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SWOT Analysis of U.S.–Russian Relations

By Alexander Sergunin and Valery Konyshov, St. Petersburg

Abstract:

This article presents a Russian perspective on U.S.–Russian relations. It identifies the key strengths and weaknesses as well as the opportunities and threats in the relationship. While the conclusion is cautiously optimistic, there are major areas of concern dividing the two countries.

Is the Pessimism Warranted?

Until recently, the leitmotif of discussions examining the state of U.S.–Russian relations was: Who (again) lost Russia? and Why was it lost? The whole tone of the discourse was quite pessimistic or even alarmist. However, with the Iranian nuclear program deal and the beginning of cooperation between Moscow and Washington on fighting the Islamic State (ISIS), the narrative describing the need for a new U.S.–Russian “reset” is gradually reemerging. Whether one is pessimistic or optimistic, it is clear that U.S.–Russian relations are at a turning point again. In the current situation, conducting a SWOT analysis of U.S.–Russian relations will help clarify the issues.

According to business planning theory, SWOT analysis is a summary of a company’s current situation. The strengths and weaknesses of a company are identified, along with opportunities and threats in its environment. SWOT analysis makes it possible for analysts to measure the current state and future potential of a company. If the strengths and opportunities outweigh the weaknesses and threats, the company is in a good position. And vice versa a company is in a bad situation if the weaknesses and threats are dominant. SWOT analysis can also be used to build strategies for the future by considering how weaknesses can be turned into strengths, and how threats can be turned into opportunities.

Strengths

To begin our analysis from *strengths*, it should be noted that U.S.–Russian relations are based on a solid historical background and rich cooperative experiences that can be helpful not only for survival in difficult times but also for developing forward-looking strategies. For example, both countries never stopped a dialogue seeking to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The Iranian nuclear deal reached in July 2015 has only confirmed this fact and demonstrated the cooperative potential that the two countries have in this sphere. The U.S. and Russia managed to observe bilateral arms control regimes, including their obligations to reduce strategic offensive armaments. Such cooperation allowed the two largest nuclear

powers to maintain the stability of the global strategic system.

Moscow and Washington have a common view on international terrorism, believing that ISIS now is the main security threat not only to the Middle East, but also to humankind at large. The Pentagon and the Russian Defense Ministry have established direct links to coordinate their military activities in Syria and exchange intelligence data. In mid-December 2015 the UN Security Council unanimously passed a resolution strengthening legal measures against those doing business with terrorist groups, targeting first of all ISIS. The resolution was jointly sponsored by the U.S. and Russia and came just days after U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry’s visit to Moscow. Following talks, Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that Russia and the U.S. have agreed on a number of “critical” issues, particularly with regard to Syria.

The U.S. economic and political sanctions against Russia did not affect research and education cooperation between the two countries. For example, Moscow and Washington continue their cooperation in exploring outer space, including the use of the International Space Station (ISS). The Russian *Soyuz* rockets remain the only vehicle to bring American astronauts both into orbit and back to earth. In some fields, such as Arctic studies or climate change, U.S.–Russian academic cooperation is even growing.

Despite the current tensions between the two countries, the institutional basis for bilateral relations is still there. For example, the U.S.–Russian Bilateral Presidential Commission was created in 2009 as part of the “reset” of relations with Russia. The commission established working groups across a range of issues. The effort was premised on the assertion that the U.S. and Russia had “many common national interests” and would embody “friendship, cooperation, openness, and predictability.” Although the commission’s activities were almost frozen with the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, it can be reactivated if bilateral relations improve with time. Another – multilateral – institution, the NATO–Russia Council (which is now semi-dormant as well), could be helpful in intensifying the U.S.–Russian dialogue in the international security sphere.

Weaknesses

In terms of *weaknesses*, at the top of the list is the lack of trust between Moscow and Washington. Even prior to the Ukrainian crisis President Obama had repeatedly expressed his discontent with both the very fact of Vladimir Putin's return in 2012 and the Kremlin's domestic and foreign policies under the third Putin administration. The Ukrainian crisis has completely destroyed any residual trust that remained between Moscow and Washington. The latter has openly taken a course toward Putin's international isolation and even seeks eventual regime change.

