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U.S.-Russian Relations in 2030

Richard Sokolsky and Eugene Rumer

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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Publications Department
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20036
P: + 1 202 483 7600
F: + 1 202 483 1840
CarnegieEndowment.org

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Summary

U.S.-Russian relations are at the lowest point since the Cold War. Almost all high-level dialogue between the two countries has been suspended. There are no signs that the relationship will improve in the near future.

However, this situation is unlikely to last forever—even during the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union maintained a limited but meaningful dialogue; the two countries eventually will reengage, even if mostly to disagree, and new U.S. and Russian leaders could pursue less confrontational policies. What is the agenda that they will need to tackle then—perhaps as far in the future as 2030?

A Changing International Landscape

U.S. and Russian leaders in 2030 will face a global landscape whose key features will include the following:

- **A Bipolar+ World:** The United States and China will remain the biggest actors on the world stage, even if their ability and will to act globally over the next several years is significantly diminished as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, competing domestic demands on resources, and preoccupation with internal matters. At the same time, a number of significant state and nonstate actors will continue to exercise considerable influence in regional and global affairs. Eurasia will remain the strategic center of gravity in the world.
- **A Proliferated World:** The spread of new, lethal, and potentially destabilizing military technologies will further strain the global nonproliferation regimes, especially in the absence of new multilateral measures that strengthen the norms and institutions that limit the spread of weapons of mass destruction.
- **A More Conflict-Prone World:** The number and intensity of conflicts in and around the Eurasian continent will likely grow, and many of these could generate new dangers for Moscow as well as the United States.
- **A Strategically Unstable World:** The United States and Russia are developing weapons that are not constrained by existing arms control frameworks or subject to any rules or limitations. If left unregulated, these capabilities will increase the risk of an accident or miscalculation that could precipitate armed conflict.
- **A Technologically Transformed World:** Breakthroughs in various technologies (such as artificial intelligence, 5G networks, and renewables, and vaccines for new coronaviruses) are bound to widen America's competitive advantage over Russia.

Accommodation Unlikely

Over the next decade, the accumulated grievances on both sides and profound differences in interests, values, and conceptions of global order will all but rule out any notions of a sustainable partnership, a reset, or a significant improvement in ties. Domestic politics in both countries will also be a factor. Mutual accommodation, therefore, will be difficult. The U.S. foreign policy community views Russia as a hostile actor, and this view is likely to prevail for the foreseeable future. U.S. policymakers resent Russia's global activism and are increasingly concerned about its partnership with China. Likewise, Moscow's foreign policy community sees the United States as an aggressive, unilateral, hostile actor and a threat to Russia's domestic stability and claim to a prominent position on the world stage.

The Solution: Managing the Relationship

It is precisely because the U.S.-Russian relationship is likely to remain contentious that Washington and Moscow need to manage their differences. To steady the relationship, both countries will need to resume a high-level dialogue on issues that divide them. This effort would not be a panacea for the current troubles, but it could create opportunities, however limited, for cooperation. U.S. priorities for a renewed dialogue should be:

- avoiding a U.S.-Russian conflict in the Euro-Atlantic area and reducing the risks of inadvertent escalation;
- retooling strategic stability in response to the erosion of arms control and the development of new military technologies;
- cooperating to prevent other countries from acquiring nuclear weapons;
- preserving peace and stability in the Middle East, especially the Persian Gulf;
- preventing China from establishing hegemony over the Asia-Pacific region; and
- managing U.S.-Russian competition in cyberspace and in space.

To begin the slow process of rebuilding a degree of trust, the two countries should develop a framework for cooperating where their interests overlap and for managing disagreements before they escalate. In the U.S. approach, small, pragmatic steps should be given precedence over big, ambitious goals. Whether these opportunities can be exploited will depend on the leadership, will, and vision of leaders in both countries, who must overcome a wall of mutual mistrust and the resistance of publics, politicians, and legislatures.

It's tough to make predictions, especially about the future.

—Yogi Berra

Introduction

This paper peers around the corner from today's highly antagonistic U.S.-Russian relationship and imagines what the relationship might look like in 2030. It is all too easy to believe, as Dmitri Trenin has written, that things will get worse before they get even worse.¹ Yet is it possible to imagine the emergence of new dynamics in the bilateral relationship that might militate in favor of a sustained, strategic dialogue across a broad range of issues? Would such a dialogue encourage leaders at the highest levels to resolve or meliorate problems when interests converge and to manage competition skillfully when they do not? If so, what would it take for the two countries to get there?

