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Russia

Russian Foreign Policy in a Time of Rising U.S.-China Competition

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter assesses Russia's response to the challenges brought on by U.S.-China competition, deglobalization, and the Covid-19 pandemic.

MAIN ARGUMENT

U.S.-China competition has not changed Russia's foreign policy trajectory during the past decade. Instead, the Russian leadership continues to deepen cooperation with Beijing and push back against Washington. Russia has provided China with strategic support but lacks similar capacity to assist technologically or economically in the Sino-U.S. trade war. Challenges to globalization have only marginally influenced Russia's capacity to generate national power due to its limited role in the global economy, which is concentrated in a few sectors such as energy and arms. Finally, the Covid-19 pandemic has impeded efforts to improve demographic trends and initially threatened the Putin regime's legitimacy. The Kremlin, however, has used measures to control the pandemic as an opportunity to consolidate power by pushing through constitutional amendments and cracking down on political opposition.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Although Russia cannot be expected to support the U.S. in its competition with China, Russian support for China has clear limits. Moscow is not ready to endorse Beijing's territorial claims or bid for regional hegemony in East Asia. Russia has been accommodating of China's growing economic and political influence in Central Asia, but Moscow attempts to maintain the upper hand in the security realm. Thus, the prospect of a revisionist Sino-Russian alliance directed against the U.S. and its allies is unlikely.

- Russia will attempt to capitalize on the U.S. preoccupation with China and improve its position globally—in particular in the post-Soviet neighborhood, Europe, and the Middle East.

- Whereas deglobalization has not significantly affected Russia, climate change and international efforts to reduce carbon emissions pose serious challenges to the political-economic model built around Vladimir Putin.

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The crisis of U.S. leadership and the onset of Sino-U.S. rivalry have generated contradictory assessments in Russia. On the one hand, they have been hailed as evidence of the emergence of a multipolar world order, the creation of which has been Russia's long-term goal in the post–Cold War period. On the other hand, the Russian elite recognizes the worsening of the international situation and the ongoing instability of international politics, putting the blame on the United States' attempt to maintain primacy. Moscow has continued to position itself as a challenger to Washington and has intensified cooperation with Beijing. The U.S.-China rivalry has improved Russia's position in global politics and, coupled with the weakening of U.S. leadership, broadened Russia's room for maneuver in both its vicinity and more distant regions.

Yet this relative success in foreign policy has been accompanied by mounting domestic challenges. Whereas the threats to globalization have affected the Russian economy only to a limited extent, the Covid-19 pandemic has exerted a heavy toll on Russia. All positive demographic trends in recent years have been reversed. While the response to the pandemic facilitated a crackdown on domestic political opposition, the authorities' failure to tackle the public health crisis poses a long-term challenge to the ruling regime.

This chapter is divided into five sections. The first provides background on Russia's foreign policy, its key aims, and its dominant features. The second section focuses on developments in the U.S.-China competition and their significance for Russia's ongoing rivalry with the United States and its closer cooperation with China. The third section discusses the implications of the

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challenges to globalization and argues that, given Russia's limited place in the global economy, deglobalization has mattered relatively little to its markets. The subsequent section analyzes the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which may have long-term effects that undermine the Putin regime's legitimacy and harm Russian demographics for years to come. The final section assesses the implications of these trends for the United States and U.S.-Russia relations.

The Drivers of Russian Foreign Policy

The overarching trajectory of Russia's foreign policy began to take its current shape in the mid-2000s during Vladimir Putin's second presidential term. Material resurgence, the strengthening of the state, and domestic political consolidation fueled Russia's assertiveness in international politics. These processes culminated in Putin's provocative 2007 Munich speech about U.S. dominance in world affairs and the 2008 war with Georgia. The period of the so-called tandemocracy (2008–12) followed, with Putin becoming prime minister and Dmitri Medvedev serving as president, and led to a partial and temporary warming in relations with the West, even though Russia did not alter its foreign policy course in any fundamental manner. This period also marked Russia's deepening cooperation with a rising China. Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 initiated a conservative-nationalist turn in domestic politics, which was reflected in Russia's foreign policy. Moscow increasingly positioned itself as not only a geopolitical but also a normative challenger to the West. The annexation of Crimea in 2014, followed by the military intervention in Syria in 2015, initiated a new phase in Russian foreign policy. Interference in the U.S. presidential election the subsequent year signaled the growing sophistication of Russia's sharp-power instruments. In recent years, Moscow has enlarged its presence in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa and emerged as a key protagonist in the Arctic.

Since Putin's return to the presidency, Russia's foreign policy has become increasingly entangled in domestic politics. Regime survival considerations have shaped Moscow's policy toward the West as well as facilitated an embrace of a rising China. The search for great-power status has helped the Putin regime maintain domestic legitimacy, which was particularly visible during the annexation of Crimea. Parochial interests of powerful individuals close to the Kremlin and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) have weighed in on the policy implementation process. Although Putin has remained the ultimate decision-maker, he often charts broad directions and leaves decisions about concrete policy actions to other actors. Domestic politics constitute both an asset and a liability for Russian foreign policy. The absence of domestic opposition provides stability that catalyzes the decision-making process and increases room for maneuverability in international forums. At the same time, certain foreign policy activities that provoke rivals are driven by a willingness to prioritize popularity at home and mobilize support for the regime. As a consequence, Russia's post-2012 foreign policy has been shaped by a combination of strategic, realpolitik considerations (offensive and defensive), the search for great-power status, and domestic political dynamics.

Whereas the concrete form of Russia's interests has been malleable, depending on specific circumstances, it is possible to reconstruct Moscow's general interests in international politics. In its immediate neighborhood, Russia aims at maintaining political primacy and preventing other powers from establishing a security presence in its vicinity. In Europe, Russia has continuously aimed at limiting the U.S. presence and eroding transatlantic ties. Moscow views bilateral relations with leading European states as the best way to secure its influence. Globally, Russia is challenging U.S. primacy by opting for a multipolar international order in which Moscow would retain its strategic autonomy and participate in global decision-making as a key player.

In terms of national security, the Kremlin's perception of external threats remains tightly linked to domestic stability and its challenges. The United States is the main focus of the regime's feeling of insecurity, not only internationally but also domestically. The Russian elite perceives Washington as responsible for undermining the stability of the international system, and U.S. power projection continues to be interpreted as a means for the United States to effect regime change. To address this challenge, Moscow is prepared to use a number of instruments, ranging from nuclear brinkmanship to election interference.

The assessment of Russia's national power has been a constant challenge for scholars and observers. Looked at from a purely material perspective, Russia has been in long-term decline and has been unable to reverse this course. Despite attempts to modernize its economy, Russia still lags economically far behind the United States, China, and the European Union. During this same period, however, Russia has not only re-emerged as a relevant global player but also demonstrated substantial resilience to external shocks. This capacity to generate national power is the function of Russia's ability to translate economic potential into instruments of power, such as military and sharp-power resources (i.e., disinformation and cyberwarfare potential). Revenue from natural resources constitutes the country's economic foundation. This allows the Putin regime to maintain the social contract and thus domestic political stability, retain the support of the elites by perpetuating patron-client networks, fund foreign policy activities, and modernize the armed forces.[1] Instruments of both hard and sharp power have gained relevance in the last couple of years, becoming key for Russia's power projection. Moreover, Russian soft power has influenced populist and right-wing movements in Europe and beyond.[2]

Following Putin's re-election in 2018, new signs of social discontent began to emerge. The positive effect of the annexation of Crimea died down, and growing popular frustrations were increasingly related to worsening socioeconomic conditions. The decreased standard of living was due to a lack of substantial economic growth and a conservative fiscal policy. As a result, the Kremlin faced growing discontent, ranging from protests after the 2019 local elections in Moscow to the arrest and trial of a popular governor who represented a systemic opposition party in Khabarovsk Krai in the Russian Far East.[3] Attempting to respond to these challenges, the Kremlin resorted to strengthening the technocratic element of its governance process and promoting a new generation of elites. At the same time, the Russian leadership attempted to boost the regime's legitimacy by mobilizing supporters under anti-American and anti-liberal banners.

Yet decarbonization of the world economy, driven by the necessity to counter climate change, has emerged as the most serious long-term challenge for Russia's generation of national power. The European Green Deal threatens to close the EU market to Russian oil and gas in the long term and increases the importance of energy markets in Asia, and China in particular. Natural resources (and especially hydrocarbons), as noted above, constitute the material foundation of the regime and are the engine of Russia's economy. Even though the share of revenue from natural resources has passed its peak, in the late 2010s they still provided around 25% of GDP, almost 40% of the federal budget, and around 65% of export earnings.[4] The most obvious risk relates to the declining demand for Russian natural resources, first and foremost oil, due both to lower overall demand for oil and to Russia losing out to cheaper producers, such as Saudi Arabia. This would, in turn, lead

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1 Kathryn E. Stoner, *Russia Resurrected: Its Power and Purpose in a New Global Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021). This work enumerates the economic basis, human capital, hard-power resources, soft-power resources, and sharp-power resources as the basis of Russia's national power.

2 Vincent Keating and Katarzyna Kaczmarska, "Conservative Soft Power: Liberal Soft Power Bias and the 'Hidden' Attraction of Russia," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 22, no. 1 (2019): 1–27.

