strategic behavior in the hope of behavioral change. The limitations placed on access to certain technologies mean that the Russian economy loses competitiveness. Consequently, Russia either loses its market share or its profit margin narrows. Either way, the cumulative effects of sanctions will reduce its competitiveness. Apparently, Russia miscalculated the consequences of its actions, in particular as far as the staying power, unity and solidarity of the West.

### ***Strategic Choices***

The Russian Federation has been a rival of the West for the last two decades. The rivalry has deepened. Moscow's disrespect for the sovereignty of other states, the violation of the prohibition of the use of force and illegal activities addressing certain individuals both inside the Russian Federation and beyond its borders, have increased tensions. The comparatively small size of its economy and its insufficiently diversified economic structure has made Russia vulnerable in its rivalry with far larger and economically better-positioned protagonists. Russia's

---

<sup>12</sup> Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). Public Law 115-44. August 2, 2017, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-115publ44/pdf/PLAW-115publ44.pdf>,

<sup>13</sup> Iikka Korhonen, "Economic Sanctions on Russia and Their Effects," *CES ifo Forum*, ifo Institut – Leibniz-Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung an der Universität München, München, Vol. 20, No. 04, 2019, 20-1, <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/216248/1/CESifo-Forum-2019-04-p19-22.pdf>.

might and its aspirations cannot be realized on the basis of economic weakness. This structural factor indicates that there may be opportunities for more powerful external economic actors to use economic means to induce and coerce Russia.

The U.S. faces strategic choices. It should not exclusively rely on coercive means. When using coercion, the U.S. must persuade partners to accept this approach and be ready to follow and support them. While in the Trump administration this approach was not always adopted. If the Biden administration seeks to reestablish U.S. leadership, this requires the acceptance by partners and allies, which in turn suggests a balanced approach: partners of the U.S. will not accept losing economic opportunities if the U.S. extorts but does not lead. The Biden administration has stated that it prioritizes countering corruption and (euphemistically put) “illiberal” regimes. Russia is at the epicenter of this agenda. Russian corruption spreads beyond its borders and is at the persuasive heart of many of its international business deals. If the U.S. plans to address the two matters systemically, then Russia matters. However, Washington also has to avoid generating unintended consequences in Russia, such as a “rally around the flag” effect in Russia and the toughening of its autocratic domestic position due to its disinterest in the views of the world at large, in particular the West. Russia “self-victimizes” itself with respect to the West and uses the besieged fortress narrative to “externalize” many of its shortcomings and weaknesses.



## Chapter 13

# Russian Diplomacy and Conflict Management

*By David G. Lewis*

### ***Introduction***

One of Russia's most significant instruments in its strategic toolbox has been its capacity to use diplomacy to pursue its geopolitical opportunities in regional conflicts. From Nagorno-Karabakh to Libya, from Syria to Afghanistan, Russia's diplomats are at the top table at peace negotiations. Russia is increasingly the key pivot power in any conflict resolution process in the Middle East. Russia's approach to conflict management is a form of coercive diplomacy: a strategic mixing of hard power and diplomatic know-how. It has often been highly effective in managing conflicts in ways that respect and promote Russia's national interests.

Russia's emerging role as a diplomatic broker and mediator in international conflicts supports several of Russia's strategic goals. First, it addresses Russia's search for international status, providing ways for Russian diplomats to be in the room when major international security issues are discussed. Second, it corresponds to Russia's self-conception of how a Great Power (and UN Security Council member) should act; in Moscow's realist worldview, Great Powers have additional rights, but also take on additional responsibilities for peace and security, particularly in their sphere of influence.

Of more immediate significance is the way in which Russia's conflict diplomacy is designed to directly benefit Russia's foreign policy goals. It has so far proved an effective and low-cost mechanism to consolidate or extend Russian geopolitical influence as in Syria or in Eastern Libya, where it acts as a multiplier for the deployment of military force and helps to legitimize a Russian military presence. Furthermore, it provides Russia with leverage in its relations with other regional powers; for example, Russia's diplomatic and military engagement in regional conflicts offers a mechanism for Russia to maintain an edge in bilateral relations with Turkey.

Finally, acting as a mediator and peacemaker in conflicts offers a relatively low-risk way to compete with the West; Russia's actions have reduced Western influence in Syria, the Southern Caucasus, Libya, and central Africa. At the same time, because Russia has positioned itself as an indispensable actor in many of these conflicts, the U.S. and its European allies are forced to maintain effective channels of communication with Russia to help manage regional conflicts.

### ***Russia and Post-Soviet Peacekeeping***

Russia's current approach to peacebuilding and armed conflict reflects a long evolution of Russian thinking on peace and conflict in the post-Cold War world. By 1993, Russia had some 36,000 troops deployed on peacekeeping duties in post-Soviet conflicts in Tajikistan,

Transnistria, and Abkhazia.<sup>1</sup> But Russian peacekeeping had no clear doctrine and policies often evolved as the result of *ad hoc* attempts by local commanders to respond to events on the ground. Russia's peacekeeping deployments certainly aimed to stem the violence in these post-Soviet wars, but they also reflected Russian geopolitical goals rather than playing a classical impartial peacekeeping role.<sup>2</sup> In the 1990s, Russia's actions seldom generated serious tensions with the West: the EU and the U.S. were happy to delegate the management of messy post-Soviet conflicts to the Russians, even if it was often clear that Russia was acting both as participant and peacemaker in a string of conflict zones. However, tensions with the West began to appear more frequently during Moscow's botched counterinsurgency in Chechnya in 1994-96. The conflict in Serbia over Kosovo caused a more significant rupture with NATO in 1999.

During the 2000s, Russia's approach to conflict management began to diverge more significantly from dominant Western approaches. First, Russia rejected the vision of humanitarian intervention inspired by the Balkan wars—the Blair doctrine—that legitimized the use of force without UN approval in cases of mass human rights abuses. After the high point of liberal international order marked by the UN World Summit in 2005, Russia began to contest ideas such as the responsibility to protect (R2P) norm much more strongly.<sup>3</sup> In January 2007, in an historic vote that symbolized the end of the post-Cold War illusion of a consensual liberal order, Russia and China vetoed a UN resolution condemning human rights abuses in Zimbabwe, marking the first use of multiple vetoes since 1989 and the first time that Russia and China had united to veto a resolution since 1972. Russia was no longer prepared to accept that internal affairs were a legitimate subject to discuss under the rubric of international peace and security. Russia's view of peace enforcement emphasized the importance of the sovereign state, not as an abstract norm, but as a form of political resistance to what Russia viewed as an unacceptable expansion of U.S. influence and power.

Second, Russia increasingly came to reject “liberal” approaches to conflict resolution that viewed pluralism as an essential component of a sustainable peace. Typically, international conflict resolution efforts sought to end conflicts by finding a solution acceptable to all warring parties through peace talks. Peace processes in the 1990s in the Balkans, Northern Ireland, and South Africa all followed such a model, which assumed that peace could emerge from carefully mediated talks among different political factions, in which armed actors would compromise to achieve peace. This approach, sometimes known as “liberal peacebuilding,” relied on peace talks often overseen by small western states such as Norway, who were assumed to be neutral actors.

Such initiatives were often accompanied by an influx of international organizations and civil society into conflict zones aiming to address both the immediate consequences of conflict and the underlying root causes. Nevertheless, liberal peacebuilding had a mixed record, often failing to resolve conflicts and arguably exacerbating others. As part of a wider backlash against liberalism, an alternative model of “illiberal” or “authoritarian” conflict management has made a comeback. Military force is central to imposing order in this model, but it cannot be deployed

---

<sup>1</sup> Bettina Renz, “Russian responses to the changing character of war,” *International Affairs* 95: 4 (2019): 817–834 [p. 820]; <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz100>.

<sup>2</sup> Dov Lynch, “Peacekeeping and Coercive Diplomacy: Russian Suasion,” *Russian Peacekeeping Strategies in the CIS* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 19-36.

<sup>3</sup> Derek Averre and Lance Davies, “Russia, humanitarian intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: the case of Syria,” *International Affairs* 91.4 (2015): 813-834.



alone. Achieving an end to the conflict also requires coercive forms of diplomatic negotiation to co-opt parties, to divide the opposition, and to provide some legitimacy to counterinsurgency operations.<sup>4</sup>

This pushback against liberal ideas about peace and conflict at the international level largely reflected Russia's own experience of war in Chechnya. The first Chechen war in 1994-96 had been a disastrous failure for Moscow. It was a brutal counterinsurgency that forever tainted the Yeltsin presidency with its mass violations of human rights by Russian troops. From Moscow's point of view, it was also an abject failure, ending with a humiliating capitulation to Chechen rebels at the Khasavyurt Accords in 1996. The rise of Vladimir Putin was accompanied by calls for no more "Khasavyurts," and the Second Chechen War was run with a different set of rules. Gone were the critical Western journalists and shocking television pictures; the OSCE and Western "mediators" were no longer welcome. This was a war fought inside sovereign boundaries where Russia brooked no external criticism.<sup>5</sup>

The Chechen war had significant influence on Russian thinking about peace and conflict. From now on, Russia would follow a new set of rules: striving for control over the information environment; using local proxies rather than Russian forces; excluding international actors and mediators; and channeling funds to loyal allies as a means of political and social control. These lessons of the Chechen conflict inevitably influenced Russian thinking about how to manage armed conflicts as the scope of Russian interests widened into the Middle East, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Africa. As Russia became involved in a wider range of conflicts, it refined its normative framework for peace and conflict and adjusted its diplomatic and military toolbox to match. While it was primarily Russia's deployment of its military forces (or Russian-tasked auxiliary forces) in conflicts such as Georgia, Ukraine, Syria, and Libya that attracted the most attention, less attention was paid to Russia's emerging doctrine of peace enforcement, which mixed diplomatic, political, informational, and military tools into an increasingly effective package.

### ***Russian Peacemaking as a Global Idea***

By the late 2010s, Russian officials were no longer just criticizing the shortcomings of Western military interventions, although the difficulties faced by the U.S. and its allies in Afghanistan, Libya, and Iraq certainly galvanized Russian diplomacy. Russia also began to promote Russian mediation and conflict management as a positive alternative to Western interventions. An influential Russian think tank report argued that Russia needed to develop new ideas for its foreign policy, the first of which should be for Russia to promote its role as "an effective and successful peacemaker." The authors argued, "Russia should give more importance to peacemaking and the settlement of military conflicts in its foreign policy rhetoric."<sup>6</sup> This role as a peacemaker was formalized in the constitutional amendments adopted in 2020. Among the changes that allowed Vladimir Putin to extend his term as president almost indefinitely, a little-noticed amendment to Article 79 mandates Russia to "support and strengthen international peace and security," while "not permitting interference in the internal affairs of states."

---

<sup>4</sup> David Lewis, John Heathershaw, and Nick Megoran, "Illiberal Peace? Authoritarian Modes of Conflict Management," *Cooperation and Conflict* 53.4 (2018): 486–506, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836718765902>.

<sup>5</sup> John Russell, "Ramzan Kadyrov's illiberal peace in Chechnya," in Anne Le Huérou, Aude Merlin, Amandine Regamey, and Elisabeth Sieca-Kozłowski, *Chechnya at war and beyond* (London: Routledge, 2014): 133-151.

<sup>6</sup> Sergei A. Karaganov and Dmitry V. Suslov, "Russia in the Post-Coronavirus World: New Ideas for Foreign Policy," *Russia in Global Affairs*, May 17, 2020, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/post-coronavirus-world/>.

Alongside this discursive shift, since 2015 Russia has actively intervened militarily and diplomatically in a series of conflicts outside the post-Soviet space. In Syria, Russia not only provided air support for Syria's brutal counterinsurgency campaign, but also negotiated truces with local rebels and initiated a national process that attempted to persuade rebels to agree to a political settlement.<sup>7</sup> In pursuit of a political agreement, Russia initiated the Astana process in 2017, a series of meetings of Russia, Turkey, and Iran.<sup>8</sup>

In Libya, Russia used the private military company Wagner to provide military backing for General Khalifa Haftar in 2019-20, and leveraged its position on the ground to emerge as a key player in peace talks. In Afghanistan, officials promoted peace talks in the so-called Moscow Format, which combined regional powers in talks among Afghan powerbrokers, after it had begun engaging more closely with the Taliban and other armed factions. In the Central African Republic (CAR), Russian officials and security contractors negotiated truces with rebel warlords in 2018 and attempted to negotiate a peace agreement at the national level, often working in competition with an alternative United Nations (UN) initiative. Finally, in November 2020, a Russian peacekeeping force was deployed as part of a deal negotiated by Moscow to stop the fighting between Azerbaijan and Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Even where Russia has no military forces, it has also offered its services as a diplomatic mediator. In the Middle East, alongside Libya and Syria, Russia has also offered its services to mediate in the civil war in Yemen<sup>9</sup> and in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In 2019, Russia advanced a Gulf Collective Security proposal, offering a regional peace proposal to complement Russia's national level initiatives.<sup>10</sup> None of these initiatives have produced any significant results, but they demonstrate Russia's willingness to play a wider political and diplomatic role in the region. Russia has also been active in South Asia offering to mediate to reduce tensions between India and Pakistan in 2019.<sup>11</sup> Russia inserted itself into the diplomacy of the Afghan conflict, hosting a Troika-Plus mechanism (United States, Russia, China + Pakistan) as a diplomatic platform to discuss the conflict.<sup>12</sup>

Although each of these situations differed—and Russia's initiatives did not always gain traction—some contours of a new Russian peacemaking model began to emerge. Russia lacked the economic and military power to replace the U.S. as a regional power or to challenge the rising influence of China, but it began to carve out an influential role as a security broker, a pivot power around which regional powers began to coalesce. Russia deployed hard force where necessary, but in selective and cautious ways, and always augmented it with active, multi-

---

<sup>7</sup> Marika Sosnowski, "Ceasefires as Violent State-Building: Local Truce and Reconciliation Agreements in the Syrian Civil War," *Conflict, Security and Development* 20, no. 2, (2019): 1–20, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14678802.2019.1679561>.

<sup>8</sup> On the Astana process, see Sergey V. Kostelyanets, "Russia's Peace Initiatives in the MENA Region: Evaluation and Prospects," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 13.4 (2019): 534-555; Samer Abboud, "Making peace to sustain war: the Astana Process and Syria's illiberal peace," *Peacebuilding* (2021): 1-18, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/21647259.2021.1895609>.

<sup>9</sup> S. Ramani, "Can Russia play a role in ending the Yemeni civil war?" *Middle East Institute*, August 12, 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/can-russia-play-role-ending-yemeni-civil-war>.

<sup>10</sup> Marianna Belenkaya, "Ot Livii do ubiystva Suleymani. Chto oznachayet dlya Rossii novaya nestabil'nost' na Blizhnem Vostoke," Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80698>.