The lack of mutual trust is compounded by mutual misperceptions. According to Mark Galeotti, Professor of Global Affairs at New York University, "Neither of them [Obama and Putin] understands each other at all. They come from such radically different worlds. Both of them have demonstrated a failure of imagination: The problem is that Obama has continued to try to understand Russia by imagining that Putin is like him, so that there is an Obama in the Kremlin. And likewise, Putin is assuming there is a Putin in the White House. This is such a tragic problem, because it means both sides get each other wrong so consistently. This is a problem of perception and intellectual empathy."¹

In addition to the problems between American and Russian leaders, the country's political and security elites also misperceive each other's intentions. For example, Russia's military and intelligence communities see NATO enlargement as a major threat to the country's national security, while Washington views this process as an expansion of democracy on the European continent and an instrument to strengthen the regional security system. On the other hand, we have the U.S. Defense Secretary and other top-ranking military officials telling the Congress and mass media that Russia is an existential threat to the security of the U.S. and its allies in Europe.

Given this overall atmosphere in their bilateral relations, the U.S. and Russia still disagree on a number of regional conflicts – first and foremost, the Ukrainian one. Washington refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of Crimea's "happy reunion" with Russia, calling it annexation. The U.S. insists on stopping Moscow's support for the Donbass rebels and withdrawal of the Russian troops from East Ukraine, albeit the Kremlin does not recognize their presence in the region. Washington also accuses Moscow of not being willing to apply pressure on the Donetsk and Luhansk breakaway republics to fully implement the Minsk accords while the Krem-

lin blames the White House for the lack of pressure on Kyiv for the same purpose.

The lack of progress in resolving the Ukrainian crisis entails the prolongation of the Western sanctions against Russia which, in turn, further poisons the atmosphere of U.S.–Russian relations and makes their amelioration impossible.

Among other weaknesses, the low level of economic and trade interdependency between the U.S. and Russia is a factor. Potentially, the two countries could be promising partners in areas, such as the development of the Russian high tech industrial sector and off-shore oil and gas industries in the Russian Arctic. But these plans have not been fully implemented to create an interdependency mechanism that could make economic sanctions impossible or too costly for both sides.

Opportunities

Turning to the *opportunities* for U.S.–Russian cooperation, the most obvious place to begin is the "burning issue" of the Syrian conflict. The immediate rationale for Putin's decision to become involved in Syria's civil war was to save Assad's friendly regime, which was in deep trouble, prevent a Western military intervention and contain the threat of Islamist terrorism away from Russia's borders. At the same time, it was a signal to the West that regime change through "democracy promotion" (which, in the Kremlin's view, usually results in a complete mess) in countries of interest to Russia would no longer be tolerated and even reversed by force if necessary.

However, along with these tactical goals, Putin's "Syrian Gambit" had some global strategic objectives. Particularly it aimed at transforming Russia's relations with the West on its terms to regain Russia's rightful place as a global power. Putin realized that it had become bogged down in the Ukrainian crisis, where Russia could not achieve its global status and reestablish Russia's geopolitical parity with the U.S. Putin needed a stage where vital U.S. interests were at stake and where Moscow could demonstrate its capabilities as a global player to be taken seriously by Washington. Syria was a perfect fit.

Overall, Putin's "master-plan" worked. As Kerry's 15 December 2015 visit to Moscow demonstrated, the sharp divergence in the positions of the U.S. and Russian governments on the solution of the Syrian conflict has now ended. The Obama administration in fact has accepted Russia's position: the U.S. will no longer insist on Assad's immediate departure, his fate will be decided when a military victory over ISIS is achieved. The two countries continued their work on the roadmap of Syrian political transition in the Vienna talks. The U.S.–

1 Pavel Koshkin. "Some you win, some you lose: Russia's foreign policy in 2015," *Russia Direct*, 2015, November 30.

Russian dialogue on Syria is not a “one-way street.” For Russia, U.S. support is also instrumental in pressuring and restraining the ambitions of American allies in the Middle East, especially Turkey and Saudi Arabia. As Kerry noted after his Moscow visit, good things happen when the U.S. and Russia work together.

