

Arms Control

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Strategic Stability beyond New START: Russian Policies and Interests in Nuclear Arms Control

Moritz Pieper

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Abstract

Following the end of the INF treaty on August 2, 2019, nuclear arms control is in a state of deep crisis. The erosion of the nuclear arms control regime, however, had already begun before this treaty's termination. In the event that New START, the final remaining U.S.–Russian treaty limiting “strategic” nuclear weapons, also expires in February 2021, (perceived) U.S.–Russian strategic equality will have to be redefined and codified. Aware of the risks and imponderables involved in this process, the Kremlin has called for an extension of New START. Thus, gaining time is deemed a preferable policy to witnessing the demise of yet another arms control treaty, despite Moscow's concerns about new developments affecting “strategic stability” that would ideally require treaty modifications.

The End of the INF Treaty and the Role of China in Russia's Discourse on Nuclear Arms Control

In 2014, the US began to accuse Russia of having developed and flight tested a ground-launched cruise missile in violation of INF treaty provisions, which ban the production, possession, and flight testing of Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF). Russia reacted with stonewalling and was initially not inclined to refute the accusation by way of cooperative verification. Instead, Moscow made a counter-accusation about alleged U.S. treaty breaches. Russia only admitted the existence of the controversial cruise missile 9M729 (SSC-8 according to NATO classification) after the US disclosed it, yet continued to claim its range was below 500 km.

In its communiqué of July 2018, NATO was likewise skeptical of the Russian claim not to have developed or tested weapons in breach of the INF treaty. By December of the same year, all member states shared the assessment that Russia had indeed developed and fielded a missile system that violates the INF treaty. On February 2, 2019, the U.S. government announced its withdrawal from the treaty, which became effective on August 2, 2019. With this, a chapter in arms control that began in 1987 with an agreement between the US and the Soviet Union—an agreement that would serve as a key pillar of the post-Cold War European security architecture—drew to a close. In the treaty, both parties had agreed to destroy all ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with a range of 500 to 5,500 km.

The Russian government publicly laments this development. In the past, however, Moscow itself had threatened to withdraw from the treaty against the backdrop of U.S. missile defence system deployment in Europe. Russia has been calling for a multilateralization of the INF treaty since the mid-2000s. The reason given by

the Russian leadership was that Russia is more exposed to proliferation risks on its southern and eastern borders than, for example, the US, which is geographically protected by two oceans. A ban on short- to intermediate-range deployment only for Russia and the US, the Russian argument went, therefore does not keep pace with the reality that other states are still allowed to develop and deploy medium-range land-based missiles.

Since October 2018, the U.S. administration under President Trump has taken the position that the treaty is unbalanced, which is why it demands that China become involved as a signatory. Beijing, however, refuses to take part in trilateral arms control talks because China has few nuclear warheads (presumably fewer than 300) and over 90 percent of its land-based missiles are medium-range weapons within the INF-relevant range. Russian observers therefore suspect that the U.S. administration used Russia's allegedly non-compliant deployment of medium-range missiles as a pretext to terminate the INF treaty; the real reason, they suspect, was China.

Russian officials stress that Moscow is not fundamentally opposed to including Beijing in future arms control treaties. They add, however, that Russia understands the Chinese position and will not act as a mediator between the US and China. If China is to be involved in new disarmament formats, the Russian leadership holds, so too should France and the United Kingdom be. Beyond this public rhetoric, however, Russian defence politicians should have an interest in China's participation in future arms control efforts even if Moscow publicly emphasizes deepening strategic cooperation with Beijing. This is because in recent years, China has invested heavily in so-called anti-access/anti-denial land-based missiles, which are geographically relevant for Russia as China's northern neighbour.

At the same time, Russian experts argue that Russia's cooperation with China falls into the areas of strategic

missile defence and air and naval exercises. Moscow is particularly interested in increased cooperation in these areas, as they are directed against U.S. military capabilities. This, in turn, would explain Russia's ambivalent position toward China's involvement in arms control talks. Moscow, according to this line of thinking, has genuine motivation to forge a Sino–Russian convergence of interests—that is, as preparation for a scenario in which the previously existing U.S.–Russian arms control were to completely fall apart.

In this vein, President Putin announced at the Valdai discussion forum in early October 2019 that Russia would help China develop an early-warning system for missile detection. Such a level of cooperation in high technology would be an expression of a strategic shift because it would demonstrate Russia's gradual alienation from the West at a technical level and complicate a reversal thereof politically. This context may also help shed light on the motivations for Putin's proposal of February 2019 to impose a moratorium on the deployment of intermediate-range or shorter-range weapons if the US will not deploy these in "corresponding regions of the world." Europe, which is particularly affected by the end of the INF treaty, is implied here, but so is the Asia-Pacific region.

Finally, however, it is questionable whether the Russian and U.S. governments really view the end of the INF Treaty as a disadvantage from a military standpoint. After all, both states have developed numerous air- and sea-based medium-range missiles that could be legally put into service in parallel with the land-based variants covered by the INF treaty. Russia, for example, demonstrated its ability to deploy sea-based cruise missiles from ships in the Caspian Sea during its military operation in Syria. Military implications notwithstanding, the demise of the INF treaty carries political significance because arms control remains an important instrument for reducing risk perception. The mutual exchange of information and verification promotes transparency and is thus security-enhancing.

The Future of New START

As the ABM treaty was terminated following U.S. withdrawal in 2002, New START is now the only remaining U.S.–Russian treaty that seeks to limit the number of nuclear weapons categorized as "strategic." New START caps accountable deployed strategic nuclear warheads and bombs at 1,550 and imposes ceilings on the number of deployed and non-deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and heavy bombers. If New START is not extended (it is set to expire on February 5, 2021), new treaty provisions will be required that cover not only medium-range (i.e., INF-range) missiles, but also strategic nuclear weapons.

Nuclear arms control would also have to be comprehensively redesigned due to new technological possibilities and the existence of nuclear powers that are not party to existing treaties. In a New START successor, the term "strategic stability" would have to be expanded beyond numerical targets and counting rules for nuclear warheads.

While Russia had threatened to withdraw from New START between 2011 and 2016 if U.S. missile defence development outside of this treaty were to continue, the Russian position was readjusted after 2016. Russia now emphasizes its wish to retain New START. At the same time, Moscow develops new nuclear systems outside the scope of the treaty. According to Moscow, the hypersonic glide missile "Avangard" (which can carry both conventional and nuclear warheads) and the intercontinental ballistic missile "Sarmat" are accountable under New START regulations and could therefore be inspected on site. Among the new Russian systems, the bigger bone of contention is the development of systems not covered by New START, namely the Russian Kinzhal missile system; the nuclear-powered Burevestnik cruise missile; and the long-range Poseidon torpedo, which is also nuclear-powered. The development of such systems, which are *not* categorized as strategic nuclear weapons, can be interpreted as an attempt to create new facts that require new arms control talks.

Initially, however, it was Moscow that had placed conditions on a possible extension of New START. For example, Foreign Minister Lavrov stated in March 2019 that it had not yet been verified that the U.S. government had actually converted certain weapon categories to New START-compliant systems. Such preconditions have not been repeated in public. At the beginning of December 2019, and most recently again in October 2020, President Putin even proposed extending New START "without preconditions." With its statements of intent to save New START, made at the highest political level, Russia presents itself as the guardian of this last remaining bilateral arms control treaty. In light of a widespread perception that the Trump administration's foreign policy is disruptive, Russia also positions itself (as a precautionary measure) on the "right" side of history in the event of a non-extension.

Trump's obstructive discourse and the U.S. withdrawal from other international agreements such as the nuclear agreement with Iran (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) of July 2015 are adding to the Russian narrative that Moscow is working around the clock to save the global arms control architecture in the face of U.S. resistance. The U.S. government's withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty, which was announced in May 2020, has fanned the flames of the crisis in arms control.

Russia's interest in maintaining New START is fed by political and military considerations. The former

relates to a level of strategic equity: the treaty codifies U.S.–Russian nuclear parity. From the Russian point of view, it thus reconfirms the country’s great power status, placing it on a par with the US. In terms of military strategy, New START serves to maintain the Russian second-strike capability. The development of new strategic and sub-strategic nuclear weapons may in part be a consequence of a threat perception that U.S. missile shields and conventional military superiority undermine this second-strike capability. In terms of the overall foreign policy result, however, such a perception primarily upgrades the role of nuclear weapons as guarantors of great power status.

This finding illustrates the classic trade-off in security policy between disarmament efforts, on the one hand, and the idea of deterrence, on the other. Russia’s Nuclear Deterrence Guidelines (Decree No. 355), published on June 2, 2020, likewise operate within this context. With the decree, the Kremlin publicized the foundations of its nuclear deterrence policy for the first time. The document summarizes Russian threat perceptions and resulting nuclear deployment options. The latter are linked to an implicit warning to countries, organizations, and coalitions (read: NATO) that view Russia as a “potential opponent.”

New Technologies, Old Ambivalence

However, an “escalate to de-escalate” approach cannot be found in Russia’s military doctrine and its nuclear deployment policy. In the assessment of the U.S. government, Russia is pursuing such an approach, according to which it allegedly considers the possible use of small nuclear warheads as a deterrent in order to impose “escalation dominance” in regional conflicts with NATO. Washington, in its 2018 *US Nuclear Posture Review*, draws the conclusion that “escalation dominance” must be restored. The Trump administration therefore intends to make its nuclear arsenal more flexible and create the illusion that a military confrontation with accurate, low-explosive nuclear warheads (so-called “mini nukes”) is feasible. Such an assumption, however, makes it difficult to distinguish between strategic and sub-strategic systems and could lower the “nuclear threshold.” In essence, it could do exactly what the Russian leadership is accused of.

Such a mutual threat perception, which has also been laid down in successive strategy papers, limits policy options and negatively affects arms control dialogue. While Washington is interested in including non-strategic Russian nuclear systems (not only the above-mentioned Burevestnik, Kinzhal and Poseidon systems, but also tactical Russian nuclear weapons) in future arms control negotiations, Moscow would like to see a dia-

logue on non-nuclear strategic weapon systems. From the Russian point of view, regulating the latter is particularly pertinent in the areas of missile defense; the U.S. Prompt Global Strike system, with its capacity for conventional strikes of global range; and satellite technology, which Moscow believes can contribute to the militarization of outer space. Against this background, Russian non-strategic nuclear weapon systems such as Kinzhal, Burevestnik or Poseidon can serve as bargaining chips that could be used to extract concessions from the US in other areas factoring into the concept of “strategic stability.”