<sup>11</sup> "Russia offers to help mediate between India and Pakistan," *Reuters*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-kashmir-russia/russia-offers-to-help-mediate-between-india-and-pakistan-idUSKCN1QH1EI>.

<sup>12</sup> David G. Lewis, "Return to Kabul? Russian Policy in Afghanistan," *Security Insights*, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, June 2020, Number 060, <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/return-kabul-russian-policy-afghanistan-0>.

channel diplomacy, business deals, niche economic offers, security assistance and arms sales, and personalized networks of relationships that enabled quick responses and flexible decision-making. Much of Russia's approach was trial and error; often things did not work out as planned, but the costs were low and risks manageable. It was certainly not a fully-fledged philosophy of post-liberal peacebuilding. Nevertheless, some key principles emerged that characterize a specifically Russian model of conflict management, or—as I have termed it elsewhere—of coercive mediation.

### ***Ten Principles of Russian Conflict Management***

Russia's approach to conflict management can best be described as a form of coercive diplomacy: a combination of peace talks with power politics. It is important to recognize that this is not a coherent blueprint or model. Unlike many Western liberal approaches, it is highly context-specific; policies are based on a study of the correlation of forces in a conflict and on the local and regional power dynamics in each case. But there are some consistent elements that underpin Russia's approach. Here I outline a set of underlying principles that can be identified as characteristic of the Russian approach to conflict management.

#### **1. *The goal is to stop the fighting, not to transform societies.***

Russia is not concerned about achieving social transformation or democratization, but instead about introducing a minimum of political order, in line with Russia's geopolitical interests. Indeed, an important underlying philosophical position is Russia's rejection of universal values in favor of particularistic cultures and civilizational divides. In Afghanistan, for example, Western policy-makers often reference the importance of women's rights and the "democratic gains" of the past two decades as important elements of any political settlement. Russia's hyper-realist approach largely leaves such normative elements on one side, instead assuming Afghanistan is a highly conservative society that is not ready for Western liberal values. This indifference to a "values agenda" means Russia is happy to support a wide range of partners with different ideologies, from the Taliban to General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan rebels, just as long as they are capable of imposing order and protecting Russia's interests.

#### **2. *The only guarantee of stability is a strong state.***

Liberal approaches to conflict resolution often view the state as part of the problem and encourage civil society and non-state actors to play a leading role. Russia took a different path, arguing that a strong state is a precondition for peace. Democratization and elections, on the other hand, are often destabilizing; much better is an authoritarian strongman who can keep order than a pluralist polity that allows terrorist and militant groups to flourish.

This tenet reflects Russia's own approach to domestic political order, where the central need for a strong state has been a *leitmotif* of Putinist thinking since the late 1990s. Even in 1999 Putin was proclaiming, "Russia needs strong state power [*vlast*'] and must have it," and talked of the strong state as "the source and guarantor of order, the initiator and driving force of any change."<sup>13</sup> In the international context, the same principle applies, not only as an ideological stance that mirrors Russia's domestic priorities, but as a reaction against what Russian officials

---

<sup>13</sup> David G. Lewis, *Russia's New Authoritarianism: Putin and the Politics of Order* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 7-8.

often see as the destabilizing effect of Western support for anti-government movements and rebellions. In the context of the Middle East, for example, Sergei Karaganov, an influential Russian academic, argues “any weakening of statehood, especially in such a vulnerable region, is a proven evil.”<sup>14</sup>

Hence, the first step to stability is through strengthening a friendly state government; Russia’s backing for Assad, Maduro, Lukashenka, and the Myanmar junta all fit this pattern. But there are important exceptions in practice. Russia has backed a rebel group in Libya that seeks to overthrow the UN-recognized government, while in Afghanistan Russian officials often appear to have better relations with the Taliban than with the elected president, Ashraf Ghani. Russian officials have dismissed the Ukrainian government as a neo-Nazi junta and provided military support to separatist groups. This apparently contradictory position is justified by Russia’s dismissal of Western-backed governments as little more than “puppet” administrations, which it views as an obstacle to the establishment of a stronger, more effective sovereign state.

### **3. *Powerful, engaged states are better mediators than weak, neutral states.***

Classic conflict resolution approaches often recommend a neutral arbiter or mediator to oversee peace talks. Typically, this has been a small state, such as Norway, a UN special envoy, or a non-governmental body such as the Crisis Management Initiative, a Finnish international non-profit organization. Russia tends to avoid these approaches, arguing that resolving conflicts is not best done through “horizontal” peace talks mediated by a neutral party (e.g. Norway), but by strong actors imposing their will on warring parties to achieve a cessation of violence (e.g. Russia or Turkey). In the case of Afghanistan, Russia opposed a widening of the peace process to include numerous states from outside the region. Instead it promoted a narrow Troika-Plus format of major powers (the United States, Russia, China plus Pakistan), which even excluded its traditional ally India. In Libya, Russia tried to achieve bilateral deals with Turkey while aligning with the UAE and Egypt. In Syria, Russia initiated the Astana process, under which Russia, Turkey, and Iran met regularly as guarantors of a political process. In each case, the entrance ticket to the diplomatic club is the power to influence armed groups on the ground.

### **4. *Peace talks are for powerbrokers.***

This focus on power politics as central to the international diplomacy of peacemaking is mirrored in Russia’s approach to peace talks. Liberal peacebuilding approaches have often tried an inclusive, participatory approach, bringing different social groups into the negotiating room. Western approaches to talks in Afghanistan, for example, have tried to include representatives of civil society and media and have also tried to improve the representation of women. In a series of Russian-sponsored intra-Afghan talks in 2019, dubbed the Moscow Format talks, Russia invited an exclusive group of powerbrokers and warlords along with the Taliban to discuss a political settlement.<sup>15</sup> Russia’s approach views peace talks through a realpolitik lens; those with guns and political power have the ability to start and stop the violence, so it makes sense to limit the process to powerful armed factions and political leaders. This can be effective for short-term deal making, but an exclusively political settlement risks being unsustainable if it involves new patterns of repression that spark new rounds of violence.

---

<sup>14</sup> Sergei Karaganov, “Год побед. Что дальше?” [A Year of Victories. What's Next?], *Россия в глобальной политике*, January 16, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> See Ekaterina Stepanova, “Russia and the Search for a Negotiated Solution in Afghanistan,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, (2020): 1-25, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09668136.2020.1826908>.

### **5. *Military activities and peace talks are closely inter-related.***

The line between war and peace is completely blurred; peace talks are a continuation of war by other means. Russian thinking stresses that there can be no outright military victory without accompanying negotiations, diplomacy, and information campaigns. Russia's understanding of the importance of politics and diplomacy in war fighting is an integral part of Russian military doctrine, which argues for a central role for non-kinetic elements in any campaign. Article 36 of Russia's 2015 National Security Strategy promises, "interrelated political, military, military-technical, diplomatic, economic, informational, and other measures are being developed and implemented in order to ensure strategic deterrence and the prevention of armed conflicts."<sup>16</sup> An editorial in the Russian military journal, *Voennaya Mysl'* [Military Thought], points to a growing belief that "to fight on the battlefield is the work of those who fail at politics and strategy." Much better to achieve strategic goals through such non-military means as smart diplomacy, covert actions, political machinations, and information warfare.<sup>17</sup> As with coercive diplomacy more generally, it is the ability to align developments in the negotiation room with activities on the battlefield that produces results; Russia has been particularly effective at linking its use of hard power with diplomatic initiatives.

### **6. *Effective peace-making requires information control.***

The first Chechen war taught Moscow that information campaigns and media activity are an essential part of conflict management. Consequently, in conflict diplomacy the Russian military and Russian diplomats view themselves as also fighting in an information war. Russia used extensive propaganda during the Ukraine conflict in 2014, including social media campaigns run from troll factories such as the Internet Research Agency (IRA). This also became a pattern during the Syrian conflict, where Russian disinformation campaigns aimed to mute international criticism of the Syrian counterinsurgency, including the use of chemical weapons. In the Central African Republic (CAR), where Russia has also mixed military assistance and peace talks with rebels, Russian contractors set up media operations, both old-fashioned radio programming and new social media campaigns, to support the Russian presence in the country. In Nagorno-Karabakh, one of the first initiatives of the Russian peacekeeping operation was to set up a media unit. Since the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to the contested zone in November 2020, Russia has been able to monopolize information coming out of the peacekeeping zone.

### **7. *The end justifies the means.***

Unscrupulous methods are acceptable to achieve stability. Russia is willing to use a wide palette of methods to produce a form of political stability that respects Russia's interests, including promises of business deals, coercion, and the use of violence, manipulation of humanitarian or development aid, or other violations of international humanitarian law. This principle is most evident in Russia's backing of any means to suppress popular uprisings or insurgencies, including turning a blind eye to mass human rights abuses or even, in the case of Syria, the use of chemical weapons. The willingness to overlook injustice and human rights violations in the

---

<sup>16</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation*, December 31, 2015, <http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> "Strategiya i kontrstrategiya gibridnoi voiny" [Strategy and Counterstrategy of Hybrid War], *Voennaya Mysl'* [Military Thought], October 10, 2018, <http://vm.milportal.ru/strategiya-i-kontrstrategiya-gibridnoj-voiny/>.



name of stabilization can also be traced to Russia's experience in Chechnya but it is also reflected in Russia's wider unwillingness to criticize other states' conduct in suppressing rebellions or civil unrest. Such an approach may produce short-term stabilization, but it undermines any possibility of a just peace emerging. At best, Russian intervention produces an illiberal or authoritarian "peace," i.e., a cessation of armed violence, but too often at the cost of human security and social justice.

### **8. Humanitarian and development aid is a political tool.**

Russia has used humanitarian and development aid as a strategic tool to enhance its conflict management mechanisms. This has been most extensively trialed during Russia's intervention in Syria, where it has attempted to reduce cross-border UN aid flows to rebel-held areas while reinforcing its own and the Syrian government control of humanitarian assistance. In a series of showdowns at the UN Security Council in 2020, Russia forced the closure of several cross-border aid routes from Turkey, leaving just the Bab al-Hawa Border Crossing open to provide aid to millions of civilians. Russia has been developing its own aid network inside Syria, managed by the Russian military's Centre for Reconciliation of Conflicting Sides in Syria (CRCSS), but recent analysis suggests that Russia's distribution of aid has aimed primarily "to buy loyalty and showcase its soft power."<sup>18</sup> Alongside the CRCSS, at least twenty-five other Russian entities, mostly religious organizations or state-linked NGOs, are also active, creating "a shadow aid system" that is part of Russia's wider mechanism of conflict management.<sup>19</sup> In Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia has replicated aspects of this model, setting up an Interagency Humanitarian Reaction Centre to manage humanitarian aid, refugees' returns, and reconstruction tasks.<sup>20</sup>

### **9. All conflicts have a regional dimension.**

In Russian diplomacy, a starting point for any conflict resolution process is a regional consensus on a way forward. Regional powers are often involved in internal conflicts through proxies, therefore effective conflict management needs a multi-level approach, in which consensus among regional powers precedes a political agreement on the ground. For more sustainable political breakthroughs, Russia also seeks legitimation through the UN. This stance is an important corrective to many western approaches to conflict, which have tended to ignore complex regional and international politics and instead have focused primarily on internal dynamics. But the Russian emphasis on regional geopolitics often risks oversimplifying the internal dynamics of conflicts: at times Russia's attempts to achieve deals with other regional powers, notably Turkey, in the Libyan conflict foundered because they did not take sufficient account of the complex internal dynamics of the conflict. Assuming that proxies can be easily managed by regional powers risks overlooking the real political struggle on the ground that does not always map easily onto regional geopolitics.

---

<sup>18</sup> Marika Sosnowski and Jonathan Robinson, "Mapping Russia's soft power efforts in Syria through humanitarian aid," Atlantic Council, June 25, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/mapping-russias-soft-power-efforts-in-syria-through-humanitarian-aid/>.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Robinson, "Russian aid in Syria: An underestimated instrument of soft power," Atlantic Council, December 14, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/russian-aid-in-syria-an-underestimated-instrument-of-soft-power/>.

<sup>20</sup> "Putin signs order to create humanitarian response center for Nagorno-Karabakh," TASS, Moscow, November 13, 2020, <https://tass.com/politics/1223523>.

### **10. *The West is part of the problem, not part of the solution.***

Moscow argues that the intervention of Western powers is one of the primary causes of conflict in the Middle East and elsewhere. It is not only that interventions by the U.S. in Iraq or Afghanistan are viewed as failures, but that conflicts are the direct result—and even the deliberate aim—of U.S. foreign policy. In his famous Munich speech in 2007, Putin criticized “an almost uncontained hyper use of force . . . in international relations,” which was “plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts.” This American-led unipolar order was creating a disorderly world, one in which “nobody feels safe.”<sup>21</sup> United States foreign policy is widely characterized by Russian commentators as a strategy of “managed chaos” (*upravlyaemyi khaos*), marked by “color revolutions,” military interventions, and covert support for anti-government rebellions.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, for Russia, regional powers, not western states, are the most effective powers to resolving conflicts. However, since the U.S. is also present in many conflicts, most cases also provide Russia with an opportunity to challenge and potentially supplant the U.S. and its allies.

### ***Conclusion: Challenges and New Problems***

Russia has ambitions to be a major security actor globally. Alongside its ability to project military power outside its immediate region, Russia also has extensive experience and capacity in conflict-related diplomacy. Russia has good intelligence and analysis capabilities and an effective diplomatic service that enables it to take on complex negotiations. The Russian model is effective at linking military, diplomatic, and economic instruments into a relatively successful policy mix.

Some aspects of Russia's approach may be a useful challenge to gaps in contemporary international peacebuilding. At times, however, a focus on Great Power rivalries oversimplifies conflicts and overlooks complex local dynamics that can derail international initiatives. In addition, a highly exclusionary political process that ignores the interests of minorities and other social groups risks creating new conflict fault lines. But the biggest problem in Russian approaches to conflict is the outcome: an illiberal peace or an authoritarian strongman may be better than all-out civil war, but a failure to address issues of injustice and human rights risks creating fertile ground for further conflicts and instability in the future.

Russia's diplomacy around conflicts and its mediation initiatives pose a challenge to Western countries, many of which have become complacent about the importance of active diplomacy in support of conflict resolution. Russia's model of top-down illiberal peace poses an ideological challenge to ideas of liberal conflict resolution and peacebuilding that the UN and Western states need to address. Russia's initiatives gain traction in places where existing international approaches have been tried and failed. Russian initiatives should galvanize other parties to become more active in finding new approaches to peace negotiations and to act more effectively to end civil wars and deadly conflict.