Putin’s move in Syria can have some positive implications for solving the Ukrainian crisis. It seems that in exchange for Russia’s continued support in fighting ISIS and Assad’s eventual departure, the U.S. is signaling its readiness to pressure Kiev to fully implement the Minsk agreements, particularly their provisions on amnesty, autonomy and recognition for the eastern regions of Ukraine. During his December visit to Kyiv, Vice-President Joseph Biden even was talking about the future of Ukraine as a federative state (the point that the Kremlin made from the very beginning of the Ukrainian crisis). There is also a growing understanding among the American elites that the Ukrainian conflict should be resolved in a way that allows the conflicting parties to save face. As Galeotti put it: “After all, we are not taking about granting Russia sovereignty and suzerainty over Ukraine, we are really talking about allowing Moscow to withdraw with a degree of pride and tact.”²

The U.S. and Russia still have a lot of opportunities for cooperation in the WMD non-proliferation sphere. Along with the need to monitor Iran’s denuclearization, Moscow and Washington have the North Korean nuclear programs on their agenda – another difficult problem to be solved.

As the recent UN Conference on Climate Change in Paris showed, U.S.–Russian cooperation is crucial for success in this field. Washington and Moscow have jointly supported the new agreement limiting greenhouse gas emissions and pledged to work hard on the ratification of this document by major pollutants.

The U.S. and Russia have good prospects for cooperation in the Arctic. For example, Russia has enthusiastically supported the program of the U.S. Presidency in the Arctic Council for 2015–2017, particularly its points on the need to reduce black carbon and methane emissions, keep the Arctic environmentally clean, protect indigenous peoples and develop research cooperation. Both American and Russian military experts are positive about the development of confidence and security building measures in the High North which continues to be an area of intensive (and potentially dangerous) military activities.

Both the U.S. and Russia express their genuine interest in continuing their cooperation on space exploration, including the use of ISS and *Soyuz* rockets.

2 Ibid.

Threats

Along with opportunities, some *threats* to the U.S.–Russian cooperation can be identified. The major threat stems from the American elites’ basic hostility towards Putin’s regime and their unwillingness to cooperate seriously with it. According to Robert Freedman, a visiting professor at Johns Hopkins University, it is hard to talk about cooperation, when the Kremlin “first of all, invaded and annexed Crimea and aided actively separatists in Ukraine and then lied about” the downing of the MH17 Malaysian Boeing over Eastern Ukraine.³ As Galeotti added, “no one is going to forget the fact that this regime [in Russia] is committed to essentially undermining many of the institutions through which Western values are communicated and expressed.”⁴

Not only is the current U.S. administration discontent with Putin’s regime, but also all presidential candidates competing in the 2016 election campaign – both Democrats and Republicans – have expressed their antipathy toward the current Russian leader. What is even more worrisome is that some American politicians seek regime change in Moscow by provoking a Russian version of Ukraine’s *Maidan* or a “color revolution.”

Such attitudes toward the Putin regime can reverse the positive dynamics in conflict resolution in East Ukraine, make this conflict another frozen one in the post-Soviet space, and keep in place Western sanctions for years.

If this happens, the NATO “problem” will inevitably become a “hot” issue. Russia will react to NATO’s military build-up in East Europe by deploying more troops and armaments in adjacent regions. Moscow perceives even the NATO enlargement in the West Balkans (Montenegro) as a serious security threat. Any plans to expand NATO to Moldova, Ukraine or Georgia would be seen by the Kremlin as crossing another “red line” and may lead to real (not proxy) military conflicts with these countries.

Moscow is also anxious about U.S. plans to create a ballistic missile system (BMD) in Europe. Prior to the Iranian nuclear deal, the U.S. rationale for building a European BMD system was a potential threat from Tehran. However, now, as Moscow points out, it became obvious that the BMD system’s real target was and is the Russian nuclear arsenal, not the Iranian one. As some military experts predict, if Washington proceeds with the European BMD system it could under-

3 Pavel Koshkin. “US–Russia relations should be seen beyond the immediate agenda,” *Russia Direct*, 2015, December 18.

4 Koshkin. “Some you win, some you lose: Russia’s foreign policy in 2015.”

mine the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty regime and will inevitably lead to a renewed arms race.