This implied willingness to offset different weapons categories against each other can be explained by the fact that Russia is striving for status recognition through arms control negotiations. Nothing supports Russia’s perceived great power status on a par with the US as clearly as the possession of nuclear weapons. The US and Russia still possess around 90 percent of the 14,000 nuclear weapons worldwide. As long as nuclear weapons remain so central to the self-perception of Russian foreign policy, a politico-technological path dependency exists that makes far-reaching concessions unlikely while simultaneously providing the foundation for a principled dialogue on arms control.

However, “status” does not only imply (political) reputation. Readiness to talk also always serves an even higher military priority: to regulate U.S. offensive weapons in order to maintain Russian second-strike capability. Like the US, Russia pursues a policy of renouncing a nuclear first strike because both sides have viable nuclear weapons (the nuclear triad) that can respond to a first strike with an equally devastating counterstrike (second strike). Treaty regulations are therefore important because they ensure predictability.

A further complicating factor is the emergence of new technological capabilities in the areas of lethal autonomous weapon systems (LAWS), cyber warfare, and the militarization of space. Moreover, some existing systems have not yet been legally accounted for. Examples fall within the areas of sub-strategic nuclear weapons, conventional weapons with strategic effects, and sea- and air-based medium-range missiles. For these reasons, new approaches to arms control are more urgent than ever in order to prevent future qualitative arms races.

In November, once the 2020 U.S. presidential election campaign is no longer tying up political resources and capital, talks will have to pick up speed, with a view not only to addressing the quickly closing window of opportunity to extend New START, but also to discussing the numerous unresolved issues alluded to here.

See overleaf for information about the author.

About the Author

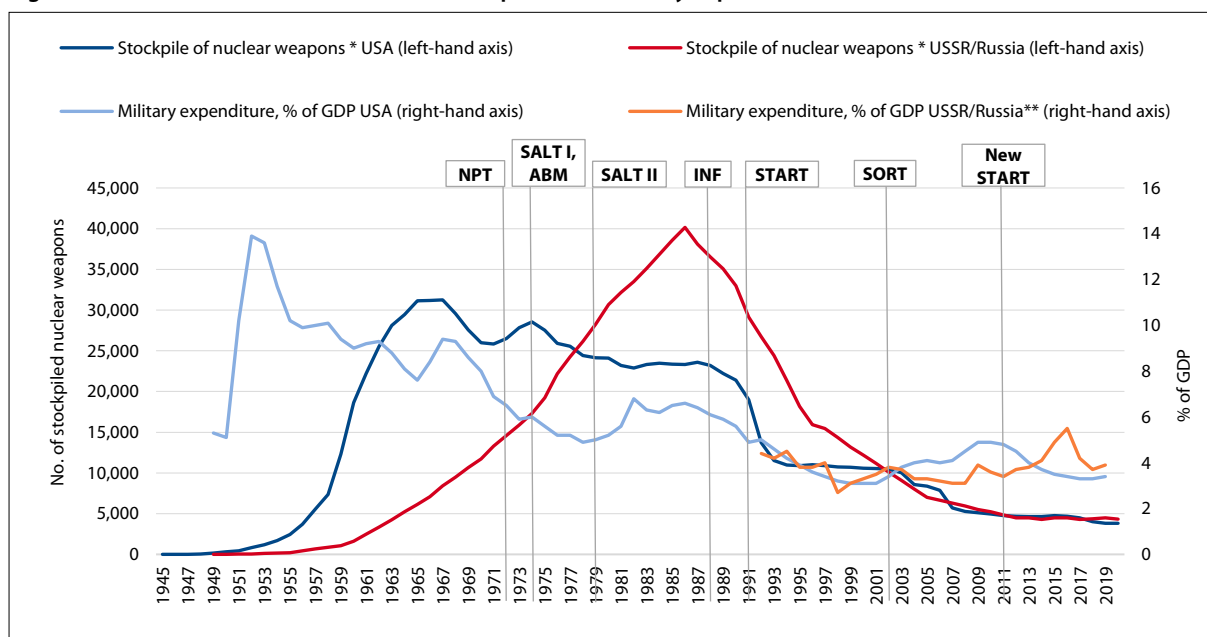
Dr. Moritz Pieper joined the German foreign service in July 2020. Prior to that, he was an Associate in the Eastern Europe and Eurasia Research Division at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP). He holds a PhD from the University of Kent and is the author of *Hegemony and Resistance around the Iranian Nuclear Programme* (Routledge, 2017). He is currently working on a new monograph on Sino–Russian interaction in Eurasia in the wake of the Belt and Road Initiative (contracted, I.B. Tauris). The views expressed in this article are those of the author alone.

A comprehensive analysis of the topics presented here can be accessed in the form of an SWP Research Paper (in German) (2020/S 12, June 2020): <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/russland-und-die-nukleare-ruestungskontrolle/>.

STATISTICS

Arms Control Treaties, Nuclear Weapons, and Military Expenditure 1945–2020

Figure 1: Arms Control Treaties, Nuclear Weapons, and Military Expenditure 1945–2020



Year	Stockpile of nuclear weapons*		Military expenditure, % of GDP		Treaty
	USA	USSR/Russia	USA	USSR/ Russia**	
1945	2				
1946	9				
1947	13				
1948	50				
1949	170	1	5.3		
1950	299	5	5.1		
1951	438	25	10.2		
1952	841	50	13.9		
1953	1,169	120	13.6		
1954	1,703	150	11.7		

Continued overleaf.

Figure 1: Arms Control Treaties, Nuclear Weapons, and Military Expenditure 1945–2020 (Continued)

Year	Stockpile of nuclear weapons*		Military expenditure, % of GDP		Treaty
	USA	USSR/Russia	USA	USSR/ Russia**	
1955	2,422	200	10.2		
1956	3,692	426	9.9		
1957	5,543	660	10.0		
1958	7,345	863	10.1		
1959	12,298	1,048	9.4		
1960	18,638	1,627	9.0		
1961	22,229	2,492	9.2		
1962	25,540	3,346	9.3		
1963	28,133	4,259	8.8		
1964	29,463	5,242	8.1		
1965	31,139	6,144	7.6		
1966	31,175	7,091	8.4		
1967	31,255	8,400	9.4		
1968	29,561	9,490	9.3		
1969	27,552	10,671	8.6		
1970	26,008	11,736	8.0		NPT
1971	25,830	13,279	6.9		
1972	26,516	14,600	6.5		SALT I, ABM
1973	27,835	15,878	5.9		
1974	28,537	17,286	6.0		
1975	27,519	19,235	5.6		
1976	25,914	22,165	5.2		
1977	25,542	24,281	5.2		
1978	24,418	26,169	4.9		
1979	24,138	28,258	5.0		SALT II
1980	24,104	30,665	5.2		
1981	23,208	32,146	5.6		
1982	22,886	33,486	6.8		
1983	23,305	35,130	6.3		
1984	23,459	36,825	6.2		
1985	23,368	38,582	6.5		
1986	23,317	40,159	6.6		
1987	23,575	38,107	6.4		
1988	23,205	36,538	6.1		INF
1989	22,217	35,078	5.9		
1990	21,392	32,980	5.6		
1991	19,008	29,154	4.9		START
1992	13,708	26,734	5.0	4.4	
1993	11,511	24,403	4.6	4.2	
1994	10,979	21,339	4.2	4.5	
1995	10,904	18,179	3.9	3.8	
1996	11,011	15,942	3.6	3.8	
1997	10,903	15,442	3.4	4.0	
1998	10,732	14,368	3.2	2.7	
1999	10,685	13,188	3.1	3.1	
2000	10,577	12,188	3.1	3.3	
2001	10,526	11,152	3.1	3.5	
2002	10,457	10,114	3.4	3.8	SORT
2003	10,027	9,076	3.8	3.7	
2004	8,570	8,038	4.0	3.3	
2005	8,360	7,000	4.1	3.3	
2006	7,853	6,643	4.0	3.2	
2007	5,709	6,286	4.1	3.1	
2008	5,273	5,929	4.5	3.1	
2009	5,113	5,527	4.9	3.9	
2010	4,950	5,215	4.9	3.6	
2011	4,763	4,858	4.8	3.4	New START
2012	4,680	4,500	4.5	3.7	
2013	4,650	4,480	4.0	3.8	
2014	4,650	4,300	3.7	4.1	

Continued overleaf.

Figure 1: Arms Control Treaties, Nuclear Weapons, and Military Expenditure 1945–2020 (Continued)

Year	Stockpile of nuclear weapons*		Military expenditure, % of GDP		Treaty
	USA	USSR/Russia	USA	USSR/ Russia**	
2015	4,760	4,500	3.5	4.9	
2016	4,670	4,500	3.4	5.5	
2017	4,480	4,300	3.3	4.2	
2018	4,000	4,350	3.3	3.7	
2019	3,800	4,490	3.4	3.9	
2020	3,800	4,310			

* Includes deployed and non-deployed strategic nuclear warheads. Retired warheads awaiting dismantlement are not included.

