

BOWLES'S *VIEW AND ACCURATE MAP OF THE WORLD, OR TERRESTRIAL GLOBE,* laid down from the *BEST OBSERVATIONS and A NEWEST DISCOVERIES*; particularly those lately made in the *SOUTH SEAS*, by ANSON, BYRON, WALLIS, BOUGANVILLE, COOK, and other celebrated *CIRCUMNAVIGATORS*; Illustrated with a variety of useful *PROJECTIONS* and *REPRESENTATIONS* of the *HEAVENLY BODIES*; the most approved *ASTRONOMICAL* and *GEOGRAPHICAL DEFINITIONS, TABLES, and PROBLEMS*; With an *easy and familiar Explanation* of the most various and interesting *Phaenomena in the UNIVERSAL SYSTEM*.



A Survey of Russia: Security Topics for 2020 and Just Beyond

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Author Background

Brigadier General Peter Zwack (Ret.) served as the United States Senior Defense Official and Attaché to the Russian Federation during the challenging years of 2012-2014. Retired in 2015 after 34 years of military service, he served for four years as the Russia-Eurasia Fellow in the Institute for National Strategic Studies within the National Defense University. While there he taught a Masters course in National Security Studies. BG Zwack is currently a Global Fellow at the Kennan Institute within the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars. He also serves as an Adjunct Fellow at the Pell Center for International Relations.

BG Zwack began his work in Russian-Eurasian affairs as an U.S. Army Soviet Foreign Area Officer (FAO) at the Defense Language Institute (1988), and then the Russian Institute in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, West Germany (1989-1991). He has served and written extensively in this field since then. His written and lectured insights, many personal, are based on his over 30-years of analytical and in-country USSR-Russia experiences that began in summer 1989 as a young U.S. Army Captain studying Russian and culture in a provincial Soviet city on the Volga River. He takes a broad Eurasian perspective while explaining key aspects of the complex US-Russia and increasingly China “triangle,” and how these and other relationships will shape the course of the world ahead. BG Zwack brings a personal hands-on perspective to Russia and Eurasian affairs and the challenges and opportunities facing the U.S. and Russia today.

Since 1989, he has interacted with Russians and international colleagues on multiple levels including defense, security, academia, policy, veterans, and private citizens. He regularly consults, writes and lectures within the interagency, defense department, think tanks, academic institutions and business community on contemporary Russian and Eurasian security issues, and leadership lessons learned.

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Introduction

Although US security concerns have recently focused to a large degree on China, it is Russia that is the unpredictable wildcard. The country has stumbled in more ways than one during the past several months. In March 2020, it overplayed its hand in a game of oil supply-price brinksmanship with Saudi Arabia. The ruble is under inflation pressure. And the Kremlin's initial fumbling of the coronavirus outbreak only added to its impact. In late May, Russian state press reported that Moscow could face a 7.5 percent drop in GDP following the pandemic.¹ One of the most telling signs of pressure on the Kremlin was the decision—no doubt a reluctant one—to postpone the grand 75th anniversary events linked to VE-Day on 9 May and reschedule a more modest celebration for 24 June. During this tumultuous period, a Levada poll saw a slide in President Vladimir Putin's popularity to 59 percent, a six-year low.²

In late spring, rural areas were ravaged by COVID-19, and unemployment soared in places where many people are already living at subsistence levels and deeply dissatisfied with a 2018 decision by the Kremlin to raise the official retirement age.³ Civic unrest has also increased. The recent arrest of former journalist and Roscosmos employee Ivan Safronov for allegedly passing state secrets to the Czech Republic stoked public anger.⁴ Large street protests in the Far East erupted in July over the arrest of the popular, anti-United Russia Governor Sergei Furgal on charges of murder.⁵ Tens of thousands of people marched in provincial Khabarovsk.

In spite of the cascade of challenges, Moscow is not in freefall. The Kremlin's prudent measures to stockpile currency and key resources following the crisis years of 2014-2015 are helping to meet basic population needs, including long-standing pensions. But those actions have



Start of the Victory Day Parade

Source: Mil.ru, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MoscowVictoryDayParade2020-06-24_2.jpg>, CC BY 4.0.



Protest in Khabarovsk on 8 August 2020

Source: Incredible Terrence, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%D0%9C%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B3%D0%B2_%D0%A5%D0%B0%D0%B1%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B5_8_%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B3%D1%83%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0_2020_3.jpg>, CC BY-SA 4.0.

not been enough to take the edge off other urgent domestic crises, such as a partially idled workforce in key industries and national infrastructure. Military procurement and modernization have slowed. High-profile initiatives involving other countries have also been impacted. The grand, if controversial, Nordstream II pipeline with Germany has been delayed. Direct military commitments in Syria might also take a hit; so, too, might the use of Yevgeni Prigozhin's ⁶ Wagner Group's "Private Military Companies" (PMCs) in non-attributed "Gray Zone" activities in murky conflicts such as Libya and greater Africa, and in supporting Venezuela.⁷

With Change Comes Opportunity...to Succeed or Fail

Change has never come easily to Russia or Russians, but change is coming. Major societal shifts are underway not only internally, but in the world beyond Russia's borders.

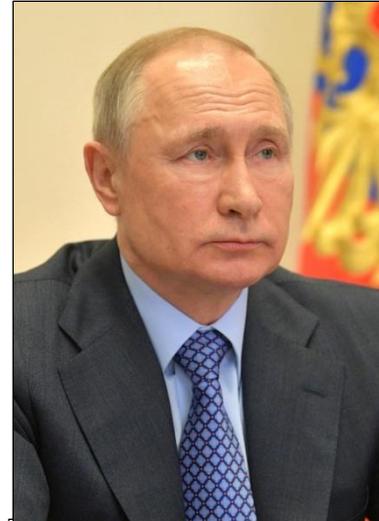
Of particular importance is the question of Moscow's relationship with the United States and the West in the years ahead. To some observers, Russia's best prospect for survival as a viable national entity will be to solidify a credible, non-confrontational relationship with the West. The same could be said for its relationship with the United States. In spite of high tensions at the moment, tough, resilient Russians still crave equal status and respect.⁸ Unfortunately, recent allegations of Russian agents paying Taliban to slay US and coalition personnel in Afghanistan serve only to muddy already toxically murky waters between the two nations.⁹

Closer to home, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014 created huge political baggage that has yet to be unpacked and stowed away. The Kremlin must find a way to resolve its fraught relationship with Kyiv. Only a normalized relationship between the two nations will lead to a major relaxation of EU-US sanctions. It would also go a long way toward reducing tensions with Eastern Europe, including Belarus, as well as the Black Sea region. The contentious Belarus presidential election on August 9 was of intense interest to the Kremlin concerned over where Minsk and its headstrong President Alexander Lukashenko would prioritize future attention.