---

<sup>21</sup> V. Putin, “Vystuplenie i diskussiya na Myunkhenskoj konferentsii po voprosam politiki bezopasnosti,” Munich, February 10, 2007, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

<sup>22</sup> V. Manoilo, “Роль стратегии управляемого хаоса в формировании нового миропорядка” [The role of the strategy of managed chaos in the formation of a new world order], *Право и политика*, 5, (2014): 638-51.



## Chapter 14

# Active Measures: Russia's Covert Global Reach

*By Mark Galeotti*

### *Introduction*

*Aktivnyye meropriyatiya*, “active measures,” are covert and deniable political influence and subversion operations, from corruption and disinformation through to outright assassination and even sponsorship of coups.<sup>1</sup> They have a long and inglorious tradition in Russian foreign operations and reflect a permanent wartime mentality, something dating back to the Soviet era and even Tsarist Russia.<sup>2</sup> The term was used by the Soviet Union (USSR) from the 1950s onward to describe the gamut of operations, often carried out through front organizations, and frequently entailing the spread of disinformation. Indeed, the Committee for State Security (KGB)’s Service A, its primary active measures department, was originally Service D, meaning disinformation.

In many ways, active measures reflect the wartime mentality of the Soviet leadership, as similar tactics were used by the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) and U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during the Second World War, but much less frequently thereafter. For the KGB, however, active measures increasingly became central to its mission abroad in the postwar period, something made explicit by then-KGB chair Yuri Andropov in his Directive No. 0066 of 1982.<sup>3</sup> Tellingly, the KGB’s official definition of “intelligence” was

a secret form of political struggle which makes use of clandestine means and methods for acquiring secret information of interest *and for carrying out active measures* to exert influence on the adversary and weaken his political, economic, scientific and technical and military positions.<sup>4</sup>

KGB defector Maj. Gen. Oleg Kalugin called subversion and active measures “the heart and soul of Soviet intelligence.”<sup>5</sup> There has been heated debate as to quite how central active measures were either to KGB activities – the most extreme example was defector Yuri

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Radin, Alyssa Demus, and Krystyna Marcinek, “Understanding Russian Subversion Patterns, Threats, and Responses,” *RAND* (2020), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE331.html>.

<sup>2</sup> See Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (London: Profile Books, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive: The KGB in Europe and the West* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 316.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Ivo Jurvec, *The Resurrection of ‘Active Measures’: Intelligence Services as a Part of Russia’s Influencing Toolbox*, Hybrid CoE Strategic Analysis (September 2018), <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Strategic-Analysis-2018-4-Juurvec.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Interviewed on *CNN*, June 27, 2007, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070627183623/http://www3.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/episodes/21/interviews/kalugin/>.

Bezmenov, who claimed that they accounted for eighty-five percent of its operations<sup>6</sup> – or Soviet foreign policy overall. Nonetheless, it was a central instrument of Soviet activities when trying to divert and subvert powerful antagonists and also to undermine the strength of powerful narratives and ideas to which they found themselves opposed.

This helps explain the utility of active measures in the post-Soviet era. While Putin’s Russia does not seek to export any specific or coherent ideology, its determination to assert its status as a “Great Power,” even at the expense of the sovereignty of its neighbors and the rules and norms of the international order, necessarily places it at odds with the West. The Kremlin’s aim is thus to divide, distract, and demoralize the West, leaving it unable or unwilling to maintain its solidarity and resist more direct and overt Russian actions in areas of greater immediate interest to it, such as in Ukraine.

### ***Active Measures in the Putin Era***

Active measures became increasingly less commonly employed during Gorbachev’s reform era in the latter 1980s and then in the chaotic 1990s, in part because of a desire to improve relations with the West and in part due to the collapse of Soviet and then Russian covert networks abroad.

However, under President Vladimir Putin, Russia’s foreign intelligence services have been restored to their old levels of funding and activity, and early hopes of a *modus vivendi* with the West soon foundered, hampered by unrealistic expectations and mutual suspicions. By the mid-2000s, active measures were no longer confined to the immediate neighborhood of the post-Soviet “Near Abroad” countries, but were again being seen as a central component of Moscow’s wider strategy. This change reflected a broad shift in strategic perspective best encapsulated by Alexander Vladimirov, a retired major-general who then chaired the military experts’ panel at the Russian International Affairs Council, an influential think tank close to the Russian Presidential Administration (AP). In 2007, he wrote that “modern wars are waged on the level of consciousness and ideas” and that “modern humanity exists in a state of permanent war” in which it is “eternally oscillating between phases of actual armed struggle and constant preparation for it.”<sup>7</sup>

This perspective owes much to a strategic culture heavily predicated on the belief that the world is a demonstrably hostile place full of covert attempts to undermine Russia’s power institutions and roll back its international influence, and which is driven by rival interests, ideological divisions, and outright “Russophobia.” This culture has deep historical roots, in Tsarist “conspirology” that saw the country under threat from Jewish, Masonic, and Bolshevik plots as well as British, German, and Ottoman subversion;<sup>8</sup> through Soviet counter-revolutionary theory predicated on what the *Red Army’s Officer’s Handbook* called a “vast system of anti-Communist propaganda... now aimed at weakening the unity of the socialist countries... and undermining socialist society from within.”<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> In an interview on YouTube, accessed March 1, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mqSV72VNnV0>.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Vladimirov, *Концептуальные основы национальной стратегии России. Военно-политический аспект* [Conceptual Bases of Russian National Strategy: Military-Political Aspects] (Moscow: Nauka, 2007), 105, 130.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Léon Poliakov, “The Topic of the Jewish Conspiracy in Russia (1905–1920), and the International Consequences,” in eds. Carl F. Graumann and Serge Moscovici, *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy* (New York: Springer, 1987); Marouf Hasian, “Understanding the Power of Conspiratorial Rhetoric: A Case Study of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” *Communication Studies* 48, no. 3 (1997).

<sup>9</sup> Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive*, 324; S. N. Kazlov (ed.), *The Officer’s Handbook: A Soviet View*, Translated by the U.S. Air Force (Moscow: Soviet Defence Ministry, 1971), 32.



Like the Soviets, today's Russian government sees an inevitable and inextricable link between external and domestic security. Since Georgia's 2003 Rose Revolution through the other color revolutions and the Arab Spring of the 2010s, there has been a growing school of thought within Russian security circles that the West—essentially the United States—has been mastering “political technologies” able to topple governments through a mix of social media subversion and old-fashioned spycraft and economic pressure.<sup>10</sup> Western encouragement of democratization, support for civil society, transparency, and efforts to encourage activists addressing issues such as corruption and human rights abuses are now seen as forms of such subversion. A crucial turning point was in the 2011–2012 Bolotnaya Square protests, which at their peak saw perhaps 100,000 people on the streets of Moscow and other major Russian cities. President Barack Obama's administration showed a clear preference for then-President Dmitri Medvedev over Putin; its support for the protests; and its decision in late 2011 to appoint an outspoken champion of democratization, Michael McFaul, as the new U.S. ambassador to Moscow were regarded by the Kremlin as proof that the protests were managed by the West. Putin personally accused then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton of sending “a signal” to “some actors in the country” to begin causing trouble “with the support of the U.S. State Department.”<sup>11</sup>

This worldview also creates a strategic culture that not only regards subversion as a perfectly suitable instrument to use against Russia's rivals, but considers the boundaries between war and peace now blurred to the point of being meaningless. Under Putin, the Kremlin—and especially the civilian national security community of the Presidential Administration (AP) and Security Council (SB) secretariats, as well as the intelligence community—has thus embraced a sense that Russia faces a Western campaign of subversion and that using active measures are the best and most logical response.

Of course, active measures have not replaced other methods and instruments, from conventional diplomacy to military force, and each of the main institutional stakeholders within the Russian system has its own interests in play and differing perspectives they have on their use and scope:

- **The Foreign Ministry:** The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID) is a relatively conventional diplomatic service that has absorbed many of the values and methods of its overseas counterparts. Its diplomats thus often affect a degree of disdain for active measures, which they view as breaking the tacit codes of their trade, and they are concerned about the potential consequences of such measures. However, MID is a fairly weak actor in the Russian system and is often required to provide cover and support for other agencies. More to the point, it is still informed by Russia's strategic culture and operational code. It has shown itself to be very eager to support and initiate (dis)information operations—more often disinformation—which are on the active measures spectrum. Some examples include the MID's involvement in Germany's infamous “Lisa Case,” which sought to stir up anti-immigrant populism,<sup>12</sup> its outspoken efforts to confuse the narrative after the Malaysian

---

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, V. A. Kiselev and I. N. Vorobev, “Гибридные операции как новый вид военного противостояния” [Hybrid operations as a new type of military confrontation], *Voennaya Mysl'* 24 no. 2 (2015).

<sup>11</sup> David M. Herszenhorn and Ellen Barry, “Putin Contends Clinton Incited Unrest Over Vote,” *New York Times*, December 8, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Stefan Meister, “The ‘Lisa Case’: Germany as a Target of Russian Disinformation,” *NATO Review* (2016), <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2016/Also-in-2016/lisa-case-germany-target-russian-disinformation/EN/index.htm>.



Airlines Flight 17 shootdown in Ukraine in 2014, and its actions following the poisoning of defected former Russian military intelligence officer Sergei Skripal in the United Kingdom in 2018. Although not responsible for the attempted murder of opposition leader Alexei Navalny in August 2020 and his arrest on return to Russia in January 2021, MID has also played a crucial role in subsequent efforts to challenge Western criticisms and deter new sanctions.

- **The media:** The state-controlled and -dominated media clearly play a crucial role in disinformation operations, but it also supports and covers for other operations, including magnifying the impact of such operations. When, for example, a politically embarrassing telephone conversation<sup>13</sup> between U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt was intercepted by the Russian intelligence community, the extensive play in Russian foreign-language media outlets really gave this operation weight. While there is a degree of direct management of media operations from the AP, notably in weekly meetings between editors and presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov, many activities are instead generated by television presenters, journalists, and editors. Without questioning the patriotic sentiments of many involved, to a considerable extent, engagement in such activities is driven by hopes of career advancement and the need to keep the authorities happy.
- **The military:** To the generals, the primary role of active measures is not to supplant but to supplement regular military operations. Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov has had to adapt his rhetoric to include the threat of “hybrid war”—*gibridnaya voina*—as a Western tactic able to use “political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures”<sup>14</sup> to shatter societies before direct military intervention. This quote came from his speech to the Academy of Military Sciences, summarized in a now-infamous article in the *Voенно-promыshlennyi kur'er* (Military-Industrial Courier) that launched many opinion pieces about a “new way of war.” Although to a large extent, he was likely simply genuflecting to the concerns of the political leadership. The Russian military is, like other militaries around the world, exploring how nonkinetic means, from electronic warfare to psychological operations, can prepare the battlefield and supplement its direct combat operations. However, the focus of its planning, training, procurement, and thinking is still on conventional high-tempo offensive war.
- **The intelligence community:** The intelligence agencies are both the main players in Russian active measures and the main beneficiaries of the Kremlin’s dependence on such methods. The Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), Federal Security Service (FSB) and military intelligence (GRU)<sup>15</sup> are all involved in a wide spectrum of operations. The GRU, for example, has been implicated in the hacking of U.S. political actors’ email accounts, as well as in an attempted coup in Montenegro and in the Skripal case.<sup>16</sup> The SVR tried to stop

---

<sup>13</sup> “Ukraine crisis: Transcript of leaked Nuland-Pyatt call,” *BBC News*, February 7, 2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-26079957>.

<sup>14</sup> Valery Gerasimov, “Ценность науки в предвидении” [The Value of Science in Foresight], *Voенно-promыshlennyi kur'er*, February 26, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Technically now simply known as the GU, for Main Administration of the General Staff, but in practice universally still known as GRU, even by President Putin.

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, “U.S. Charges Russian GRU Officers with International Hacking and Related Influence and Disinformation Operations,” October 4, 2018, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/us-charges-russian-gru-officers-international-hacking-and-related-influence-and>; “Montenegrin Court Convicts All 14 Defendants Of Plotting Pro-Russia Coup,” *RFE/RL*, May 9, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-court-convicts-14-on-terrorism-charges-/29930212.html>; U.K. Prime Minister’s Office, “PM Statement on the Salisbury Investigation: 5

attempts by Canadian unions to block a partnership between Bombardier and Russian aircraft manufacturers and to disrupt a name-change referendum in what is now known as North Macedonia.<sup>17</sup> The FSB, while primarily a domestic security agency, is increasingly active abroad, and is linked with operations from the murder of Chechens in Turkey to recruiting criminals as intelligence assets in Estonia.<sup>18</sup>

- **Presidential Administration:** The AP (which includes the SB) is the nerve center of Putin's deinstitutionalized state, and is the coordination center for those active measures which require interagency collaboration.<sup>19</sup> Many of the AP's departments are also directly involved with their own operations, from the Foreign Politics Department seeking to suborn foreign politicians and movements to the Presidential Council for Cossack Affairs encouraging paramilitary groups abroad. Active measures, as a reflection of a style of Russian foreign policy that enthusiastically ignores the constraints of traditional institutional roles and international etiquette, very much play to the country's culture and perceived role. In effect, the more fluid and covert the policy, the more power and freedom of maneuver it gives the AP.

### *Active Measures as Guerrilla Geopolitics*

Russia's reliance on active measures can be considered an example of "guerrilla geopolitics," an asymmetric response for a nation keenly aware of the limitations of its position. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)'s Article 5 guarantee of mutual defense and the formidable risks in a direct challenge to a richer and, in overall terms, more powerful West would seem to preclude any direct military options. However, active measures make use of Russian strengths, not least the scale of its intelligence networks, to exploit perceived Western weaknesses—from its divisions to its commitment to free speech and open politics.

The "hybridity" of this approach also reflects the "hybridity" of Putin's Russia, in which the boundaries between state and private, politics and business, legal and illegal are much more permeable than in the West.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, in a way the Wagner Group private military company could in itself be characterized as an active measure.<sup>21</sup> Originally established for operations in

---

September 2018," September 5, 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-the-salisbury-investigation-5-september-2018>.

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, "Evgeny Buryakov Pleads Guilty In Manhattan Federal Court In Connection With Conspiracy To Work For Russian Intelligence," March 11, 2016, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/evgeny-buryakov-pleads-guilty-manhattan-federal-court-connection-conspiracy-work>; Patrick Wintour, "Greece to Expel Russian Diplomats over Alleged Macedonia Interference," *Guardian*, July 11, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/11/greece-to-expel-russian-diplomats-over-alleged-macedonia-interference>.

<sup>18</sup> "Have Russian Hitmen been Killing with Impunity in Turkey?" *BBC News*, December 13, 2016, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-38294204>; Holder Roonemaa, "How Smuggler Helped Russia to Catch Estonian Officer," *re:Baltica*, September 13, 2017, <https://en.rebaltica.lv/2017/09/how-smuggler-helped-russia-to-catch-estonian-officer/>.