3 Aimar Ventsel, "The Background to the Protests in the Russian Far East," International Centre for Defence and Security, August 27, 2020, https://icds.ee/en/the-background-to-the-protests-in-the-russian-far-east.

4 James Henderson and Tatiana Mitrova, "Implications of the Global Energy Transition on Russia," in *The Geopolitics of the Global Energy Transition*, ed. Manfred Hafner and Simone Tagliapietra (Cham: Springer, 2020), 100.

to a drastic decrease in budget revenue that could jeopardize the survival of the regime by undermining its legitimacy among both the elites and the general public.

U.S.-China Competition

The U.S.-China competition has broadened Russia's room to maneuver in international politics. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Moscow had to rely on Beijing's support to stave off Western political pressure and economic sanctions. The shift in U.S. policy toward China from engagement toward decoupling and neo-containment opened new possibilities for Moscow.[5] Russia is no longer singled out by the United States as its only rival great power. For the Chinese leadership, the value of the partnership with Russia has risen, especially in the political and military-security dimensions. In the United States, meanwhile, the number of voices calling for a "reverse Kissinger" (i.e., pulling Moscow away from Beijing) has grown steadily,[6] even as the 2017 National Security Strategy identified Russia as a competitor on par with China and the U.S. government aimed to punish Russia for interference in the 2016 presidential election.[7] Similar ideas about the need to re-establish dialogue with Russia to counter China have appeared among U.S. allies.[8] As a result, amid escalating U.S.-China competition, Russia appears to have found itself as a swing power, courted by both Washington and Beijing, an ideal situation from the realpolitik perspective.

This is not, however, how the Russian expert community has assessed the implications of the U.S.-China rivalry. Prior to the conflict over Ukraine, most Russian experts regarded the scenario of Sino-U.S. competition as disadvantageous to Moscow's interests, equal to the potential marginalization

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[5] Michael Mastanduno, "Partner Politics: Russia, China, and the Challenge of Extending U.S. Hegemony after the Cold War," *Security Studies* 28, no. 3 (2019): 479–504.

[6] See, for instance, an anonymous paper prepared by a former U.S. official, "The Longer Telegram: Toward a New American China Strategy," Atlantic Council, January 28, 2021, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/atlantic-council-strategy-paper-series/the-longer-telegram; and Simon Tisdall, "Donald Trump Attempting to Play Nixon's 'China Card' in Reverse," *Guardian*, December 12, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/12/donald-trump-us-china-relations-taiwan-nixon.

[7] White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C., December 2017), https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf. On election meddling, see, for example, Nathan Layne, "U.S. Imposes Fresh Russia Sanctions for Election Meddling," Reuters, December 19, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-sanctions-treasury-idUSKCN1OI27F.

[8] "Emmanuel Macron in His Own Words (English)," *Economist*, November 7, 2019, https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-in-his-own-words-english; and Matthew Dal Santo, "Yes, to Balance China, Let's Bring Russia in from the Cold," Lowy Institute, Interpreter, July 7, 2020, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/yes-balance-china-bring-russia-in-from-cold.

that might result from the United States and China setting up an informal G-2. Even though some experts continue to favor equidistance between the two powers,[9] the majority seem to prefer closer ties with China as a way of limiting U.S. influence and advancing a multipolar order.[10] They do not see the rivalry as an opportunity for Russia to maneuver between Washington and Beijing. Instead, the emerging U.S.-China cold war is interpreted as being provoked by the United States, whereas China is regarded as interested in slowing down the pace of confrontation.[11] Russian experts do not see a new bipolarity but rather a shift from unipolarity to multipolarity, in which Russia will maintain its relevance and the threat of marginalization in the bipolar world will fade away. These views may be read as a response to a Kremlin policy that has preferred closer ties with China.[12]

Russia's Grand Strategy

Russia's response to U.S.-China competition has been more complex than realists would predict. Rather than striking a balance between its two most important bilateral relationships, Moscow's actions have further eroded relations with the United States and deepened collaboration with China.

Russia-U.S. relations. U.S.-China competition has emerged at a time of crisis in Russia-U.S. relations.[13] Washington's shifting focus toward the Indo-Pacific generally and East Asia specifically means that Moscow could capitalize on diminished U.S. attention toward Europe, post-Soviet states, or the Middle East. Alternatively, Moscow could soften its anti-Americanism and broaden its room for maneuver in relations with China.

Russia's relationship with the United States has been driven by a combination of defensive and offensive strategic considerations, regime survival, and desire for recognition as a great power. In terms of power politics, Moscow has sought to gain an advantage in particular regions and prevent U.S. encroachment on what it has perceived as its sphere of

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9 Dmitri Trenin, for instance, argues that Russia should keep its distance from the conflict between China and the United States. See Dmitri Trenin, "Rossija budet nahodit'sja v sostojanii konfrontacii s Zapadom eŝe dovol'no dlitel'noe vremja" [Russia Will Be in a State of Confrontation with the West for Quite a Long Time], *Kommersant*, June 3, 2021, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4838065.

10 See, for example, Timofei Bordachev, "Kogda sblizheniye Kitaya i Rossii stanet vygodnym ikh protivnikam?" [When Does Sino-Russian Rapprochement Become Beneficial for Their Rivals?], *Rossiya v globalnoi politike* 20, no. 4 (2021), https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/kogda-sblistanet-vygodnym.

11 See, for example, Vasily Kashin and Ivan Timofeev, "Amerikano-Kitayskiye otnosheniya: K novoy Kholodnoy Voyne?" [U.S.-China Relations: Towards a New Cold War?], Valdai Discussion Club, 2021, https://ru.valdaiclub.com/files/37874.

12 Ibid.

13 Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia and America: The Asymmetric Rivalry* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).

influence.[14] With regard to domestic politics, the Kremlin has perceived U.S. policies as threatening the regime's survival and employed anti-Americanism to prop up domestic legitimacy.[15] Finally, Russia's search for great-power status has been largely driven by the pursuit of Washington's recognition of it as an equal.[16]

Russian expectations are sometimes unclear, and the elite's attitude toward the United States retains a contradictory character. On the one hand, Moscow aims to capitalize on the weakening U.S. global position and the damage done to U.S. leadership during Donald Trump's presidency. On the other hand, there is a deepening perception that the United States is working to undermine, if not directly overthrow, the ruling regime. This "doublethink" of strength and vulnerability, especially vis-à-vis Washington, was identified by scholars as part of the dominant worldview of the Russian elite in the late 2000s.[17]

The U.S.-China competition has not changed Moscow's calculus. First, Washington put Russia on par with China as a "strategic competitor." Even if this rhetoric was challenged by some U.S. leaders, including Trump himself, the majority of the U.S. establishment, and Congress in particular, has recognized Russia's actions as detrimental to U.S. interests and countered with new sanctions on Russia on an almost regular basis. Second, the Kremlin has been interpreting U.S. actions through a prism of domestic politics. The United States' support for political opposition in Russia, including Alexei Navalny, and critique of Russia's continuous crackdowns are interpreted by Moscow not only as interference in domestic politics but as encouragement for a color revolution and regime change.[18] The growing number of sanctions against Russia has only reinforced the Russian elite's belief that the United States is trying to contain and punish Russia for any independent action in international politics in order to maintain U.S. global leadership.[19]

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[14] Alexander Gabuev, "Russian-U.S. Flashpoints in the Post-Soviet Space: The View from Moscow," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2018, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Gabuev_Flashpoints_web.pdf.

[15] Michael A. McFaul, "Putin, Putinism, and the Domestic Determinants of Russian Foreign Policy," *International Security* 45, no. 2 (2020): 95–139.

[16] Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, "Russia Says No: Power, Status, and Emotions in Foreign Policy," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 47, no. 3–4 (2014): 269–79.

[17] Andrew Monaghan, "'An Enemy at the Gates' or 'from Victory to Victory'? Russian Foreign Policy," *International Affairs* 84, no. 4 (2008): 717–33.

[18] Andrew Roth, "Putin Rejects Navalny Poisoning Allegations as 'Falsification,'" *Guardian*, December 17, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/17/putin-questions-navalny-poisoning-covid-crisis-annual-press-conference-russian-president-kremlin.

[19] Andrei P. Tsygankov, "The Revisionist Moment: Russia, Trump, and Global Transition," *Problems of Post-Communism* (2020).

Moscow has demonstrated a lack of interest in mending ties with Washington, unless Washington makes substantial concessions, and instead has chosen to capitalize on U.S.-China competition to maximize its gains. Russia has exercised pressure on the United States in two areas in particular: U.S. domestic politics and Europe. Moscow has continued to interfere in U.S. politics via hacking and disinformation campaigns conducted by state and nonstate actors to sow unrest and deepen existing divisions.[20] Russia also has intensified its military buildup across Europe—from the Arctic through Central Europe and from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean.[21] Moscow consistently has opposed U.S. missile defense plans as well. With the sale of S-400 missile systems to Turkey, it has successfully driven a wedge between Turkey and other NATO members, the United States in particular.[22] Russia has also tried to dissuade Washington from pursuing closer ties with Ukraine, especially to prevent weapon sales. The amassing of Russian troops at the border with Ukraine has been interpreted as both a warning signal to and a test of the Biden administration. On top of this, Russian and U.S. interests have clashed in other regional conflicts, with Moscow and Washington supporting opposing sides in Syria and Libya, and the Kremlin promoting formats that exclude its rival like the Russia-Iran-Turkey triangle.