The first section of the paper sets out global trends over the next decade that could bear on U.S.-Russian relations and U.S. interests in Russia. The next section makes projections about how these conditions, coupled with domestic political factors in each country, might affect the strategic directions of U.S. and Russian foreign policy. The final section sets out U.S. goals and priorities for the relationship across a comprehensive, albeit not exhaustive, basket of issues.

U.S. Grand Strategy and a Changing International Landscape

Over the next decade, the enduring geopolitical elements of American grand strategy—preserving U.S. dominance in the Western Hemisphere, preventing a hostile power from establishing hegemony over critical parts of the Eurasian landmass, and maintaining freedom of the seas—will remain unchanged. Russia can be a spoiler and a negative influence, though at times it has been a positive force on, for example, the nuclear challenges posed by Iran and North Korea. However, as troublesome as its current behavior is, Russia does not pose a hegemonic threat to America's influence in the Western Hemisphere, the Asia-Pacific region, Europe, or the Persian Gulf. The erosion of transatlantic ties and U.S. influence in Europe are mostly the results of shifting U.S. priorities, the anti-European animus of President Donald Trump, and changing political dynamics in Europe that Russia has been able to exploit to sow discord, rather than a Russian desire to become a hegemonic power in Europe. Continuity will mark America's conception of its core interests, but future administrations will have to pursue those interests and adapt their policies to changing international realities. The U.S. conception of its desired relationship with Russia in 2030 and the options for reaching it will also be shaped to a large degree by the changing global landscape.

Predicting the state of the world in 2030 is an impossible task, especially considering the risk of global health crises, environmental crises, and economic dislocations, as demonstrated by the coronavirus pandemic. However, it is possible to identify a number of major trends—economic, political, military, and societal—that likely will help shape the world of 2030. As a useful point of departure, this assessment relies on the National Intelligence Council’s *Global Trends 2030* report, which identified several “megatrends” that will affect the fundamental character of the U.S.-Russian relationship over the next decade.² The most important of these trends and their implications are highlighted below.

A Bipolar+ World

The balance of military and economic power will continue to shift more toward the East and the South in relative terms. The United States and China will remain superpowers in the major dimensions of power (that is, military, economic, technological, and diplomatic), but there will be multiple power centers—at both the international (like the United Nations) and regional levels, such as the European Union, India, Japan, and Russia in its self-proclaimed sphere of privileged interests—that are capable of exercising influence in specific areas. Nonstate actors like Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple—as well as transnational forces, such as pandemic diseases; jihadist terrorism; and populist, nationalist, and nativist movements—will affect global security and prosperity. This emerging world order might be best described as bipolar+. But whatever label is pinned on it, the most salient point for American foreign policy is that, even though China will be the main beneficiary of the global diffusion of power, other (albeit lesser) power centers will pose major obstacles to the emergence of a hegemonic power in the critical geopolitical regions of Eurasia.

It is not yet clear how such a shift would affect Russian foreign policy. The Kremlin has favored a multipolar configuration of global power ever since the enunciation of the Primakov doctrine in the mid-1990s. It is conceivable, therefore, that such a development could induce Moscow to act with more restraint because it will cease to see the United States as the main impediment to its preferred world order and to Russia’s desire for recognition as a major power. At the same time, however, Moscow could see a multipolar world as a blow to Russia’s standing on the world stage because there will be more major powers to contend with and, as a result, it will become relatively less important. The psychological blow to Russia’s ego could embolden the Kremlin to act with less restraint because it would feel compelled to assert itself.

A Proliferated World

The spread of new, lethal, and potentially destabilizing nuclear and non-nuclear military technologies—and their availability to a greater number of state and nonstate actors—would put the global nuclear nonproliferation regime under greater strain. Although the United States and Russia have not

always agreed on approaches and priorities, they share a common interest in preventing the further spread of nuclear weapons, and they have worked cooperatively together on the North Korean and Iranian nuclear challenges. Over the next decade, it is possible, though arguably not likely, that several countries—Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and perhaps South Korea and Japan—could seek to acquire nuclear weapons, while North Korea will continue to increase its nuclear weapons capabilities, and Iran could resume pursuit of a nuclear weapons program if the Iran nuclear deal (known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA) cannot be reconstituted in some form. Other emerging technologies such as synthetic biology could open the door to a wave of entirely new threats such as the creation of dangerous pathogens, including by nonstate actors. Such scenarios may present greater opportunities or imperatives for U.S.-Russian cooperation to halt the further spread of nuclear weapons and other dangerous technologies.