**1992–2012: Estimates by SIPRI

Sources: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database; <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>; Kristensen, H. M. & Norris, R. S. (2013): Global nuclear weapons inventories, 1945–2013 in: *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist*, 69:5, S. 78; <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096340213501363>; Kristensen, H. M. & Norris, R. S. (2014): US nuclear forces, 2014 in: *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 70:1, S. 86; <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096340213516744>; Kristensen, H. M. & Norris, R. S. (2014): Russian nuclear forces, 2014 in: *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 70:2, S. 77; <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096340214523565>; Kristensen, H. M. & Norris, R. S. (2015): US nuclear forces, 2015 in: *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 71:2, S. 108; <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096340215571913>; Kristensen, H. M. & Norris, R. S. (2015): Russian nuclear forces, 2015 in: *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 71:3, S. 85; <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096340215581363>; Kristensen, H. M. & Norris, R. S. (2016): United States nuclear forces, 2016 in: *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 72:2, S. 64; <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2016.1145901>; Kristensen, H. M. & Norris, R. S. (2016): Russian nuclear forces, 2016 in: *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 72:3, S. 126; <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2016.1170359>; Kristensen, H. M. & Norris, R. S. (2017): United States nuclear forces, 2017 in: *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 73:1, S. 49; <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2016.1264213>; Kristensen, H. M. & Norris, R. S. (2017): Russian nuclear forces, 2017 in: *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 73:2, S. 116; <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2017.1290375>; Kristensen, H. M. & Norris, R. S. (2018): United States nuclear forces, 2018 in: *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 74:2, S. 121; <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2018.1438219>; Kristensen, H. M. & Norris, R. S. (2018): Russian nuclear forces, 2018 in: *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 74:3, S. 186; <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2018.1462912>; Kristensen, H. M. & Korda, M. (2019): United States nuclear forces, 2019 in: *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 75:3, S. 123; <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2019.1606503>; Kristensen, H. M. & Korda, M. (2019): Russian nuclear forces, 2019 in: *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 75:2, S. 74; <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2019.1580891>; Kristensen, H. M. & Korda, M. (2020): United States nuclear forces, 2020 in: *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 76:1, S. 47; <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2019.1701286>; Kristensen, H. M. & Korda, M. (2020): Russian nuclear forces, 2020 in: *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 76:2, S. 104; <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2020.1728985>

ANALYSIS

Strategic Stability in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Strategic Stability in the 21st Century needs to be rethought in order to involve all relevant actors and to meet new technological challenges. The USA, Russia, China, and Europe each have different definitions of and perspectives on Strategic Stability and related threat perceptions. In particular, the asymmetry between US and Russian capabilities, on the one hand, and Chinese capabilities, on the other, requires innovative arms control concepts. Germany could play an important role as a mediator between the major powers.

Introduction

Security and stability in the 21st century are seriously at risk. The erosion of existing arms control agreements and the growing rivalry between the United States, Russia, and China are increasing the threat of a new and global arms race. At the same time, all institutionalized forms of cooperation are in retreat. This development calls for innovative approaches in order to promote cooperation and dialog. Rethinking the concept of Strategic Stability could help to prevent competition from turning into open conflict.

Against this background, the Körber Foundation and the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (IFSH) have founded the Körber Strategic Stability Initiative. The project brings together a group of experts from China, Russia, the USA, and Europe (specifically from France, the United Kingdom, and Germany) in order to develop novel approaches and solutions. This article presents a number of their preliminary findings.

Why Strategic Stability?

The classic definition of Strategic Stability is a situation in which nuclear weapons offer the advantage of deterrence without generating the incentive to strike first. Accordingly, policies of Strategic Stability have mainly focused on preserving the ability to carry out a second strike as well as reducing incentives to expand one's own nuclear arsenal, thereby contributing to arms race stability. The concept was first officially sanctioned in a joint declaration issued by the Soviet Union and the United States (1990) in conjunction with the START I Treaty. Back then, Strategic Stability aimed to prevent the outbreak of nuclear war and to further reduce nuclear arsenals.

As such, the concept mirrored the conditions of the late Cold War, which were based on the bilateralism of the two superpowers and an almost exclusive focus on nuclear weapons. Since then, there has been a realization that Strategic Stability in the 21st century must be rethought.

First, a greater number of actors must be included, above all China—despite the asymmetries between America and Russia, on the one hand, and China, on the other, in terms of their conventional and nuclear capabilities. While the nuclear arsenals of Russia and America are considerably larger than that of China, Beijing has the advantage when it comes to conventional ground-launched medium-range missiles. This asymmetry presents a great challenge to conceptualizing a new arms control architecture.

Second, the concept of Strategic Stability can no longer concentrate on nuclear weapons alone. It has to take into account other novel technologies that affect Strategic Stability. This includes hypersonic weapons as well as conventional precision-strike weapons of strategic ranges, missile defense, and certain cross-domain challenges. To this should be added the domains of space, cyber warfare, and AI. In effect, future arms control will no longer be mostly about quantity, but increasingly about the quality of the weapons, including in very different domains.

To that end, the traditional concept of Strategic Stability needs to be rethought. The participants in the Körber Strategic Stability Initiative agreed on a definition of Strategic Stability that describes a situation intended to minimize the risk of a potential deterrence failure, including strategic, technical, and human risks.

Regional Perspectives

The United States, Russia, China, and Europe each have different definitions of and perspectives on Strategic Stability—from narrow definitions that focus only on reducing the incentives for a first strike to broad definitions such as the absence of military conflicts and rivalries or the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons in general. There are also different emphases *within* the national and regional expert communities.

In the **United States**, Strategic Stability is often defined rather narrowly to mean reducing first strike and arms race incentives. However, the understanding of *how* Strategic Stability can be maintained in different international and military-technical contexts varies significantly from one administration to another. Under the Trump administration, much emphasis was put on China at (almost) any cost, including the possible non-extension of the New START Treaty.

In **Russia**, too, Strategic Stability is understood in terms of preventing nuclear war and arms racing—including securing a second strike capacity and minimizing incentives for a first strike. This definition of Strategic Stability has become a fundamental principle of Russian foreign policy and of how Russia views the international system. However, Russia takes a different stance to the US on how this goal should be achieved. From the perspective of Moscow, France and the United Kingdom must be included in nuclear arms control *before* any inclusion of China can be discussed. Furthermore, a number of Russian experts question whether the close connection between Strategic Stability and nuclear reductions, as during the Cold War, is still compelling and necessary in the 21st century. Experts such as Sergey Karaganov and Dmitry Suslov argue that Strategic Stability is not a synonym for nuclear disarmament.

In **China**, a broad understanding of Strategic Stability as a balance of power between the major powers dominates. It is characterized by the absence of crises, the recognition of peaceful coexistence, and respect for other actors' major security interests and spheres of influence. A narrower understanding of Strategic Stability is mainly confined to academic circles with direct connections to Western discourses. The latter do not wield any significant political influence. At the same time, China's classical foreign and security policy circles are extremely distrustful of U.S. calls to join the previously bilateral U.S.–Russian arms control architecture. From the Chinese perspective, Washington could try to use arms control as an instrument to contain China while simultaneously freeing itself from existing treaties and restrictions. In particular, the fear is that Washington's advantage in terms of verification expertise could be misused to trick China. This view is in line with Beijing's general skepticism toward arms control, which is seen as a way for powerful states to dominate weaker ones. The positive common experiences from the Cold War era that bind the United States and Russia are missing for China.

The discourse in **Europe** focuses mainly on questions of disarmament and nonproliferation, regularly neglecting other critical aspects, such as deterrence. At the same time, Europe's geopolitical position between the United States,

Russia, and China should give European countries even more reason to go beyond the role of mere U.S. allies protected by extended deterrence arrangements and to strengthen Europe’s voice in discussions about Strategic Stability. In the long term, Europe must find a common voice. The initiatives of French President Emmanuel Macron go in such a direction.

Threat Perceptions

What are the greatest threats to Strategic Stability today from the perspectives of the United States, Russia, China, and Europe? Here, one can see a significant overlap between Russian and Chinese threat perceptions, which, above all, are directly related to certain defensive and offensive U.S. capabilities. For Washington, it is predominantly the conventional regional capabilities of Russia and China in Europe and East Asia, which represent a threat to its allies in the regions. All actors view Europe as being on the negative—that is, receiving—end of any possible threat scenario.

From the **U.S. perspective**, the greatest challenge to Strategic Stability today comes in conjunction with regional power plays in Europe and East Asia that negatively affect its allies. More specifically, these challenges stem from Chinese and Russian conventional regional capabilities, which might exceed those of the United States, as well as from both states’ sub-strategic nuclear systems (i.e., systems with shorter ranges than strategic nuclear weapons). The influence of new technologies on nuclear escalation, possible misperceptions, and the lack of constructive dialog formats between Washington, Moscow, and Beijing were also mentioned. There was disagreement about whether the current crisis in arms control poses a threat to Strategic Stability from the U.S. perspective.

From the **Russian perspective**, the development and diversification of U.S. offensive and defensive capabilities, including its conventional capabilities, are considered a threat to Strategic Stability. This goes hand in hand with an unwillingness to reduce these capabilities or to agree on mutually accepted rules in times of increasing confrontation. A similar threat perception can be found on the **Chinese** side. The latter is based on dismissive U.S. attitudes toward the acceptance of mutual nuclear vulnerability as a principle governing U.S.–Chinese relations, along with the development of U.S. missile defense systems and additional strategic offensive capabilities.

For **Europe**, increasing rivalry between the major powers, including new arms races and the current arms control crisis, are discussed as challenges to Strategic Stability. However, the greatest threat from a European perspective is potential abandonment by Washington.

		Greatest threat to Strategic Stability for...			
		USA	Europe	Russia	China
From the perspective of...	US participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China and Russia’s conventional regional capabilities, which could exceed those of the United States The impact of new technologies on potential nuclear escalation China and Russia’s sub-strategic nuclear systems Misperceptions in planning and disposition as well as a lack of constructive dialog formats between the United States, Russia, and China 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being caught between the United States and China or being abandoned by the United States 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> America’s pursuit of strategic invulnerability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> America’s pursuit of strategic invulnerability
	European participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The risk of limited nuclear use against allies in a regional context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being abandoned by the United States 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> U.S. conventional counterforce capabilities for offensive and defensive purposes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> U.S. conventional counterforce capabilities for offensive and defensive purposes
	Russian participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China’s unwillingness to participate in arms control Anti-satellite weapons Russia’s destabilizing behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russian tactical nuclear weapons Aggressive Russian behavior in Europe, including cyber-attacks The demise of arms controls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The constant development and diversification of U.S. offensive and defensive capabilities, including conventional capabilities Unwillingness to limit these capabilities or to agree on mutually accepted rules in times of increasing political confrontation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> U.S. containment policy toward China Increase in U.S. offensive weapons in Asia (including INF-range weapons) U.S. missile defense

Table continued overleaf

		Greatest threat to Strategic Stability for...			
		USA	Europe	Russia	China
From the perspective of...	Chinese participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China's regional military advantage in the Asia-Pacific region, including new technologies such as AI for cross-domain deterrence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arms races between the major powers The demise of arms control treaties such as INF Unstable relationship with the United States 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> U.S. missile defense Military capabilities in space Conventional attacks by United States/NATO 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> U.S. rejection of the principle of mutual vulnerability Development of missile defense and other strategic offensive capabilities (sometimes in cooperation with allies)

Asymmetry as a Challenge to Strategic Stability

Strategic stability in the 21st century must include new actors, in particular China. At the same time, the asymmetry between U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals and strategic conventional weapons, on the one hand, and Chinese ones, on the other, presents a challenge for conceptualizing future arms control agreements. In order to take into account the security needs of all countries and reflect these asymmetries, new, innovative arms control models are required. Such models could include bringing together conventional strategic weapons and nuclear arms into an integrated treaty—a combination of New START and INF measures—that might, for example, set new comprehensive upper limits for a combination of different systems. Different models are conceivable.