As far as the Syrian conflict is concerned Moscow and Washington can argue over two main points: how to separate “moderate” rebels from the “terrorists,” with only the former being granted a place at the future peace talks; and how to define the role of Assad in that process and provide assurances that he and his clan will leave power at some reasonable point.

As for the Iranian issue, the resolution of one problem (the nuclear weapon program) can produce another one. Lifting Iranian sanctions may lead to a boost in Russian arms exports to Tehran, including weapon systems which can destabilize the regional military balance (e.g., the S-300 air defense systems).

Conclusion

To sum up our SWOT analysis of U.S.–Russian relations, we believe that there are some grounds for cautious optimism. On the one hand, it is unrealistic to expect a radical improvement in these relations unless Russia’s domestic and foreign policies fundamentally change.

About the Authors

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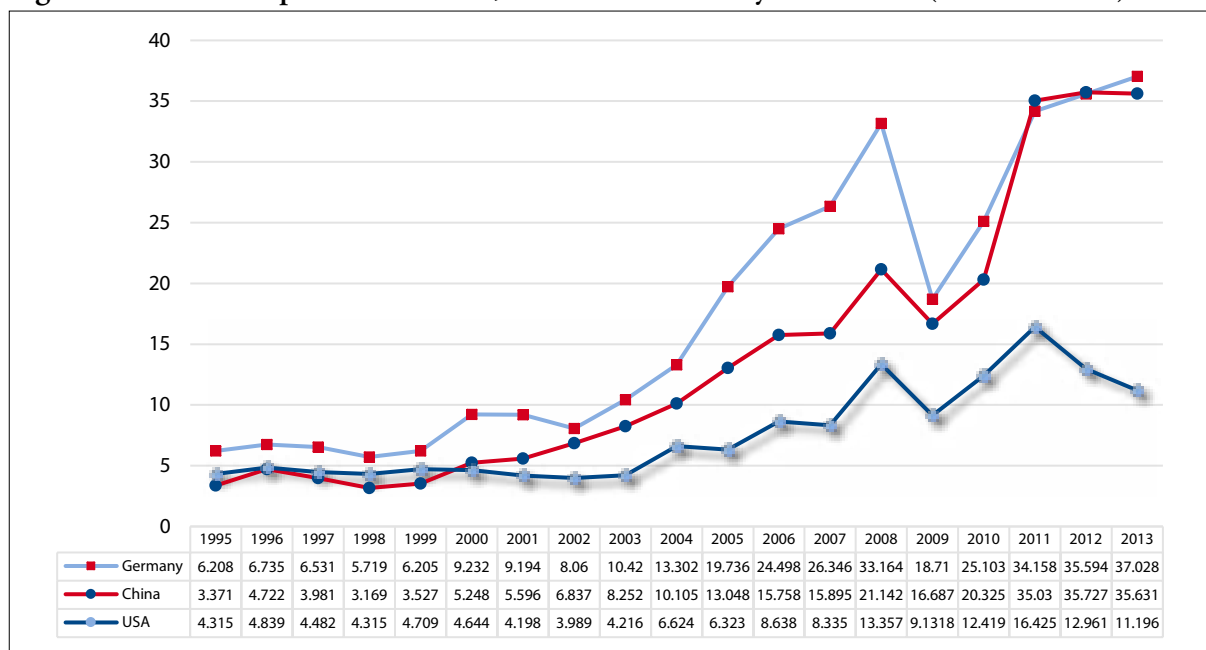
On the other hand, Moscow and Washington pursue a rather pragmatic course trying to identify potential areas for cooperation. As Galeotti emphasizes, the recent changes in the relationship between Moscow and Washington do not indicate “the start of any grand U.S.–Russian rapprochement: There is no ‘re-reset’ on the way. But it does demonstrate that the campaign to isolate Moscow is over, and even if it is grudging, pragmatic, and focused on very specific issues of common interest, we are seeing a newly flexible and collaborative relationship emerging.”⁵ In other words, a limited collaboration on a selected number of issues is possible, but a new *Entente Cordiale* between Russia and the U.S. is unlikely.