Other compass directions also point to major challenges for Russia. The South (including the Middle East and Central Asia) presents mainly strife and instability. As for the Far East, despite its burgeoning partnership with China, Russia faces major long-term risks by tying up too tightly with Beijing.

A huge factor in managing any and all of the above problems is the Russian regime. President Vladimir Putin's future role in Russia's power structure has been ongoing political theater. Initial speculation focused on the likelihood that he would move to a top position in the Federation Council when his final presidential term expired in 2024. But a controversial nationwide constitutional referendum was held on June 1, 2020, which included the proviso that the presidential term be reset to zero, allowing Putin two more six-year terms, extending his run to 2036.¹⁰ He won 78 percent of the popular vote. When recently asked about Putin, a rough-hewn taxi driver in his fifties from Rostov was direct and brief: "He is a strong man ... *he takes care of us.*"¹¹

Such frank support was not always forthcoming. In the winter of 2011-2012—after Putin reassumed the presidency under murky electoral circumstances—chaotic demonstrations in Moscow’s Bolotnaya Square broke out. Major efforts to legitimize Putin’s ongoing power were made in the aftermath, and included most recently an unusual constitutional plebiscite on June 25, 2020.¹² The scheduling of the plebiscite was intriguing: Just one day after the Kremlin’s rescheduled Victory Day Parade, normally held on May 9, but delayed by COVID-19.¹³ The upshot of all the maneuvering is that Vladimir Putin is likely to remain in office for a dozen more years.



Vladimir Putin
Source: The Presidential Press and Information Office.
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vladimir_Putin_April_2020_\(cropped\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vladimir_Putin_April_2020_(cropped).jpg)>, CC BY 4.0.

The de facto extension of Putin’s power to 2036 means that the regime will have to wrestle with how to maintain its grip on power when faced with so many real challenges. How will it manage the economic, social and military stresses that will come on the heels of a likely overall population decline over the next generation?¹⁴ Can the country’s oil-gas dependent economy adjust long-term to the bottom falling out of the market in 2020? What happens as a weak ruble continues to chip away at the average citizen’s buying power?¹⁵ The Kremlin will not be able to ignore growing numbers of Russian citizens who might well become more restive as problems pile up and more suffering results.¹⁶

Will the Putin regime “muddle through” on an ad hoc footing, dealing with challenges as they arise? Or would it likely deploy hyped-up narratives of external threats in order to unify the home front—a strategy that would take pressure off the regime? For example, Moscow could readily stoke cross-border tensions in sensitive areas like the Baltics, Belarus, Ukraine or the Caucasus to relieve pressure from its center.

Also looming on the near horizon is the very real possibility that all existing global arms control agreements will lapse and the world’s stability will be in serious jeopardy for the first time since the end of the Cold War. If no checks are in place, how will Moscow bolster and deploy its arsenal of weapons and tactics? How will the regime respond to an increasingly restless China? How will it manage ever-more potent technologies in the cyber and AI realms?

Finding answers to these and many other questions will keep teams of international analysts and academics, including Russian, busy 24/7 as this jarred new decade further unfolds.



Location, Location, Location: The Central Role of Geography and History in the Russian Worldview

If any major nation on this planet is defined and driven by its geography and history, it is Russia. To better understand modern Russia and its psychological and policy drivers it is instructive to sometimes pull out a map and review the immense country from every direction.

A quick refresher tour: Russia stretches from the western Baltics and Barents Seas across upper Eurasia to the Pacific through eleven time zones. For a sense of scale, the legendary Trans-Siberian railroad from European Moscow to Pacific Vladivostok spans a greater distance than the miles an airplane covers flying from Washington DC to Honolulu. In essence, Russia IS Eurasia, with other countries large and small filling in the gaps.

Russia's sprawling land mass didn't gel all at once. It was created by conquest. Russia carved pieces of land out of neighboring civilizations and nations during a millennium of imperial and Soviet expansion. Modern Russia both benefits and suffers from its legacy of conquest. The country is vast and its borders are mind-bogglingly long and impossible to fully defend. Therefore while its enormous terrestrial size connotes strength it also presents great vulnerability. Its population is largely concentrated west of the Urals, leaving huge swaths of Russian territory to the east lightly populated and less tethered culturally or socially to Moscow. It is no exaggeration to say that there are many Russias within Russia.

Ground transportation to connect these widely-dispersed “Russias” is limited. The country’s entire rail and road network—largely completed before WWI to connect the Czar’s vast empire—runs mostly west to east. This orientation is especially evident in the southern latitudes east of the Urals. For the most part, the road networks, notably the recently completed, unofficially named Trans-Siberian Highway, mirror the west to east track of the country’s rail system. There are very few north-to-south conduits east of the Urals.

Geography sets the stage for another key ingredient in Russia’s long history: demography. The country’s relatively small population is utterly out-of-balance with its vast land mass. At approximately 145 million citizens, Russia’s population is about 40 percent of the US’s, one-third that of the European Union and a mere one-ninth of China’s. The population is not appreciably increasing, with its barely break-even birth rate anticipated to slacken in the years ahead—a factor that will have a big impact down the line.¹⁷ Religious and ethnic diversity within Russia are shifting as well. While still dominantly Russian-Orthodox, the nation’s population is approximately ten percent Moslem, primarily secular Sunni, with a growing presence mostly in the Caucasus and southern regions.

The uneven distribution of the country’s shrinking population presents a serious challenge. Three-quarters of Russia’s people live in western Russia, in an area reaching from the Baltic Sea to the Ural Mountains, where greater Europe ends and Asia begins. East of the Urals lies vast Siberia and the Far East, regions sparsely populated and sharing borders with Central Asia, Mongolia and China. (Russia and China share a 2600-mile border, approximately the same length as the US-Canadian border). In the north, approximately two million Russians live within the inhospitable Arctic zone, where half the landmass is claimed by Russia. The melting of the polar ice cap in recent decades has given rise to a navigable Northern Sea Route (NSR)—a commercial opportunity, but also exposing Russia’s resources and submarine nuclear bastions.

Climate shifts are also having a negative impact on Russia’s geo-ecology. About fifty-five percent of the county’s barely habitable landmass is permafrost. Record heat spikes in 2020 have been melting frozen topsoil, kicking methane into the atmosphere and making gas lines and oil storage unstable. A huge diesel fuel spill (as much as 17,500 tons) in late May near Norilsk was dire enough to push Putin to declare a state of emergency. At the same time, forest fires—increasingly commonplace—raged in the Siberian taiga.¹⁸ Another limiting factor is the ever-present reality that only approximately eight percent of Russia is arable land; rural Russians must turn to micro-greenhouses to raise food. In spite of its huge size, Russia is hobbled by millions of square miles of unusable land.