Whereas in Europe Russia has aimed to capitalize on Washington's diminishing attention and the rifts in transatlantic ties generated by Sino-U.S. competition, in Asia Russia faces different obstacles. U.S. attempts to bring India into a loose anti-China camp, coupled with Sino-Indian tensions, have threatened to weaken Russia's ties with India. While Washington has achieved limited success so far, and some moves have even been counterproductive, such as threats to sanction India for purchasing Russian weapons, India's tilt toward the United States, driven by poor relations with China, poses a challenge to Russia's attempt to keep both India and China in its orbit.

The arrival of the Biden administration, as keen on countering China as the Trump administration, has not changed Russia's approach to the

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[20] NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, *Russia's Strategy in Cyberspace* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2021), https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/Nato-Cyber-Report_15-06-2021.pdf; and Joe Walsh, "Here Are Some of the Major Hacks the U.S. Blamed on Russia in the Last Year," *Forbes*, June 1, 2021, https://www.forbes.com/sites/joewalsh/2021/06/01/here-are-some-of-the-major-hacks-the-us-blamed-on-russia-in-the-last-year.

[21] Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolsky, and Paul Stronski, "Russia in the Arctic—A Critical Examination," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2021, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Rumer_et_al_Russia_in_the_Arctic.pdf; and Can Kasapoğlu and Sinan Ülgen, "Russia's Ambitious Military-Geostrategic Posture in the Mediterranean," Carnegie Europe, June 10, 2021, https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/06/10/russia-s-ambitious-military-geostrategic-posture-in-mediterranean-pub-84695.

[22] Mehmet Yegin, "Turkey between NATO and Russia: The Failed Balance," German Institute for International and Security Affairs, SWP Comment, no. 30, June 2019, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2019C30_Yegin.pdf.

United States. The relationship seems to have stabilized at a low level, especially after Putin's summit with President Joe Biden in June 2021.[23] However, the outlook remains uncertain.

Deepening cooperation with China. The deterioration of Russia-U.S. relations has coincided with Russia's closer cooperation with the United States' key rival—China. Russia's post–Cold War relationship with China is marked by two turning points. First, Moscow abandoned its cautious policy vis-à-vis Beijing in the aftermath of the 2008–9 global economic crisis and accelerated cooperation. The Kremlin agreed to construct an oil pipeline to China, and key players in oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG), state-owned Rosneft and privately owned Novatek, concluded long-term, multibillion dollar deals with their Chinese counterparts. Moscow allowed arms trade between the two sides to revive, despite previous unease about reverse engineering. Joint armed forces exercises became a regularity, with naval exercises emerging as the second pillar of the security and defense collaboration. In Central Asia, Russia chose policies that accommodated China's growing influence and implicitly promoted a division of labor, with Beijing dominating the energy sector and Russia the security realm.[24]

The second turning point came with the Ukraine crisis, which accelerated Russia's political and economic dependence on China. In a first, Russia provided China with its most advanced fighter jets and anti-missile systems available for export (the Su-35 and S-400, respectively). Russian state-owned energy corporation Gazprom concluded a long-term contract to deliver natural gas to China and embarked on the construction of the Power of Siberia gas pipeline along a route preferred by Beijing.[25] Moscow also actively sought ways to reconcile its Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) with the Belt and Road Initiative, which had implicitly challenged Russian influence in the post-Soviet space.[26]

Russia's closer relationship with China has been accompanied by a rise in asymmetry between the two states. An imbalance in material power and the ability to project influence abroad have led many observers to perceive

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[23] Sharyl Cross et al., "The Biden-Putin Summit: An Expert Analysis," Wilson Center, June 21, 2021, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/biden-putin-summit-expert-analysis.

[24] Marcin Kaczmarski, *Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

[25] Edward C. Chow, "Russia-China Gas Deal and Redeal," Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 11, 2015, https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-china-gas-deal-and-redeal.

[26] Marcin Kaczmarski, "Russia-China Relations in Central Asia: Why Is There a Surprising Absence of Rivalry?" *Asan Forum*, August 19, 2019, https://theasanforum.org/russia-china-relations-in-central-asia-why-is-there-a-surprising-absence-of-rivalry.

Russia as China's "junior partner."[27] Some have gone further, reducing Russia's role to that of a "resource appendage." While the latter assessment simplifies the complexity of the relationship, the asymmetry between the two states has become an increasingly relevant factor.

Russia's acquiescence to China and readiness to forge closer ties despite the power asymmetry confirm that Moscow is driven by more than just realist assumptions. Instead, its policy toward Beijing is underpinned by a combination of strategic considerations, domestic politics, and status seeking. The deteriorating relationship with the United States is a factor but cannot alone explain the dynamics of the Sino-Russian relationship. Domestic politics have facilitated Russia's accommodation of China's rising power in a number of ways. The growing similarity in political systems, characterized by a high degree of centralized power and a crackdown on dissent, has shaped similar threat assessments. Because the Putin regime has not been challenged by Beijing, China's rising power and influence, while disadvantageous geopolitically for Russia, have not posed a threat to regime survival. Moreover, in some areas, the privileged position of certain domestic individual and corporate actors has enabled them to promote closer cooperation with China.[28] China for its part has skillfully deferred to Russia's great-power status, making sure to diminish rather than emphasize the asymmetry.[29] Personal chemistry between Putin and Xi Jinping has helped prioritize the relationship for both states' elites, leading to the suppression of skeptical voices.[30]

The shift in U.S. policy toward China has paved the way for Moscow to reassert its position vis-à-vis Beijing and choose how and in what ways to support China in its competition with the United States. Ultimately, Russia has increased cooperation and expanded ties with China, even defending it against criticism from the West.[31] In some areas, Moscow's willingness to

[27] Alexander Gabuev and Vita Spivak, "The Asymmetrical Russia-China Axis: An Overview," in "Russia and China: Anatomy of a Partnership," ed. Aldo Ferrari and Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, May 3, 2019, 37–60.

[28] Alexander Gabuev, "Russia's Policy towards China: Key Players and the Decision-making Process," *Asan Forum*, March 5, 2015, https://theasanforum.org/russias-policy-towards-china-key-players-and-the-decision-making-process.

[29] Deborah Welch Larson, "An Equal Partnership of Unequals: China's and Russia's New Status Relationship," *International Politics* 57, no. 1 (2020): 790–808.

[30] Bo Xu and William M. Reisinger, "Russia's Energy Diplomacy with China: Personalism and Institutionalism in Its Policy-making Process," *Pacific Review* 32, no. 1 (2019): 1–19.

[31] See, for instance, Putin's comments on the West trying to drive a wedge between Russia and China and defense of Chinese policies. "Full Transcript of Exclusive Putin Interview with NBC News' Keir Simmons," NBC News, June 14, 2021, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/transcript-nbc-news-exclusive-interview-russia-s-vladimir-putin-n1270649.

cooperate has been constrained by a lack of capacity, specifically economic and technological.

Since 2017, Russia has sent several signals of its readiness to provide China with strategic, political, and military support. The most significant so far were the participation of the Russian Air Force in joint bomber patrols in the vicinity of Japan and South Korea and the first joint naval patrol in the seas surrounding Japan, which suggested that Moscow was considering expanding its security ties with Beijing.[32] Support for China and a readiness to intimidate U.S. allies in Asia seemed to have prevailed over Moscow's desire to maintain close relations with Tokyo and Seoul. Yet the potentially most far-reaching testimony to Russia's readiness to expand cooperation with China was Putin's October 2019 announcement that Russia had begun assisting China in the construction of an early-warning missile system.[33] Though Putin repeated this declaration several months later, no further details emerged and the Chinese side remained silent.[34] If confirmed, this would not only strengthen Chinese nuclear potential vis-à-vis the United States but also send a clear signal of Moscow's readiness to seriously consider a full-fledged alliance with Beijing.

At the same time, the change in joint military exercises, observed since 2018, has testified to Moscow's growing confidence vis-à-vis Beijing. Joint land and maritime exercises have been supplemented with the Chinese troops' participation in Russia's annual strategic exercises. In 2018, three thousand Chinese troops took part in the Vostok 2018 exercise; in 2019, Russian and Chinese armed forces cooperated within the framework of the Tsentr 2019 exercise; and in 2020, the Southern Military District hosted Chinese troops in the Kavkaz 2020 exercise in the Caucasus.

Of these three exercises, the Vostok exercise sent the most potent signal. Exercises in previous years (2010 and 2014) left a certain ambiguity about the potential targets, with many observers interpreting the drills as a warning to Beijing.[35] The invitation of Chinese troops to take part in the largest military

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[32] Franz-Stefan Gady, "The Significance of the First Ever China-Russia Strategic Bomber Patrol," *Diplomat*, July 25, 2019, https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/the-significance-of-the-first-ever-china-russia-strategic-bomber-patrol; and Justin McCurry, "Japan and South Korea Scramble Jets to Track Russian and Chinese Bomber Patrol," *Guardian*, December 22, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/22/russia-and-china-fly-joint-bomber-patrol-over-the-pacific. On the naval patrol, see "China, Russia Ships Needle through Japan's Southern Chokepoint," *Nikkei Asia*, October 24, 2021, https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/China-Russia-ships-needle-through-Japan-s-southern-chokepoint.