<sup>19</sup> Mark Galeotti, "Controlling Chaos: How Russia Manages its Political War in Europe," *ECFR Briefing*, September 1, 2017, [https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/controlling\\_chaos\\_how\\_russia\\_manages\\_its\\_political\\_war\\_in\\_europe](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/controlling_chaos_how_russia_manages_its_political_war_in_europe).

<sup>20</sup> Graeme P. Herd, "Russia's Hybrid State and President Putin's Fourth-Term Foreign Policy?" *RUSI Journal* 163, no. 4 (2018); Mark Galeotti and Anna Arutunyan, "Hybrid Business -- The Risks in the Kremlin's Weaponization of The Economy," *RFE/RL*, July 26, 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-commentary-hybrid-business-weaponization-economy/27869714.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Kimberly Marten, "Russia's use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2019): 181-204; Nathaniel Reynolds, "Putin's Not-So-Secret Mercenaries: Patronage, Geopolitics, and the Wagner Group," *Carnegie Moscow Center*, July 8, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/07/08/putin-s-not-so-secret-mercenaries-patronage-geopolitics-and-wagner-group-pub-79442>.

south-eastern Ukraine, it was expanded and professionalized as a means of sending ground troops to Syria without alarming a Russian population with little enthusiasm for the conflict. In this respect, it was “deniable” both to the outside world and even the Russian people. It performed adequately well, but by some time in 2017, the Russian defense ministry decided it did not need Wagner’s services.

Yet the Kremlin was reluctant to see it disbanded, thinking it might have further value, and so charged businessman Evgeny Prigozhin with keeping it alive. To cover its costs, Prigozhin’s Concord Group holding company secured a deal with the Assad Regime in Damascus that granted it a share in the profits from any oil and gas fields it helped recapture in Syria, which led to the debacle of their assault in the Deir ez-Zor region and subsequent decimation at U.S. hands – something the Russian military did nothing to deter. In other words, a pseudo-mercenary force seamlessly transitioned into a genuine mercenary force, and looking at Wagner’s later engagements, from Venezuela and Libya to the Central African Republic and Mozambique, it is clear that while some operations may be directly in support of Kremlin interests, others are primarily motivated by private enterprises. Wagner’s status as both deniable state instrument *and* private commercial venture underscores this “hybridity” of modern Russia.

It also makes a virtue of the way that Putin’s state system is not the ruthlessly-disciplined and rational “power vertical” that many believe, but rather a loose and flexible deinstitutionalized “adhocracy” in which powers and responsibilities are often assigned and reassigned with little direct connection to individuals’ and organizations’ formal roles.<sup>22</sup> A corollary of this is that all kinds of actors and agencies are using active measures to compete and demonstrate their value to the Kremlin, just as Andropov’s Directive No. 0066 made active measures the responsibility of all the KGB, not just Service A. Everyone—from businesspeople to clergymen, students to scholars—can generate their own initiatives that would often be considered covert acts of subversion and disruption.

Many operations are thus neither conceived nor directed by the Kremlin. Indeed, they may not even be known to the authorities, unless and until the prime mover brings it to their attention. Major operations carried out by government agencies such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the intelligence services, obviously are subject to such oversight. However, many of the smaller-scale active measures, especially those involving disinformation, cyberattacks or other low risk “arm’s length” means, are carried out by businesspeople, hackers, media pundits or other individuals either out of a sense of patriotic duty (which the Kremlin has sought to mobilize) or in the hope of future reward from the regime if they prove successful.

### ***The Limitations of the Model***

This approach has many advantages – it is often deniable, requires no or little up-front resourcing, and capitalizes on the imaginations and ambitions of numerous autonomous actors – but carries with it some serious weaknesses, too. Because of the lack of central coordination, operations can often be small-scale, contradictory and amateurish.

More seriously, what the Kremlin does not order or bankroll, and which it cannot acknowledge, it also finds it harder to control. Many of the individuals and agencies concerned are working to their own personal ideological agendas or else their assumptions about what the Kremlin “wants.” They may well get that wrong, or simply fail to adapt to tactical changes in the government’s position. A case in point has been the response to the coronavirus pandemic. The

---

<sup>22</sup> For more on the concept of Russia as an “adhocracy,” see *Business New Europe*, 18 January 2017, <https://www.intellinews.com/stolypin-russia-has-no-grand-plans-but-lots-of-adhocrats-114014/>.

Kremlin tried to use it to regain some of its lost political ground since 2014, pushing a narrative of common endeavor against a common threat, agitating for a moratorium on sanctions, and launching controversial “From Russia with Love” medical aid missions to Italy, Serbia, and the United States. Setting aside the limitations of such nakedly opportunistic efforts, the Kremlin was unable to prevent the activities of many low-level disinformation outlets and creators. Although there is little evidence of the kind of coordinated, multi-platform magnification of narratives that marks a Kremlin-sponsored or -sanctioned disinformation campaign, the mere presence of these malign narratives helped undermine any attempts to mount a pandemic charm offensive.

Active measures, when unmasked, can often poison diplomatic relations: the attempted Skripal and Navalny assassinations, the “Lisa Case,” and interference in the 2016 U.S. elections all created serious strains in relations with London, Berlin, and Washington, respectively. However, when poorly-managed, they can also lead to a more subtle blowback. Disinformation around coronavirus, for example, may have been directed at the West, but given the two-way flow of ideas, has also contributed to the sizeable body of myth, conspiracy theory, and quack remedies inside Russia.

In general, the reputation of being an enthusiastic user of active measures can sometimes give Russia disproportionate “dark power” – the coercive counterpart to soft power, the capacity to intimidate<sup>23</sup> – but in the longer term it is deeply problematic, contributing to a perception of Russia as “rogue state” and potential international pariah.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Different Theaters, Different Plays***

While much is made sometimes about a supposed “Russian playbook,” in practice, active measures are by definition opportunistic and flexible, responding both to the Kremlin’s needs of the moment and also to what scope there is for covert political operations. Active measures against China, for instance, are not wholly ruled out – although largely confined to jousting for influence in third countries – but they are severely constrained. This is in part because one of the Kremlin’s primary concerns is not alienating Beijing and also given the practical and operational constraints of mounting such missions in China.

Opportunities for their use are thus most commonly found in theaters which are both relatively uncontrolled – whether democracies or simply less effective authoritarianisms – and also the subject of particular Kremlin initiatives and interests. In the “Near Abroad,” for example, relative weak structures of governance and rule of law mean that Moscow can often rely on outright corruption and the use of so-called *kompromat*, compromising materials, to exert

---

<sup>23</sup> Mark Galeotti, “Russia pursues ‘dark power’ and the West has no answer,” *Raam op Rusland*, March 15, 2018, <https://www.raamoprusland.nl/dossiers/kremlin/894-russia-pursues-dark-power-and-the-west-has-no-answer>.

<sup>24</sup> Something also being recognized in Russian research, even if often framed as an unfair and Orientalizing perspective. See, for example, O. A. Solopova and M. Yu. Pyushkina, “Russia as a target domain in American, British and Canadian political discourses,” *Вестник Южно-Уральского государственного университета*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2017); Ekaterina A. Repina, Marina AR. Zheltukhina, Natalya A. Kovalova, Tatiana G. Popova, and Conchita Garcia Caselles, “International media image of Russia: trends and patterns of perception,” *XLinguae* vol. 11, no. 2 (2018); Galina Melnik, Boris Misonzhnikov, and Evgeniya Vojtik, “The Image of Russia in the Western Media as a ‘Military Threat’,” *Ariel*, vol. 1. no 2. (2019).

covert influence. It almost goes without saying that they are a constant feature of the Russian campaign against Ukraine,<sup>25</sup> but they also range from alleged election meddling in Moldova<sup>26</sup> to cyberattacks on Georgia.<sup>27</sup>

Conversely, in Western and Central Europe, while such measures are not unknown, they are at once more risky and less usable. Instead, as in North America, greater use is made of disinformation and support for extremist and divisive movements and voices, whether leftist or rightist, separatist or nationalist. At a time when the West is in any case experiencing something of a crisis of confidence and a wave of interconnected challenges to the status quo, with constituencies questioning everything from existing borders to the democratic model, the Russians have ample opportunities to exacerbate existing divisions. After all, the evidence is that they cannot create such fissures, but can widen them. It appears that Moscow has backed away from attempts to directly influence polls, seeing them as unpredictable and prone to backfire, and instead seeks to capitalize on the tensions and disagreements they inevitably create.

In Africa, active measures have become a central component of a campaign to acquire status, favorable economic deals, and leverage through quick, cheap initiatives.<sup>28</sup> As well as trying to hasten a general Western retreat from much of the continent, the Russians are in effect becoming active measures mercenaries, with covert political operations part of a package of measures they offer regimes in return for economic and political stakes. Thus, Prigozhin's Concord Group markets not just armed force but also "political technologists" willing to deploy disinformation in support of a regime.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, persistent allegations of commercial espionage and bribery have dogged *Rosatom*'s efforts to sell nuclear power stations across the continent.<sup>30</sup>

Unlike the Soviet Union, Putin's Russia does not have a long-term ideological objective in Africa – indeed, in many ways there is a stark absence of any real strategy.<sup>31</sup> Instead, it looks to the continent for quick, transitory gains that both support the narrative that Russia is a global rather than just a regional power and could be used as bargaining chips in the future. Besides which, China is seen as a much more serious and deep-pocketed rival for African influence, and ultimately Moscow neither believes it can compete on the same terms as Beijing, nor does it want to.

---

<sup>25</sup> Alya Shandra and Robert Seely, "The Surkov Leaks: the Inner Workings of Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine," *RUSI Occasional Paper* (2019), [https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/201907\\_op\\_surkov\\_leaks\\_web\\_final.pdf](https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/201907_op_surkov_leaks_web_final.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> "Senior Official Accuses Russia Of Meddling In Moldovan Politics," *RFE/RL*, February 10, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-russia-election-meddling-dodon-candu/29031766.html>.

<sup>27</sup> "UK says Russia's GRU behind massive Georgia cyber-attack," *BBC*, February 20, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-51576445>.

<sup>28</sup> Jidefor Adibe, "What does Russia really want from Africa?" *Brookings Africa in Focus*, November 14, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2019/11/14/what-does-russia-really-want-from-africa/>.

<sup>29</sup> "The Chef's Global Footprints," *OCCRP*, December 17, 2019, <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/the-chefs-global-footprints>; "Master and Chef. How Evgeny Prigozhin led the Russian offensive in Africa," *Proekt*, March 31 2019, <https://www.proekt.media/investigation/evgeny-prigozhin-africa/>; "A Private Army for the President: The Tale of Evgeny Prigozhin's Most Delicate Mission," *The Bell*, January 31, 2019, <https://thebell.io/en/a-private-army-for-the-president-the-tale-of-evgeny-prigozhin-s-most-delicate-mission/>.

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Weiss and Eugene Rumer, "Nuclear Enrichment: Russia's Ill-Fated Influence Campaign in South Africa," *Carnegie Endowment Paper*, November 16, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/12/16/nuclear-enrichment-russia-s-ill-fated-influence-campaign-in-south-africa-pub-80597>.

<sup>31</sup> "Arms, Oil and Influence: What You Need to Know About Russia's First-Ever Africa Summit," *Moscow Times*, October 24, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/10/24/arms-oil-and-influence-what-you-need-to-know-about-russias-first-africa-summit-a67885>.



Conversely, both Latin America and Asia are seen at present as less suitable and interesting arenas for active measures. These operations are, after all, largely connected with efforts to sway or subvert governments that are either antagonists or else potential clients. In these continents, the perception is that while Russia has some friends such as Cuba, Venezuela, and Vietnam, the scope for expanding its influence is minimal, not least because of the presence of the U.S. and China, respectively. Given that Russia lacks the resources to outbid either and is essentially looking for cheap and easy wins, the environment is uncongenial. Instead, active measures are only really employed when there is a very specific goal in mind – such as the campaign to try to prevent the extradition to America of arms dealer Viktor Bout in 2010 – and even then largely confined to disinformation campaigns.

### ***Conclusions and Implications***

Active measures are both an expression of Russia's strategic culture, with its propensity to see the world as full of covert challenges, and the operational code of the Putin regime, which considers the best defense against such threats to be good offense. A central element of this code is that responsibility for active measures has become diversified, even universalized, linked with the way Russia has become an "adhocracy" of competing, semi-autonomous actors expected to generate their own plans to work toward the state's broad objectives.

Of course, this does not mean that every Russian individual or institution is necessarily involved in active measures. Most are not, and furthermore, most of the initiatives generated should not be considered active measures, as they are often overt and well within the usual norms of political activity.

However, the crowning irony is that it has become very easy for foreigners to see the Kremlin's hand behind every reversal, every trip, and every Russian initiative. Ironically, at a time when ordinary Russians' perceptions of the West are increasingly favorable,<sup>32</sup> Westerners are more negative about Russia. According to a study by the Pew Research Center, only eighteen percent of Americans, twelve percent of Swedes, and twenty-six percent of Britons have a positive view.<sup>33</sup> More broadly, the mistaken perception, even in policy circles, that Russia's active measures are simply part of a nihilistic hunger for chaos, to "watch the world burn," is not only inaccurate but also dangerous, as it inclines other powers to regard the country simply as a threat.<sup>34</sup>

All this has an undeniably baleful impact on international relations, for while it may seem to suit Putin well, crediting him with more influence and impact in the world than he and his Russia truly deserve, his country ultimately can neither sustain an open-ended strategic competition with the West, nor does it largely want one. Putin is undoubtedly more than just a KGB veteran in terms of his experiences, attitudes, and approach to the world. Nonetheless, the KGB's penchant for active measures, an instrument adopted when Moscow had far fewer options for more positive engagement with the West, is one of the more pernicious of its lasting legacies for him.

---

<sup>32</sup> "4 in 5 Russians View West as a Friend – Poll," *Moscow Times*, February 18, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/02/18/4-in-5-russians-view-west-as-a-friend-poll-a69322>.

<sup>33</sup> "Russia and Putin receive low ratings globally," *Pew Research Center*, February 7, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/07/russia-and-putin-receive-low-ratings-globally/>.

<sup>34</sup> Kasey Stricklin, "Why Does Russia Use Disinformation?" *Lawfare*, March 29, 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/why-does-russia-use-disinformation>.



## Chapter 15

# Russian Strategic Messaging: Propaganda and Disinformation Efforts

*By Dmitry Gorenburg*

### ***Introduction***

Over the past decade, and especially since the Ukraine crisis, the level of economic, political, military, and geostrategic competition between the United States and Russia has intensified significantly, to levels not seen since the Cold War. As relations have deteriorated, such competition has been taking on an increasing variety of forms, both globally and regionally, and across the full spectrum of functional domains. Russia has increasingly focused on using the media, including foreign language channels, to shape and promote, on a global level, strategic narratives about the world and Russia's place in it. Due to the diverse nature of these activities, the U.S. and its partners and allies have been challenged to compete more effectively in the information environment and to shape adversary perceptions, structuring cogent approaches to deter or compel Russia globally.