A More Conflict-Prone World

The number and intensity of interstate and intrastate conflicts in and around the Eurasian continent will likely grow, and some of these will occur in areas near or bordering Russia. Moscow attaches a high priority to maintaining its hold on and stability in (as it interprets stability—meaning no Western involvement) its immediate neighborhood, which it claims as its sphere of privileged interests. The wars with Georgia and Ukraine, as well as continuing Russian involvement in a handful of post-Soviet regional conflicts, have been motivated by the Kremlin's desire to enforce its sphere of influence. But in most if not all conflicts on Russia's immediate periphery, U.S. core interests will not be at stake, and a direct military confrontation between Russia and the United States as a result of those regional conflicts is unlikely. Moreover, the experience of the two militaries operating side by side in congested Syrian air space and successfully deconflicting their activities there suggests that Washington and Moscow have the will and the means to manage even the most complex situations responsibly.

A Strategically Unstable World

The United States and Russia are developing new and increasingly more sophisticated and lethal weapons, many of which are not constrained by existing arms control frameworks or subject to any rules or limitations. These systems include hypersonic boost-glide and cruise missiles (both conventional and nuclear-armed), cyber weapons, prompt conventional strike capabilities, antisatellite (ASAT) weapons, space-based missile defense weapons, and autonomous systems. The integration of these capabilities into U.S. and Russian arsenals and war-fighting plans will challenge the relevance of the remaining traditional U.S.-Russian arms control regime and increase the potential for both crisis and arms race instability. This state of affairs will also increase the risk of a war resulting from an accident or miscalculation and potentially compromise secure second-strike capabilities. Advanced missile defenses and conventionally armed hypersonic weapons, in particular, are poised to have a

profound effect on strategic stability. The United States and Russia have an interest in managing this dynamic, which could provide a basis for cooperation on developing new rules, restraints, and redlines to maintain strategic stability.

A Technologically Transformed World

The world of 2030 promises to be technologically far more advanced than it is today. It is likely to be a world where

breakthroughs in various technologies, notably artificial intelligence (AI), 5G networks, and renewables, are bound to have significant effects not just on the economies of Russia and the United States and the strategic balance between them but also on the global economy and the very nature of the international system. Such technologies—and, just as importantly, the ability to set the standards by which they are developed and commercialized—are already empowering state and nonstate actors as well as producing new winners and losers. Predicting the scale and scope of such technological change—including the development of new technologies to produce medical equipment, therapies, treatments, and surveillance and monitoring devices to contain and suppress pandemic diseases over the next decade—is well beyond the purview of this paper. However, it is possible to say that technological change could have significant disruptive effects for both Russia and the United States, and its likely consequences for the global system and national economies should be on the bilateral agenda of discussions.



Russia tests the warhead of the Avangard hypersonic boost-glide weapon (July 2018) (Photo by TASS/TASS via Getty Images)

Trajectories of U.S. and Russian Foreign Policy

Over the next decade, the accumulated grievances on both sides; profound differences in interests, values, and conceptions of global order; and domestic political conditions all but rule out any notions of a sustainable partnership, a reset, or a significant improvement in U.S.-Russian ties. In other words, the two countries will remain strategic competitors. How long they maintain this largely adversarial relationship—and how U.S.-Russian relations will evolve over the next decade—will depend primarily on global geopolitical trends and on domestic factors in each country that will influence their foreign policy priorities.

The United States

Regardless of the outcome of the 2020 presidential election, Russia will remain a contentious issue in U.S. domestic politics at least for the next several years and certainly longer if Moscow continues to interfere in U.S. elections. If Trump is reelected in 2020 and embarks unilaterally on a path toward better U.S.-Russian relations, he is certain to face strong congressional opposition to any attempts to normalize ties with Russia let alone lift even some of the post-2014 sanctions, particularly if no progress is made in resolving the conflict in eastern Ukraine. U.S. policy toward Russia will remain a product of a divided government that would limit the president's ability to take a more accommodating stance, although Trump would have some leeway to make superficial and largely symbolic changes in the relationship. Washington will remain preoccupied with handling domestic political divisions, recovering economically from the coronavirus pandemic, containing China, and scaling back the outsized military role it has played in the Middle East and Southwest Asia in recent decades.