The development of such models could take place in a variety of formats. America, China, and Russia should be prepared to address asymmetries at different levels in bilateral, trilateral, or multilateral talks, depending on what is at stake and which actors are affected. Any future formats should be designed to address the content and not the other way around. In particular, the inclusion of China in trilateral arms control will be a long-term process that does not promise to lead to any concrete negotiations, not to mention reductions, in the short and medium term.

In the meantime, trust-building measures will play an important role. In the short term, “socializing” Chinese security experts with arms control concepts by means of dialog formats might be a promising way to generate shared perspectives on what arms controls can achieve, to exchange experiences and expertise, and to avoid security communities further drifting apart in times of heightened tensions. Such formats might focus on the utility and technical realization of certain verification measures.

In the long term, trilateral arms controls between Washington, Moscow, and Beijing could be built around less controversial topics, for example through declarations of intent not to launch cyber-attacks against each other's nuclear systems. It would also be advisable to start trilateral talks on conventional forces. An alternative to trilateral arms controls could be bilateral agreements between the United States and Russia, on the one hand, and between Washington and Beijing, on the other, as a means of addressing military asymmetries. Furthermore, asymmetrical arms control could prove to be a useful framework within which to integrate new technologies into future arms control treaties.

Conclusion

The possible extension or non-extension of New START will show whether a new arms control architecture based on the concept of Strategic Stability has to be designed from scratch or whether it can build on existing structures and treaties. If neither is possible, then we are faced with nothing less than a new nuclear arms race. In order to maintain Strategic Stability between the major powers in the 21st century, the United States, Russia, and China must operate from a joint understanding that strategic invulnerability cannot be pursued at the expense of other actors. Arms control is an important instrument for achieving Strategic Stability, but it cannot be abused in order to force other actors into making unilateral concessions. Willingness to compromise is the precondition for success.

Berlin can play an important role here as a trustworthy interlocutor and provide a platform for talks between the major powers—at the official and expert levels. Concrete and pragmatic arms control ideas are needed. For Germany, the task is also to exert pressure together with its European partners: a return to arms racing and nuclear instability is not in the interest of Europe and cannot be in the interest of the major powers.

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Please see overleaf for a short bibliography.

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STATISTICS

Russian, US and Chinese Nuclear Forces**Table 1: Russian, US and Chinese Nuclear Forces 2019**

	Russia	USA	China
Total defence spending	65 bln USD	732 bln USD	261 bln USD
Nuclear forces spending, 2016	11 bln USD	35 bln USD	Not known
Deployed strategic nuclear warheads	1,600	1,600	320
Intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM)	318 ICBM	400 ICBM	187 ground-launched missiles
Submarine-launched ballistic missiles	160	240	48
Heavy bombers	68	107	20
Non-strategic weapons	1,820	230	Not known

Source: Russell, Martin (2020): *Briefing Russia, arms control and non-proliferation*, p. 11, European Parliamentary Research Service; [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI\(2020\)652100](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2020)652100)

Conventional Arms Control and Military Confidence-Building with Russia

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Abstract

Thirty years after their inception, the European arms control regime and military trust-building stand at a crossroads. Moscow has not been involved in the implementation of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty) since December 2007. Revision of the Vienna Document on confidence- and security-building measures has stagnated since 2011. The future of the Open Skies Treaty (OST), too, has been in jeopardy since the United States announced its intent to withdraw from the agreement. Unless political relations between NATO and Russia improve, Europe's military stability will be weakened still further.

Introduction

The history of conventional arms control and military confidence-building in Europe is a relatively short one. While its political roots date back to the early 1970s, its actual implementation began only in the brief period between 1989 and 1992 and coincided with the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This was made possible largely by changes to Soviet policy introduced by CPSU general secretary Mikhail Gorbachev. In addition to the domestic policy-focused concepts of glasnost and perestroika, Gorbachev's *New Thinking* and the "reasonable sufficiency" principle, which stated that armaments should be limited to a level necessary for defense, ushered in an unexpected shift in foreign and military policy.

In December 1988, Gorbachev announced the reduction of the Soviet army by half a million soldiers and the withdrawal of six divisions from Hungary, the former Czechoslovakia, and East Germany. Following the ratification of the INF Treaty in June 1988, these and other initiatives posed a challenge to the United States, which wanted to chart its own course in arms control. In May 1989, President George H. Bush revived the proposal for a Treaty on Open Skies (OST), an idea originally pursued in the 1950s by President Eisenhower. The aim of the treaty was to permit mutual aerial surveillance in order to strengthen transparency and confidence. Initial negotiations began in 1990 at conferences in Ottawa and Budapest and ultimately led to the signing of the treaty in March 1992. The OST entered into force in 2002. Today, an average of 100 observation flights take place every year in accordance with fixed flight quotas.

In parallel with this, the 35 signatory states of the 1975 CSCE Final Act in Helsinki developed further ideas for encouraging military transparency and confidence-building despite continued divisions on the European continent at the Conference on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures and Disarmament in Europe (CDE) from 1984. The resulting Stockholm Document, which was adopted in 1986, constituted

a breakthrough. For the first time, states agreed upon concrete, verifiable, and politically binding confidence-building measures, such as notification of military activities and clear rules for the observation of military exercises. In 1990, these provisions were incorporated in expanded form into the Vienna Document on confidence- and security-building measures, which has since been updated four times—most recently in 2011.

Eventually, NATO and the members of the Warsaw Treaty Organization (WTO; also known as the Warsaw Pact) commenced negotiations in Vienna on what would become the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty). The goal was the disarmament of large conventional weapons (including combat tanks and artillery), primarily in East and West Germany, Central Europe, and the Soviet Union. NATO's main concerns were reducing the numerical superiority of the WTO, which would potentially increase flexibility in nuclear deterrence, and reducing the prospect of successful large-scale surprise attacks. For the Soviet Union under Gorbachev, the focus was on reducing costs and on long-term societal and economic reforms.

Even then, it was clear to all observers that conventional arms control and the confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs) would not remain limited to the stabilization of East-West relations. Rather, they were instruments intended to accompany political change and, in the end, redefine the security order in Europe. This function became obvious following the unexpected dissolution of the WTO and the Soviet Union in 1991. The actual implementation of arms control as a process that began in the 1990s thus had the goal of consolidating the new and still evolving political order on the European continent.

Is Conventional Arms Control a Relic of the Cold War?

Nearly 30 years later, the European arms control architecture is at a crossroads. The CFE Treaty, once the corner-

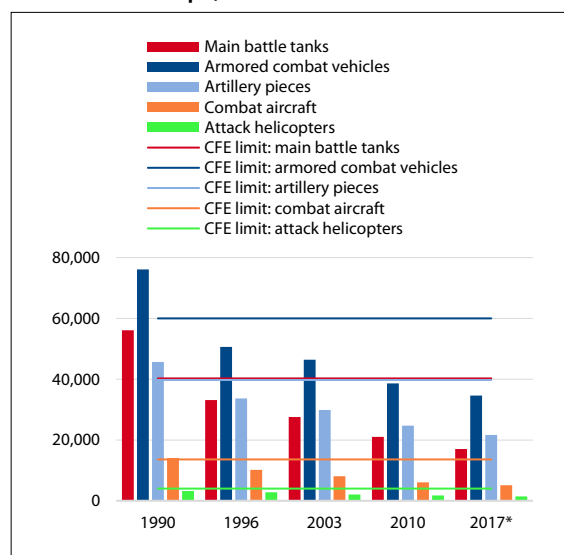
stone of European security, was rendered politically toothless in December 2007 by Moscow's suspension of the treaty. Since then, neither on-site inspections nor information exchange regarding weapons stocks limited by the treaty have taken place in Russia. The NATO member states discontinued their implementation of the treaty vis-à-vis Russia in late 2011. Russia also eventually withdrew from the CFE Treaty Joint Consultative Group in March 2015; its interests have since been represented by Belarus.

For Russia, the CFE Treaty primarily amounted to a limitation of its freedom of movement and deployment in the so-called flank regions, which include the former military districts in the Caucasus and Leningrad. In addition, the treaty's bloc structure, which endures to this day, had already been rendered void following the dissolution of the WTO. When the three Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—became independent, they simultaneously declared that they would opt out of the not-yet-ratified treaty. The first two waves of NATO enlargement, in 1999 and 2004, also pushed the CFE Treaty's structure to the point of absurdity. The Adapted CFE Treaty, which was signed in November 1999, was intended to remedy this anachronistic state of affairs. The adapted treaty established national ceilings and an improved information and inspection mechanism, as well as opening up the treaty to new members.

However, the agreement never entered into force. While Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine ratified the adapted treaty until 2004, NATO has, since 2002, refused to ratify until Russia fulfills the so-called Istanbul commitments. These are commitments made in the 1999 OSCE Istanbul Summit Declaration, which Russia pledged to implement. They include the full withdrawal of troops from Moldova and, in accordance with Annex 14 of the Final Act of the Conference, the reduction of military equipment stationed in Georgia and the closing of two military bases by July 2001, as well as a commitment to negotiate the modalities of the functioning of two further bases. While Russia complied to a large extent with these demands by reducing the number of troops as well as munitions from Moldova and reaching an agreement with Georgia in 2005 on the closure of all remaining military bases by the end of 2008, it refused to fulfill other requests, such as the withdrawal of peacekeeping forces from Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia.

In addition to its political value, however, the military value of the CFE Treaty in its current form is also in question. On the one hand, since it was signed, the treaty has contributed significantly to the destruction of over 100,000 heavy weapon systems throughout Europe. The build-up of conventional arms on the continent was thus essentially brought to an end, and the process of disarmament persists, at least in part, to this day.