In order to be able to counter Russian strategic messaging successfully, it is essential to establish, and maintain, situational awareness of Russian perceptions of the United States, its allies and partner policies, activities, exercises, and also what narratives Russia is broadcasting domestically and internationally. Mapping and assessing Russian information activities helps offer insights needed to support U.S. planning, decision-making, and understanding of how the battle for the narrative is unfolding in this competition.

In this environment, political-military analysis of Russian information activities, and their perceptions and responses informed by analysis of Russian open source media reports can serve as a powerful tool to assist U.S. decision-makers in understanding the rationale behind Russian national security decision-making at both the strategic and operational levels—and thereby to help shape U.S. plans, activities, policies, and initiatives. This chapter provides a summary of the results of a project that examined Russian foreign policy positions using statements and interviews given by Russian government officials.

The research team monitored Russian and Western media over a ten-month period, from September 2018 to June 2019, collecting both Russian- and English-language statements.<sup>1</sup> We found a set of ten narratives frequently used by officials discussing Russian foreign policy. We

---

<sup>1</sup> Materials were collected through a variety of sources, including Opensource.gov, the Eastview database of Russian newspapers, and direct access to the TASS news agency and the websites of major Russian and Western newspapers. The bulk of the materials came from newswire reports, such as TASS in Russian and Interfax in English. Russian-language sources also included all major central newspapers. English-language sources also included Western English-language newspapers and media sites of record, such as the *New York Times* and the BBC. All materials were hand-coded by one of the two team members. Our analysis assumes that statements in Russian-language sources are aimed primarily at a domestic audience, while statements in English-language sources are aimed primarily at an international audience. I would like to thank Katherine Baughman, Kasey Stricklin, and Umida Hashimova for their work on the larger project.

describe each of these narratives and provide some recent examples of their use. We conclude with a preliminary frequency analysis of trends used over time during the study period.

### ***Eurasia Versus Europe***

This narrative tends to portray Russia as the center of a distinct Eurasian civilization with its own sovereign path that is separate from the rest of Europe. According to this argument, Russia is separate and different from the rest of Europe and should not be expected to integrate with it on purely European terms. This argument reflects a long tradition of Eurasianist discourse among Russian intellectuals that goes back to the early twentieth century and also harkens back to an even older debate about Russian identity between Slavophiles and Westernizers that goes back to the Tsarist era.

Officials focusing on this narrative discussed the need to form a greater Eurasia to safeguard the region's distinct path, often in contrast to decadent European values. For example, in April 2019, Kremlin aide Yuri Ushakov stated, "We believe that there is the need to aspire for Greater Eurasia, which includes the European Union, our Eurasian Union and various Chinese initiatives."<sup>2</sup> This statement highlights the significance placed by Russian officials on deepening Russia's relationship with China and especially highlights Russia's role as a conduit for Chinese trade with Europe.

### ***Russia as a Bastion of Traditional Values***

According to this narrative, Russia possesses a distinct civilization that embodies and promotes "traditional" religious, societal, and other values in contrast with the more liberal, "decadent" West. This has been a common trope for Vladimir Putin. For example, in November 2018, he stated, "There is one thing I do not doubt: the voice of Russia will be dignified and confident in the future world, which is predetermined by our tradition, domestic spiritual culture, self-awareness, and, finally, the very history of our country as a distinctive civilization that is unique but does not make self-confident and loudish claims of exclusiveness."<sup>3</sup>

This narrative has been particularly favored by senior leaders in the Russian Orthodox Church, such as Patriarch Kirill, who stated the following in November 2018:

The narrow paradigm of the New Time speaks of globalization as an inevitable process. Hidden underneath the word "inevitability" is the western principle of global development which features liberal secularism and modern forms of colonialism. . . This mistake is a departure from tradition, the system of passing values from generation to generation which forms the civilizational code of peoples with its cultural, spiritual and religious paradigms, relying on God-given and thus invariable moral values which have accompanied the humankind throughout history. Experience shows that the trampling of these values has led to tragedies and cataclysms in personal, societal and international relations.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> "Russia Calls for Creating Greater Eurasia Uniting Integration Initiatives – Kremlin Aide," *TASS*, April 28, 2019, <http://tass.com/economy/1056228>.

<sup>3</sup> "Russia to Retain Unique Role Without Claiming to Be Exclusive – Putin," *Interfax*, November 1, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> "Patriarch Kirill Speaks Out Against Western-Style Globalization," *Interfax*, November 1, 2018, <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/22262/>.

Russian leaders have focused on traditional values, particularly in their domestic messaging, as a way of contrasting Russia with the supposedly immoral member states of the European Union. This narrative helps Russian leaders justify their caution about developing close ties with Western Europe and their policies aimed at curtailing Western influence in Russia.

### ***Russophobia***

Russophobia refers to the narrative that the policies and actions of Russia's opponents are motivated by an unjustified prejudice against Russia, rather than legitimate disagreement over policy or differences in geopolitical interests. Russian officials frequently highlight the role of Russophobia in accusations by U.S. politicians and media commentators of Russian interference in U.S. elections. For example, in April 2019, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov commented on the publication of the Mueller Report, "Unfortunately, there is no sign that U.S. political circles, particularly those who seek to score political points in the Congress from Russophobia, are ready for dialogue. The document is most likely to have no effect from the standpoint of improving relations." He added that Washington "continues to bombard the public with anti-Russian allegations."<sup>5</sup> Russian officials often argue that Russophobia makes it easy for Western politicians to blame Russia for all of their problems, rather than dealing with the actual causes.

### ***Whataboutism***

Whataboutism is the narrative that other powers are engaging in the same activities that they accuse Russia of engaging in. During the study period, Russian officials resorted to whataboutism frequently, including when criticizing the U.S. and its allies for interfering in Russian elections. In May 2019, the Federation Council released a statement noting that "Washington, its allies, and its partners are using available instruments, including information, political, administrative, diplomatic, organizational, technical, and financial ones, for illegally intervening in Russia's sovereign affairs, including in the period of preparation for and holding of electoral campaigns of various levels in Russia."<sup>6</sup> This statement was clearly designed to highlight the equivalence between U.S. activities in 2019 and accusations of Russia's efforts to influence the 2016 U.S. election.

Russian officials also highlighted violations of freedom of the press in Western Europe and compared Russian police actions against protesters with French police actions against Yellow Vest protesters to show that Russian actions are no different than those of the countries that regularly accuse Russia of violating human rights and international norms. For example, Vladimir Putin highlighted restrictions placed on RT broadcasting in France by noting, "We hear from our Western colleagues that the free dissemination of information . . . is one of the most important principles of democracy. . . States should not hinder information spread through administrative routes, but rather put forward their perspective and let the people decide for themselves where the truth is and where its falsification is."<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> "Senior Diplomat Expects Mueller Report to Have No Effect on Russia-US Relations," *TASS*, April 19, 2019, <http://tass.com/politics/1054580>.

<sup>6</sup> "U.S. May Try to Interfere in Sept Elections in Russia – Federation Council Member," *Interfax*, May 30, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> "«Это не имеет ничего общего с демократией»: Путин о ситуации с RT во Франции," ["This has nothing in common with democracy": Putin on the situation in France with RT], *RT*, November 11, 2018, <https://russian.rt.com/world/video/572421-putin-interview-rt>.



Commenting on European government actions against domestic protesters, State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin said, “Unlike France and Germany, Russia never uses water cannons, tear gas or rubber pellets to disperse protesters.”<sup>8</sup>

Whataboutism is also used to reject criticism regarding Russian military and political influence activities abroad. In April 2019, referring to Russian support for the Venezuelan government, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said, “What do they mean by insolent remarks that the countries [outside] the Western Hemisphere are not allowed to have any interests there? But what is the U.S. doing? Take a look at the map of the U.S. military bases: the entire world is dotted with red spots and each of them poses rather serious risks.”<sup>9</sup> Overall, the whataboutism narrative is used to suggest that Russia is no different from the Western states that regularly condemn Russian behavior both domestically and on the world stage.

### ***Fraternalism with Russia’s Near Abroad***

The Near Abroad is Russia’s preferred term for the countries of the former Soviet Union, with the arguable exception of the Baltic States. The term is associated with fraternalist narratives concerning brotherly links, paternalistic relationships, and special historical and cultural commonalities with these countries.

Officials using this narrative during the study period made references to the continuing fraternal relationship with Belarus during a period of intense discussion of potential closer integration of the two states. Presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov highlighted the special fraternal relationship, noting, “I don’t think anyone in Moscow or Minsk would dispute the existence of de facto and de jure special and allied relations between the two countries.”<sup>10</sup>

Officials also lamented the destruction of brotherly ties with Ukraine by fascists and nationalists bent on tearing Ukraine away from Russia. For example, in reference to Russia’s relationship with Ukraine, Vladimir Putin said, “As for the long term, no matter what happens, no matter who is in power in Kyiv today, the Russian and Ukrainian peoples have always been and will forever be fraternal and very close . . . This political scum will go away, recede.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Peskov stated in May 2019 that “[Putin] has always stated that the relations between the countries’ leadership should not in any way be projected to the long-standing close and brotherly relations of the peoples of the two countries.”<sup>12</sup> These statements highlight Russian leaders’ tendency to continue to consider former Soviet states, especially Ukraine and Belarus, as “naturally” belonging to Russia’s cultural and political sphere of influence.

### ***Relations with Soviet-Era Allies***

This category refers to the set of Russian narratives that relate to “traditional relations” with partners that have maintained close ties with Russia since the Soviet Era, such as Vietnam and Syria. When discussing new initiatives with foreign states that fit this category, Russian leaders

---

<sup>8</sup> Alice Scarsi, “Putin’s Fury: Russia Rages This Is ‘Unacceptable’ as Macron and Merkel Issue War Demands,” *Daily Express*, December 30, 2018, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1064703/vladimir-putin-russia-news-emmanuel-macron-angela-merkel-ukraine-crisis-sea-of-azov>.

<sup>9</sup> “Russia’s Lavrov Labels US Demands for Russia to Get Out of Western Hemisphere as Insolent,” *TASS*, April 3, 2019, <http://tass.com/world/1051990>.

<sup>10</sup> “Hardly Anyone in Moscow, Minsk Can Dispute Special, Allied Relations Between the 2 Countries – Peskov,” *Interfax*, December 25, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> “Russian, Ukrainian Peoples to Remain Fraternal, Political ‘Scum’ to Recede – Putin,” *Interfax*, November 28, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> “Putin Sends Greetings to Ukrainians on Victory Day, Urges to Counter Revival of Fascism,” *TASS*, May 8, 2019, <http://tass.com/politics/1057554>.



commonly refer to the history of bilateral ties in the Soviet period. During the study period, Vladimir Putin mentioned such ties during official meetings with leaders of Vietnam and Serbia, and Sergey Lavrov highlighted the history of close relations between Russia and Latin American countries.<sup>13</sup> This emphasis is especially common in situations in which the two sides are discussing military assistance. For example, in April 2019, Russian Presidential Special Representative for the Middle East and Africa Mikhail Bogdanov noted “Sudan’s willingness and readiness to develop cooperation with Russia on the basis of traditionally friendly relations spanning since 1950s.”<sup>14</sup> Although this is not a frequent narrative, it does play an important role when Russian officials seek to further links with states with which Russia had ties during the Cold War.

### ***Outside Intervention in Sovereign Affairs***

This category describes the narrative that certain domestic policies and developments in a given country are the result of meddling from outside powers, most often the United States, rather than the outcome of internal factors. Russian leaders frequently express vehement opposition to such activities, although many countries accuse Russia of employing similar tactics abroad. During the study period, Russian officials made strong statements against U.S. intervention in Venezuela, citing the principle of noninterference in sovereign affairs. For example, in May 2019, Sergey Lavrov stated, “Mike Pompeo called me, urged [Russia] not to support [Venezuelan President Nicolás] Maduro, and urged us and Cuba not to interfere in Venezuela’s internal affairs. This whole story sounds quite surrealistic. I answered him, based on our principled position, that we never interfere in somebody else’s affairs and call on others to act the same way.”<sup>15</sup>

Russian officials have made similar statements about how U.S. military operations in Syria and support for specific political groups in Ukraine were instances of interference in sovereign affairs. In the context of the Syria operation, State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin condemned the “United States of America, which continues using terrorists and extremists as a tool of pressure and direct interference in the affairs of sovereign states.”<sup>16</sup> Regarding Ukraine, Russian officials accused the U.S. of getting involved in the conflict over the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and condemned its influence on Ukrainian elections.<sup>17</sup> Sergey Lavrov’s assessment was that, “The current leadership in Kyiv is guided not so much by the interests of their country but by the ambitions and ‘recommendations’ and often direct orders from other capitals.”<sup>18</sup> When asked about similar Russian activities, Russian leaders argue that unlike the United States, Russia only acts when invited by a country’s official government.

---

<sup>13</sup> “Россия заинтересована в тесной внешнеполитической координации с Вьетнамом” [“Russia is interested in close foreign policy cooperation with Vietnam”], *TASS*, September 6, 2018, <https://tass.ru/politika/5531260>; “Kremlin Says Serbia Protests Are ‘Internal Affair,’” *Interfax*, March 18, 2019; “Top Diplomat Reiterates Russia’s Respect for Sovereignty of Latin American Countries,” *TASS*, March 11, 2019, <http://tass.com/world/1048180>.

<sup>14</sup> “New Sudanese Government Willing to Forge Ties with Moscow, Says Diplomat,” *TASS*, April 17, 2019, <http://tass.com/world/1054244>.

<sup>15</sup> “Pompeo’s Call on Russia Not to Support Maduro Sounds ‘Surrealistic’ – Lavrov,” *Interfax* May 2, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> “U.S. Continues Using Terrorists as Tool of Direct Interference in Sovereign States’ Affairs – Volodin,” *Interfax*, December 10, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> “Russian Orthodox Church Accuses Patriarch Bartholomew of Fulfilling U.S. Order in Ukraine,” *Interfax*, December 27, 2018, <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/21720/>; “Putin: Kyiv Being Paid to Keep Russian, Ukrainian People Apart,” *Interfax*, December 20, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> “Russian FM Criticises US, Ukraine in End of Year Interview,” *RIA Novosti*, December 24, 2018.