If Trump is reelected, he will continue to eschew multilateralism and U.S. alliance relationships in favor of bilateral transactional diplomacy in the service of his more unilateral, nationalist America First agenda. If former vice president Joe Biden is elected, it is likely that, rhetorical deference toward a renewed liberal order notwithstanding, domestic and external constraints on U.S. power will limit the scope of American ambitions and appetite for transformational solutions to pressing international challenges. It will also take some time for a Biden administration to repair the damage to America's credibility and reputation caused by its predecessor. Washington will continue to struggle to forge a domestic consensus to commit major resources for ambitious foreign policy undertakings. Further, as poll after poll has shown, the majority of the American public, weary of foreign commitments, wants its leaders to focus more on domestic challenges that have a significant negative impact on the quality of life of many Americans.³ This will be especially true in an era that could be marked by the threat of more pandemics and the need to deal with the economic, political, and social problems they will engender.

As a consequence of these factors, the next few years and beyond will likely see the United States playing a less active and influential role in global affairs, though to what degree will depend in part on who is president. America's unipolar moment has passed; U.S. alliances are badly frayed; and the international system has been transitioning to a much more complicated, uncertain, and confusing global order, in which other global and major regional powers are rebalancing. The established Cold War-era and post-Cold War concepts of U.S. leadership, exceptionalism, and indispensability have yet to fully adjust to these new realities. The U.S.-Russian relationship is likely to remain contentious because Washington will continue to view Moscow's defense of what it sees as its legitimate interests—and Russian activism more generally—as evidence that Russia remains hostile to U.S.

leadership of the rules-based international order; to U.S.-fashioned solutions to global problems; and to the United States' enduring commitment to national sovereignty, independence, and adherence to democratic norms.

Russia

It is probably safe to assume that for the next decade and perhaps beyond the most likely scenario is that Russia will remain on its present course both at home and abroad, whether or not President Vladimir Putin remains in power. This prognosis is grounded in enduring features of Russian domestic politics and foreign policy that transcend Putin and any successor regime; these include pursuing authoritarian-leaning and statist policies and Russia's commitment to maintaining its great power status, expanding its global presence and influence, weakening transatlantic ties and Europe, dominating the former Soviet space, challenging Western norms of democracy and the rule of law, creating a more multipolar world, sustaining a partnership with China, and rejecting integration with Western-led security and economic structures.

Given these realities, Washington should focus on (1) carefully managing U.S.-Russian strategic competition, rather than seeking comprehensive resets, grand bargains, or other breakthroughs, and (2) reducing the risk of direct military confrontation by moderating competition, seeking cooperation to deal with common regional and transnational threats, and keeping open the possibility of rapprochement as global circumstances change.

Sources of Discontinuity

Although the status quo in U.S.-Russian relations is likely to continue for many years, it is not the only possibility. Four potential triggers could have a major impact on the trajectory of Russian foreign policy:

- However unlikely, it is still possible that an economic implosion and/or large-scale domestic unrest could have a debilitating effect on Russian domestic policymaking and foreign policy, as happened in the 1990s. Should this occur, the main challenge the United States and the West will confront would be a weak Russia—with a reduced capacity for maintaining internal order in the face of political, social, and economic pressures and for sustaining Russia's great power ambitions. Russia could respond to these circumstances by seeking accommodation with the West to create a more benign external environment while also seeking greater trade, technology, and investment ties.

- Another trigger would be an attempt by a future Russian leader to introduce major reforms similar to the Gorbachev-era perestroika and Yeltsin-era economic and political reforms. Such a turn of events would curtail the Kremlin's global ambitions and potentially even undercut its domestic policymaking abilities, leaving Russia in a state of domestic turmoil. The result would not necessarily be a more U.S.-friendly Russia, but a Russia more focused on its domestic challenges than on foreign adventures. However, just as Russia's domestic instability in the 1990s created problems for U.S. security interests, so could a future attempt at domestic reforms in Russia put these interests at risk.
- The third trigger would be the emergence, after Putin leaves the scene, of a more reckless or less skillful leader, resulting in a more precarious and dangerous relationship. It is unlikely that Putin's departure from Russian domestic politics will inaugurate a more pluralistic order inside Russia and a more accommodating stance toward the West in its foreign policy. Notwithstanding Putin's reputation in the West as an authoritarian and aggressive leader, his two decades at the helm and the pinnacle of global politics have reflected the fact that he is, on balance, a calculating and experienced decisionmaker, as evidenced by his decision not to employ Russian forces to help Syria defend itself against Turkish attacks. Any potential successor to Putin could inherit his negative qualities without the benefit of his experience. Domestic economic difficulties, even if they become more acute due to the coronavirus pandemic and low oil prices, may not act as a restraining factor on foreign policy ambitions, as was the case in the aftermath of the 2014 collapse of oil prices, which dealt a heavy blow to the Russian economy but did not contain the Kremlin's global ambitions.
- The final trigger would be serious Russian pushback against growing Chinese power, particularly its encroachment into the space claimed by Russia as its sphere of privileged interests. If China continues on its current trajectory, Moscow could ultimately face the choice between trying to restrain Chinese ambitions and pinning its hopes on Chinese goodwill to safeguard its interests. Even though it seems unlikely under the current circumstances, Moscow and Beijing could have a falling out over growing Russian fears about China's geopolitical intentions. This development would offer perhaps the best opportunity for the United States and Russia to set aside their animosity based on a shared interest in containing the expansion of Chinese influence.