Figure 1: Disarmament of CFE Weapons Systems in Europe, 1990–2017



See also Table on p. 16; *incl. data for the Russian Federation from 2010

Sources: For 1990: Zellner, W. (1994): *Die Verhandlungen über Konventionelle Streitkräfte in Europa. Konventionelle Rüstungskontrolle, die neue politische Lage in Europa und die Rolle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft: Baden-Baden, S. 365–366.

Note: Between 1988 and 1990, the Soviet Union removed thousands of weapons systems beyond the Ural Mountains and thus outside the geographical scope of the CFE.

For 1996 ff: Hartmann, R., Heydrich, W. (2002): *Die Anpassung des Vertrages über konventionelle Streitkräfte in Europa. Ursachen, Verhandlungsgeschichte, Kommentar, Dokumentation*, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft: Baden-Baden, S. 735–739.

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For 2017 ff: Ministry of Defense of the United Kingdom (2017): "Vehicle & Aircraft Holdings within the scope of the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty," https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/279985/2013.xls.

On the other hand, the treaty provisions reflect neither the political situation nor the current structures of military forces and their weaponry. With few exceptions, the member states have no trouble keeping to the Cold War-oriented arms limits. At the same time, the treaty does not include modern weapons systems that could potentially have a destabilizing effect on security relations, such as drones and air defense systems as well as naval forces. Threat perceptions and potential risk scenarios in the event of conflict have also changed significantly since the Cold War era.

Military Confidence-Building after the Annexation of Crimea

The focus today rests not on large-scale offensives for territorial gain or surprise attacks, but rather on potential escalation scenarios resulting from miscommunication,

risky maneuvers, and a lack of transparency in military exercises in sub-regional contexts. Since the start of Russia's military operations in Crimea, the subsequent annexation of the peninsula in March 2014, and the beginning of armed conflicts in parts of Donbass, the question of military confidence-building and cooperative conflict resolution is once again at the center of political attention.

The OSCE's Vienna Document has proved to be an important instrument in risk management and crisis communication during the Ukraine crisis. In 2014 and 2015, the OSCE member states were already making extensive use of the opportunity to make consultation and information requests with regard to unanticipated and unusual activity by armed forces in Russia and Ukraine (Vienna Document, Chapter III).

Furthermore, on-site inspections and evaluations were being performed in Ukraine as well as Russia within the scope of the Vienna Document provisions in Chapters IX and X. Five exceptional meetings of the Forum for Security Cooperation (FSC) and the OSCE Standing Committee took place between February and August 2014 alone, with three meetings related to mechanisms for risk minimization. Russia, however, was partly absent and refused additional, voluntary visits for the purpose of monitoring military activity per Chapter III of the Vienna Document.

The Ukraine crisis thus also revealed the limits of cooperative security in cases of military conflict, since the efficacy of CSBMs depends largely upon political willingness to cooperate. Multiple attempts by a multinational inspection team to obtain access to Crimea in March 2014 were unsuccessful. In April of that year, separatist militias detained a Germany-led observation team, which had been invited to Ukraine on the basis of Chapter III of the Vienna Document, at the behest of the self-proclaimed "people's mayor" of Sloviansk. Only following efforts by the OSCE and the Ukrainian government, as well as the direct intervention of Moscow, was the team released two weeks later.

Against this backdrop, the creation of the civilian Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM) in March 2014, which initially consisted of 500 observers, is an important achievement despite ongoing access issues. In March 2015, the number of observers working in Western and South-east Ukraine increased to a record 1,000. Since the Minsk Protocol was signed in September 2014 and February 2015, the SMM also performs duties central to monitoring the still-fragile ceasefire and verifying the pullout of heavy weaponry. The OSCE deployed drones for the first time in its history in order to fulfill these monitoring duties.

Aerial surveillance measures in Ukraine have also been used within the framework of the Open Skies Treaty. In March 2014, Sweden, the US, and Canada each conducted an overflight outside of the flight quota

system at the invitation of Ukraine. During the same month, Russia permitted Ukraine to conduct an overflight of its southwest border region. An additional flight over the Ukrainian-Russian border region by the US followed in May. In June 2014, however, one of two Ukrainian Open Skies aircraft was shot down over Sloviansk during a mission undertaken outside the treaty.

As a result, further Open Skies flights over the immediate combat zone and nearby areas were suspended. Nevertheless, between March and August 2014, a total of 22 regular OST missions (out of 35 total successful overflights of Russia and Belarus in 2014) were flown over Russia, with most of the missions concentrated in the Southwest and the Ukrainian border region. Following a military confrontation between Russian and Ukrainian ships in the Kerch Strait in December 2018, the United States, Great Britain, Canada, France, Germany, and Romania used an Open Skies mission to emphasize their political solidarity with Ukraine.

The annexation of Crimea, however, has meant that in practice, military facilities and bases on the peninsula no longer fall within the framework of the Vienna Document or the OST. Russia did invite overflights as early as May 2014, later designating an airport in Sevastopol for refueling, and extended the Vienna Document's scope of application to include the Crimean peninsula. To this day, however, no OSCE member has availed itself of this opportunity. Verification and the performance of inspections and overflights would indirectly legitimize Crimea's affiliation with Russia.

Present-Day Challenges and Perspectives

Difficulties in implementing the CSBMs extend beyond the existing territorial and status conflicts in the post-Soviet sphere, however, because the Vienna Document provisions—like those of the CFE Treaty—are outdated and in need of reform. In addition to political provisions for risk reduction as per Chapter III, the mechanisms for notification and monitoring of military activities take center stage here. Currently, military exercises involving 9,000 troops or more must be announced in writing 42 days in advance. If the number of participants reaches 13,000 troops, the states involved are required to allow third parties to observe the military activities.

Since the end of the Cold War, however, these thresholds have rarely been reached. The currently valid levels (for troop numbers and combat tanks) date back to the year 1992. In addition, notifications and observation visits are required only if the activities have been announced in advance to the troops involved and are subject to unified command in the zone of application. Voluntary concessions agreed upon by the OSCE member states in the FSC therefore account for the majority of notifications and observation visits today.

A significant lowering of the threshold values, as well as a closing of the aforementioned loopholes, has been discussed for many years. From NATO's perspective, Russia purposefully subverts the spirit of the Vienna Document though the use of "snap exercises" on short notice and by deliberately splitting up large-scale strategic exercises involving tens of thousands of participants. At the same time, Russia is becoming less and less interested in updating the agreement.

At the FSC's last meeting on a new edition of the Vienna Document in 2016, Moscow firmly rejected the update, justifying its position on the basis of NATO's policy of deterrence and the resolutions on increased NATO presence in the Baltic region. Moscow argued that a modernization of the Vienna Document could only take place if Russian interests were respected and relations returned to the status quo ante 2014. This position reveals a fundamental difference between NATO and Russia. While states in the West seek to stabilize political relations by means of technical solutions, Moscow insists on a political solution and makes the technical implementation of the CSBMs dependent on this. Meanwhile, given the new great power rivalry, the US now seems to prefer a political approach as well.

The OST situation clearly illustrates this. In May 2020, the US announced it would withdraw from the treaty. The withdrawal will take effect at the end of November. The primary reasons cited for the decision are Russian violations of the treaty, such as a flight distance limit of 500 kilometers above the Kaliningrad territory and a ban on overflights in a ten-kilometer-wide corridor on the borders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two Georgian territories recognized by Russia as sovereign.

But the current U.S. administration also objects to both the monitoring of U.S. territory and involvement in multilateral agreements. The other 33 member states, in contrast, want to maintain the treaty. In October 2020, an agreement was reached on the allocation of overflights for 2021. Without the possibility of conducting overflights in U.S. airspace, however, Russia's long-

term participation in the treaty is uncertain, especially as Moscow suspects that NATO will continue to provide Washington with data collected during overflights over Russia even after the US withdraws from the treaty.

In light of the multidimensional crisis in arms control and military confidence-building, Germany established the Structured Dialogue format in August 2016 during its tenure as OSCE chair. The Dialogue is intended to provide an additional format that encourages dialogue on reviving cooperative security policy. The aim is, first and foremost, to establish the prerequisites for dialogue rather than undertake a complete restructuring of European arms control. The exchange takes place within an Informal Working Group focused on risk perception, military doctrines, and the efficacy of CSBMs. To date, however, the participating states have been unable to agree on mutual, substantive positions.

Conclusion

Experts have been calling for a reform of conventional arms control in Europe for more than ten years now. But while there is no shortage of proposed technical solutions, reform is hardly possible under the current political conditions. The option of ensuring military transparency through CSBMs has met thus far with only limited success, at least in part because the underlying political conflict persists. Taking refuge in preventative arms control, which seeks to regulate emerging technologies, will do little to change this.

Within this framework, European security policy remains dependent upon the evolution of bilateral U.S.–Russian relations at the global level, as for Russia, NATO is primarily a vehicle for U.S. military policy and American political hegemony. From this perspective, arms control and military confidence-building are only useful if they offer an advantage from the standpoint of strategic rivalry, help to limit the freedom of movement of U.S. forces, or at least improve transparency about them. The future of conventional arms control in Europe will depend on learning to deal with this approach.

About the Author

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Table 1: Disarmament of CFE Weapon Systems in Europe, 1990–2017

	1990	1996	2003	2010	2017*	CFE limits
Main battle tanks	56,079	33,099	27,572	20,979	16,970	40,000
Armored combat vehicles	76,090	50,594	46,425	38,646	34,613	60,000
Artillery pieces	45,628	33,708	29,833	24,681	21,681	40,000
Combat aircraft	14,076	10,167	8,114	6,110	5,069	13,600
Attack helicopters	3,256	2,763	2,096	1,750	1,393	4,000

*incl. data for the Russian Federation from 2010

Sources: For 1990: Zellner, W. (1994): *Die Verhandlungen über Konventionelle Streitkräfte in Europa. Konventionelle Rüstungskontrolle, die neue politische Lage in Europa und die Rolle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft: Baden-Baden, S. 365–366.