[33] Vladimir Putin, "Valdai Discussion Club Session," President of Russia, October 3, 2019, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61719.

[34] Vladimir Putin, "Vladimir Putin's Annual News Conference," President of Russia, December 19, 2019, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62366.

[35] Paul N. Schwartz, "The Military Dimension in Sino-Russian Relations," in *Sino-Russian Relations in the 21st Century*, ed. Jo Inge Bekkevold and Bobo Lo (Basel: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 87–111.

exercise since the 1980s deepened Russian-Chinese ties, on the one hand, and projected Russia's bolstered self-confidence, on the other. During subsequent exercises, the profile of Chinese participation has been significantly lower, "hidden" among other invited guests. In 2020, Russia was unable to secure participation of troops from both China and India, as New Delhi decided to withdraw. Although the official reason was the Covid-19 pandemic, India probably did not want to create the impression of normalizing relations with China after violent clashes along their shared border.[36] Likewise, the pattern of naval exercises changed too, with Russia and China increasing the number of exercises with third parties, including trilateral drills with South Africa and Iran in 2019 and a repeat with Iran in 2020. These strategic exercises may be interpreted as a step backward in terms of practical coordination of Russian and Chinese armed forces, especially compared with the land-based Peaceful Mission or naval Joint Sea exercises in previous years.[37] Instead, China's recent participation in Russian strategic exercises seems to prioritize sending political signals, with the practical dimension of military preparedness being of secondary importance.

The majority of Russian signals have not, however, been reciprocated by China. As mentioned, Beijing has remained silent about the prospects of an early-warning system built with Russian assistance. The joint activities conducted in China's neighborhood have not been re-enacted in the regions of Russia's greatest interest—Central Europe or the Black and Baltic Seas. Beijing's wariness to throw its weight behind Moscow's political-military brinkmanship in Europe was recently confirmed during Russia's Zapad 2021 exercise.

The Zapad series of exercises tends to simulate conflict with the West through the use of the full spectrum of Russia's capabilities, including nuclear weapons.[38] Thus, the participation of Chinese troops in Zapad 2021 (in line with their participation in three previous strategic exercises) would have sent a strong signal about Beijing's readiness to elevate its relations with Moscow to the level of a de facto military alliance. China decided, however, against sending such a signal. Rather than joining Russia in the European theater, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) hosted their Russian counterparts in Chinese territory. Russia and China conducted a joint exercise directed at the West

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[36] Dinakar Peri, "India Decides to Pull Out of Kavkaz 2020 Military Exercise on Russia Due to Chinese Participation," *Hindu*, August 29, 2020, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-decides-to-pull-out-of-kavkaz-2020-military-exercise-on-russia-due-to-chinese-participation/article32475212.ece.

[37] For complete data on all exercises, see Alexey D. Muraviev, "Strategic Reality Check: The Current State of Russia-China Defence Cooperation and the Prospects of a Deepening 'Near Alliance,'" *Australian Journal of Defence and Strategic Studies* 3, no. 1 (2021): 27–48.

[38] Andreas Ventsel et al., "Discourse of Fear in Strategic Narratives: The Case of Russia's Zapad War Games," *Media, War and Conflict* 14, no. 1 (2019): 21–39.

that, according to the Russian media, paralleled Zapad 2021. Even its name, Zapad/Vzaimodeistviye-2021, suggested the link to the Russian exercise. In the exercise, troops from the Russian Eastern Military District arrived in China and joined PLA units.[39] The exercise was regarded as the Sino-Russian demonstration of participation capacity directed at the United States. China's decision to not participate in the main Zapad exercise is evidence of its desire to mitigate potential fears of the Sino-Russian threat among key European states. While there are voices in China calling for more coordinated activities with Russia, Beijing does not seem ready to bankroll Moscow's aggressive moves in Europe.[40]

Surprisingly, U.S.-China competition has not accelerated Russian arms exports to China. Instead, arms sales have stagnated. Since the big contracts on the S-400 and Su-35 were signed in 2014–15, Russia and China have not concluded any new major agreements. Moreover, unconfirmed reports suggest that in 2020 Moscow put on hold the delivery of S-400 missiles to China amid rising tensions between China and India.[41] Another limitation of Russia's cooperation with China is the absence of shifts in both states' attitudes toward each other's territorial claims. Russia has neither secured Chinese support for its annexation of Crimea nor recognized China's territorial claims in the East and South China Seas. Fears of entrapment and an unwillingness to commit resources to the other side's interests—territorial claims and bids for regional hegemony, in particular—seem to be preventing the emergence of a revisionist Sino-Russian alliance.

Russia's readiness and capacity to strategically and militarily support China in the latter's great-power competition with the United States also does not extend to the economic and technological domains—those areas where the rivalry between Washington and Beijing has been most intense.[42] While Sino-Russian technology cooperation embraces a number of areas, such as civilian nuclear energy and aviation, Russia cannot provide China

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[39] Reid Standish, "China, Russia Showcase Growing Ties with Joint Military Exercises," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 9, 2021, https://www.rferl.org/a/china-russia-military-cooperation/31401442.html.

[40] For example, in response to the Lithuanian government's decisions to withdraw from China's 17+1 grouping with Central and Eastern European states and agree to the name change of a Taiwan representative office in Vilnius, Beijing recalled its ambassador and asked Lithuania's representative to return home. The editorial in the English-language version of the *Global Times*, a mouthpiece for the Chinese Communist Party, called for China and Russia "to jointly deal a heavy blow to one or two running dogs of the U.S. to warn other countries." "China, Russia Can Cooperate to Punish Lithuania," *Global Times*, August 11, 2021, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202108/1231251.shtml.

[41] Probal Dasgupta, "Why Russia Really Stopped Its S-400 Supply to China," *Print*, November 12, 2020, https://theprint.in/opinion/why-russia-really-stopped-its-s-400-supply-to-china/542583. This news has not been confirmed by either Russian or Chinese sources independently of the Indian news outlets.

[42] Ferial Ara Saeed, "The Sino-American Race for Technology Leadership," War on the Rocks, April 23, 2021, https://warontherocks.com/2021/04/the-sino-american-race-for-technology-leadership.

with cutting-edge technology, and the Russian market is too small in size and too poor in purchasing power to be attractive for Chinese companies that are deprived of access to Western markets.[43] On the contrary, it is Russia that may benefit from Chinese technologies such as artificial intelligence. Space and aerospace are the only sectors where Russia can provide China with tangible assistance. While the two sides have advertised cooperation in space, implementation of ambitious designs remains to be seen.[44] The most promising undertaking in the aerospace industry, a widebody jet codenamed CR929 and designed to compete with Boeing and Airbus, is in the early stages of development. The Sino-Russian joint venture started the construction of the first prototype in 2021, with mass production to begin in 2025.[45]

Apart from strategic and security-oriented cooperation, the Sino-U.S. competition has accelerated normative convergence between Russia and China. Prior to the shift in U.S. policy, Chinese rhetoric directed toward the United States tended to be more benign than that coming from Russia. Faced with U.S. pressure, Beijing has adopted a much harsher attitude, which at times approaches the level of anti-Americanism observed in Russian discourse. While Russia and China have consistently emphasized the right to each state's "own political and economic path," the escalating U.S.-China competition has elevated these declarations of mutual support for sovereignty and noninterference in domestic affairs to new heights. The focus on regime survival and the similarity of both sets of ruling elites' worldviews have reinforced their perception of the West as the main driver behind any domestic opposition. Both states have declared unambiguous support for the other side's domestic actions, be it Russia's crackdown on Navalny and his associates or China's suppression of Hong Kong's autonomy and independent media. Putin has explicitly lent support to China's policies on Xinjiang, with any criticism being dismissed as unacceptable Western interference.[46] Russian representatives drew parallels between protests in Belarus and Hong Kong, seeing both as failed color revolutions.[47] Moscow has also stood by Beijing regarding debates about the origins of the virus

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[43] For an overview of Sino-Russian technology cooperation, see Christopher Weidacher Hsiung, "China's Technology Cooperation with Russia: Geopolitics, Economics, and Regime Security," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 14, no. 3 (2021): 447–49.

[44] Pavel Luzin, "Russian-Chinese Cooperation in Space," Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor, March 31, 2021, https://jamestown.org/program/russian-chinese-cooperation-in-space.

[45] Linnea Ahlgren, "China and Russia Want to Start Building the 1st CR929 This Year," Simple Flying, June 25, 2021, https://simpleflying.com/china-russia-cr929-construction.

[46] "Full Transcript of Exclusive Putin Interview with NBC News' Keir Simmons."

[47] Xie Wenting and Bai Yunyi, "No Armed Conflict Predicted between China and the U.S.; Russia's Position Is Clearly Much Closer to China's: Russian Ambassador," *Global Times*, June 11, 2021, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202106/1225982.shtml.

that causes Covid-19, actively supporting Chinese disinformation efforts and echoing Chinese conspiracy theories linking the virus to the United States.[48] This convergence has been particularly acute in global forums, such as the United Nations or G-20. At the same time, Moscow and Beijing have remained divided on other issues such as separatism and globalization.[49]

Strategic support and normative convergence notwithstanding, Russia's approach toward China's rising influence in Asia and regional competition with the United States has oscillated between staying on the sidelines and tacit to open support for Chinese policies. Russia has sought to remain neutral in China's territorial disputes with Moscow's traditional Asian partners, such as India and Vietnam. Even though Moscow supported China's position vis-à-vis the international arbitration with the Philippines in 2016, it has refrained from offering any other kind of support for China's claims in the South China Sea, as noted above.[50] Russia has even pursued political-military and energy cooperation with Vietnam, and Rosneft conducted drillings in Vietnamese territorial waters, an area over which China claims sovereignty as part of its nine-dash line. To not test Beijing's patience, however, Rosneft (a company with a large stake in the Chinese market) handed operations over to another Russian SOE, Zarubezhneft.[51] While maintaining cooperation with Vietnam, Russia was unwilling to risk the position of its key energy company in China.