### ***Russia as a Proponent of Stability in the World***

Russian leaders frequently argue that Russia's activities at home and abroad are justified by the need to maintain stability, while portraying opponents' actions as attempts to destabilize a given situation. For example, in April 2019, Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov criticized Western humanitarian operations around the world in the following terms: "Frequently, the so-called humanitarian interference is done under the pretext of promoting democracy, thus provoking intra-state instability. For Western countries, unilateral actions towards other states carried out with disregard for the opinion of their legitimate governments and not authorized by the UN [United Nations] have already become the norm."<sup>19</sup> Around the same time, General Alexander Levin, one of the commanders of the Russian military base in Tajikistan, highlighted the beneficial nature of the humanitarian operation there, saying, "The joint actions by the Russian base, units of the Defense Ministry and other security structures of Tajikistan are becoming a guarantor of peace and stability in the region."<sup>20</sup> This pair of statements highlights the Russian trope that Russian interventions promote stability in the world, while interventions by Western countries, especially by the United States, sow chaos.

### ***Russia as a Proponent of Multipolarity in the World***

Russian officials often describe the current world order as being unfairly dominated by a single power—specifically, the United States. In response, they promote the idea that the international community should welcome multiple arbiters, including and especially Russia and China. In the meantime, they highlight how most of the world's problems are caused by the U.S. trying to resist the natural development of a polycentric world order. In late May 2019, Lavrov noted, "As we can see, security problems have been piling up in the Asia Pacific region and the world at large because Western countries are trying to stall or even reverse the objective formation of a polycentric world order."<sup>21</sup> Also that month, Vladimir Putin called for the establishment of an efficient security system that would be equal for all states, arguing that only through a collective response can radical extremist ideas be defeated.<sup>22</sup>

Russian officials generally argue that the U.S. effort to maintain its unilateral dominance is a fruitless battle, and one that the United States will eventually lose. For example, in April 2019, Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu argued that "[o]ur Western colleagues cannot accept the fact that the era of the unipolar world order is nearing an inevitable end so they are trying to protract this natural process."<sup>23</sup> These statements highlight the key idea of this narrative: that multipolarity is inevitable, and that efforts by Western states to resist it are both futile and counterproductive.

### ***Promotion of International Structures in Which Russia Plays a Leading Role***

This narrative refers to Russian leaders' tendency to promote the involvement in international negotiations of organizational entities in which Russia has a dominant or equal voice as compared with Western powers. Such organizations include, most prominently, the Organization

---

<sup>19</sup> "West Provoking Instability Through 'Humanitarian Interference' – Russia's General Staff," *TASS*, April 24, 2019, <http://tass.com/politics/1055336>.

<sup>20</sup> "Russia Views Military Base in Tajikistan as Stability Factor in Region," *TASS*, April 18, 2019, <http://tass.com/defense/1054440>.

<sup>21</sup> "Lavrov Accuses West of Stalling Formation of Polycentric World Order," *Interfax*, May 30, 2019.

<sup>22</sup> "Putin Supports Establishment of Security System Equal for All Countries (Part 2)," *Interfax*, May 9, 2019.

<sup>23</sup> "Western Countries Seek to Delay End of Unipolar World Order, Says Russian Minister," *TASS*, April 29, 2019, <http://tass.com/defense/1056430>.

for the Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the UN Security Council. Conversely, Russian leaders frequently criticize structures in which their country is less empowered, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Council of Europe.

During the study period, Russian officials frequently argued that international crises could only be solved through the UN. This was particularly noticeable during the peak of the effort by the Venezuelan opposition to replace Nicolás Maduro with Juan Guaidó. Sergey Lavrov stated, “We with our Venezuelan partners share the opinion that any use of force in circumvention of the [UN] Security Council is fraught with disastrous consequences for modern international security as a whole.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Vyacheslav Volodin argued that the Kosovo conflict can only be solved under the auspices of the UN: “A solution to the Kosovo problem can definitely only be sought via dialogue based on decisions made in the UN. Primarily, UN Security Council Resolution 1244.”<sup>25</sup>

Russian officials also sought to use other international organizations, especially the OSCE. The OSCE was used to promote Russian interests in Ukraine, as highlighted in the following statement from the Russian Foreign Ministry: “Regardless of this fact, Russia will utilize its right to monitor the elections within an international mission in another OSCE member state, in this case in Ukraine. Our steps are based on the mutual obligations of all OSCE members to provide reciprocal, and unimpeded access by observers to one another’s elections. This measure needs to ensure that electoral processes are transparent and democratic.”<sup>26</sup> These statements show that Russian officials prefer to promote their country’s interests through international organizations in which Russia plays a prominent role, while avoiding or denigrating organizations from which Russia is excluded (such as NATO).

### ***Frequency Analysis and Trends over Time***

As shown in Table 1 (below), the frequency with which these narratives were used by Russian officials during the period of analysis can be divided into three groups. The most frequently used included outside intervention in sovereign affairs, whataboutism, the promotion of international structures in which Russia plays a leading role, and Russophobia. A second set of narratives was used somewhat less frequently, including references to Russia’s near abroad, Russia’s focus on multipolarity versus Western unilateralism, and Russia’s role as a promoter of stability as compared with the Western tendency toward destabilizing interventions. The least frequently used narratives included references to Soviet-era allies, the importance of Russia’s Eurasian identity, and Russia’s role as a bastion of traditional values.

In terms of trends over time, most of the narratives were relatively evenly spread out over the entire ten-month period of observation. In particular, Russophobia, whataboutism, and references to the near abroad occurred at a fairly constant rate throughout the period. Figure 1 shows that some narratives have noticeable peaks and valleys over time, especially sovereign affairs and the promotion of international structures. The February peak in the sovereign affairs narrative is related to the peak of the crisis in Venezuela and concurrent Russian fears of a U.S. military intervention there.

---

<sup>24</sup> “Any Use of Force in Venezuela Bypassing UN Security Council Fraught with Disastrous Consequences – Lavrov,” *Interfax*, May 6, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> “Kosovo Problem Can Be Settled only Based on UN Security Council Resolution 1244 – Volodin,” *Interfax*, June 3, 2019.

<sup>26</sup> “Russia to Send Short-Term Observers to Ukraine as Part of OSCE Mission,” *TASS*, February 13, 2019, <http://tass.com/politics/1044490>.

Narrative	Frequency
Outside Intervention in “Sovereign” Affairs	95
“Whataboutism”	86
Promotion of International Structures in Which Russia Plays an Equal or Leading Role	69
Russophobia	59
Near Abroad	38
Unilateralism vs. Multipolarity	33
Stability vs. Destabilization	31
Soviet-Era Allies	8
European vs. Eurasian Russia	2
Russia as Bastion of Traditional Values	2

Table 1. “Frequency of Narratives Used by Russian Officials”

However, the smaller April peak in that narrative and the February peak in the promotion of international structures both include mentions of a wide variety of topics. For the former, these include discussion of Western intervention in Libya and Venezuela and discussion related to Brexit and cyberattacks. For the latter, Russian officials refer to a wide variety of crises that they say should all be dealt with either in the UN Security Council or the OSCE, including Ukraine, Syria, Macedonia, Kosovo, and the U.S. decision to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

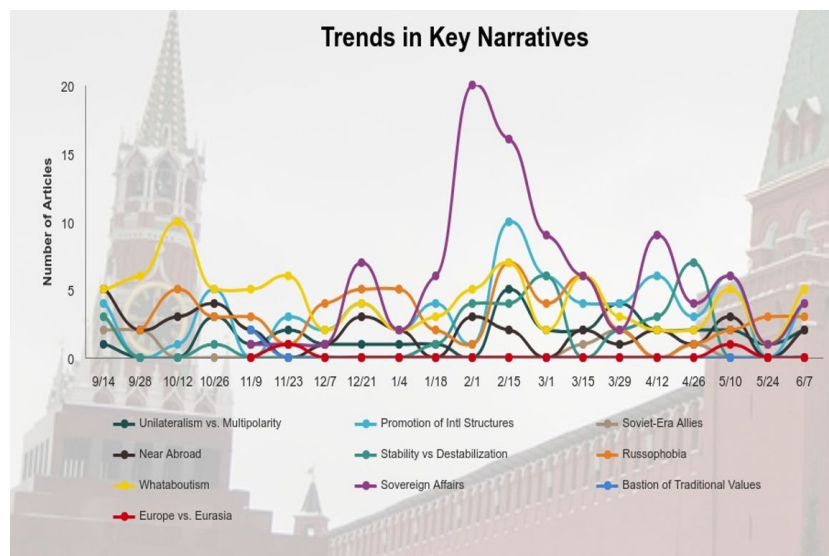


Figure 1. “Trends in Key Narratives”

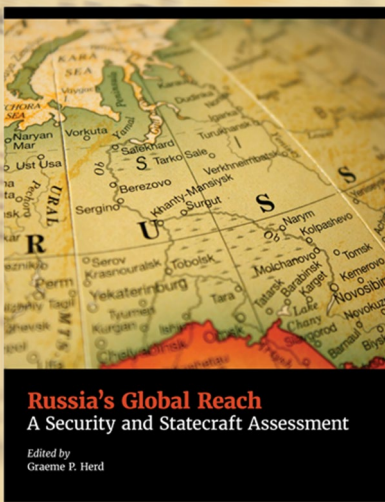
## Conclusion

By analyzing statements and interviews given by Russian government officials, this chapter has highlighted a set of ten narratives frequently used by Russian officials discussing their country’s foreign policy. The most frequently used narratives included outside intervention in sovereign affairs, whataboutism, the promotion of international structures in which Russia plays a leading role, and Russophobia.

Although Russian official foreign policy narratives are designed to twist reality in ways that promote and justify foreign policy decisions to both domestic and foreign audiences, one common thread tying these narratives together is that all of them have an element of truth at their core. These narratives all connect with prevalent perceptions of the world and of the role of Russia and the U.S. in it. By starting with a core element of truth, Russian officials are able to create narratives that resonate with the dominant frames through which their audiences view the world.

Thus, they tend to highlight Russophobia and traditional values to domestic audiences. They also highlight the tendency of the U.S. to intervene in other countries and connect this tendency to increased instability in regions such as the Middle East in order to create the narrative of the U.S. as a destabilizing actor in world affairs. Whataboutism is used with both domestic and international audiences to highlight instances in which Western actors fall short of their stated principles, making the argument that Western leaders have no standing to criticize Russian actions. The end result is a relatively coherent picture of the world as a chaotic place and of Russia as a stabilizing agent within it.





## Chapter 16

# Assessing Russian Statecraft and U.S. Policy Considerations

*By Graeme P. Herd*

### ***Introduction***

Russia's ways and means could be inter-enabling. Russia could demonstrate its strategic relevance by using its mediation and arbitration power to exercise a *de facto* veto on attempts at conflict resolution on terms that do not meet its interest. This would then allow Russia to shape and build a new status quo around alternative non-Western or even anti-western governance models and norms. Russia then provides security to uphold the new normal and can advance its economic interests. The consensus is that in practice, Russia "punches above its weight." Through the skillful deployment and coordination of its limited ways and means, Russia is said to "play a weak hand well." The sum of Russia's agile and skilled diplomatic corps' transactional and pragmatic approach to Great Power competition is considered to be more than its parts. However, when we survey the totality of Russian global activism, from regional and cross-regional thematic perspectives, what is our assessment of contemporary Russian statecraft? The answers to this core question provide a firmer foundation upon which to identify policy implications and considerations for possible U.S. policy responses.

### ***Strategic Relevance?***

Russia maintains its Great Power strategic relevance through the exercise of its veto power and spoiler role in global hotspots and through regional interventions. Such activities signal Russia's strategic relevance and Great Power status. However, with such activism, Russia faces the challenge of prioritizing and maintaining coherence, translating short-term tactical military successes into longer-term strategic engagements, while avoiding costly reputational-sapping entanglements. Syria, Ukraine, Venezuela, Central African Republic (CAR), and Libya are test cases for these propositions. In Latin and South America, for example, Russian support for revisionist states such as Cuba and Venezuela boosts Russia's strategic relevance. At the same time, however, support for Cuba and Venezuela directly undermines the position of Brazil, a member of the far more strategically influential BRICS grouping (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) as well as Mexico and Argentina, core regional leaders within the G20 grouping. Support for Maduro in Venezuela alienates eleven of fourteen states in the Lima Group. In Syria, Russia needs to pacify Idlib (in northwestern Syria) to eliminate threats (drone and rocket attacks) to its base in Hmeimim and to prevent a domestic political crisis and, possibly, regime failure. At the same time, Russia's strategic goal is to maintain its transit through the straits of Bosphorus, which entails securing good relations with Turkey. Russia considers the Middle East a secondary priority and will have difficulties maintaining its influence.

### ***Mediator Role?***

Russia cultivates a role as a neutral mediator, an honest power broker, and constructive stabilizing presence. Russia finds it easier to support status quo incumbents than opposition leaders and groups proposing regime change, not least given official Russian narratives around which norms are appropriate (i.e. non-interference in domestic affairs). However, there are clear gaps between what Russia says and what it itself does. Putin's words are not reliable indicators of intent, as his own claims of withdrawal of Russian armed forces in Syria clash with the reality of a permanent presence. Russia's attitude to third parties in its "sphere of special interest" (in the former Soviet space) and how it projects power globally marks another gap, pointing to a "do as I say, not as I do" approach. We find other dichotomies in Russia's core narratives. For example, if "incumbents good; regime change bad" is a Russian foreign policy mantra, how can we account for the role of rebels in Russian foreign policy? How can we account for Russia's emphasis on state-based rights and rules and the reality of a political system built on connections, clientelism, and the subordination of law to power. Russia positions itself to lead an anti-imperial axis in the global context yet practices neo-imperial policies towards its near neighbors. It undertakes a war on democratic governance yet advocates the democratization of the international system.

From a Russian perspective, to make the international system more democratic is to make it more pluralist, that is, to reduce the role of U.S. leadership in the system. Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) activity and foreign investment in critical national infrastructure raises its profile in the former Soviet space, particularly Ukraine and through Central Asia in the last decade. Former Soviet states may look to China as a third party actor to balance Russia either through adopting Russia's mediation role or by bolstering their multi-vector and equidistance-based foreign policies. It is notable that Russia does not offer itself as a mediator between India and China, reflecting its desire to hedge.

### ***Balancing Alternative?***

Russia finds new geopolitical partners through its positioning as a predictable hedge and balancing alternative to the West, particularly the United States. Russia promotes its role as an alternative partner that states in regional confrontations can turn to as a hedge and balancing partner. In Northeast Asia, for example, Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and Mongolia look to Russia to balance China and as a hedge against the U.S. becoming isolationist, as under the previous administration. However, history, current strategic partnerships, public sentiment, and a new U.S. administration all combine to limit further alignment between Russia and states in the region, though Mongolia may prove an exception. In other regions, such as Latin America, states like Cuba, Venezuela, and Bolivia look to Russia and China to balance the United States.