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COMMENTARY

Navalny, Russia and the Chemical Weapons Prohibition

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Abstract

How the Kremlin deals with accusations that it is responsible for the Novichok attack on Alexei Navalny is a test case for Russia's role within the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). If Moscow changes its policy of deception and takes steps to come clean on its Novichok program, the West should proactively create the diplomatic elbow room necessary for Russia to realign itself with the CWC. In the end, the international community must receive verifiable assurances that the Russian Novichok program has been completely dismantled.

The failed attempt to assassinate the Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny with the nerve agent Novichok is quickly turning into a test case for Russia's role within the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). How the Kremlin chooses to deal with accusations that it is responsible for the attack will be an indicator of Moscow's interest in multilateral arms control as an instrument of global cooperation. The international community should continue to name Russian acts of non-compliance with the CWC. At the same time, it should leave the door open for cooperation from Moscow within the chemical weapons regime. The CWC's rules and procedures should be applied with a sense of proportion in order to persuade the Kremlin to comply with and implement the treaty.

Out of the Light, into the Shadows: Russia and the Chemical Weapons Convention

Moscow's support remains central for the successful implementation of the ban on chemical weapons. When Russia ratified the agreement in 1997, it was the largest possessor of chemical weapons—the United States being the second largest. The safe destruction of approximately 40,000 metric tons of Russian chemical weapons was carried out under international verification within the CWC framework. Many states, including Germany, supported these demilitarization efforts. Russia still needed around 20 years to complete the dangerous task of chemical weapons disarmament safely and successfully.

Between 2013 and 2015, Russia cooperated closely and intensively with the United States on the neutralization of 1,300 metric tons of Syrian chemical weapons agents. This cooperation was controversial in Moscow, yet the shared strategic goal of securing Syrian chemical weapons pushed Russia's geostrategic rivalry with the United States into the background. This cooperative effort was a prerequisite for the international community's ability to work together collectively to reduce—but not eliminate—Syrian chemical weapons.

Moscow's interests shifted, however, with Russia's military intervention in Syria in late 2015. Geopolitical factors gained in importance. The Kremlin provides Syria with military as well as political support, even though the Assad regime has repeatedly used chemical weapons against its own people.

Worse still, Russia now also uses chemical weapons to kill political opponents and apparently hopes that these poisonings will intimidate government critics. The botched Novichok attack on former spy Sergei Skripal in Salisbury, England in March 2018 and the assassination attempt against Navalny—which was also carried out using a nerve agent from the Novichok group—clearly show that Russia has continued to work on chemical weapons. It is inconceivable that these attacks, conducted using one of the world's most advanced nerve agents, could be carried out without the knowledge, approval, and active support of Russian governmental authorities. [EU sanctions listings](#) and the results of [independent investigations](#) have since described the role of these governmental institutions in detail. [Tragicomic cover-up efforts](#) and grotesque diversionary tactics by Moscow add to the perception of complicity.

Can't Live with or without You: The CWC and Russia

Russia's treaty violations create a dilemma for the West. There is an interest in having a well-functioning CWC. [The treaty is approaching universal membership and more than 98% of declared chemicals weapons worldwide have already been destroyed under international verification.](#) But Russia's cooperation remains crucial for the effective implementation of the convention.

As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Moscow can block resolutions which would impose sanctions in response to CWC violations. In the case of Syria, Russia has already vetoed such decisions to enforce compliance. Again and again, Moscow has been able to throw a wrench into the machinery of international diplomacy, including by associating itself with China, India, Iran and other relevant states. Decision-making within the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which is responsible for monitoring the implementation of the chemical weapons

ban, used to be by consensus—until the dispute over the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Faced with Russia's intransigence, Western states now increasingly rely on majority decisions in order to take forward investigations into, for example, chemical weapons attacks. In the long term, this could very well damage the legitimacy of The Hague-based OPCW.

A policy that relies solely on pressure and the containment of Russia might, therefore, end up throwing the baby out with the bathwater. The end result could be long-term damage to the CWC's comprehensive prohibition on the development, production, possession, and use of chemical weapons.

Flexible Responses: The Case for a Rapprochement between Moscow and the CWC

So how might a path out of the current crisis be charted? Two limiting conditions are clear.

First, some economic and political pressure will have to be part of the solution—as Russian intransigence in the face of diplomatic charm offensives and suggestions of dialogue has shown. Penalizing the use of chemical weapons is also desirable and necessary, allowing the international community to demonstrate the value it attaches to upholding the chemical weapons taboo. At the same time, it appears unlikely that pressure alone will cause Moscow to change its policies.

Second, Moscow's interest in preserving the chemical weapons regime is a prerequisite for Russia's realignment with the CWC. So far, the Kremlin has contributed nothing to the investigation into the attack on Navalny. On the contrary, it has attempted to impede the investigation through intentional obfuscation. If Moscow does not change its policy of deception, any attempts to overcome conflicts within the CWC over the investigation into the use of chemical weapons will be doomed to failure from the outset.

There is, however, a glimmer of hope that Russia's policy may not be set in stone. In November 2019, [Moscow contributed to an agreement among CWC states-parties that made it mandatory to declare several types of Novichok to the OPCW.](#) As a result, the first Russian report on Novichok and certain historical aspects of its previously secret program was due in June 2020. Because such declarations by states-parties are strictly confidential, we do not know if and to what extent Russia has reported information related to its Novichok program or stockpiles to The Hague.

Therefore, Moscow should voluntarily release its own declaration and thus pave the way for a public corroboration. The effect of such a confidence-building step would be strengthened if, in this context, Moscow were also to describe the additional measures it is taking or

has taken to permanently and verifiably end declared activities and to destroy existing stockpiles as well as production facilities.

Alexei Navalny was apparently poisoned with a type of Novichok agent that was not on the list of declarable substances adopted in November. But the issue of whether Moscow has been or is operating a program to develop and produce state-of-the-art nerve agents must be settled in order to avoid lasting damage to the CWC.

Western nations should keep a path open for Russia to rectify the situation. Russian disarmament of the Novichok program must be verifiable and any disarmament steps must be verified. This verification, however, need not necessarily happen in full view of the international public: member states of the UN Security Council, acting as representatives of the international community, could validate the information provided by Russia. Such a mission could, to a certain extent, take place confidentially, as long as the results provided to the OPCW and its 193 member states can be authenticated. The difficulty of deceiving inspectors is something Russia experienced first-hand in the 1990s when, under the Trilateral Agreement, it unsuccessfully tried to mislead experts from the United Kingdom and the United States about the Soviet bioweapons program.

It would also be prudent to link a gradual lifting of the sanctions imposed by the EU in response to the

attempted assassination of Navalny to specific Russian steps toward disclosing and dismantling the Novichok program. If the question of whether the Russian state perpetrated the attack cannot be conclusively resolved, the attack on Navalny does not have to be considered a use of chemical weapons under the CWC. This could provide the political room necessary to impose or lift sanctions with some flexibility. To be sure, the CWC comprehensively prohibits any use of chemical weapons. Yet it is the responsibility of states-parties to enforce this prohibition domestically through so-called implementing legislation, under which violations committed by the state's own citizens or within its territory must be prosecuted and penalized by the state authorities. Obviously, Moscow has not complied with this obligation. Yet insufficient domestic implementation of the CWC is not necessarily grounds for UN Security Council involvement. Rather, this diplomatic elbow room could be used to create a way forward for Russia to realign itself with the CWC.

The goal would be to provide reassurances to the international community that the Russian Novichok program has been completely dismantled. But for this to occur, Moscow must first fulfill its obligation to verifiably disclose its chemical weapons programs.

About the Author

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OPINION POLL

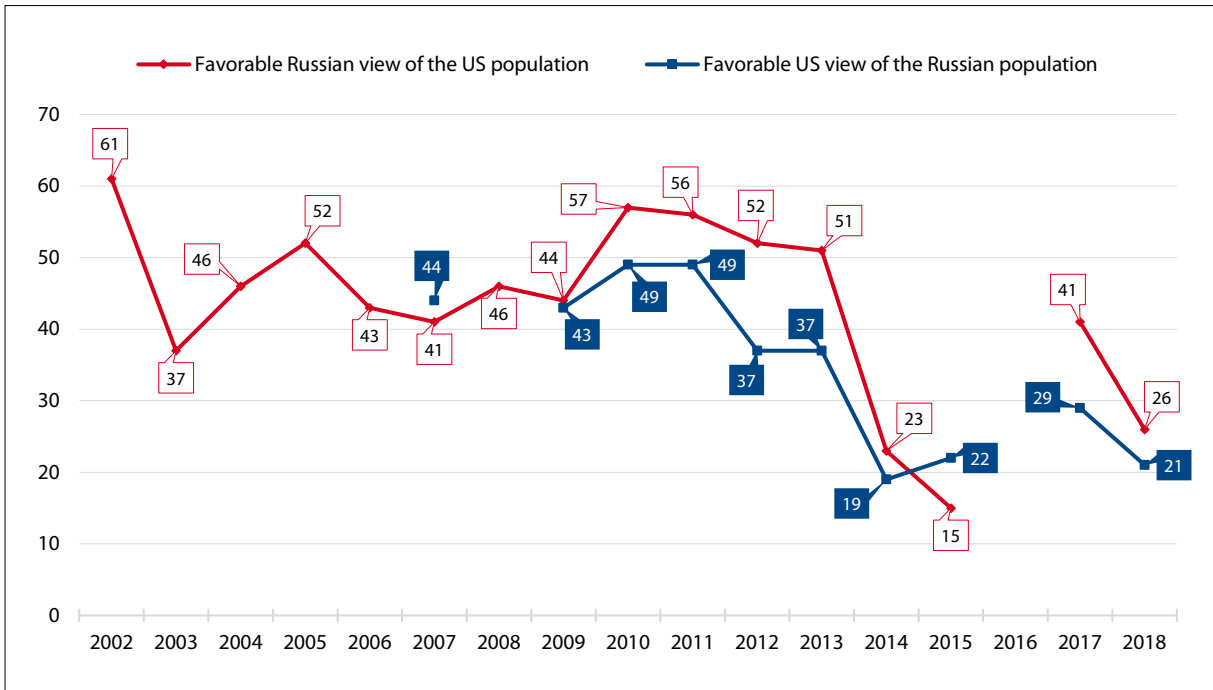
Arms Control and Attitudes of the Russian Population and Elites Towards US–Russian Relations

Table 1: Perception by the Russian Population of Countries That Are Most Unfriendly and Hostile Towards Russia, 2006–2020, %
Which Five Countries Would You Say Are Most Unfriendly, Hostile Towards Russia?