Moscow has invested considerable effort to remain neutral during Sino-Indian border tensions, even offering services that might help keep communication lines between the two adversaries open.[52] This policy is grounded both in Russia's desire to keep cordial relations with India and in the widespread belief that the Russia-China-India triangle serves as an instrument to balance U.S. primacy. While it is difficult to pinpoint any tangible results of this trilateral cooperation, the Russian elite seems convinced of the necessity to maintain this format.[53] Moscow's determination to overcome Beijing's opposition to India's accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

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[48] "Russian Officials, Experts Say Covid-19 Origin Tracing Should Not Be Politicized," Xinhua, July 13, 2021, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202107/1230157.shtml.

[49] Marcin Kaczmarski, "Convergence or Divergence? Visions of World Order and the Russian-Chinese Relationship," *European Politics and Society* 20, no. 2 (2018): 207–24.

[50] Andrey Dikarev and Alexander Lukin, "Russia's Approach to South China Sea Territorial Dispute: It's Only Business, Nothing Personal," *Pacific Review* (2021).

[51] Vladimir Afanasiev, "Zarubezhneft to Pick Up Rosneft's Offshore Assets in Vietnam," Upstream, May 7, 2021, https://www.upstreamonline.com/production/zarubezhneft-to-pick-up-rosnefts-offshore-assets-in-vietnam/2-1-1007528.

[52] Artyom Lukin, "How Russia Emerged as Key Mediator in the China-India Dispute," East Asia Forum, October 23, 2020, https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/10/23/how-russia-emerged-as-key-mediator-in-the-china-india-dispute.

[53] For instance, the triangle is repeatedly included in all relevant foreign policy and security documents of the Russian Federation.

demonstrates Russia's persistence in keeping China and India on the same side. Yet boiling tensions between them, as well as U.S. courtship of India, make this balancing act increasingly difficult for the Kremlin. Moscow clearly dislikes the U.S.-led cooperation within the Quad and criticizes the concept of the Indo-Pacific region as a U.S. construct aimed at containing China.[54] At the same time, Moscow tries to avoid antagonizing India so as not to push it into the U.S. orbit and seeks to demonstrate the value of the Russian-Indian partnership through various means, such as by providing India with S-400 anti-missile systems. With some of its actions, however, Russia has inadvertently undermined its policy of diversifying ties in Asia.

Russia's Capacity to Generate National Power

The escalation of open U.S.-China competition could improve Russia's economic situation in several ways. Moscow might count on the easing of economic sanctions and pressures from the United States and other Western states eager to prevent further Sino-Russian rapprochement. It might also hope for potential benefits from Russian companies replacing U.S. companies in the Chinese market or attracting Chinese companies debarred from the U.S. market. Yet in both cases, these hopes have so far turned out to be overblown. As discussed in the previous section, there are some sectors in which Russian companies have profited from their U.S. competitors being pushed out of China. In the majority of cases, however, Russia does not have the capacity to fill the gaps that have emerged. Moreover, China's gradual shift toward dual circulation (i.e., greater self-sufficiency and less reliance on overseas markets for long-term development) has made it more difficult for Russia to economically capitalize on the Sino-U.S. rift.[55]

While the Russian economy has been quite resilient to sanctions imposed by the United States and EU following the Crimea conflict, the lifting of at least some of those sanctions would certainly improve its situation. However, U.S.-China competition has not generated enough pressure for the United States to consider reversing sanctions. As a result, the majority have remained in place, even after the change of the U.S. presidency in January 2021. The only major concession made by the Biden administration has been to lift sanctions on the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. However, this move had less to do with a general policy shift toward Russia and instead stemmed from Washington's

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[54] Ian Hill, "Why Is Russia Worried about the Quad?" Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Strategist, July 1, 2021, https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/why-is-russia-worried-about-the-quad.

[55] Kevin Yao, "What We Know about China's 'Dual Circulation' Economic Strategy," Reuters, September 15, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/china-economy-transformation-explainer-idUSKBN2600B5.

desire to mend ties with Germany.[56] Meanwhile, the U.S. Congress has continued to impose new sanctions on Russia.

The Chinese side of the Sino-U.S. equation has had a greater potential impact on Russia's capacity to generate national power because of several factors. First, with growth in bilateral trade and investment, Russia's GDP has become increasingly dependent on China's rate of economic growth.[57] Thus, negative trends in the Chinese economy from the U.S.-China trade war increasingly have the potential to harm Russia. Second, after China cut ties with some of its economic partners, Russia was able to step up in some sectors, such as natural resources and agriculture. The fallout from the Sino-U.S. competition has increased Russian food and agricultural exports to China (e.g., soy beans).[58] Likewise, China's disputes with Australia paved the way for Russian companies to increase their coal exports.[59] Moscow even went so far as to support the construction of new railway infrastructure to allow for increased transport of coal to China.[60]

While these inroads into the Chinese market have benefited Russian companies, they have only amplified the existing economic imbalance between the two countries. The persistence of this asymmetry explains Russia's inability to benefit from Sino-U.S. "decoupling" in other, more sophisticated economic areas. Regarding market access, as noted earlier, the size of the Russian market will not compensate for Chinese losses in the U.S. or European markets. Concerning investment opportunities, the Russian market offers only a few options for Chinese investors. With the exception of the energy sector, the scope of participation in projects to construct transportation infrastructure is limited by Moscow's financial constraints. The Russian stock exchange does not provide an alternative platform for Chinese companies forced to delist from U.S. stock exchanges. In sum, Russia is not positioned to fully benefit from the U.S.-China economic rift.

U.S.-China competition has only marginally influenced the energy sector, which is the cornerstone of Sino-Russian economic cooperation and the bedrock of the Russian political economy. Collaboration in the oil sector

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[56] "Nord Stream 2: Biden Waives U.S. Sanctions on Russian Pipeline," BBC, May 20, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57180674.

[57] Alexander Gabuev and Temur Umarov, "Will the Pandemic Increase Russia's Economic Dependence on China?" Carnegie Moscow Center, July 8, 2020, https://carnegiemoscow.org/2020/07/08/will-pandemic-increase-russia-s-economic-dependence-on-china-pub-81893.

[58] Tatyana Karabut, "Bob ne vydast" [Bob Won't Give In], *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, April 21, 2021, https://rg.ru/2021/04/21/postavki-rossijskogo-prodovolstviia-v-kitaj-vyrosli-v-poltora-raza.html.

[59] Natalia Skorlygina and Yevegenii Zainullin, "Dayesh na storone ugliya" [Gimme on the Coal Side], *Kommersant*, December 16, 2020, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4615746.

[60] "Putin soglasilsiya s ideei postroit' 'novyi BAM' dlya eksporta ugliya" [Putin Agreed with the Idea to Build a "New BAM" for Coal Export], RBC, July 8, 2021, https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/60e633099a7947bba18b53fa.

flourished well before the Western response to the Crimean crisis, with major pipelines already in place and major contracts signed by 2013. China also began investing in the Russian LNG sector before 2014. Russia's conflict with the West only made a difference in Sino-Russian cooperation on pipeline natural gas. After years of negotiation, Moscow chose to accept Chinese demands concerning the price and the route of a gas pipeline. The Power of Siberia project (opened in 2019) supplies China's east coast cities from newly explored gas fields.[61] The scope of China's participation in Novatek's LNG projects has also broadened, with Chinese companies buying stakes in the Arctic LNG 2 project and Chinese banks providing substantial loans to increase production amid Western sanctions.[62] In addition, despite advances made by China's civilian nuclear energy sector over the last decade, Russian SOE Rosatom secured the contracts for the construction of new units at two nuclear power plants in Jiangsu and Liaoning Provinces.[63]

Nonetheless, energy cooperation has been driven primarily by the activities of domestic players and economic calculations made by both sides rather than in response to U.S. pressure or U.S.-China competition. The case of pipeline gas exports from Russia illustrates this phenomenon. Even in 2024, Russia will still supply less than half the pipeline natural gas purchased by Chinese companies in Central Asia. However, the future of new gas pipelines, such as Power of Siberia 2 (a project crossing a western section of the Sino-Russian border, negotiated since the mid-2000s under the name Altai) and Power of Siberia 3 (a project transiting Mongolian territory), remains uncertain. Regarding Power of Siberia 2, Russia lobbied for the project as a way of putting pressure on the EU. If implemented, the gas to supply the pipeline would originate in Western Siberia (the same area used to supply the EU), giving Moscow substantial leverage over its customers in both the West and East. Although Beijing took part in negotiations, from the Chinese perspective the pipeline would duplicate already existing infrastructure in Central Asia and probably require additional infrastructure to bring gas to the eastern coast. The Power of Siberia 3 pipeline remains more plausible, but the issue of transit is looked at with suspicion by Beijing and may turn out to be an insurmountable obstacle. China's demand for natural gas is predicted to rise along with the country's attempts to limit coal consumption, but Gazprom has to compete with other Central Asian sources and LNG delivery.