It is important to recognize that Russian foreign policy is a product of domestic *and* external drivers. U.S. actions, both real and perceived, play an important role in shaping it. Thus, a great deal in Russian policy toward the United States may depend on the vision that future U.S. administrations adopt to guide America's global role and responsibilities over the next decade and the purposes for which U.S. power is used. One of the key questions, therefore, is whether Washington will be able to contain its impulses to become involved in situations where important Russian interests are at stake

(and acknowledge them as such) but where the stakes for the United States are not nearly as important. For example, it may be tempting for U.S. political leaders to offer rhetorical encouragement to popular movements or color revolutions inside Russia itself or in countries along Russia's periphery. Washington is likely to dismiss Russian interests in those countries as illegitimate manifestations of Russian neoimperialist ambitions, but its capacity to alter Moscow's policies is sharply limited.

A more sober acknowledgment of Russian leaders' anxiety about their own political staying power, as well as Moscow's enduring interests in these neighboring countries, combined with less ambitious U.S. rhetoric and greater openness to dialogue with Russia—none of which was evident during the 2013–2014 Ukraine crisis—could lead to a better outcome for all concerned. Not least, it could encourage Russia to take a less confrontational stance toward the United States and its core interests. Similarly, it is evident to all that, official policy notwithstanding, the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has reached its limit and as a practical matter the door to the alliance is closed for the foreseeable future for Ukraine and Georgia. A de facto recognition of this reality—without expressly reversing the 2008 Open Door pledge, but deemphasizing it in the alliance's statements—could pave the way toward a more stable security environment in Europe. This course of action does not preclude bilateral U.S. and allied security assistance to Ukraine and Georgia. As one expert has observed, “by moderating the claims of American exceptionalism and diminishing the role of rules in regulating international behavior, it would encourage the emergence of a concert of great powers and the co-existence of different value systems as the way of creating order and fostering peace.”⁴ If Washington follows this path, the Russian argument goes, it may find a more accommodating Russia.

A great deal of skepticism is warranted, but it will be worth keeping a close eye on the views of future Russian leaders. At a minimum, however, while reestablishing meaningful communications between the United States and Russia is not a panacea—and at times has not been helpful—a sustained, high-level strategic dialogue would show Russia that the United States takes its interests seriously and could start to chip away at mutual mistrust. Real accommodation would require both countries to act with greater consideration for each other's interests and sensitivities. In most scenarios, however, the United States and Russia appear likely to sustain an adversarial relationship even if they have fewer resources and/or less resolve for ambitious foreign policy undertakings. But whether or not these or more favorable circumstances prevail, what would the United States want out of its relationship with Russia by the year 2030?

U.S. Goals and Priorities

Resuming a productive U.S.-Russian strategic dialogue will be difficult. To get traction for the talks and begin the slow process of rebuilding mutual trust and confidence, the two countries should develop a framework for cooperation to deal with areas of common or compatible interests and common threats, as well as for managing disagreements. Given the scale and scope of the challenge and the baggage that both sides will bring to the table, small pragmatic steps should be given precedence in the U.S. approach over big, ambitious goals. As relations and other circumstances permit, the priority among these should be: avoiding a U.S.-Russian conflict in the Euro-Atlantic area and reducing the risks of inadvertent conflict and escalation; retooling strategic stability in response to the erosion of arms control and the development of new military technologies; cooperating to prevent other countries from acquiring nuclear weapons; preserving peace and stability in the Middle East, especially the Persian Gulf; preventing China from establishing hegemony over the Asia-Pacific region; and managing U.S.-Russian competition in cyberspace.

Avoiding U.S.-Russian Conflict

Avoiding a conflict between the United States and Russia, and especially nuclear war, should be the paramount U.S. priority in the bilateral relationship. Arguably, there is a much greater risk of an inadvertent war between the two countries arising from an accident or miscalculations and miscommunications—for example, a military reaction to a false warning of attack—than from a premeditated attack.⁵ The highest risks are in the Baltic and Black Sea regions, where alliance members are most vulnerable to an attack with little warning and NATO and Russian forces operate in close proximity. By the end of the next decade, if not sooner, the alliance and Russia should mutually aspire to deterrent and defensive force postures in both regions that have eliminated or reduced to near zero the risk of a conflict between them. However difficult to imagine, restoring a measure of trust is necessary to improve the bilateral relationship. One way to do this is for the United States and Russia to restore a serious and strategic high-level dialogue, focused initially on building mutual security in the Euro-Atlantic region.⁶ The two sides should address several questions.