	2006	2007	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
USA	37	35	45	26	33	35	38	69	73	72	69	78	67	60
Ukraine	27	23	41	13	20	15	11	30	37	48	50	49	40	35
Great Britain	5	3	8	6	8	7	9	18	21	18	15	38	38	29
Latvia	46	36	35	36	35	26	21	23	25	23	24	26	27	26
Lithuania	42	32	35	35	34	25	17	24	25	23	24	23	26	26
Poland	7	20	10	14	20	8	8	12	22	24	21	24	22	26
Georgia	44	46	62	57	50	41	33	19	11	10	9	8	11	16
Germany	2	2	3	1	4	3	3	18	19	19	24	17	18	15
Estonia	28	60	30	28	30	23	16	21	19	16	16	15	12	11
Afghanistan	12	11	7	14	15	8	10	5	4	2	3	3	4	7
Canada	1	<1	1	<1	1	1	1	7	8	6	3	8	9	7
Iraq	9	8	5	9	9	8	7	3	2	2	3	4	5	6
Iran	7	7	3	7	7	7	5	2	2	2	2	2	3	4
Syria	<1	<1	<1	<1	1	2	3	1	1	3	4	4	4	4
Japan	4	3	3	3	9	6	7	5	6	5	6	3	4	4
Israel	4	3	3	2	3	3	3	2	2	2	1	5	4	3
China	–	3	3	4	4	4	5	1	<1	1	2	1	3	3
Turkey	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	29	8	3	2	3
France	1	1	1	<1	1	1	2	5	7	4	8	8	8	3
Australia	<1	<1	<1	<1	1	<1	<1	1	3	2	1	1	2	2
Bulgaria	1	1	<1	<1	2	<1	<1	<1	1	1	<1	1	2	2
Netherlands	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	1	1	1	1	2
Italy	<1	<1	1	<1	<1	1	<1	1	3	1	1	1	1	2
Pakistan	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	<1	1	1	2	2
Romania	2	2	3	3	3	1	2	2	3	2	2	2	2	2
Saudi Arabia	–	1	<1	1	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	1	2	2
North Korea	<1	1	1	1	1	1	4	2	1	1	2	2	2	2
Azerbaijan	4	4	2	3	5	2	4	2	1	2	1	1	1	2
Armenia	3	2	1	3	4	1	1	<1	1	1	<1	1	1	2
Belarus	2	5	2	3	8	3	2	<1	1	1	1	1	1	2
Vietnam	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	<1	<1	<1	1	2
Czech Republik	1	2	1	<1	1	1	<1	1	2	1	<1	1	1	2
Hungary	1	<1	<1	1	1	1	<1	1	<1	<1	1	1	1	2
None	4	2	3	4	14	7	7	3	3	5	3	2	3	7
It is difficult to say	19	17	15	17	1	21	24	17	14	10	11	10	7	7

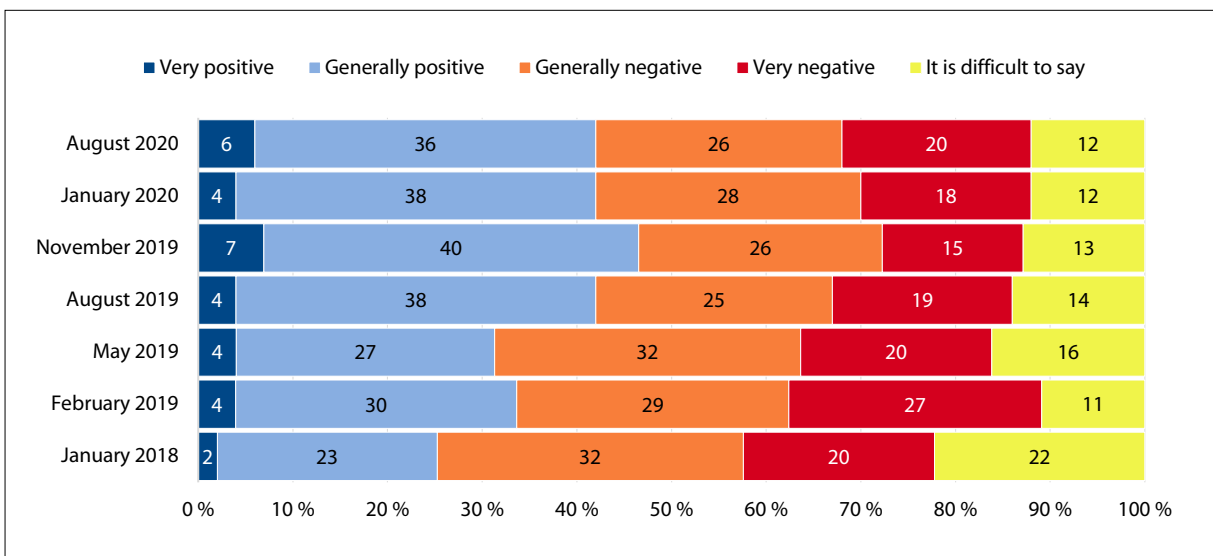
Source: representative polls by Levada-Center from 2006 to 20–26 August 2020, published 20 September 2020; <https://www.levada.ru/en/2020/09/30/attitudes-toward-countries-4/>

Figure 1: Comparison of Russian and US Views of the Other Country 2002–2018, %



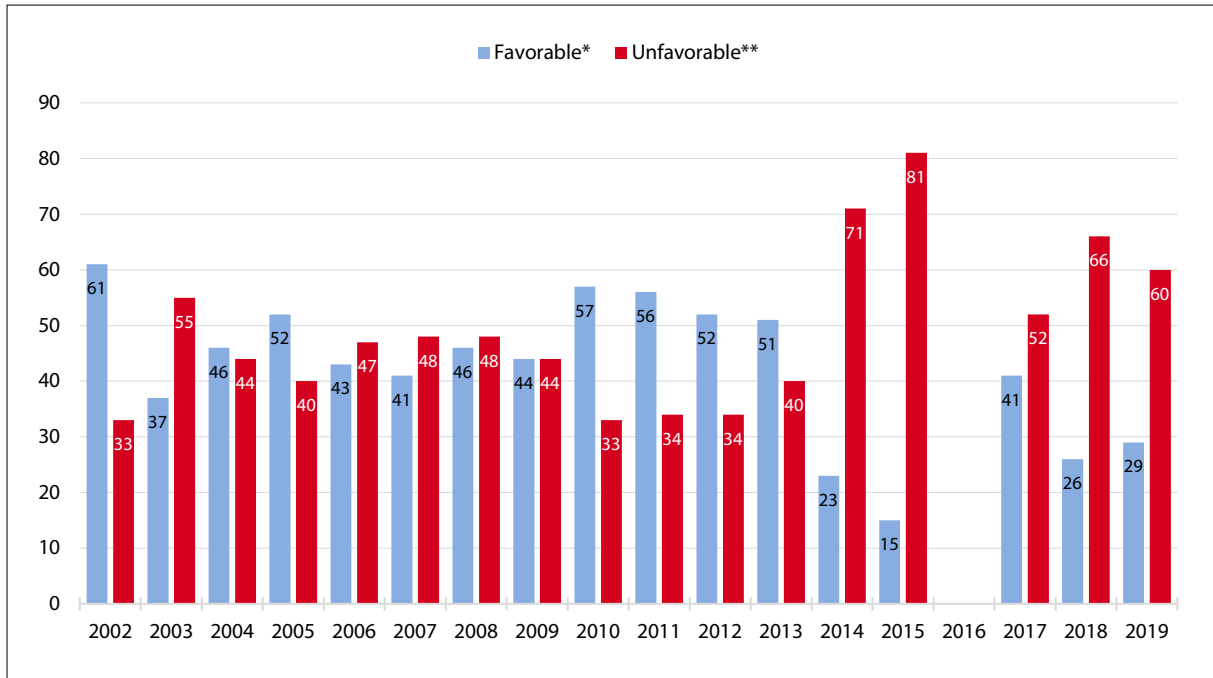
Source: Pew Research Center, Spring 2018 Global Attitudes Survey; <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/04/6-charts-on-how-russians-and-americans-see-each-other/>

Figure 2: Attitude of the Russian Population Towards the USA, %
Overall, What Is Your Current Attitude Towards the United States? (one answer)



Source: representative polls by Levada-Center from January 2018 to 20–26 August 2020, published 20 September 2020; <https://www.levada.ru/en/2020/09/30/attitudes-toward-countries-4/>

**Figure 3: Attitude of the Russian Population Towards the USA 2002–2019, %
Do You Have a Favorable or Unfavorable View of the USA?**

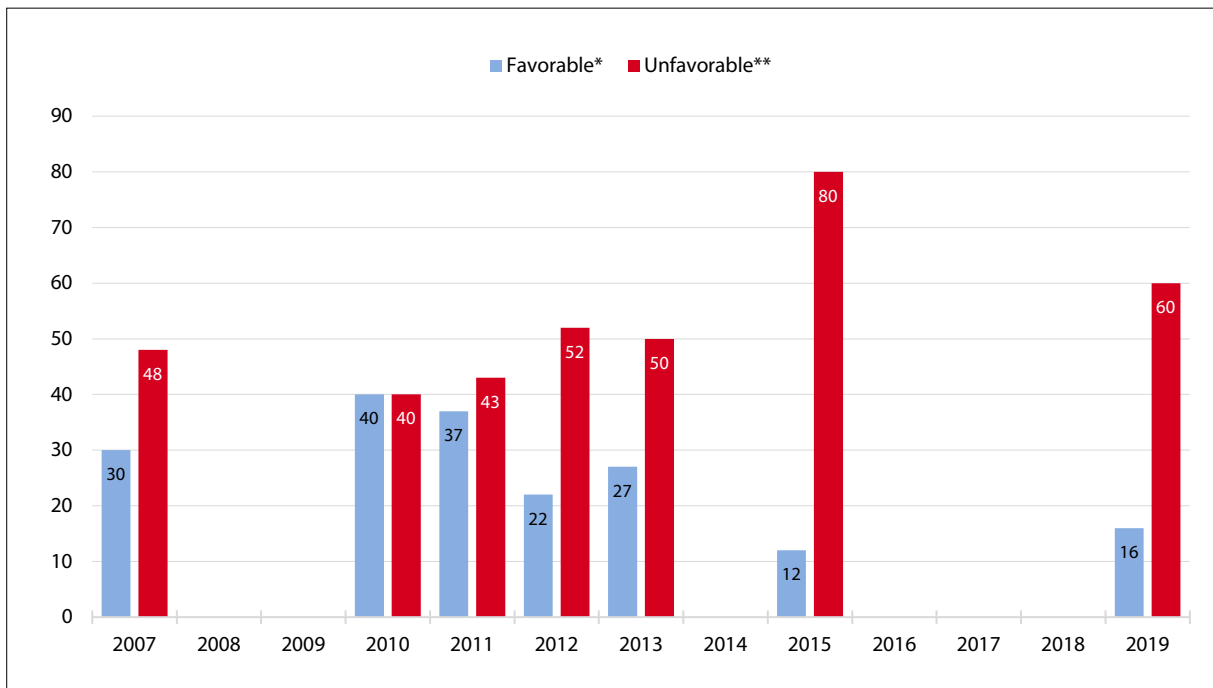


* Favorable combines "very favorable" and "somewhat favorable" responses.