One more conclusion can be drawn from our analysis: Both the U.S. and Russia badly need comprehensive strategies toward each other. Presently, such strategies are lacking; equally, both the American and Russian leaders lack a strategic vision of their policies toward each other’s countries.

STATISTICS

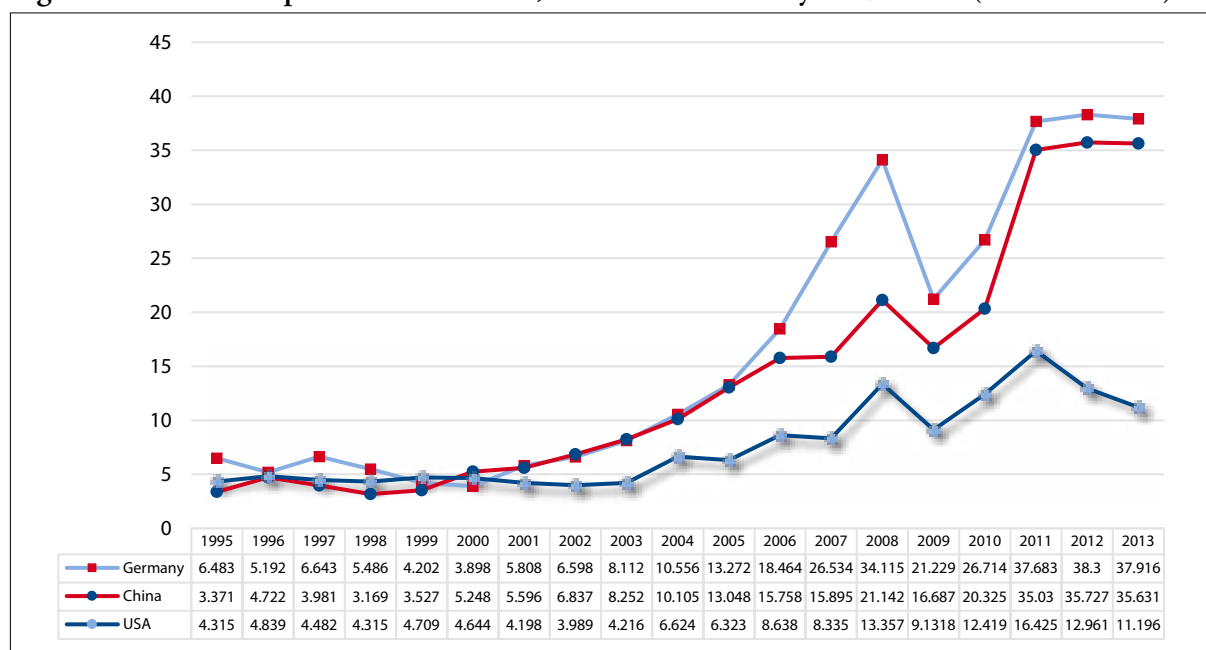
US-Russian Trade in Comparison

Figure 1: Russian Exports to the USA, China and Germany 1995–2013 (bln US dollars)