Given all of the challenges outlined above, it is easy to understand how and why Moscow views the world through a prism of real, perceived and contrived existential threats—many of them rooted in geography and history.¹⁹ Frustrated by its longstanding uneasy relationship with the West, for example, Russia in recent years took to emphasizing its Eurasian destiny and heritage. Invocations of the near mystic but increasingly less influential political scientist Alexander Dugin abounded; Dugin’s 1997 book, “Foundations of Geopolitics” is sometimes referred to as Russia’s “Manifest Destiny” doctrine. On a more pragmatic note, Moscow has been trying to merge the defense aspects of its Central Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) with the more economic efforts of its Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Chinese-driven

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).²⁰ This renewed Eurasian-centric mindset on the part of Russia informs many of the policies and actions emanating from the modern Kremlin and is likely to continue to do so. Despite such, Russia's culture—primary Slavic ethnicity, Orthodox religion, language, alphabet, architecture, fine arts and philosophical underpinnings—still remains overwhelmingly western albeit with Asian strains and influences.

Ranking right up there with geography and demography is the powerful tug of Russia's long history—especially in the realm of warfare. From 1240AD, when the Mongols swept from the east to destroy and enslave “Rus,” (site of today's Kyiv), to the ghastly Nazi invasion from the West a mere 75-79 years-ago, Russians have been fighting existential enemies from every direction for many centuries. Much of the conflict is self-imposed; aggressive expansionism begets paranoia about revenge and retaliation. That said, the extraordinary toll on the country's population is all too real and many magnitudes beyond what most Americans can begin to comprehend. How does a country—including FSU states—process and mourn the loss of over forty million citizens to global war, internal revolution, civil war, famine, repressions, gulags and more—just in the period from 1914 to about 1954? No modern Russian family has been untouched by tragedy; many take great pride in stories of individual courage and moments of national triumph. The collective fallout and deep reactionary distrust feed a defensive and reactively xenophobic worldview that runs deep through the Russian mindscape even today.

A Survey of 2020 Russia and Its Periphery

One of the most obvious manifestations of Russia's defensive posture is the Kremlin's fixation on pushing out the country's borders—at least psychologically—to match the size and shape of the Soviet Union (FSU) before 1991. In 2009, then President Dmitry Medvedev referred to the region formerly in the FSU as its “privileged” sphere of influence.²¹ Moscow is in a perpetual state of disruptive, coercive “gray zone” conflict in those fourteen now independent nations. Its goals range from simply exerting influence regionally to disrupting efforts by any of these UN recognized states from joining Western economic and security institutions and organizations (NATO being a prime example). This endless shadow conflict occasionally erupts into outright aggression against its immediate FSU neighbors. The two best known examples are the preemptive invasions—aggression—of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014.

It may be easier to understand Russia's actions if you put yourself in the shoes of a senior security analyst or seasoned planner on the Russian General Staff in the 1990s, after the collapse of the FSU. Suddenly, Russia was no longer protected from the West by both a Soviet and Warsaw Pact buffer zone multiple hundreds of miles distant. By the early 2000s, the post-Soviet picture must have looked particularly alarming to the Kremlin: the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) were expanding, the US and allies had intervened in Kosovo, the Middle East and Afghanistan; sleeping giant China was awakening and in 2002 the US withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Treaty that was for Moscow a key security mechanism. Moscow's aggressive moves into Georgia and, later, the Ukraine were in part attempts to arrest this momentum and its fears about encroachment. The pushback strategy has been somewhat sidelined by the double whammy of the oil price shock and COVID-19 in the first half of 2020. The rivalry between Russia and the US in the West, for example, has settled for now into an edgy stalemate—playing out against a backdrop of weakening democracies and

growing authoritarianism, plus the breakdown of long-standing international strictures and convention. The Kremlin sees the West as the purveyor of liberal democratic and free market soft power—potent threats that must be countered and forestalled.

The Russian Military and Security Forces

The age-old strategy of saber-rattling is alive and well in Russia, albeit in a form that often depends more on hype than heft. The Russian military, though powerful and much improved since 2008, is not “10 feet tall.”²² Carefully orchestrated military exercises are designed to downplay the relative size and imbalance of the Russian military certainly when compared to the muscle of the US military enterprise and her allies. Despite displays of regular heavy air and naval patrolling, the Russian military power posture overall appears mostly defensive. Such displays typically deploy from under large, integrated but not impermeable “A2/AD” (Anti Access – Air Defense) air defense and missile belts protecting mostly coastal regional power centers, such as Kaliningrad, Crimea, Severomorsk and Petropavlovsk.²³

This is not to say that Russia doesn’t maintain an ace in the hole: its strategic nuclear capability. The nuclear Strategic Rocket Forces remain the ultimate guarantor of Russia’s survival and brings international stature and respect. But where the growing danger lies is in the Kremlin’s willingness to operate in an ambiguous non-linear “gray zone” where it can exploit the many well-known vulnerabilities that open societies manifest. It is in this shadowy cyber realm that Russia (and other nations) launch non-declared asymmetric operations to erode civil society, undermine credible governance and encourage illiberal politics. Fighting back is made all the more difficult by Russia’s inherent ruthlessness, a trait acquired through centuries of internal and external strife requiring both national and personal survival skills. Free societies that are not willing or able to be equally ruthless during official peacetime are often hamstrung when it comes to contesting and repelling the onslaught of corrosive messages and provocations lobbed across the dark space of the Internet or by unattributed assassination. Yet it is on this ‘battlefield’ where many future victories and defeats might well occur...without firing a shot or launching a missile.

Conventional Forces: Much Improved but Uneven Quality

In the meantime, the traditional Russian military, though increasingly flexible, capable and lethal—and numbering less than one million active-duty personnel—is limited by the demographic and economic realities of mainstream Russia. It is likely that its pre-mobilization numbers make it difficult to handle more than one major front-level mission with several other secondary missions at a time.²⁴ For backup, the regular military does have a pool to draw on, but it consists of largely inactive reserve forces. The National Guard (@250,000 members), formed in 2016 as a sort of regime protecting “Praetorian Guard,” the truncated Interior Ministry (MVD) (under 200,000), plus several hundred thousand more from the FSB (including border guards), SVR, security services and from Russia’s challenged civilian demographic all pull from its multi-tasked manpower pool. In any major conflict scenario employing its standing land, air or sea forces, the Kremlin’s strategy would almost certainly have to depend heavily on initial deception and surprise to gain a paralyzing asymmetric advantage in any first phase of war.