- How worried is Russia about the risks of escalation and inadvertent conflict in the European theater? If there is concern about the impact of new weapons and technologies, what measures would Moscow consider desirable and feasible for addressing the challenge of short warning times available to the national command authorities to deescalate a crisis before it precipitates armed conflict? What are Moscow's views about how a crisis between NATO and Russia might begin and what different escalatory paths it could take? How are changes in military, surveillance, and other relevant technologies affecting Russia's crisis calculations?

- Should the United States and Russia, in addition to maintaining strict compliance with their obligations under Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) agreements, consider more robust transparency measures on force movements and notifications of exercises; restrictions on the size, nature, and location of military exercises; and geographic limits on where armed forces and weapons that can strike deep into NATO territory and Russia can be deployed? Should they consider new arms control negotiations in Europe that would constrain deployments of destabilizing conventional weapons systems?
- How can existing channels of communications for crisis management be upgraded to mitigate the risks of confrontation? Should the two sides, for example, create new bilateral civilian-military channels, starting first perhaps at the operational level, that would work out and test new procedures for crisis management?

Maintaining Strategic Stability

Strategic stability, defined here as a condition in which neither the United States nor Russia has an incentive to strike first with nuclear weapons, has been an enduring feature of the U.S.-Russian nuclear relationship for well over sixty years. In fact, mutual vulnerability to nuclear attack, based on secure second-strike capabilities, has proven to be highly resilient in the face of significant changes in strategic force postures and military technologies. The United States and Russia share a common interest in maintaining strategic stability and eliminating all incentives for the use of any nuclear weapons—a goal that will become increasingly difficult to achieve in the face of emerging weapons systems and technologies that could destabilize the nuclear relationship.

In the near to mid-term, the risk of a premediated, large-scale nuclear attack is extremely low. In the longer term, however, a confluence of developments—the end of U.S.-Russian strategic arms control if the *New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty* (New START) is not renewed and the incorporation of new and potentially destabilizing technologies into each country’s conventional and nuclear arsenals—could have far-reaching effects, eroding strategic stability. More critically, it also could increase the risk that an accident or blunder could trigger a conventional conflict between the two countries with the potential for nuclear escalation.

By 2030, if not sooner, it is conceivable that the United States and Russia might be open to establishing a new regime to rebuild and adapt the collapsing U.S.-Russian arms control architecture. Such a structure would help maintain strategic stability as both countries seek to incorporate cyber weapons, strategic conventional weapons, hypersonic missiles, space-based missile defense interceptors, ASAT weapons, and AI systems into their force postures and doctrines. This goal should become the central focus of a renewed high-level U.S.-Russian dialogue on the requirements of

strategic stability and nuclear risk reduction. For this dialogue to be meaningful, it would need to address the following questions.

- How do Russia and the United States define the short- and longer-term risks to and requirements of strategic stability? What do Moscow and Washington see as the most serious potential threats to strategic stability and how do they propose to address these threats? Does Russia, for example, still have the same concerns that the deployment of a U.S. strategic missile defense system would eliminate its second-strike capability after a U.S. first strike? How worried are both countries about the risks of nuclear escalation arising from an incident or accident involving their military forces? Do they believe it is possible to maintain strategic stability without addressing conventional forces and missile defenses?
- What are the implications for strategic stability of not having the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty? Rather than engage in an unconstrained buildup of INF-capable systems on both sides, would it not be better for mutual assured security if both banned the deployment of INF-prohibited missiles from Europe and agreed on transparency measures to verify this commitment? Should this class of weapons be at least limited if not banned under a future agreement?⁷
- Whether or not New START is extended, should the United States and Russia try to negotiate a successor treaty—or more likely a set of agreements, confidence-building measures, and other mechanisms—to address both strategic nuclear forces and other nuclear and conventional systems? Examples of the latter include strategic conventional weapon systems, nonstrategic nuclear warheads, INF-range weapons, hypersonic boost-glide vehicles and cruise missiles, missile defense systems, cyber weapons, and space weapons. At what point and how should Washington and Moscow seek to bring other nuclear-weapons states into the arms control process? What scope do the United States and Russia see for concrete, practical step-by-step measures to bolster strategic stability and deterrence outside the formal arms control treaty framework through, for example, unilateral or mutual reciprocal changes in nuclear force postures, increased transparency (with, for example, enhanced data exchanges), development of norms and rules of the road, and related confidence-building measures?
- Would the United States and Russia support changes in nuclear policy and posture that would more directly flow from the principle declared by Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985 that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought?”⁸ Should both Washington and Moscow move away from nuclear postures, such as launch on warning or launch under attack, that are unnecessary and potentially dangerous if both countries predicate strategic stability on secure second-strike capabilities and mutual assured destruction?⁹