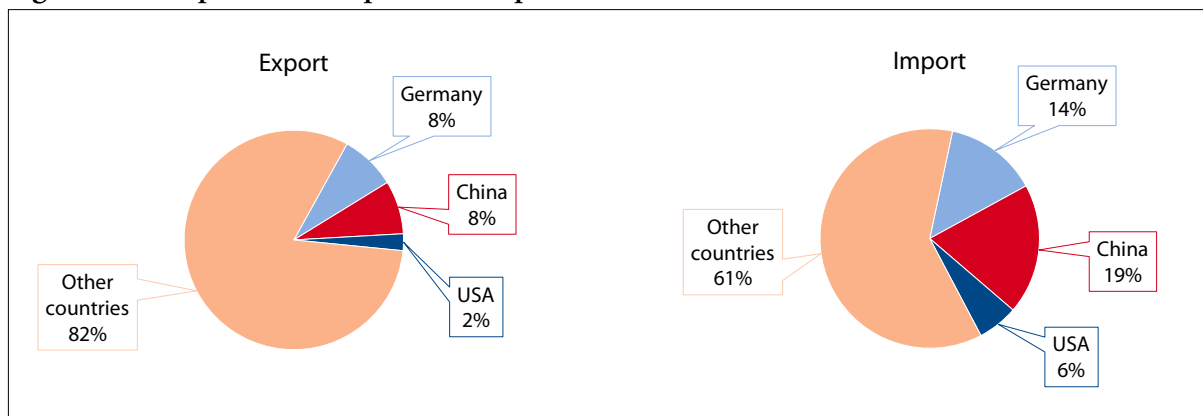


Source: Russian Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat), <http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/vnesh-t/vnt-dz.xls>

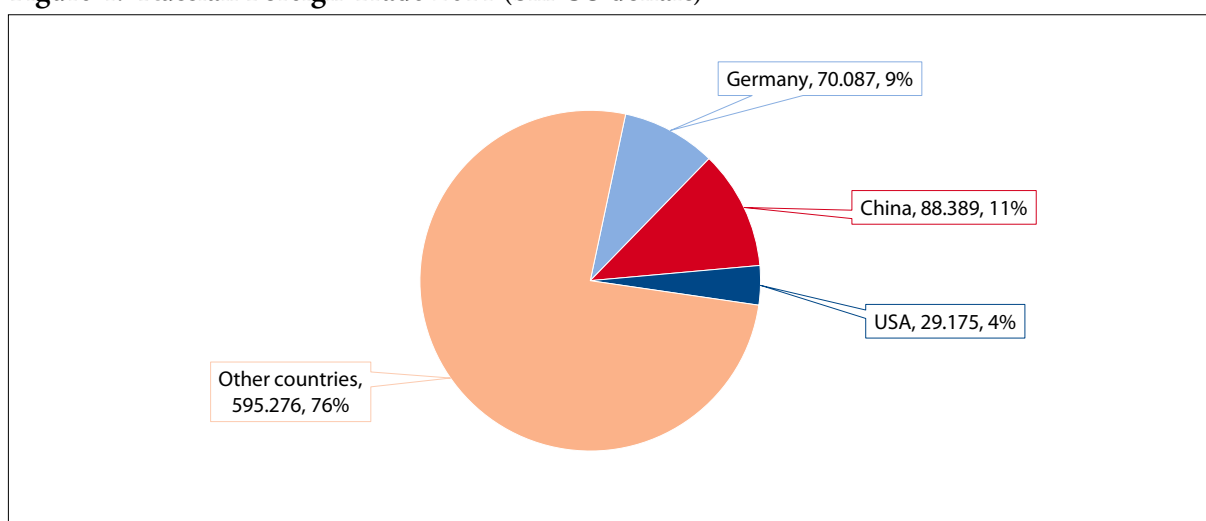
Figure 2: Russian Imports from the USA, China and Germany 1995–2013 (bln US dollars)



Source: Russian Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat), <http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/vnesh-t/vnt-dz.xls>

Figure 3: Comparison of Export and Import to and from Russia 2013

Source: Russian Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat), <http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/vnesh-t/vnt-dz.xls>

Figure 4: Russian Foreign Trade 2014 (bln US dollars)