Another planning factor is that a solid 30 to 35 percent are one-year conscripts that are most numerous in the Land Forces. These represent mainstream Russian society and while mostly patriotic, present the Russian military with special challenges especially in the case of major out-of-Russia operations. A long-dwell occupation force astride an unsupportive population such as in the Baltics, rump Georgia or deeper into Ukraine would present considerable challenges if composed of numerous one-year conscripts.

Add to the mix the reality that Russia's "Gen Z" recruits are far more connected to the world and less easily led than during the Soviet era. The same applies to the civilian population. Controlling access to smartphones and news is virtually impossible in 2020. Even in the 1980s, when smartphones did not yet exist, bad news from the front eventually filtered back home and the Russian population grew increasingly agitated against the Afghanistan operation.²⁵ More recently, in 2018, thousands of mostly young Russians hit the streets to protest the regime's efforts to enforce decryption of the widely used "Telegram" internet app.²⁶ While attaining a fully professional "contract" force has always been an objective, the goal is hampered by economics, demography and competition from the large internal security forces. The Russian population is gradually aging, reducing the annual pool of available recruits, whether contract or conscript.²⁷ Finally, although the Russian military is generally held in high esteem, the conscript system still suffers black eyes, such as the hazing that included a mass shooting in the Trans-Baikal region last October.²⁸

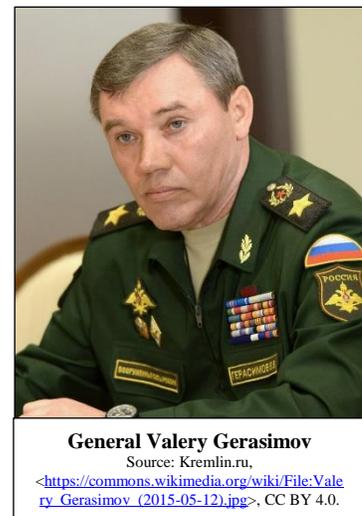
With the bulk of its first-line ground forces arrayed in the Western and Southern MDs, Russia's fleets operate out of all five districts, with the best platforms including strategic ballistic missile submarines (SSBN), assigned to the Northern Fleet MD from Severomorsk and the Pacific Fleet out of Petropavlovsk. Arrayed across the breadth of north-central Russia are the bulk of Russia's Strategic Rocket forces, consisting of hundreds of fixed and mobile strategic launchers, and airbases from which fly the majority of its heavy nuclear bombers. The operation and maintenance of these strategic forces requires the crème of Russian military personnel (other than elite specialized forces, such as the Airborne and Naval Infantry) within each branch.

Hard-Won Lessons? Or Heavy Baggage?

Russia's "troika" of major military operations from 2014 to 2020 has provided many hands-on lessons in deploying forces. The first involved the GRU "little green men" used in Moscow's stunningly successful takedown of Crimea in February 2014. Next came the messy proxy-led invasion of Eastern Ukraine culminating in unattributed formed units of Russian regulars deployed in early summer 2014. Lastly came, the full-blown, white blue and red flag-waving tactical to high-operational intervention in Syria in autumn 2015.²⁹ In all three cases, the entire spectrum of Russia's *non-nuclear military*—a distinction from calling such "conventional" military—was employed with varying degrees of success. While Crimea's occupation and illegal annexation was swiftly accomplished, the less popular and sapping struggle in eastern Ukraine continues without resolution. In Syria, Russia's carefully modulated operations supporting Bashar-al-Asad's regime are mired in a conflict that seems to have no end.

What Russian forces *are* mastering is how to conduct more flexible and mobile combined missions with coalition partners/proxies and joint operations, especially in Syria within its ground, air and maritime forces. Also, major advances in integrating enhanced C2, electronic warfare, drones and space supported operations using advanced cyber capability are noteworthy.

Although heavy air strikes inflicting heavy civilian losses in support of the Bashar-al-Asad regime grabbed headlines, Russia's disciplined ground forces in Syria have displayed a growing deftness in working within coalitions, and deconfliction with high-end foreign forces including—paradoxically—Americans, Turks and crossborder, the ever watchful Israelis. This multi-domain "New Type Warfare" (as the Russian military calls it) is part of the ongoing evolution of the "New Look" reforms begun by Chief of the General Staff General Nicolai Makarov (2009-2012) after the clumsy Georgia operation in 2008.³⁰ Since then, the Russian military and Defense Ministry have been capably led by Chief of the General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov and Minister of Defense Sergey Shoigu respectively, a rather competent, non-flashy tandem representing defense-military continuity and Putin's continuing trust during turbulent times. It was Gerasimov who was credited in 2017 for stating this key proven point:



"A great number of Russian officers of have gained combat experience. All the heads of military districts with their staff, combined arms armies, air and air defence armies and almost all the division commanders and more than half of combined arms brigades and regiments commanding officers have been involved in the Russia's grouping in Syria. They had combat practice in command and control, joint cooperation and complex surveillance, control and fire systems." ³¹

No Re-Start for New START?

Perhaps the most ticklish—and time-sensitive—military issue is nuclear weapons and arms control. The current New START treaty expires on February 5, 2021, unless it is extended by Russia and the United States. Russia's position remains unwavering.³² In December 2019, Vladimir Putin publicly declared (and subsequently reiterated):

*"I have already said, I want to repeat it again, until the end of the year we are ready to extend the current New START. Now, if they [the United States] send us by mail tomorrow or we sign and send it to Washington, let them just put a signature, but only if they are ready. So far there is no answer to any of our proposals and if there is no New START, there will be nothing at all in the world that is holding the arms race back and this, in my opinion, is bad,"*³³

The February 5, 2021 “expiration date” represents a critical crossroads in how strategic “Mutually Assured Destruction” (MAD) will be managed, with or without consultation, with or without the built-in verification procedures that New START provides. Russia's new Deterrence Policy—unveiled on June 2, 2020—outlines specifics on how and when Russia would employ nuclear weapons—including first use—in response to various nuclear and non-nuclear threats.³⁴

Complicating US-Russian strategic stability are new Russian and US weapons systems that are being fielded or are under development, which could nudge both nations into a full-out arms race if New START expires. Long-range precision conventional weapons, missile defense, and new technologies including fast evolving cyber, AI and space threats must also be addressed in any future treaty.