- How would the United States and Russia regulate or establish norms for the use of cyber weapons, AI, and other new technologies to attack strategic early warning and command-and-control (C2) systems? Could such regulations or norms be verified—or could they nonetheless provide some measure of increased confidence even if not fully verifiable? Should the United States and Russia consider banning the deployment of space-based interceptors or directed energy weapons for missile defense and ASAT weapons? Should there be rules of the road for the operation of satellites and other objects in space? If a prohibition or limitations on these weapons systems are not feasible, what mutual agreements on unilateral defense programs should be considered to regulate military activities in space?

Preventing the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction

The United States and Russia had a robust nonproliferation agenda before their relationship cratered in 2014 and the United States pulled out of the JCPOA. Both countries share a common interest in preventing the growth of more nuclear-weapons states and keeping weapons of mass destruction out of the hands of terrorists. Moreover, very few nonproliferation problems can be resolved without U.S.-Russian cooperation or Russia's tacit acquiescence.¹⁰

- **Regional challenges:** Over the next decade, North Korea will continue to pose a growing nuclear weapons threat to the region and possibly the United States. Iran has the potential to return to an active nuclear weapons program if it breaks free from all JCPOA restrictions and there is no successor agreement. Russia has played a positive role in nuclear negotiations with both countries and particularly Iran, where its role was essential, and it will likely be constructive if the United States seeks to reenter the JCPOA or negotiate a new agreement. The United States and Russia have a mutual interest in the denuclearization of North Korea, with potential for cooperation should serious negotiations ever get off the ground. Both countries also have a common interest in stemming the flow of technology to both North Korea and Iran that would contribute to their capabilities. That said, Russia's control over exports of sensitive equipment and technology has been uneven.
- **Civilian nuclear cooperation with third countries:** Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey are in various stages of developing and operating civilian nuclear reactors, and other countries will have incentives to develop civilian nuclear power. Thus, it will be more important than ever for Moscow, which has pursued robust civilian nuclear cooperation programs abroad, to adopt more stringent standards in providing third countries with the full nuclear fuel cycle of enrichment and reprocessing capabilities. A renewed dialogue should encompass consultations on the conditions for nuclear supply as well as on enhancing the safety of nuclear reactors and finding solutions to the problem of nuclear waste.¹¹ The United States,

France, and other countries are getting out of the civil nuclear export business, which Russia (and China) will dominate in the future. It is not clear that Moscow will feel obligated to embrace and strengthen existing norms, but it does not want to see the emergence of new nuclear-weapons states.

Strengthening Regional Security

Historically, maintaining stability and order in a more multipolar world has depended on preserving a balance of power in at least three regions of geopolitical importance: Europe, the Persian Gulf, and Northeast Asia. Over the next decade, the most likely scenario for Europe is the continued fracturing of a united and powerful European bloc, with Moscow all too eager to exploit existing divisions. Under the circumstances, the United States would have to play the role of shoring up Europe, and there would be little scope for U.S.-Russian cooperation in helping a fractured Europe overcome its differences to maintain a European balance of power. Yet it is worth exploring with Russian interlocutors how they can envision a breakdown of the long period of stability that has prevailed across Europe in the coming decade as well as their preferred vision for the continent.

In East Asia, Washington has witnessed the steady growth of the Russian-Chinese partnership. A number of U.S. policies have driven the two countries closer together, including American military interventions in Kosovo, Iraq, and Libya, which both countries viewed as regime change, democracy promotion, and support for color revolutions. Presently, Russia is helping China augment its power by providing advanced weapons and military technology and diplomatic support for China's positions on North Korea and the South China Sea. By signing on to an asymmetric partnership with Beijing, Moscow is adjusting to the reality of the continued accumulation of Chinese power in Asia. Russia is poised to become increasingly dependent on China as a source of technology and investments. At a minimum, Washington should avoid policies that drive the two countries closer together in ways that are counterproductive to U.S. interests. There are also potential areas for U.S.-Russia-China trilateral cooperation, such as advancing denuclearization in North Korea and broader P5 efforts (among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council) to strengthen the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