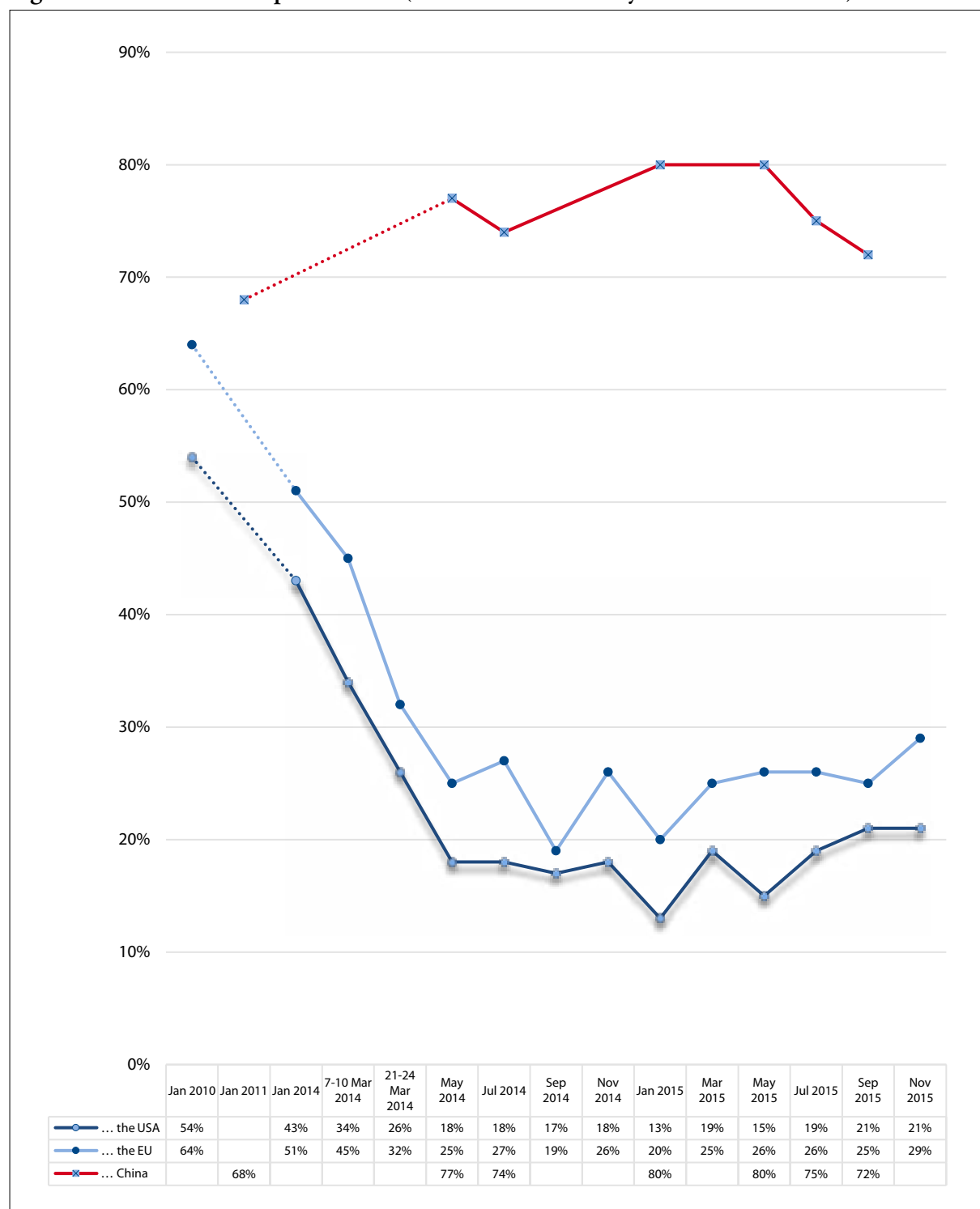
Total foreign trade 2014: 782.927 bln US dollars

Source: Russian Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat), <http://www.gks.ru/bgd/free/b04_03/IssWWW.exe/Stg/d05/35.htm>

OPINION POLL

Russian Attitudes Towards the USA

Figure 1: What is Your Opinion of ... (Sum of Answers “Very Good” and “Good”)



Source: representative opinion polls by Levada Center, <http://www.levada.ru/old/sites/default/files/levada_2011_0.pdf>. <<http://www.levada.ru/print/09-02-2015/mezhdunarodnye-otnosheniya>>, <<http://www.levada.ru/print/02-04-2015/otnoshenie-k-drugim-stranam>>, <<http://www.levada.ru/print/29-07-1.1.2015/monitoring-otnosheniya-rossiyan-k-drugim-stranam-iyul>>, <<http://www.levada.ru/2015/12/02/strany-zapada-vospriyatie-sanktsii-gotovnost-k-sotrudnichestvu/>>; dates of last polls: 20–23 November 2015 (USA, EU) and 18–21 September 2015 (China).

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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