And then there's China, which was not a major factor when the original New START was implemented in February 2010. There is growing consensus among US and Russian arms control experts that all of these thorny topics—including China's steady growth as a nuclear power—could be addressed during any five-year extension period. That said, a potential fly in the ointment is China's (to date) implacable rejection of any arms control regulation.

The fate of the Open Skies Treaty is also in doubt. That treaty—heavy on verification methods—utilizes optically-equipped aircraft platforms and involves 34 nations, including numerous US allies and partners. Most want to maintain this treaty, as does Moscow, while Washington in 2020 has stated its intent to depart.

On March 10, 2020, Russia reaffirmed its support of the 191-nation signatory Nuclear Proliferation Treaty. Moscow, however, is quite concerned about Trump administration discussions about reenergizing nuclear warhead testing that would violate the spirit of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test Ban Treaty (1996), which the US has signed but not ratified.³⁵

Russian Security Seen through the Prism of its Five Military Districts

One useful way to review Russia’s current security issues in more depth is by examining each of the country’s five main Military Districts (MDs) (See map, below). By looking at the world through the prism of those five MDs spanning Russia’s broad periphery we can assess Moscow’s threat perception and how it has prioritized potential responses to those perceived threats. Then this survey will also briefly review activities in what can be called the Russian “Mid-Abroad” and “Far Abroad. These five military districts (wartime OSKs – Unified Strategic Commands) are in rough congruence to US Geographic Combatant commands (GCCs-COCOMs) in how they project their operations and influence throughout Eurasia, the Arctic and out of area. We shall begin with the Far East and Pacific.

Russian Military Security Posture

Far East MD

Status Quo

- Balance China
- Gateway to Pacific
- Defend Far East Flank

Southern MD

Revisionist Status Quo

- Project via Black Sea
- Secure Crimea
- Keep Georgia Frozen

Northern Fleet MD

Aggressive Status Quo

- Vast Arctic Flank
- Secure the NSR, resources
- Nuclear Bastion

Western MD

Revisionist

- No Further Expansion
- Destabilize Europe-NATO
- Defend Core Russia

Central MD

Status Quo

- Prevent Jihadist Spillover
- Maintain CA Influence
- Watch BRI



Russian Military Security Posture

Source: Designed by author from Russian MOD Map of Military Districts, Wikimedia commons
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/43/Military_districts_of_Russia_2016.svg



Eastern Military District EMD (Khabarovsk): Russia’s overall strategic posture in the Far East is *defensively status quo*. This immense area abuts China, the NW Pacific and eastern Arctic. Moscow has does not have territorial ambitions beyond retaining her end-WWII Kurile Island conquest, and Sakhalin Peninsula. With no major border changes

from the USSR’s break-up except some local Sino-Russia land swaps along the Amur-Ussuri Rivers near Khabarovsk in 2004, Moscow has been particularly proactive during Putin’s long stewardship in diffusing the major points of friction that existed between China and Russia in the latter 20th century.³⁶ This includes the current difficult coronavirus period where Beijing and Moscow have been working through some related policy differences.³⁷ Especially during the overlapping leadership period of Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Putin, Moscow and Beijing have entered a pragmatic partnership. The relationship stops short of an alliance, but appears substantial enough that both conceivably could coalesce into temporal military-political entente

if their existential threat perceptions aligned into mutually actionable circumstances. Despite increasingly aggressive Russian air-patrolling (that also occurred in the Cold War), and the Russian navy's recent dangerous "brushbacks" against US warships in the Arabian and South China Seas, this does not necessarily mean overt Russian military support if China were to push brinkmanship to conflict with Taiwan or the South China Sea. What it does risk is a difficult to control accident or incident that neither side wants.

With few "real" allies to call on, both Beijing and Moscow are loath to be strategically isolated, whether by hard power alliances or within soft power venues such as the United Nations (UN). As Dmitri Trenin succinctly writes from the Carnegie Moscow Center:



“In its bilateral relations with China, Russia should continue to adhere to the following formula: Russia and China must never act against each other, but they do not necessarily always have to act as one, thereby guaranteeing that neither power will stab the other in the back while refraining from imposing constraints on how the two states interact with the rest of the world. Russia and China are both major powers, even if their economic, political, and military resources and advantages differ. They must maintain a certain distance from each other; otherwise, friction becomes inevitable.”³⁸

The US in turn, has strong Pacific allies in Japan, South Korea and Australia-New Zealand and good relations with multiple other regional partners. Mystifying is Russia's impractical enmity to Japan. If the Kurile Island issue could be resolved, Russia could provide a strong regional economic partner, counterbalancing China.³⁹ As for North Korea, Russia remains carefully realistic and balanced about a relationship that dates back to 1948. Moscow is concerned foremost about North Korea's fundamental stability, given that the two countries share a narrow border. Although Russia does not officially support North Korea's nuclear program, it worries about the wound-tight nation imploding under the unpredictable Kim Jung Un.⁴⁰ While in general agreement with Beijing regarding Pyongyang, Moscow is not always in lockstep. Until the ruble inflated in 2014, Russia's Far East benefited from cheap North Korean laborers. Russia's relations with South Korea are carefully cordial with modest business, tourism and occasional low-profile military visits.

In pure geostrategic terms, Beijing and Moscow economically cover each other's major flanks, which allows Russia to focus resources and forces in the west and south, while China remains fixated on its Pacific periphery, Southeast Asia and islands, its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and related Polar Silk Road. Despite recent US military and political retraction worldwide, both nations share a core threat perception that the US—with its array of global allies and

military capabilities—continues to weaponize soft power liberal democratic and free market principles aimed at forcing regime change in Moscow and Beijing.⁴¹ This deep-rooted perception of US motives appears to be more menacing in the eyes of both regimes than straightforward US-allied military power.⁴²

Despite a deep mutual distrust based on a millennium of difficult coexistence, Russo-Sino cooperation is increasing politically, economically and militarily. The frequency and breadth of Chinese and Russian military interactions continues to deepen. In just the past several years several thousand Chinese and Russian ground troops exercised (but did not closely interoperate) during the major 2018 Vostok (east) and 2019 Tsenter (center) exercises in south-central Siberia. Warships sortied together in the Baltic, Mediterranean and Indian oceans. Perhaps the most arresting moment was when Russian and Chinese strategic bombers flew a mission together in July 2019, pushing into Japanese and South Korean Air Defense ID zones.⁴³