However, Russia's regional approaches are weakly institutionalized and Russia lacks the capacity and economic influence to ensure that its political and diplomatic initiatives in Africa, Latin America, and Asia develop into more lasting influence. Moreover, Russia has to contend with a "rising China" factor, in which Russia is a situational and transactional partner for China, with different approaches to world order and different interests. China projects an image of being a defender of a reformed global economic system; Russia seeks to replace it. While Russia thinks in terms of G3, China is focused on a G2 world, with Russia, EU, Japan, and India having second tier status. Outside of the Asia-Pacific, China adopts an economic not military-first approach, which demands a stable operating environment, not disorder. China gives loans to build infrastructure that it then controls in lieu of debt repayment, whereas Russia sells weapons to both sides of a conflict, supporting destabilization then stabilization on Russian terms. China

acts as a strong constraint and moderating influence on Russian power-projection in Europe, the militarization of the Arctic being perhaps the best illustration. Russia's anti-Western foreign policy creates greater dependence on China; this results in a less diversified, comprehensive, rounded, and constructive Russian Asia-Pacific policy. Indeed, potential alternative Russian partners, such as ROK and Japan, are U.S. treaty allies. Russia also faces the danger of being instrumentalized by other states. Turkey's S-400 purchases signal to the West that it has alternatives and so increases its strategic value. Does China use Russia as a stalking horse against U.S. and European interests, while viewing Russia itself as a safe strategic rear and raw materials base? Does the Central African Republic (CAR) President Faustin-Archange Touadéra use Russian presence as leverage to increase concessions from France?

### ***Sovereignty and Security Provider?***

Russia posits itself as a sovereignty and security provider, as a reliable “bulwark against revolutions” and “champion of counter-revolution.” Russia articulates a narrow legal positivist approach to Syria and yet insists on red lines when engaging with Belarus and Ukraine, while in Libya it supports Haftar against the government. Security is provided by both direct Russian conventional military intervention and the deployment of proxy forces. Proxies exemplify a tension between control and deniability; the more deniable, the less Russia can exert a measure of control. It is also difficult to send strategic signals via proxies, inter-agency coordination is harder, and the monetization agendas of such autonomous actors may limit their utility. Russia provides security to unstable clients that have not first turned to either the U.S. or China, as Russia lacks the resources to outbid the other two given current power disparities. Russian proxies and active measure operations can be poorly coordinated, pursue contradictory goals and, when unmasked, can severely damage diplomatic relations and cause reputational damage. Russia's “strategic partnership” with China, highlighted by growing security cooperation since mid-2014, appears to be an embryonic undeclared military alliance. Russia's growing economic dependency on China, and closer conventional military cooperation, mean that for Russia to remain strategically autonomous, it must rely more heavily on the one dimension of power in which it has dominance: its strategic nuclear triad. However, short of offering to extend its nuclear umbrella, it is very difficult for Russia to accrue political dividends in terms of extending its authority and influence in the international system.

### ***Advancing Economic Interests?***

Russia's global reach seeks to promote Russian economic interests, or more precisely, those of Putin's inner circle that dominate state-owned enterprises where they can privatize profit and pass risk onto the state. One clear tension in Russia's foreign economic policy lies between the desire for geopolitical influence and economic rationality and profit principle that animates Russian state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Igor Sechin, the manager of *Rosneft*, backs Bolivarian regimes and *Rosneft* appears to advance Russian geopolitical interests at the expense of its shareholders. Russian debt forgiveness (\$20bn) in Africa clears a path for further economic cooperation and is officially characterized as a “pragmatic approach” to managing bilateral relations. Russia advances loans to states that purchase Russian arms, in so doing subsidizing production lines running in its defense industrial complex, replicating the failed Soviet model of relations with Cuba. By contrast, China gives loans to build infrastructure and takes control of infrastructure in lieu of repayment.

Russia embodies a “Sovereign Globalization” approach: it integrates into global markets, transport, logistics, information, and supply chains to survive economically but seeks to isolate its population culturally, psychologically, and politically within the walls of its besieged fortress, as inoculation against democratization processes. Tensions arise between President Putin’s rhetoric about global cooperation and global responsibility and the need for continuous military-patriotic mobilization against external enemies. Russia faces two economic vulnerabilities. First, Russia is economically over-dependent on China. China is Russia’s most significant trading partner. Since 2015, the largest consumer of Russian oil and China supplies Russia with essential technological goods. China has also become Ukraine’s largest investor, is the largest investor in the Balkans, as well as in Latin America and Africa (in trade), to take some examples. Second, Russia is unable to affect the price oil globally.

### ***Core Current Characteristics, Trends, and Trajectories***

When we view Russia’s global activism, we find that Russia pivots more to commodities-based economies in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) through the application of hard conventional and proxy power than it has towards China and the Asia-Pacific wider region, through soft power, trade, and enhanced economic relations. However, the Asia-Pacific is central to global order/disorder. We find here the most potent geo-political rivalries, where global governance ideas and norms are contested and where innovation (AI, robotics, quantum computing) occur. Russia’s soft power deficit and China alignment are inadequate to meet this challenge. In reality, adopting or emulating the basic characteristics of Putinism entails embracing ineffective authoritarianism, economic stagnation, and overly Russian national-conservatism. To be resurgent Russia must be a constructive autonomous player with a positive agenda beyond “conservatism.”

Russia adopts ambitious goals designed to highlight its activism and global reach but implementation is under-resourced, poorly coordinated, and often at cross-purposes. After five years of low-cost expeditionary coalitional operations in Syria, Russia is the principal external actor, but without an exit strategy, Syria could become a costly reputation-sapping entanglement. Russia’s global activism is characterized by differentiated regional engagement. There is a clear focus of strategic effort in post-Soviet space and the Western Balkans. Elsewhere, Russian behavior is more opportunistic. Russian influence as a security provider is more positive in some states that are less developed and democratic, for example, Tajikistan. In some areas and in some conflicts, Russia refrains from “activism”; this can be seen from the South China Sea to Tibet, and from Yemen to Kyrgyzstan. Russia appears ready to share influence with China in Central Asia and in Iran, Vietnam, and Pakistan. Russia takes geostrategic gains when it has the opportunity, even at the expense of monetization opportunities (Venezuela) and in cases where there are no real prospects of geo-strategic influence, such as CAR, Russia takes what it can.

Are we reaching a “Cold War 2.0” inflection point, as relations between the US, its friends, and allies on the one hand, and Russia and China on the other, rapidly deteriorate? Within just one week (March 15-22, 2021), a U.S. Director of National Intelligence assessment noted with “high confidence” that President Putin authorized “influence operations” in support of Donald Trump’s bid for re-election in the 2020 presidential campaign. In the same week, President Biden stated that Russia will “pay a price” for such meddling and agreed that President Putin is a “killer.” The UK’s defense and foreign policy review announced a forty percent increase in the UK’s nuclear stockpile (raising the cap from 180 warheads to 260) “in recognition of the evolving security environment” and identified Russia as the “most acute threat” facing “Global Britain.” In Anchorage, Alaska, United States-China talks opened to an

undiplomatic spat between U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and China's most senior foreign policy official, Yang Jiechi, Director of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission Office and State Councilor and Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi. The EU, the United States, UK, and Canada imposed sanctions on Chinese officials over Uighur human rights abuses.

In response, Russia froze relations with the United States, having already done so with the EU, and China reacted to EU/U.S./UK/Canada sanctions with bans on institutes, individuals, and, remarkably, the Political and Security Committee of the European Union. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visits China for the first time since the pandemic began. Given the disruption caused by the visit (the entire Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, after receiving the delegation, had to go into quarantine afterwards), the significance of the visit is obvious. Both delegations reported that high-level strategic cooperation counters the “hegemony pursued by some Western countries led by the United States.” It is clear that both Russia and China feel that they gain leverage over the United States by the threat of closer cooperation, given the widespread and natural assumption that a Russian-Chinese military alliance represents a force multiplier, creating a powerful axis of authoritarianism in which the sum of the combined threats are more than the parts.

The United States, Russia, and China appear to be locked into a pattern of escalation, unable to step back: President Biden must consider the domestic political context; Xi Jinping has to manage strongly nationalist public opinion; and, Russia’s *siloviki* need anti-western rhetoric to suppress internal opposition in wider civil society. However, national interest places limits on the inevitability of a slide into “Cold War 2.0.” The United States’ competitive advantage in Great Power competition is its network of friends and allies, who are prepared to support pushback against specific malign activity but not adopt a comprehensive neo-containment strategy. A Russian alliance with China would expose Moscow’s asymmetric dependencies on Beijing and render Russia a junior partner within a Sino-centric technology-trade bloc (*Pax Sinica*), with little or no strategic autonomy. China has not yet developed its military sufficiently, nor does it have technological independence, preconditions for thriving in a “Cold War 2.0” context. Thus, March 2021 represents a rhetorical shift, but this has yet to be matched by major policy changes.

In the 1990s, hardliners in Moscow argued that should NATO enlarge, Russia’s response would be to develop partnerships with anti-Western rogue states, such as Libya, Syria, Iran, and North Korea (DPRK); resort to military-patriotic mobilization of its population and modernize its military; adopt autarky; weaponize organized crime and corruption; and pivot to China. Since 2011-12, Russia has adopted each prediction, with the possible exception of closer relations with DPRK. In terms of a further deterioration with relations to the West, Russia’s only additional escalatory option may be to resort more openly to nuclear blackmail and accept greater tactical and strategic risk, leveraging this tolerance as competitive advantages.

Rather than “Cold War 2.0,” Russia’s stated preference, in keeping with its Great Power status and historical experience, is for the emergence of a global concert of powers, a contemporary expression of the 1815 Concert of Europe. Russia, alongside the United States, China, India, and Japan, who collectively represent 70 percent of global GDP, would exercise an influential leadership role on the world stage. Through transactional strategic dialogue and informal negotiation, Russia would direct and manage the global strategic agenda, while still able to take unilateral action in its sphere of privileged interest. However, in reality, Russia’s ideal operating environment would be a “G-Zero” world. In such a world, no group of states,



such as the G3, G7 or G20, exerts leadership and management of the global strategic agenda (e.g. over WMD proliferation, climate change, regional crisis, and terrorism). In such an ambiguous, unpredictable, contested, and transactional world, states with well-developed alliance systems are disadvantaged, while states without (e.g. Russia, China, and DPRK) are freer to maneuver.

By default or by design, it is a “G-Zero” world order that best secures and protects a Russia in relative power decline. Which other strategic context is acceptable, affordable, and appropriate for a status-seeking power that cannot achieve acknowledgement and recognition for the status claims it projects? Russia cannot achieve G3 status, and can hardly accept unipolarity or even bipolarity if it cannot be one of the poles. Even Russia’s order-producing and managerial role in its shared neighborhood is increasingly compromised by third parties, not least the EU and China. In a leaderless world, states that have a spoiler role ability and a higher tolerance for risk-taking thrive and flourish. A trajectory towards a “G-Zero” rather than a “Cold War 2.0” or “Global Concert” world order paradigm appears more to favor Russia’s strategic culture and President Putin’s operational code.

For at least twenty-one years, President Putin has been the core strategic decision-maker in Russia. If he continues in this role until 2036, the accumulation of stresses, vulnerabilities, and complexities that he currently faces will be exacerbated. Despite pockets of military innovation, inherent conservatism permeates Russian domestic policy, evidenced by a status quo elite that continues to defer modernization. Russia currently resembles what Mark Galeotti has termed an “ad hococracy” of competing, semi-autonomous actors, who are able to work toward the state’s broad objectives, generating their own plans to those ends. It is a hard truth but global reach and activism and foreign policy successes may reinforce domestic elite legitimacy but they cannot compensate for the lack of structural economic reform. At heart, the fundamental obstacle to reform and renewal is Russia’s status quo dynastic elite, particularly Putin’s inner circle that has most to lose and least to gain from change. These elites are driven by twin opposing fears: on the one hand, they fear that they will lose control of a failed reform process, as Gorbachev did, and this will result in the chaos of regime and then political system change; on the other, they fear reform will succeed, with the same end result, perhaps without the chaos.

The tragedy of Putinism is, then, that its management system cannot ultimately achieve genuine regime legitimacy (as measured by popularity and longevity), but can sustain itself for another ten years before collapse and reset. Macro-economic stability and 1.5-2.0 percent economic growth allows for a state of stable order in Russia, but limited resources means less ability to institutionalize foreign policy gains. “Late Putinism” will be characterized by increased factionalism and inter-institutional competition, a culture of overreach and overstretch, and a growing preparedness to accept tactical risk while avoiding strategic risk.

### ***U.S. Policy Considerations***

Given our cross-regional comparative assessment and the stated policy of the new Biden administration, what are the implications of this study for U.S. policy towards Russia and towards Russian global activism? This summary first identifies general considerations in terms of overall approach before examining specific regional considerations. This summary aims to provide opportunities for the United States, as well as its friends and allies, to engage with the Russia more effectively in each region and globally.

## **Global**

- The Biden administration has not adopted a new reset with Russia, as since 2012 President Putin embarked on more revisionist and revanchist policies. Although President Putin accuses the Biden administration of having embraced a comprehensive neo-containment policy, this is not the case. Unlike the late 1940s, the world is globalized and increasingly multi-polar. In this context, containment is not possible. In addition, the U.S. realizes that even to attempt such an approach would break transatlantic unity and undercut Euro-Atlantic cooperation with Russian civil society and parts of its private sector. There is a transatlantic consensus for a targeted “pushback” against the Kremlin’s malign activity and influence, especially “active measures” and to build resilience in defense of shared core democratic values and practices. The U.S. and Europe can coordinate approaches to “impose real costs” to reduce Russian military and diplomatic efficacy through disruption. Disruption can cause friction, overextend and unbalance Russia and thereby control Russian escalation and deter further malign activity. The tools at the disposal of the U.S. and its friends and allies that facilitate the imposition of costs are varied and context specific. These tools include:
  - **Diplomatic:** These tools include “attribution diplomacy” (“name and shame”), diplomatic expulsions, and closing diplomatic properties. In public diplomacy terms, the West can restructure the narrative from Putin’s preferred besieged fortress Russia encircled by an aggressive, dysfunctional, and failed West to one about a Russian elite kleptocracy and oligarchy (“Kremlin blacklist”) versus Russian civil society.
  - **Economic:** The expansion of U.S. anti-money laundering regime beyond traditional banks as well as the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, which imposes visa bans and freezes the assets of individuals anywhere in the world who are responsible for committing human rights violations or acts of significant corruption, is complemented by the European Magnitsky Act, established in December 2020. The Global Fragility Act calls for all parts of the U.S. government to coordinate strategies to prevent violence and extremism and to focus foreign assistance on averting conflict in fragile countries.
  - **Cyber:** Cyber tools can be used to reveal or freeze Putin’s secret assets and expose corruption and a policy of “defend forward” or “hack back” can be used.
- The U.S. needs to demonstrate positive world leadership and substantively re-engage globally: redouble its efforts to support and strengthen its existing alliance system beyond military exercises, arms sales, and senior leader dialogues to encompass the diplomatic, economic, and, in some cases, development communities. Partnerships should agree on shared ends but be flexible to allow partners to adopt different ways and means to these ends, allowing a mix of compellence and diplomatic persuasion.
- The U.S. should support the international system it helped create through statements and actions, in both word and deed. Messaging is critical to the success of U.S. efforts to engage with Russia. Partners and allies are important to the success of U.S. national security interests but they may not be as willing to cooperate with the U.S. if they do not understand U.S. objectives. The U.S. needs to improve its external messaging so that it is consistent and unambiguous in order to both reassure partners and allies of U.S.

commitment; this helps build the consensus necessary to address large challenges and to provide very clear policy positions to adversaries, which can prevent misunderstandings from spiraling into conflict.