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61 Chow, "Russia-China Gas Deal and Redeal."

62 Nastassia Astrasheuskaya, "Russia's Novatek to Sell Stake in Arctic Gas Project to Chinese Partners," *Financial Times*, April 25, 2019, https://www.ft.com/content/f7c32864-676a-11e9-9adc-98bf1d35a056.

63 "Work Starts on New Tianwan and Xudabao Units," World Nuclear News, May 19, 2021, https://world-nuclear-news.org/Articles/First-concrete-poured-for-new-Tianwan-and-Xudabao.

Moreover, Biden's conciliatory approach toward the Nord Stream 2 pipeline has decreased the relevance of the Chinese market for Gazprom.

Russia's National Security

Contrary to the limited impact of U.S.-China competition on Russia's capacity to generate power, the influence on Russia's national security has been considerable. On the one hand, Russia's strategic environment has improved as the intensifying U.S.-China rivalry has diverted Washington's attention away from Europe and limited the scope of U.S. actions in the European theater. On the other hand, U.S.-China competition has seriously weakened the existing arms control architecture and accelerated the development of the U.S. arsenal in some areas. Even if Russia's lack of compliance contributed directly to U.S. withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in February 2019, Washington also cited Beijing's unwillingness to join the regime. Moscow blamed the United States for the breakdown of arms control and consistently denied U.S. accusations that Russia breached the INF Treaty.[64] As a result, Russia must balance the benefits of increased freedom of action in the defense realm with the costs of heightened regional and global instability generated by escalating U.S.-China competition.

The threat assessment espoused by the Russian elite has not undergone any substantial changes because of the U.S.-China rivalry. Rather, anti-American and anti-Western trends that have dominated thinking about Russian security for the last decade have only been reinforced, with Washington being identified as the major source of instability. The new National Security Strategy, signed by Putin on July 2, 2021, represents Russia's first major attempt to assess the dominant developments in international politics.[65] The lack of any reference to the impact of U.S.-China competition on Russia's security environment, however, demonstrates its limited utility. Chapter 2, titled "Russia in the Contemporary World: Tendencies and Possibilities," emphasizes the ongoing transformation toward multipolarity that is accompanied and countered by "attempts of Western states to maintain hegemony."[66] The general assessment is that international security has worsened since the 2015 edition. According to the 2021 National Security Strategy, the number of sources of pressure on Russia have increased, with a proliferation of protectionist instruments and sanctions, as well as the use

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[64] Shannon Bugos, "U.S. Completes INF Treaty Withdrawal," Arms Control Association, September 2019, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2019-09/news/us-completes-inf-treaty-withdrawal.

[65] Office of the President of Russia, *Strategiya bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii* [National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation] (Moscow, February 2021), http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/47046/page/5.

[66] Ibid., para. 6.

of climate change as a pretext to limit Russian access to export markets and establish control over transportation routes, including in the Arctic.[67]

Faced with growing U.S.-China tensions, Russia has focused on strengthening its strategic deterrence potential. First, it has accelerated work on new armaments that would prevent the U.S. missile defense system from weakening Russia's second-strike capability. These weapons include, among others, Avangard hypersonic glide vehicles and new RS-28 Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missiles.[68] Second, Russia has attempted to exploit the ambiguity of conditions under which it would be ready to use nuclear force. The U.S. withdrawal from the INF Treaty was one of the reasons behind Russia's new nuclear doctrine, which was made public (for the first time) in June 2020.[69] The document, titled "Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence," however, did little to clarify Russia's nuclear policy.[70]

Finally, while pushing the United States to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), Moscow refused to support Washington in pressuring Beijing to join strategic arms control talks. The Trump administration made extension conditional on China joining the treaty and explicitly asked Moscow to apply pressure to Beijing in this regard. But Moscow has consistently resisted and sided with Beijing in opposing any trilateral arms control talks. Russian representatives claimed that they "understood" China's position and expressed no intention to exercise leverage over Beijing. Russian observers then pointed out that the United States should include the UK and France in any multilateral talks and accused Washington of trying to drive a wedge between Russia and China.[71] All the while, Russia continued to push for a bilateral extension to New START and officially submitted a proposal to extend the treaty to the U.S. State Department in December 2019.[72] By generating

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[67] Office of the President of Russia, *Strategiya bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, para. 16.

[68] Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, "Russian Nuclear Weapons, 2021," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 77, no. 2 (2021): 90–108.

[69] Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Russia), "Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence," June 8, 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/disarmament/-/asset_publisher/rp0fiUBmANaH/content/id/4152094.

[70] Andrzej Wilk and Marek Menkiszak, "Russia on the Information War's Nuclear Frontline," Centre for Eastern Studies, June 4, 2020, https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2020-06-04/russia-information-wars-nuclear-frontline.

[71] Elena Chernenko, "Obvinenija SŠA ne podkrepleny nikakimi dokazatel'stvami" [The U.S. Accusations Are Not Supported by Evidence], *Kommersant*, June 15, 2020, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4378452.

[72] Some Russian scholars suggest ratification is necessary on Russia's part. See Anton Khlopkov and Anastasia Shavrova, "Pyat shagov na puti k prodleniyu DSNV. Osobennosti protsedury v Rossiyskoi Federatsii" [Five Steps towards an Extension of the START Treaty. Features of the Procedure in the Russian Federation], *Rossiya v globalnoi politike* 19, no. 4 (2020), https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/pyat-shagov-na-puti-k-dsnv.

uncertainty about its principles for the use of nuclear weapons, Moscow might have hoped to tilt the calculus in Washington. Russian pundits warned that Moscow "takes a world without arms control seriously and is preparing for it"[73] and recognized the dissolution of the arms control system.[74]

Biden's election as president and his determination to expeditiously extend New START removed this item from the list of contentious bilateral issues between the United States and Russia. Nonetheless, the parameters for future talks on strategic stability and arms control remain uncertain. Russia has maintained an ambiguous attitude to arms control. For one, it responded to Biden's extension offer by shortening the ratification process (required by Russian law) to less than 24 hours. Thus, the extension of New START seemed to signal Moscow's willingness to return to a comprehensive strategic dialogue with the United States. That being said, the new security strategy omits the New START extension and contains no suggestions of Russia's readiness to engage in further dialogue on strategic stability or arms control. Instead, it emphasizes the necessity to maintain nuclear deterrence potential.[75] The joint statement issued by Putin and Biden during their June 2021 summit promises a dialogue on strategic stability but does not offer any suggestions as to how the two sides might reconcile their differences.[76]

Pressures on Russia's Economic Outlook from Challenges to Globalization

Unlike the United States, China, or the EU, Russia does not depend on globalization for economic growth and related geopolitical clout. This has stemmed from its marginal place in the global division of labor, limited participation in global supply chains, and the attitude of the Russian regime toward globalization in general. While political and business elites have benefited from globalization, the Russian economy as a whole has remained in the backwater, with no political push to embrace it. As a result, the challenges to globalization—such as growing protectionism, U.S.-China decoupling, and the gradual replacement of the global trade regime regulated by the World Trade

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[73] Dmitri Trenin, "Decoding Russia's Official Nuclear Deterrence Paper," Carnegie Moscow Center, June 5, 2020, https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81983.

[74] Vasily Kashin, "Rossiyskaya yadernaya doktrina: Neobkhodimaya prozrachnost" [Russian Nuclear Doctrine: Essential Transparency], *Rossiya v globalnoi politike*, https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/rossijskaya-yadernaya-prozrachnost.

[75] Office of the President of Russia, *Strategiya bezopasnosti*, para. 40.

[76] "U.S.-Russia Presidential Joint Statement on Strategic Stability," June 16, 2021, available at https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/16/u-s-russia-presidential-joint-statement-on-strategic-stability.

Organization (WTO) with regional agreements—have turned out to be less of a problem for Russia than for other major powers. Instead, Western sanctions and volatile prices have constituted its biggest economic challenges.

Russia's Grand Strategy

The shifting attitudes of the Russian ruling elite to globalization can be traced back to the 2008–9 global economic crisis. At the time, Moscow decided to delay its application for WTO membership. Rather than joining the global trading regime, Russia chose to pursue regional economic integration in the form of a customs union with Belarus and Kazakhstan, which evolved into the EAEU. Although Moscow ultimately joined the WTO in 2012, its participation has continued to be half-hearted.[77]

Western sanctions imposed since 2014 have reinforced Russia's views on globalization as a Western-led process skewed to benefit the United States as an instrument of political influence.[78] Russian leaders sought ways to limit potential harm to the economy. The instruments employed have included countersanctions (mostly directed at European food producers), import substitution, tightening control over regional economic integration, de-dollarization (moving away from the U.S. dollar as the main currency used in transactions with external partners), and relatively conservative fiscal policies aimed at maintaining macroeconomic stability.[79] A relatively consistent macroeconomic policy has allowed Russia to withstand the impacts of Western sanctions. Moscow has managed to rebuild its sovereign funds ($180 billion) and substantially increase the Central Bank's reserves to $600 billion.[80] In addition, Russia's sovereign debt remains at a low level (19.3% of GDP in 2020).[81]

The Russian economy thus has turned out to be quite resilient to external economic pressures that accelerated during the Trump administration. Russia's energy exports continue to provide the bulk of revenues and are in most cases regulated by bilateral agreements rather than multilateral

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[77] Pamela A. Jordan, "Diminishing Returns: Russia's Participation in the World Trade Organization," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33, no. 6 (2017): 452–71.