Russia is funneling natural gas into China as an initial part of a giant natural gas agreement—the Power of Siberia pipeline—that until recently has been more complicated and less satisfactory for both regimes than as originally envisioned.⁴⁴ The Chinese continue to bore their BRI toward the Caspian Sea and Europe through the independent southern lands of the former Soviet Union (welcoming officially supportive but privately skeptical Russian acquiescence) and via its maritime lanes through the Indian Ocean to the Middle East and Europe. China is also building the capability to navigate the mostly Russian Northern Sea Route (NSR), including the use of icebreakers. She is also helping extract LMG on Russia’s arctic Yamal peninsula nearby the Kara Sea where Exxon Mobil had a drilling joint venture with Rosneft as late as 2018.⁴⁵



For long-term Russian planners, the future must be murky regarding Beijing. China is an emergent superpower that outstrips Russia in all but nuclear weapons and natural resources. There is no feasible way that Russia could block Chinese influence and infrastructure by conventional terms, therefore Moscow must shape and manage burgeoning Chinese inroads, aspirations—and encroachment—by riding with Beijing. Long-term, China’s enormous population, coupled with its incessant thirst for resources, risk becoming perilous for weakening Moscow.⁴⁶

Not forgotten is Russia’s difficult regional history with China in which imperial Russian gained its resource-rich Far East via unpopular treaties from a moribund Qing Dynasty during the mid-1800s.⁴⁷ The two “made peace” with the long-ago treaties, but for countries with very long memories, the mid-1800s is not yet the distant past especially when recalling the brief but vicious Sino-Soviet border clashes along the Amur River near Khabarovsk in 1969.

Finally, the Chinese and Russians are utterly different on many fronts: historically, culturally, religiously, ethnically and perhaps most importantly, philosophically. The differences are clear, even along the shared border. Populations there live together but remain quite distinct from one another. They are collocated in some places but not integrated. Both Moscow and Beijing are acutely sensitive to any perceived US and allied governments attempts to try to drive wedges between the China and Russia. Doing so will only drive them more closely, malignly together. Instead, multiple natural wedges are already there and will deepen naturally if left alone by outside forces.

A Russian post-graduate student from the Far East who had spent time studying language and culture in a provincial Chinese city sums up the relationship:

*“It was a good experience and I was well treated. It was, however, like living on another planet.”*⁴⁸



Central Military District – CMD (Ekaterinberg): The CMD’s strategic posture in 2020 is *defensively* “*Status Quo*.” The huge Central Military District spans Russia’s Central Siberia, from the Urals east along the Central Asian borderlands to mid-Mongolia, and north to a long boundary along the Arctic. It is home to approximately 55 million citizens and encompasses over 40 percent of Russia’s landmass, including much of the country’s resource-rich heartland. This is also a very religiously and ethnically diverse region, with a large and mostly secular Sunni Moslem population living along the Volga River basin. To quote noted Russia scholar and former President of the Council on Foreign Relations, Leslie Gelb, the CMD’s primary role is to:

*“Orchestrate Russian engagement in local conflicts within Central Asia, to manage Russia’s bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and to supply reinforcements from its two armies either to the east or west in the event of war,” and that their purpose is to forestall instability that might spill over into Russia and to remind everyone that Russia’s forces in the region are mightier than China.”*⁴⁹

Russia’s priorities in the central region are to maintain secure borders, exert strong influence on the independent FSU Central Asian nations, deter the spread of jihadism from the south and be the principal transportation conduit between east and west. Any potential for reabsorbing these lands back into a greater Russia is gone. They’re not only developing their own identities, but China is extending its economic corridors through the vast region via the Belt Road Initiative. The peaceful and moderate turnover of power in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan after strongman Islam Karimov’s death in September 2016, and Nursultan Nazarbayev’s step-down in March 2019, muted mainstream fears that Russian forces would intervene after their passing—a scenario still worrisome in Belarus. As in most other FSU nations, most Central Asian citizens under 40 years old have little to no recollection of the USSR, and likely do not speak Russian. In fact, more are learning Chinese.⁵⁰ That said, canny Central Asian diplomats—master balancers—are wary of aggressive Chinese business practices including entangling “debt traps.” These diplomats see Russia—a neighbor they know all too intimately—as a security

guarantor for any extreme circumstance.⁵¹ The US is seen as a balancing entity but not anymore as a key regional power broker, after reducing its presence and investments in the region. Russian bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are mostly focused on maintaining stability in the face of chaos bubbling out what Moscow sees as future failed Afghanistan. Those bases also anchor Russian interests in the region.

While the Putin regime is officially supportive, some influential Russians are increasingly vocal about their concerns of deeper Chinese encroachment in former Soviet Central Asia. A major new airbase is being built in restive Xinjiang province, just across the border. Another airbase is rumored by Agence France Presse to be in the works in the extended Wakhan Corridor bordering China in northeast Afghanistan.⁵² Of special interest to the United States is Moscow's disruptive, dangerous relationship with the Taliban—a relationship that epitomizes Russia's attempt to disrupt US-backed missions and interests world-wide. The pairing should also be viewed as an effort by Moscow to build a pragmatic regional firebreak with what it perceives will be the likely inheritor of Afghan power, and overall future regional instability.

Further south, Russia maintains good relations (including major arms sales) with India, who also has increased its influence and investment in Central Asia and Afghanistan. This geostrategic area promises a new-age “Great Game,” involving a potential “Quadrangle” of regional “Great Power” interlocutors, including Russia, China, the US and India.



Southern Military District SMD (Rostov on Don): The 2020 Russian military posture in the Black Sea-Caspian regions is both *aggressively status quo* and *revisionist*. The SMD borders the fractious Caucasus region including NATO partner Georgia, that along with Ukraine remain sensitive hot spots for Russia and has a dense population along the Black Sea's shorelines.⁵³ In autumn 2020 Russia will stage its major quadrennial “Kavkaz” exercise with SMD as its focal point.⁵⁴

The SMD is the smallest of Russia's five military districts, but arguably the most complex. Wedged between the strategic Black Sea and hydrocarbon-rich Caspian Sea, the SMD has been an epicenter of Russian military activity since the break-up of the USSR. Both Chechen wars (1990s), the Daghestan counter-insurgency, the 2008 Georgian conflict and the stealth invasion of Ukraine's Crimea in 2014 were largely staged by forces operating out of this MD.

Moscow is still solidifying her connection of Crimea to the mainland via the recently built Kerch bridge, site of a major Russia-Ukraine maritime crisis in November 2018.⁵⁵ Russian forces also maintain presence in the Caucasus within Armenia, keeping an eye on simmering Nagorno-Karabakh tensions with Azerbaijan. Major fighting broke out in 2016, and deadly skirmishes flared up again in July, 2020.⁵⁶ Complicating the situation for Moscow is Turkey's support of Baku, Azerbaijan's capital.⁵⁷ Russian support for the non-recognized statelets of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, carved out of Georgia in 2008, require resources and effort, as does Ramzon Kadyrov's reactionary proxy leadership of ever volatile Chechnya. Dagestan, within Russia proper, still harbors radical Islamist jihadists who periodically erupt. Some worry that

Dagestan, indeed the entire region, will be a springboard for returning ISIS Jihadists from Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.⁵⁸ If so, more turmoil can be expected.