** Unfavorable combines "very unfavorable" and "somewhat unfavorable."

Source: Pew Research Center, Global Indicators Database, Country Profile Russia; <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/database/indicator/1/country/ru/>

**Figure 4: Attitude of the Russian Population Towards NATO 2007–2019, %
Do You Have a Favorable or Unfavorable View of NATO?**



* Favorable combines "very favorable" and "somewhat favorable" responses.

** Unfavorable combines "very unfavorable" and "somewhat unfavorable."

Source: Pew Research Center, Global Indicators Database, Country Profile Russia; <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/database/indicator/1/country/ru/>

Table 2: Opinion of the Russian Population on Whether or Not Western Member States of NATO Have Reason to Be Wary of Russia, 1997–2020, %
In Your Opinion, Do Western Countries Belonging To NATO Have Reason To Be Wary Of Russia? (one answer)

	Definitely yes	Probably yes	Probably not	Definitely not	It is difficult to say
January 2020	12	23	39	22	5
December 2017	14	27	33	16	11
November 2016	10	27	29	23	10
November 2015	13	26	30	21	10
March 2014	14	30	30	15	10
July 2008	12	21	36	24	8
April 2007	7	21	33	24	15
June 2006	10	21	38	22	10
April 2006	9	25	37	20	9
February 2002	7	22	38	20	14
February 2001	8	16	40	25	12
August 2000	8	20	38	19	14
April 1997	11	16	32	27	13

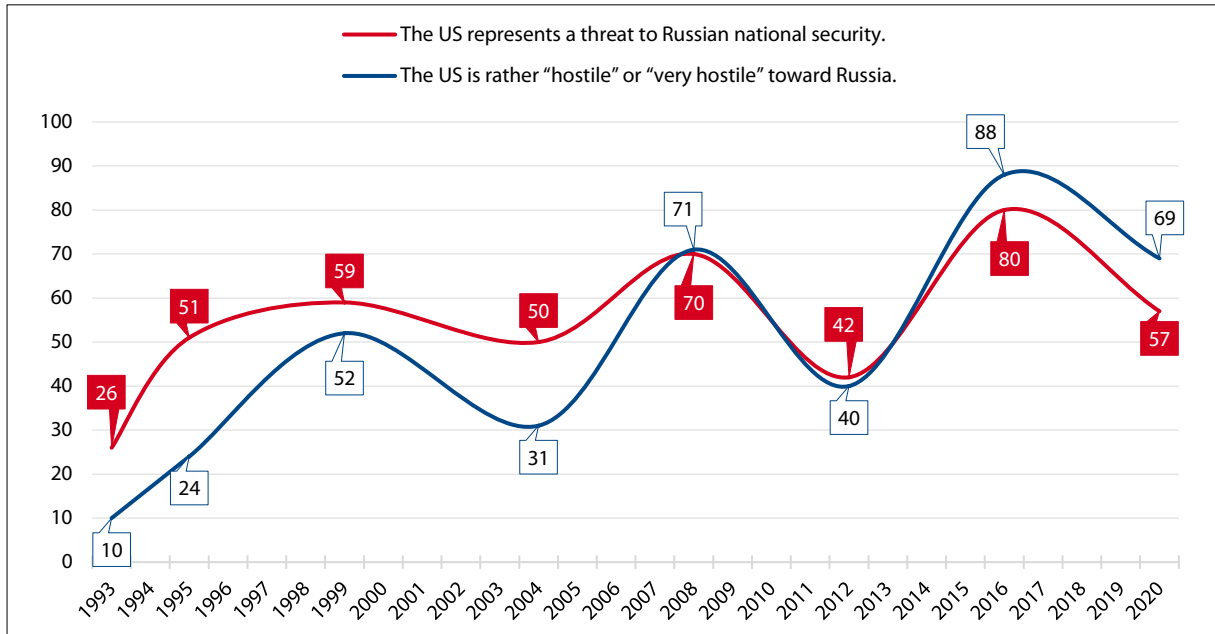
Source: representative opinion polls by Levada-Center from April 1997 to 23–29 January 2020, published on 28 February 2020; <https://www.levada.ru/en/2020/02/28/russia-and-the-west/>

Table 3: Opinion of the Russian Population on Whether or Not Russia Has Reason to Be Wary of Western Member States of NATO, 1997–2020, %
In Your Opinion, Does Russia Have Reason To Be Wary Of Western Countries Belonging To NATO? (one answer)

	Definitely yes	Probably yes	Probably not	Definitely not	It is difficult to say
January 2020	16	36	32	12	5
December 2017	17	40	24	6	13
November 2016	15	42	24	7	12
November 2015	16	38	26	10	11
March 2014	17	45	22	5	11
March 2011	21	42	21	3	12
March 2009	22	40	21	6	12
July 2008	23	39	21	8	10
April 2007	14	35	27	8	16
June 2006	22	40	22	7	10
April 2006	15	43	26	8	9
February 2002	14	42	23	7	14
February 2001	25	33	22	8	13
August 2000	16	38	25	7	14
Mai 1999	27	36	22	7	10
March 1999	27	37	23	6	9
April 1997	26	34	18	9	13

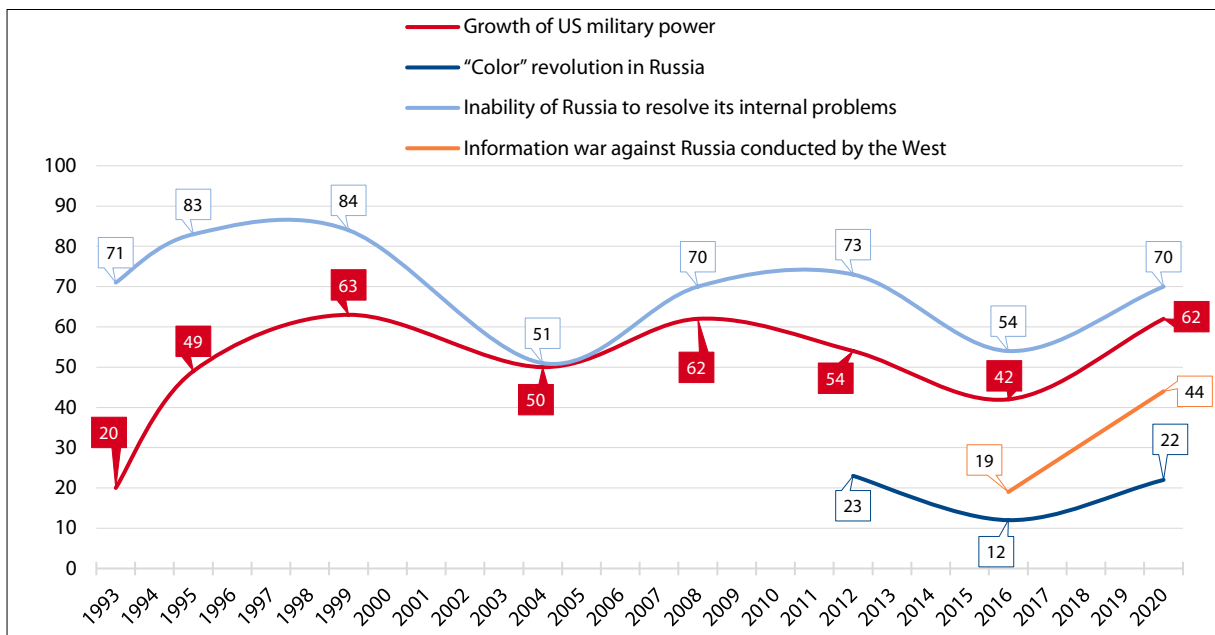
Source: representative opinion polls by Levada-Center from April 1997 to 23–29 January 2020, published on 28 February 2020; <https://www.levada.ru/en/2020/02/28/russia-and-the-west/>

Figure 5: Perception of the USA by Russian Elites as a Threat to Russian National Security or as an Enemy of Russia 1993–2020, %
Do You Think That the US Represents a Threat to Russian National Security?
For Each Country or International Organization That I Will Name, Please Tell Me How Friendly Or Hostile You Think It Is Toward Russia Today: Very Friendly, Rather Friendly, Neutral, Rather Hostile, Or Very Hostile [US].



Source: Rivera, S. W. et al. (2020): Survey of Russian Elites 2020. New Perspectives on Foreign and Domestic Policy; <https://www.hamilton.edu/documents/SRE2020ReportFINAL.pdf>

Figure 6: Threats to Russian Security as Perceived by Russian Elites in Comparison, 1993–2020, %
Which of the Following Represent the Greatest Threat to the Security of Russia and Which Do Not Represent Any Threat Whatsoever? Rate the Level of Threat on a Five-Point Scale, Where 1 Means the "Absence of Danger" and 5 Means "the Utmost Danger."*



*The figure displays the percentage of all respondents (including those who answered "don't know" or refused to answer) who assessed the threat as either a four or five. Source: Rivera, S. W. et al. (2020): Survey of Russian Elites 2020. New Perspectives on Foreign and Domestic Policy; <https://www.hamilton.edu/documents/SRE2020ReportFINAL.pdf>

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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