[78] Nigel Gould-Davies, "Russia's Sovereign Globalization: Rise, Fall and Future," Chatham House, January 2016, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/20160106RussiasSovereignGlobalizationGouldDaviesFinal.pdf.

[79] Richard Connolly, *Russia's Response to Sanctions: How Western Economic Statecraft Is Reshaping Political Economy in Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[80] Ministry of Finance (Russia), https://www.minfin.gov.ru; and "International Reserves of the Russian Federation (End of Period)," Bank of Russia, https://www.cbr.ru/eng/hd_base/mrrf/mrrf_m.

[81] "Russia's Sovereign Rating Resilient to Latest U.S. Sanctions," Fitch Ratings, April 16, 2021, https://www.fitchratings.com/research/sovereigns/russias-sovereign-rating-resilient-to-latest-us-sanctions-16-04-2021.

trade regimes. Since December 2016, Russia has participated in the OPEC+ mechanism, within which participants agree to reduce exploration in order to keep prices sufficiently high. In March 2020, Moscow temporarily left and increased oil exploration but quickly found itself on the losing side as Saudi Arabia suppressed prices by increasing its own exploration.[82] As a result, Moscow returned to the mechanism within a couple of weeks.[83] Likewise, Gazprom has been able to adapt to regulatory frameworks introduced in the EU's gas market. Although sanctions have deprived Russian energy companies of access to most advanced Western technologies and made it more difficult to secure financing for future projects, they have not directly targeted oil and gas exports. Similarly, industries in which Russia has a competitive edge—the civilian nuclear energy and arms manufacturing—are isolated from multilateral regulatory frameworks, and neither sanctions nor the process of deglobalization has harmed Russian exports in either sector.

Russia continues to promote regional cooperation projects in Eurasia, but the slow pace of their implementation suggests that the Russian leadership considers them to be valuable geopolitically to strengthen the country's great-power credentials rather than a response to challenges from deglobalization.[84] The Greater Eurasian Partnership, put forward by Putin in 2016, seems to confirm Russia's relative lack of interest in practical arrangements.[85] The partnership, of which the EAEU is a part, serves mostly to promote Russia's status as a great power and has not gone beyond rhetoric. It is, however, a useful instrument to counter the concept of the Indo-Pacific region. The synchronization of the Belt and Road Initiative and the Greater Eurasian Partnership also reduces possible tensions between Moscow and Beijing, though the practical dimension of the partnership remains limited.[86]

Russia's National Power

From the perspective of Russia, oil prices have remained the single most important factor defining its capacity to generate national power. In this sense, the Russian capacity to generate national power depends not so much on

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[82] Nikolay Kozhanov, "The Fall of OPEC+ and the Age of Oil Price Wars," Al Jazeera, March 12, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/3/12/the-fall-of-opec-and-the-age-of-oil-price-wars.

[83] Nigel Gould-Davies, "Russia's Failed OPEC Gamble," International Institute for Strategic Studies, April 15, 2020, https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2020/04/russia-opec-agreement.

[84] Marcin Kaczmarski, "Non-Western Visions of Regionalism: China's New Silk Road and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union," *International Affairs* 93, no. 6 (2017): 1357–76.

[85] David G. Lewis, "Geopolitical Imaginaries in Russian Foreign Policy: The Evolution of 'Greater Eurasia,'" *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 10 (2018): 1612–37.

[86] Gaziza Shakhanova and Jeremy Garlick, "The Belt and Road Initiative and the Eurasian Economic Union: Exploring the 'Greater Eurasian Partnership,'" *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 49, no. 1 (2020): 33–57.

globalization as on the global demand for oil and, to a lesser extent, natural gas. Given that Russia has been experiencing increasing external pressures since 2014—in the form of both Western sanctions and a dramatic fall in oil prices—the trend of deglobalization has not caught Moscow by surprise. As noted above, with its exports focused on natural resources and limited inclusion in global value chains, Russia does not rely on globalization as much as other players, such as China, the United States, and the EU. The challenges to globalization are dangerous for Russia mostly in terms of their implications for demand. Russia used the period of higher prices to build its reserves and thus increase its resilience to external economic pressures, from the West in particular.

Russia has tailored existing instruments to withstand additional pressures. For example, it has managed to build resilience to most of the Western sanctions, even if import substitution has often been costly and produced far from desired results. Low-growth seems to be satisfactory to Moscow as long as it brings sufficient revenues and maintains macroeconomic stability. The role of external partners remains limited, even though Chinese assistance has helped with financing key energy projects such as the Yamal LNG joint venture. Russia's flagship pipeline project, Nord Stream 2, was initially delayed as a result of U.S. sanctions and pressures, but Gazprom completed the project in 2021.[87]

In terms of generating military power, Russia modernized a substantial part of its armed forces before the Ukraine crisis. Moreover, domestic political mobilization after 2014 enabled the Kremlin to increase military expenses. Russia's military-industrial complex is capable of providing the majority of required systems and relies on external partners only to a miniscule degree. The military budget peaked in 2016 and, though decreasing since then, remained at 4% of GDP in 2020.[88]

The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Russia

Russia's actions in response to the Covid-19 pandemic strongly resemble its response to the 2008–9 global financial crisis. In the initial phase, the Kremlin attempted to score points internationally by portraying Russia as safe from the pandemic and offering help to Western nations. In later phases, the

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[87] Vladimir Soldatkin, "Russia Completes Nord Stream 2 Construction, Gas Flows Yet to Start," Reuters, September 10, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russias-gazprom-says-it-has-completed-nord-stream-2-construction-2021-09-10.

[88] Michael Kofman and Richard Connolly, "Why Russian Military Expenditure Is Much Higher than Commonly Understood (as Is China's)," War on the Rocks, December 16, 2019, https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/why-russian-military-expenditure-is-much-higher-than-commonly-understood-as-is-chinas.

efforts have focused on tackling domestic challenges that might arise from the mismanagement of the pandemic.

Russia's Grand Strategy

The Covid-19 pandemic's overall effect on Russia's trajectory in international politics has been limited so far. Moscow has attempted to elevate its great-power status, increase its soft power, and project influence. The pandemic, however, has neither made Russia more cooperative nor less assertive.

Moscow's first attempts to improve its international image and demonstrate great-power credentials occurred during the early stages of the pandemic in spring 2020 when it sent highly publicized medical assistance to Italy and the United States.[89] These activities turned out to be short-lived once the virus began spreading in Russia itself. Moscow later used production of a Covid-19 vaccine as a means to increase its status. The Russian-made vaccine was the first Covid-19 vaccine to be registered and the government has promoted it as evidence of Russia's scientific potential and credentials as a modern great power. The very name of the vaccine, Sputnik V ("V" for "victory"), suggests the country's ambitions to play the role of the world's savior from the pandemic. To this end, Moscow has engaged in vaccine diplomacy, attempting to improve bilateral relations and demonstrate its upper hand as well as generosity vis-à-vis the West.

Although not yet approved by the World Health Organization, the vaccine has gained approval in over 70 countries, including some EU members. As of September 2021, Russia had sold around 600 million doses, with India, Iran, Argentina, Egypt, the Palestinian Authority, Mexico, Nepal, Peru, Turkey, Vietnam, and Venezuela being among the biggest buyers. Other countries have declared willingness to produce the Sputnik vaccine domestically: South Korea (1,850 billion doses), India (1,150 billion doses), and China (260 million).[90] In addition, Russia has provided a smaller number of doses as humanitarian aid, often as a way to open commercial talks.[91]

Russia's self-promotion as a scientific great power has faced some backlash. A low vaccination rate in Russia of only 32% of the population,

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[89] Holly Ellyatt, "From Russia with Love? Why the Kremlin's Coronavirus Aid to the West Is Controversial," CNBC, April 7, 2020, https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/07/why-the-kremlins-coronavirus-aid-to-the-west-is-controversial.html.

[90] Statista, "Sputnik V Doses Bought from Russia 2021, by Country," https://www.statista.com/statistics/1123927/sputnik-v-exports-from-russia-by-country.