Across the Black Sea lies NATO's Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria. Russia regularly encounters US and allied air assets and naval forces sortieing through the strategic Dardanelles to support allies and partners. These timeless historic straits are also critical for seaborne supply to Russian forces in Syria and interests within the Mediterranean. The Caspian region also presents both opportunity and challenge for Russia, by providing maritime touch points with Iran, Azerbaijan and Central Asia. While patrolling these waters, the SMD's Caspian Flotilla has flexed its offensive capability; it surprised the world in late 2015 by launching long-range Kalibr cruise missiles over 900 miles into Syria.⁵⁹



Northern Fleet Military District (NFMD) – Severomorsk (Joint Strategic Command): Russia's security posture in the north is *aggressively status quo*. Russia has no realistic ambition to physically seize the high north but definitely intends to strongly control and influence the vast region.

About fifty percent of the landmass framing the Arctic is Russian. It is the longest contiguous border—and geostrategic flank in the world and as such presents Moscow with both opportunity and vulnerability. The large area is populated by no more than two million hardy citizens. Looking west to east is the ever ever-widening Northern Sea Route (NSR) that spans all of northern Eurasia from the Atlantic (Barents Sea) to the Pacific Ocean (Bering Sea). From the NFMD's icy terrestrial borders jut massive extended underwater formations, such as the Lomonosov Ridge, that thread their way deeper toward the northern pole and appear to reinforce Russian claims to rich Arctic waters and resources (Russia has cited the UN Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) of which the US is not a signatory to support its claims). One of the original eight members of the Arctic Council, Moscow is very active diplomatically in managing its northernmost interests. China's increasing interest in the resource rich Arctic, exemplified by its ambitious "Polar Silk Road," investment and construction of ice breakers, is officially welcomed by Moscow, but warily so.

The Arctic, and how it evolves over the next generation, is one key to Russia's long-term future. Equipped with more than 45 icebreakers of varying sizes, Russia is truly an "ice-faring" nation and continues to significantly increase its military capability in the region. The boost includes two recently deployed ground brigades, and a strong aviation and naval component—the most notable commitments since the drastic cuts and retraction of the 1990s. Most of the deployed assets give the appearance of being offensive, but in fact the bulk of these forces are in defensive mode. That orientation is especially notable, because the heart of Russia's strategic deterrent capability rests with its nuclear ballistic missile submarines (SSBN) bastions in the Barents and White Seas, and also with in the Far East's Sea of Okhotsk. A lattice-work of mostly former Soviet bases and search and rescue stations are being built or reestablished to manage combat operations, fishing and resource extraction, fighting oil spills, and even saving a sinking passenger liner plying treacherous Arctic waters.

The formation of the independent Northern Fleet MD began in 2015 and was just confirmed in 2020. The establishment of the NFMD signals Moscow's focus on maintaining close control of its perceived equities and vulnerabilities in the Arctic.⁶⁰ (See the affixed map that shows its location.) Spanning the western portion of the NSR, and covering the Barents-White Sea nuclear bastion, the NFMD projects strong maritime and air capability through the Barents Sea into the North Atlantic, where it can threaten NATO sea lines of communication (SLOC) with the US and Canadian homeland. Its Northern Fleet is the largest and most capable of the Russian Navy. Of special note are vulnerable NATO concerns that would likely be an early target in any major conflict: Russian undersea assets that could conceivably cut key C2 cables and links running along the ocean floor.⁶¹



Western Military District WMD (St Petersburg): The Russian posture in the West is *aggressively revisionist*, but less so than in 2014.

This survey intentionally left the WMD for last in order to give priority attention to Russia's tremendous Eurasian span and potential challenges. That said, this region and its traditionally contentious relationship to the West has been of great strategic importance for multiple generations. NATO—now up to 30 members—has long been perceived by Moscow as its core threat. The organization remains the main friction point between Moscow, Brussels, and Washington DC.⁶² Most Russians continue to believe that the alliance should have been disbanded after the Cold War and the bitter break-up of the USSR.⁶³ The European Union is seen as a soft power extension of NATO's alliance; most of the EU's 27 members are also members of NATO.

For centuries, Russia has had a turbulent history with the “west”—long stretches of hostility, punctuated by short periods of calm. In spite of a grandiose West-USSR alliance to defeat the horrific Nazis during World War II, the Russians blame US-NATO for breaking the USSR and the disbanding of the Warsaw Pact. Initially a useful platform for Russian Cold War aggression toward the West, the Warsaw Pact had also provided a perceived valuable geographic buffer zone for Moscow, Leningrad-St. Petersburg and Kiev. (Remember: Geography coupled with its tough history is key to the Russian worldview.)

The USSR's 1991 collapse was bitter for Russians, whether they lived inside the Federation or in one the new nations within its so-called Near Abroad. It's not surprising that the independent western FSU nations remain the most dangerous and volatile clash points for direct US-NATO and Russian interests. Fueling the flames, the Kremlin consistently portrays NATO as an existential threat—paradoxical, as no NATO nation is seeking conflict with Russia.⁶⁴

The Western MD's posture remains spring-loaded with enough forward conventional military power spear-headed by the formidable First Guards Tank Army, to achieve early offensive objectives in the Baltics, and/or Eastern Ukraine. Russia can readily call on its Baltic fleet, interdiction support in the North Atlantic from the NFMD and powerful tactical and operational aviation to create shock and havoc quickly. Electronic warfare (EW), cyber and space-based platforms would add to initial disruption. Assets from both WMD and SMD have heightened their attention in the Black Sea region, where NATO has raised its defensive profile the past several years. As previously noted, the Russian seizing of three Ukrainian vessels near

Kerch in November 2018, and holding their crews for almost a year, underscores the tensions in this region as well.⁶⁵

There was major angst in 2018 during the huge quadrennial Zapad (West) military exercises that the Russians would use the exercises to move large forces into prickly Belarus, and under some pretext, attack across the Suwalki Gap meeting forces from the heavily armed Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. While preparing for the worst case, others asked this question: What would the Russians actually achieve with such an unprovoked offensive? Such a move, when the regime was not existentially backed against the wall (which is when Russia would be most dangerous) would trigger NATO's Article 5, global condemnation, strangling sanctions and overall isolation—which combined would possibly lead to unsustainable international and domestic pressure on the Russian regime. Such a move might also give rise to a regional “coalition of the willing”—possibly with NATO partner nations—to intervene on the Baltics behalf.⁶⁶ Playing such high stakes, especially if threatening use of tactical nuclear weapons when under heavy conventional pressure, would not enhance Russia's overall position. If significant numbers of NATO and US personnel died at Russian hands, Russia would risk swift retaliation against vulnerable interests and assets across Eurasia and globally. Moreover, such an attack would demand a long, hostile occupation, something for which Russia's conscript-laced ground forces is not well configured. The Russian public would likely lose patience with the regime for embroiling the country in massive, lengthy conflicts. Plus, perhaps most importantly, for an autocratic regime that is also an oligarchic kleptocracy, such a high stakes adventure would simply be *bad for business*.