In the Middle East, there may be opportunities for U.S.-Russian cooperation in the Persian Gulf, where both countries have an interest in keeping nuclear weapons out of the hands of Iran and Saudi Arabia and in establishing an equilibrium between these two countries to manage their debilitating, destabilizing quest for regional supremacy. One long-term vision that both Washington and Moscow should support—and where Russia has already shown interest with its formation of the Russian-Arab Cooperation Forum—is the creation of a new and comprehensive security forum in the Persian Gulf that would bring together all the key regional states including Iran and outside

powers to address transnational issues. These include maritime security; illicit trafficking; environmental remediation; management of water resources; responses to natural disasters; measures for risk reduction, conflict resolution, and dispute settlement; and naval confidence-building measures.¹²



Competition in Cyberspace

The United States and Russia are looking at many years of unrestrained competition in

the cyber domain. Arms races typically do not end well, and both countries' cyber capabilities are likely to experience dramatic growth. U.S. vulnerabilities are likely to outpace Russia's because of America's greater economic and social reliance on the internet. The conditions for establishing norms of conduct, verification, or (more likely) confidence-building measures, as well as any sense of common purpose over, for example, safeguarding strategic C2 systems, will be dangerously slow in materializing. It will be hard to break out of this trajectory unless and until something really bad happens that shakes both sides out of their current stances. Finding ways to manage competition in the cyber domain is of paramount importance for both countries.

*Russian and U.S. military vehicles along the M4 Motorway in Syria monitor the reopening of the road to civilian traffic (May 2020)
(Photo by DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP via Getty Images)*

Expanding Economic and Trade Relations

The two-way volume of trade between the United States and Russia (roughly \$28 billion in 2019) is miniscule when compared to U.S. trade with China (around \$560 billion in 2019).¹³ The idea from the 1990s and early 2000s that Russia and the United States could develop an energy partnership based on Russian oil has lost its saliency as the United States has emerged as the largest oil producer in the world, and as Russia stares at the possibility of a long-term decline in its energy industry.¹⁴ The two appear more likely to be competitors than partners in the energy sector. The Russian economy remains nondiversified despite repeated promises to diversify: hydrocarbons account for—depending on how one [calculates](#) it—anywhere between 25 percent and 70 percent of its gross domestic product.¹⁵ The combined effects of climate change, the development of green technologies, and the

proliferation of oil and gas producers promise a bleak future for the Russian economy absent a major push to diversify, which by most accounts is not forthcoming. And without diversification, the prospects will remain limited for expanded U.S.-Russian trade and economic relations. Further, the economies of the two countries are not complementary, and indeed there is competition in exports for oil, gas, agricultural products, and arms. As long as this situation persists, it will be extremely difficult to expand U.S.-Russian trade; cooperation on joint economic ventures involving technology, energy, and space; and American foreign direct investment in Russia.

Conclusion

For the first twenty-five years of the post–Cold War period, the U.S.-Russian relationship was characterized by a mix of competition and cooperation. Since 2014, the balance between these elements has shifted dramatically toward competition, and this trend is likely to continue for the indefinite future. Nonetheless, changing global trends and domestic political dynamics could pry open the door to greater possibilities for cooperation. Whether these opportunities can be exploited will depend on the leadership, will, vision, and courage of leaders in both countries, who must overcome a wall of mutual mistrust and the resistance of publics, politicians, and parliaments. It is not too early to ask what the United States and Russia should want from each other over the next decade, what kind of bilateral relationship the countries would like to have in 2030, and how they could get from where they are today to the U.S. preferred end state should circumstances permit.

About the Authors

Eugene Rumer is a senior fellow and the director of Carnegie's Russia and Eurasia Program. Prior to joining Carnegie, Rumer was the national intelligence officer for Russia and Eurasia at the U.S. National Intelligence Council from 2010 to 2014. Earlier, he held research appointments at the National Defense University, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, and the RAND Corporation. He has also served on the National Security Council staff and at the State Department, taught at Georgetown University and the George Washington University, and published widely.

Richard Sokolsky, currently a nonresident senior fellow in Carnegie's Russia and Eurasia Program, worked in the State Department for six different administrations. During his tenure at State, he was the director of the arms control office from 1990 to 1997 and a member of the Secretary of State's Office of Policy Planning from 2005 to 2015. He has also been a senior fellow at Carnegie, the RAND Corporation, and the National Defense University. His writings have been published in numerous outlets.

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Notes

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