[91] Kerry Cullinan and Esther Nakkazi, "Russian and Chinese Bilateral Vaccine Deals & Donations Outmaneuver Europe & United States," Health Policy Watch, March 3, 2021, https://healthpolicy-watch.news/russia-and-chinas-bilateral-vaccine.

bottlenecks in the production of the vaccine, and ongoing uncertainty surrounding the vaccine's efficacy have undermined confidence in Sputnik V.[92] Some partners, such as Ghana and Kenya, have even canceled orders.[93] Russia was also accused by the EU of spreading disinformation related to the pandemic and other vaccines.[94]

Russia's National Power

The pandemic's impact on Russia's capacity to generate national power has been threefold: economic, demographic, and political. From the Kremlin's perspective, the most relevant impact has been in the domestic political sphere. Given the importance of political will as an instrument of Russia's power,[95] the ability to rein in potential rivals and control allies is one of the key determinants of Russia's capacity to generate national power. Initially, the government's weak response to the pandemic appeared to have seriously undermined the regime and Putin's personal legitimacy.[96] Since then, however, the Kremlin has used the opportunities provided by social distancing measures to consolidate power. Major steps taken by Moscow have included the introduction of constitutional amendments and the crackdown on Alexei Navalny and his supporters. The constitutional amendments enable Putin to run for president twice more (and potentially remain in power until 2036), while deferring the question of leadership succession, which had begun to loom over the Russian elite and had the potential to create divisions.[97] Furthermore, the targeting of Navalny has temporarily removed the most able and serious political opposition to the ruling regime. Navalny was poisoned in summer 2020, and upon his return from Germany (where he received medical treatment), he was arrested and tried for violating parole. His imprisonment was followed by crackdowns

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92 Grace Kier and Paul Stronski, "Russia's Vaccine Diplomacy Is Mostly Smoke and Mirrors," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 3, 2021, https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/08/03/russia-s-vaccine-diplomacy-is-mostly-smoke-and-mirrors-pub-85074.

93 Ibid.

94 Lorne Cook, "EU Report Takes Aim at Russia over Vaccine Fake News," Associated Press, April 28, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/european-union-russia-europe-fake-news-coronavirus-d12316c1e6c21fe2f1a450e8f387dbac.

95 Stoner, *Russia Resurrected*.

96 Graeme P. Herd, "Covid-19, Russian Responses, and President Putin's Operational Code," George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, Security Insights, no. 50, April 2020, https://www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2020-11/PDF_PUB_SI_50.pdf.

97 Ben Noble and Nikolay Petrov, "From Constitution to Law: Implementing the 2020 Russian Constitutional Changes," *Russian Politics* 6, no. 1 (2021): 130–52.

on his organization, the Anti-Corruption Foundation, which was labeled as an "extremist organization" and effectively disbanded.[98]

The economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic have been unexpectedly mild, especially when compared with the impact on other states. The biggest challenge for Russia was a slump in oil demand, which in turn led to a sharp decrease in prices, but the global economy's revival has lifted prices and allowed Moscow to rebuild its coffers. Russia's GDP contracted in 2020 by only 3%, and growth is expected to reach 3% in 2021 and 2022.[99]

The demographic effects of the pandemic are among the most difficult to assess. According to official data, as of November 2021, Covid-19 cases had reached 8.4 million and reported deaths were 245,000. However, external observers have questioned official data provided by the Russian government.[100] Based on a statistical analysis to determine "excess deaths" compared with a typical year, the real death rate from the virus may be four times what the state has reported. As of September 2021, total excess fatalities in Russia since March 2020 had reached more than 750,000.[101] The pandemic has aggravated several long-term trends in human life indicators and reversed the previous efforts of the Kremlin to stop demographic decline. The decrease in population was the biggest since 2005, while the number of births fell to its lowest level in the last two decades. As a result, Russia's population declined to 146.2 million, the lowest point since 2014.[102]

Implications for the United States and U.S.-Russia Relations

The Russian ruling elite continues to perceive the United States both as a declining hegemon that is struggling to maintain its dominant position and as the major threat to Russia's role in international politics. U.S. competition with China has not altered this dominant way of thinking. Moscow has been

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[98] Jan Matti Dollbaum, Morvan Lallouet, and Ben Noble, *Navalny: Putin's Nemesis, Russia's Future?* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2021); and "Crackdown on Navalny Allies," Bell, January 31, 2021, https://thebell.io/en/crackdown-on-navalny-allies.

[99] "Russia's Economic Recovery Gathers Pace, Says New World Bank Report," World Bank, Press Release, May 26, 2021, https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/05/26/russia-s-economic-recovery-gathers-pace-says-new-world-bank-report.

[100] "Coronavirus in Russia: The Latest News: Nov. 3," *Moscow Times*, https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/11/05/coronavirus-in-russia-the-latest-news-nov-5-a69117.

[101] Polina Ivanova, John Burn-Murdoch, and Oliver Barnes, "Russia Excess Deaths Soar amid Jab Hesitancy," *Financial Times*, November 3, 2021, https://www.ft.com/content/f1a270c3-3870-46ad-99e8-45b5d8f127e0.

[102] Jadwiga Rogoża, "The Pandemic Takes Its Toll: Russia's Demographic Crisis," Centre for Eastern Studies, February 16, 2021, https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2021-02-16/pandemic-takes-its-toll-russias-demographic-crisis.

unwilling to make any concessions that would pave the way for mending ties or improving relations with Washington. Instead, Russia has chosen to strengthen its ties with China and provide Beijing with strategic and political support.

Russian policy complicates U.S. strategy both globally and toward China. Globally, Russia can be expected to seek benefits from U.S.-China competition, first and foremost by counting on and exploiting the United States' inability to fully address two strategic challenges simultaneously: one in Europe and one in Asia. While a scenario where Russia openly supports China in a confrontation with the United States appears to be far-fetched, a rise in pressure on U.S. allies in Europe is highly plausible. Moscow will opportunistically capitalize on Washington's diminished attention to regions such as the post-Soviet environs, the Black Sea, and the Middle East. With regard to China, Moscow can be expected to extend political support and demonstrate cordial relations with Beijing, including in the security and defense realms. Joint exercises will amplify political signals sent to Washington by Beijing, and any further Russian arms transfers or support for the construction of early-warning missile systems will strengthen China's military potential. As the case of the New START negotiations demonstrated, Washington will find it more difficult to convince Beijing of the benefits of arms control if Russia backs China's intransigence. The Sino-Russian strategic partnership helps secure China's backyard, allowing the country to concentrate on its rivalry with the United States.

The bottom line is that the United States cannot count on any form of Russian support in its competition with China. Any potential rift emerging between China and Russia is highly implausible. Russia has been careful not to send signals suggesting the possibility of anti-Chinese policy, while China in turn tends to downplay its advantage and demonstrate respect for Russia's equal status, despite the growing asymmetry between the two countries.[103] Under such circumstances, even the U.S. attempts to make Russia "neutral" in the U.S.-China competition may turn out to be futile.

Still, the United States can diminish the value of Russia's support for China by shifting the weight of Sino-U.S. competition to those areas in which Moscow is either unwilling or unable to provide strategic assistance to China. Russia will not throw its full weight behind China because the two have not established a revisionist alliance, one in which both states would

[103] See, for example, China's silence on its military presence in Tajikistan, close to the border with Afghanistan. See "Tajikistan: Secret Chinese Base Becomes Slightly Less Secret," Eurasianet, September 23, 2020, https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-secret-chinese-base-becomes-slightly-less-secret; and Stephen Blank, "China's Military Base in Tajikistan: What Does It Mean?" Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, April 18, 2019, https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13569-chinas-military-base-in-tajikistan-what-does-it-mean?.html.

support each other's most aggressive foreign policy actions and commit to mutual defense. As noted earlier, for example, Russia is unwilling to support China's territorial claims—either in the South and East China Seas or vis-à-vis India. Moscow does not want Chinese hegemony in East Asia or Eurasia and wants to maintain close relations with states such as Vietnam. Closer Russia-India relations might slow down Russia's cooperation with China and thus indirectly benefit Washington. At the very least, any U.S. attempts to punish New Delhi for closer ties to Moscow will ultimately be counterproductive, alienating India while doing little harm to Russia.

In the Sino-U.S. technological race and trade war, Moscow does not have sufficient capacity to partner with Beijing. Apart from certain technologies helpful in space exploration, Russian capabilities in the high-tech sector are limited. Nor will Russia be able to compensate China for any economic losses incurred through loss of access to the U.S. or European markets. The Sino-Russian partnership matters solely for classical power-political games and multilateral diplomacy in the United Nations. Its potential in nontraditional areas of great-power competition is much smaller and thus less relevant.

In its policy toward Russia, the United States might capitalize on China's unwillingness to back Russia's political-military brinkmanship in Europe. While China may be willing to join Russia in targeting individual European states seen as "U.S. clients" (as in the case of Lithuania), it continues to demonstrate restraint toward Europe as a whole.

The options for improvement in U.S.-Russia relations remain limited. Finding common rules in cyberspace requires trust that is absent. The list of sixteen critical infrastructure areas presented by Biden to Putin during their June 2021 summit may invite Russia to test U.S. resolve rather than deter competition. Likewise, progress in arms control will be difficult to achieve without substantial concessions made by the United States. For Russia, the most contentious issue since the early 2000s has been the U.S. missile defense program. While Moscow ultimately agreed to New START back in 2010 without receiving any concessions from Washington, opening a dialogue on a replacement treaty in five years may be extremely difficult. The fact that the Russian elite still craves U.S. recognition of Russia's great-power status may provide a certain degree of flexibility for the United States. What is most problematic is that the expected forms of this recognition are often difficult to disentangle, as Russia awaits not only symbolic but also substantial concessions.

Finally, Russian domestic politics creates a substantial obstacle to more stable U.S.-Russia relations. Tensions with the United States, including over sanctions, provide an excellent scapegoat for any failures of Putin's leadership and serve as an instrument to mobilize his conservative base.

Any improvement of bilateral relations would make it more difficult for the Kremlin to play this anti-American card. The usefulness of this strategy has only increased amid the economic difficulties and challenges to the legitimacy generated by the regime's mismanagement of the Covid-19 pandemic.