In the meantime, looming existential threats are on the rise around the world. If the current vicious and dangerous distraction in the West continues, wherein US-NATO and Russia fail in the next half-generation to achieve a credible, cooperative even if imperfect relationship, the world will quite simply become a more dangerous place for everyone.

And the Distant Rest of the World

The Mid-Abroad. This construct touches on how Russia is able to project power and influence on those non-FSU areas that it does not border, but can support with its own strategic lift and logistics. Syria, toward which Russia can sail and fly directly into, falls within its “Mid-Abroad” interests. Libya is on its edge. Russian sealift, supported by strategic aviation, can project and supply Russian forces in the Middle East and most of the Mediterranean. To sustain these logistics functions, the Crimea would be essential to the effort. Strategically situated near the Dardanelles, Crimea could provide not only basing capabilities, but maintain pressure on Turkey and control the straits. It is hard to envision a realistic scenario where Russia could fully support its contingents in a real crisis over an extended period on the edge of this support. Other than the eastern Mediterranean basin there are no other major nodes in this so-called “Mid-Abroad” that Russia could reliably support for an extended period without major effort.

The Far Abroad: These are locations where the Russians can reach via extended refueled flight or sea transport from MD ports and airbases. As such, they are extremely vulnerable to interdiction in any real military crisis with any modern global or regional military. At distant Latin American locations such as Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua, and countries in Africa such

as the Central African Republic (CAR), Congo, Nigeria, Sudan, Mozambique and several other states, Russian business and non-attributed paramilitary entities abound. Among these are the Wagner Group which is operating in numerous sub-Saharan countries and apparently was particularly badly handled in the CAR and Mozambique.⁶⁷ It is worth noting that more Russian soldiers serve in African peacekeeping missions than the US, UK and France combined.⁶⁸ Arguably the most brazen show of strategic Russian military reach into its “Far Abroad” was in December, 2018 when two strategic Backfire bombers flew to Venezuela, a bold move that created quite a sensation.⁶⁹

Summary

Based on numerous readings and conversations, Russians acknowledge major future security challenges and opportunities, both from a short- and long-term outlook. The collective weight of its multiple challenges as outlined in this short survey risks engulfing it over future generations. Moscow’s initially erratic response to Russia’s late-breaking coronavirus outbreak, coupled with simultaneous political demonstrations especially in Moscow and the Far East reveal how fluid 2020 has been for the Kremlin. How traditionally resilient Russia manages its formidable demographic, geographic and historical fundamentals with the core needs of its struggling economy, diverse, aging population and increasingly assertive neighbors across vast borders will determine its difficult national course.

For Moscow, there can be several future outcomes. Russia and the West can remain trapped in an ongoing and debilitating confrontation that weakens both, while other competitor nations rise. Or somehow, someday, Russia and the West, with Moscow and Washington leading the way can find a way out of the dangerously distrustful morass both find each other.

Highly unlikely as it may appear, perhaps Vladimir Putin, seemingly secure in his position until 2036, will become less confrontational and more expansive in his thinking, although NATO, and especially Ukraine, will weigh heavily with him. Or more likely, would he, the Kremlin, be more emboldened and even more revanchist. Western actions will have a hand in this. Meanwhile the 2020 American presidential election will certainly shuffle Washington’s, and by extension, Moscow’s political landscape, no matter the final result.

First and foremost in any effort to begin improving relations between Russia and the US, experts on both sides agree that must be a commitment to measurably reduce the most malign and poisonous activities in the cyber-disinformational “Gray Zone.”⁷⁰ Furthermore, Moscow gives, along with many in the US, allied expert and political community, high priority to maintaining a nuclear Arms Control regimen with an extended New START as its centerpiece—one that, over time, must address dangerous new technologies and the emergence of China. It would be quite energizing as scientists and astronauts in both countries muse, if the two experienced space-faring nations, the US and Russia, could somehow partner on a mission to Mars as they did on the international Space Station (ISS).⁷¹ This would be much more desirable and progressive than embarking on an expensive new space race building destabilizing ASATs.⁷²

Bilateral US and Russian competition is no longer the only game in town. The rise of China, and other growing powers such as India, are tipping the global scales away from the

traditional rivalries of the past. Further, undisciplined demonization toward China regarding coronavirus, deserved as it may be, may accelerate tensions and its actions. As we have reviewed Beijing's restless growth, its trading activities along the vast Chinese border with Russia, its Eurasian push economically and influentially into Central Asia via the BRI, and its declared Polar Silk road through the Arctic all put a long-term stress on Moscow, in spite of political platitudes, natural gas/resources and military training exchanges between them. Some Russians would grudgingly say that Russia is mortgaging its long-term future in the Far East with its careful embrace with China. India also, a cordial Russian interlocutor and a Chinese adversary, will be an increasing important balancer in the years ahead.

As the US does with its geographic COCOMs, how Russia manages its tremendous security dilemmas via its Eurasian-oriented MDs along its vast terrestrial periphery and abroad will be central to its safety, its prosperity and its future. How then will Russia-US relations evolve worldwide? Wouldn't carefully reopening "eyes-wide-open" contact between diplomats and militaries through the global, Eurasian spanning MDs and COCOMS be beneficial for both nations in this dangerously fluid world? The simple geography and global tensions implore such. Despite hardliners on both sides, numerous Russians and Americans (and allies) including seasoned practitioners participating in non-governmental diplomatic Track II dialogues would cautiously support such a reopening.⁷³ The current intensely distrustful environment malignly colored by destabilizing gray zone activities could inadvertently lead to unintended catastrophe anytime, anywhere. Those with long experience and context are acutely aware of this.

Is continued existence with fewer checks and balances in this taut state-of-being really in both nuclear-tipped nation's best interest as the world struggles beyond COVID-19? Only time will tell.

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