- The U.S. should look to potential cooperation with Russia in areas of mutual interest, including the prevention of further nuclear proliferation, counterterrorism and organized crime, cyber and outer space, and limiting China's influence, to give some examples. However, as the United States, its friends, and allies have little direct leverage over Russian strategic behavior, Russian cooperation will be conditional and transactional. Beyond START III, Russia views indications of cooperation as "concessions," that is, signs of weaknesses. While Russia backs Assad in Syria, military deconfliction is possible but not cooperation. In Ukraine, where the U.S. is not part of the multilateral framework and where the discord is antagonistic, cooperative potential is very limited.
- U.S. policy responses cannot avoid generating unintended consequences in Russia, such as a rally around the flag effect in Russia. Attribution diplomacy can be ineffective when *siloviki* in Russia have *de facto* immunity from prosecution. Adverse publicity can intimidate opponents, instruct, and educate society into submission and be worn as a badge of loyalty. Russia may well adapt by further fragmenting internally, accepting greater strategic (including potential nuclear) blackmail and not just tactical risk, as well as weaponizing corruption and monetizing its foreign policy, resulting in greater unpredictability and increasing destabilization of its internal order.
- Russian confrontation with the U.S. is the norm; relations with the EU have deteriorated to a record low and will continue to remain there; and offensive cyber operations as well as active measures are ongoing and unremitting. Offering concessions to Russia or compromising on human rights in the name of pragmatic and flexible cooperation will not alleviate Russia's narrative of western encroachment, encirclement, and containment. The West does not have to confirm Russia's claim to Great Power status as it defines it. Russia's placing of its own interests above the sovereignty of neighboring states is neither aligned with Western national interest nor its democratic norms and values.

## ***Regional***

### ***Europe***

- The U.S. should seek to strengthen ties with Europe and Germany in particular, as the Washington-Berlin relationship constitutes the operational center of gravity in the political West. Greater coordination of strategy through National Security Council-*Bundeskanzleramt* working groups can help shape shared NATO approaches and avoid strategic surprises in the relationship.

- Broader burden-sharing (“New Deal”) and an Eastern Partnership Security Compact suggest Germany seeks to offset its determination to complete Nord Stream 2. A U.S.-German action plan can mitigate the negative effects by extending the gas transit agreements to increase revenue for Ukraine, increase support for the Three Seas Initiative and work can be done to agree to the regulatory environment once the pipeline is operational.
- Thus, in order to effectively “push back” against Russian malign activity and influence, the U.S. needs to strengthen transatlantic relations. In practice, this entails managing better the differences it has with Europe and recognizing their nature. Differences arise in part from different structural and economic relationships with Russia. Europe in general is more broadly and deeply dependent on and integrated with the Russian economy than is the United States; this includes, for example, the UK (financial services and investments) or Germany (trade and energy). European business interests, subject to Russia’s “weaponized corruption,” lead to different levels of threat perception and political will.

### *Arctic*

- The U.S. should expand confidence-building measures around common interests and encourage Russia’s desire to make a success of its chairmanship in the Arctic Council in order to discourage its military build-up in the High North and prevent further militarization of the Arctic.
- The United States, alongside its Arctic EU allies and with China, should work on dissuading Russia from asserting its sovereignty over the Northern Sea Route and enforcing restrictive regulations on the maritime traffic. For example, the U.S. could leverage China’s preference for economic and scientific activities in the Arctic.
- Limited U.S. freedom of navigation operations to the west of the Bering Strait might reinforce the common benefit that flows from denying Russia the exclusive control over this maritime route.
- In general, U.S. Arctic policy should neutralize Russian strengths and pressure its weaknesses and vulnerabilities. For example, Russia is unable to protect its strategic nuclear submarines on the Kamchatka Peninsula, as it cannot organize a “naval bastion” or uses an anti-access/area denial “bubble” in the Sea of Okhotsk.
- Greater U.S. cooperation with NATO partners and Finland and Sweden in the Barents regions allows for asymmetric and smart containment. The U.S. should collaboratively build monitoring and intelligence gathering capabilities that are deployable and train through exercises to signal strategic resolve without triggering an Arctic security dilemma.

### *Latin America*

- Russia's post-Cold War reengagement with Latin America can leverage a long history of relations in this region, longer than most other U.S. competitors, including China, and it demonstrates it can be flexible and pragmatic.
- Russia's engagement in Latin America has a regionally specific function: Russia signals it can operate in the United States' backyard and fundamentally challenges the Monroe Doctrine. Russia also demonstrates that Great Powers can push back, provide an alternative to the United States, and support left-leaning regional groupings. In doing so, Russia imposes costs on the regional hegemon, dilutes its power, and undermines democratic values and practice.
- The U.S. has peaceful and productive relationships with the region and shared cultural capital rooted in democratic values, alliances, and partnerships. Recognizing the importance of these links and continuing to build on them through rhetoric and actions will be crucial in maintaining the U.S. position in the region.
- Although Russia is unconstrained by democratic norms as it engages the region, the U.S. should not abandon democratic principles, values, and norms in the name of Great Power competition. Greater engagement in the region will promote democracy and shut down the space for Russian gray zone activities.
- Geographical proximity to Latin America remains the greatest advantage the U.S. has in the region. However, this advantage is undermined if the United States does not capitalize on it by engaging with all instruments of power.
- While China is also strengthening relationships with Latin America, so far China and Russia have sought engagement in different spheres. Increased Russian ownership of energy assets and related companies, particularly in Venezuela, could however create new dynamics as China seeks to continue to acquire oil and gas from the region to fuel its own growth.

### *Northeast Asia*

- The U.S. needs to build stronger relationships between its allies with the goal of a true multiparty alliance structure. Stronger relations between allies and partners will minimize Russia's and China's ability to sow dissension or pit one ally against another.
- The U.S. should work across elements of national power to strengthen its relationship with Japan. Particularly, the U.S. should re-enter the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, now retitled the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, which Japan leads.
- The U.S. should encourage Japan to table its desire to settle the Kuril Islands dispute in the near-term.



- Helping Mongolia to maximize its status as a free and independent partner in Northeast Asia can be enabled by the U.S. supporting the Third Neighbor Policy and Mongolian democracy.
- The U.S. needs to consider and be prepared for potential Russian support to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in various forms if the PRC should employ a more coercive approach toward Taiwan.

### *China*

- Splitting the partnership between Russia and the PRC through U.S. actions may not be fully possible in the near term.
- Incentivize Russia to moderate its support of the PRC in the Indo-Pacific through greater economic integration between the Russian Far East and non-PRC partners in Asia. These additional economic considerations could complicate Russian decision-making in a dispute between the PRC and another Russian economic partner or regarding PRC actions that generally affect new Russian economic interests.
- The U.S. needs to effectively use and message the Indo-Pacific Strategy as a model for its engagement in region. This model champions each state's sovereignty, fair trade, and the role of regional institutions. While the strategy is not ostensibly against anything, it does seek to preserve the system that Russia and the PRC are seeking to alter.
- The U.S. should visibly engage partners and allies at all levels and expand engagement with countries beyond the military domain. Russia and the PRC engage where the United States does not—both geographically and in various sectors and domains—and the U.S. should not cede the competition in these areas due to inattention.

### *Middle East*

- Since the “Arab Spring,” some Arab leaders have perceived the U.S. as an unreliable partner. This misperception is based on an incorrect understanding of the “Carter Doctrine.” The doctrine pledged U.S. support to defend Arab countries against foreign threats, not to keep ruling regimes in power against the will of their peoples. Given this misperception, Russia has an opportunity to present itself as a reliable partner.
- The U.S. needs to work closely with European allies to address socio-economic and political challenges in the Middle East. Russia and China will continue to be adversaries. Presenting Middle Eastern leaders with a united Western front against Moscow and Beijing will further strengthen U.S. influence and credibility.
- Iran is a major regional power. Since the 1979 revolution, U.S.-Iranian relations have been poor, leaving Iran with two options: Moscow and Beijing. Reaching an agreement on Iran's nuclear program and then gradually reducing tensions will reduce incentives for Iran to maintain its strategic partnerships with Russia and China.
- Civil wars in Syria and Libya provide Russia opportunities to intervene. The U.S. needs to work with our European allies to end these civil wars.

- Several Middle Eastern countries, particularly oil producers, are much more interested in economic than political reform. However, consistently low oil prices force producers to diversify their economies by introducing measures to encourage foreign investment and empower the private sector. The U.S. should encourage and support these economic reform efforts, particularly in the IT sector.
- The U.S. enjoys “soft power” advantages in the Middle East as members of the political and economic establishments speak English and American movies, TV, and sport are very popular. Washington should seek to expand this positive influence.
- Russia builds civil nuclear reactors in the region, but several states have expressed an interest in renewable energy. The U.S. can help Middle Eastern countries to “go green,” reduce their reliance on fossil fuels, and utilize the region’s solar and wind potential.

### *South Asia*

- The Soviet Union was a key arms supplier to India, aided its embryonic nuclear power program, and used (and Russia continues to use) its UN veto power to block resolutions critical of India, for example on Kashmir. Although the shared ideological-emotional mindset (loosely “anti-colonialism”) has waned in the post-Cold War period, the Soviet legacy continues to provide substantial leverage for contemporary Russian activism in the region, even in the context of a rising China. Furthermore, in a very pragmatic sense, India today is still heavily dependent on Russia for maintenance of its large arsenal of Soviet-era weaponry, a situation that will remain a constant for many years to come.
- From the mid-2010s, Russia softened its antagonistic Cold War relationship with Pakistan to develop select areas of cooperation, such as Russian-Pakistan support for the Taliban in Afghanistan. Both Moscow and Islamabad see their limited collaboration as a means to reduce American influence in the region while expanding their own, but Pakistan, desperate for outside support, is especially keen to portray any interaction with Russia (even symbolic) as an advantage in its perennial rivalry with India. Russia aims more to depict itself as an alternative to the United States, therefore its growing connections to Pakistan pose challenges to its “traditional” ties with New Delhi.
- Russia resents India’s participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the “Quad”) as Russia understands India’s role as the United States’ “preeminent U.S. partner in the Indo-Pacific” as a dilution of India’s “strategic autonomy” and as shift away from Moscow towards Washington. Close cooperation between India and the U.S. thus represents a potential attack on Russia’s interests and influence. In fact, Indian moves to hedge against or balance China are in some respects a reprise of its role in the Sino-Soviet dynamic during the Cold War, a role that the USSR had endorsed.
- Russia prefers a Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral grouping as it could then hold the balance of power through mediation, promote multi-polarity, and advance non-western if not anti-western global governance norms, institutions, and practices. India, on the other hand, seeks to maintain its policy independence in what it sees as a permanently multipolar world, while finding an equilibrium between the U.S. and Russia that pushes

back against China. As part of its hedging against Beijing, New Delhi is thus likely to endeavor to reinforce its ties to Moscow while continuing to expand cooperation with the United States.

- In the current Sino-Indian border confrontation, Russia has pragmatically declined a mediation role due ultimately to its dependence on China, while retaining its position as a key arms supplier to India.
- In South Asia, the breadth and depth of U.S.-India linkages far exceed those of Indo-Russian relations in almost all areas. However, the Russia-India arms relationship will remain in place as a practical lynchpin for the foreseeable future. Moreover, many Indians retain a sentimental attachment to Russia as emblematic of their country's "strategic autonomy," while Russia looks to weaken U.S.-India collaboration. Washington will thus continue to face challenges in balancing improving its ties with New Delhi while contending with Russia as a competitor.

### *Africa*

- The United States' security and economic interests in Africa are best advanced by long-term partnerships with stable, democratic governments. Despite a long history of engagement in Africa, there is a common perception that the United States has not been playing its traditional leadership role on the continent in recent years, creating a vacuum that Russia has tried to fill.
- A first priority is to articulate clearly the shared interests and vision that the United States holds with Africa. In so doing, the United States can underscore that U.S. policy in Africa encompasses far more than simply countering Russia (or China).
- Another priority is to weigh in on Russia's geo-strategic positioning on the continent, particularly in Libya, where the establishment of a Russian foothold poses a long-term threat to NATO. The U.S. should commit to working with EU and NATO partners to support United Nations-backed stabilization efforts while isolating the influence of rebel warlord, Khalifa Haftar.
- The United States can also enhance its interests by being more diplomatically active in conflict mitigation efforts. By working with host nations and regional bodies, U.S. diplomatic, technical, and financial support can serve as a stabilizing counterweight to Russian destabilization.
- Helping Africa fight Russian disinformation campaigns is another critical vehicle for advancing stability and democracy. These disinformation campaigns aim to foment political and ethnic polarization, distrust, and political instability—to Russia's advantage. Strengthening the capacity of African governmental and non-governmental fact-checking and digital detective firms to identify fake Russian-sponsored accounts, trolls, and disinformation campaigns can help mitigate these destructive effects.
- U.S. Treasury sanctions on Yevgeny Prigozhin for his destabilizing activities in Sudan and the Central African Republic are useful and should be expanded. The Global

Magnitsky Act and the European Magnitsky Act broaden the means to apply such penalties in a coordinated manner in defense of democracy and human rights. The Global Fragility Act includes provisions for punitive actions to be taken against political actors that drive instability. These tools, as well as the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, the Countering American Adversaries through Sanctions Act, and laws pertaining to transnational criminal organizations provide the United States with a menu of legal means of increasing penalties on Russia for its destabilizing activity in Africa.

# Russia's Global Reach

## A Security and Statecraft Assessment

When we survey the totality of Russian global activism from regional and cross-regional thematic perspectives, what is our assessment of contemporary Russian statecraft? How well does Russia align its ways and means with its strategic ends when operating outside the borders of its historic 400-year-old empire?

The answers to this core question provide a firmer foundation upon which to identify policy implications and opportunities for the United States as well as its friends and allies to engage with Russia more effectively in each region and globally.

Led by the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, this collaborative project pools the knowledge of the five U.S. Department of Defense Regional Centers and invited international experts to provide a contemporary statecraft assessment of the Russian Federation.



### Defense Security Cooperation Agency Regional Centers

George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies • Africa Center for Strategic Studies • Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies • William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies • Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies.