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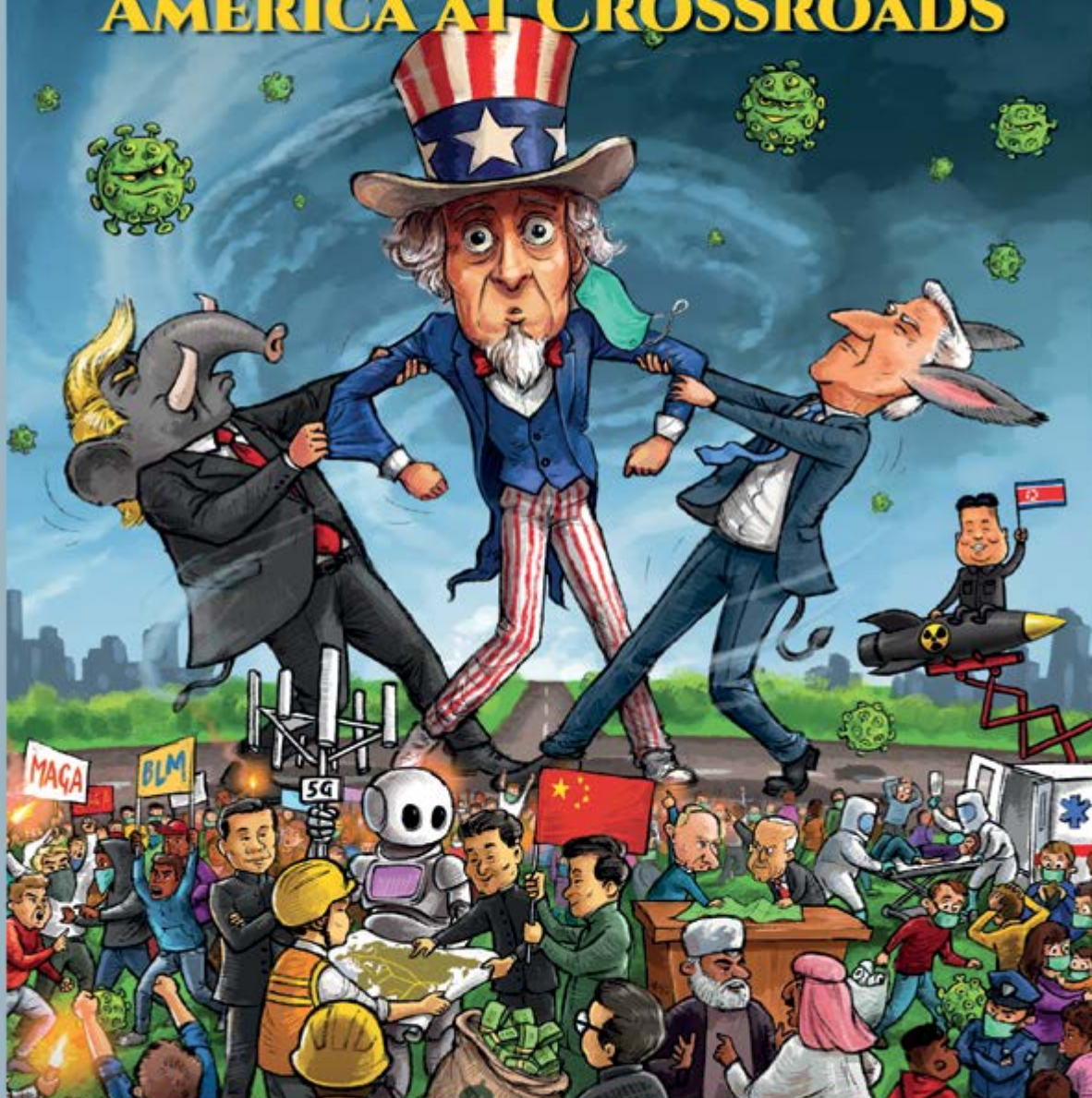
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# HORIZONS

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## AMERICA AT CROSSROADS



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# IT WILL GET WORSE BEFORE IT GETS WORSE

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE OF U.S.-RUSSIA RELATIONS

*Dmitri Trenin*

THE 2020 U.S. presidential elections offers a bleak prospect for Moscow. Regardless of who will win the race for the White House, U.S.-Russian relations are going to get worse, and maybe much worse. A re-election of Donald Trump would elevate the anti-Russian frenzy among the Democrats to an even higher pitch than in 2016, with accusations of Russian meddling, already made frequently during the campaign, leading the U.S. Congress to impose even more sweeping and more stringent sanctions on Russia. On the other hand, a victory by Joe Biden would produce a President who would need to show the Kremlin that he is not “Putin’s puppy,” as Biden called Trump during their late-September televised debate, and that he would have no problem not just lambasting Putin’s foreign and domestic policies without mercy, but also making Russia pay a really high price for its misdeeds.

Personalities matter, but U.S.-Russian relations these days are not that much dependent on who’s the boss of the White House or the Kremlin. The seven-year-old highly asymmetrical confrontation between the two countries, which began in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, is properly labeled systemic, and the American sanctions subsequently imposed on Russia are deemed to be eternal. In all probability, these sanctions will last decades and survive long after what had caused them is no more. In 2014, it was Ukraine that became the last straw that broke the relationship, but the issue was much wider than Ukraine. Essentially, the end of the Cold War three decades ago has failed to produce a settlement that the defeated party, Russia, would be happy with. Throughout history, such victories promised the onset of a new conflict in the generation that followed the previous one.

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Photo: China Daily

*Russia must maintain equilibrium but not equidistance between America and China*

Today, the United States is seeking to uphold its primacy and dominance, even if under Trump the concept of U.S. global leadership has receded somewhat, while Russia is seeking to keep its sovereignty vis-à-vis the power of the United States as well as its ability to define and defend its own security interests, and also act accordingly. Washington has found it impossible, so far, to make Moscow change its policies. For its part, Moscow has had to pay an ever growing bill of problems caused by the U.S.-led drive to restrict its access to global finances, advanced technology, and economic opportunities.

### CONFRONTATION & ENTENTE

THE Moscow-Washington rivalry, as asymmetric as it is, is linked to the power redistribution processes changing the world order, and each country’s position and role within that order. With Trump in office, the United States has decided to confront, before it is too late, a very powerful and dynamic challenger, China. Russia, stymied in the West—due to the aforementioned confrontation with the United States and a serious deterioration of relations with Europe, particularly Germany, has expanded its ties with China as its most important economic and geopolitical partner in the world.

Thus, America has found itself in a confrontation with both China and Russia, while Beijing and Moscow in turn have upgraded their partnership to something one might call *entente*: a high degree of mutual understanding and policy coordination between the two leaderships, complete with a capability to manage their inevitable differences.

The idea, once popular in the Trump entourage, of weaning Russia off China has virtually no chance, however. Moscow values its good relations with Eurasia's most powerful nation, which is also Russia's close neighbor. Undermining that relationship would be sheer strategic madness. Faith in Washington stands about as high in Moscow as the other way around. Moreover, a Biden presidency would probably lead to a change in tone in America's China policy, if not in substance; this would contrast with a hardening of tone from the Biden White House on Russia. It is therefore unlikely that a Kissingerian maneuver—in this case, pointing the geopolitical triangle against Beijing—is in the cards.

It is fair to add here that a further tightening of the Sino-Russian relationship—upgrading the *entente* to an alliance—is similarly unlikely. Russia sees

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itself as a great power, and running into the close embrace of China after having rejected the position of junior partner to the United States would constitute a supreme and bitter irony. Russia's international identity is inseparably linked to the status of the country as an independent power. In the early 1990s, Moscow played with the idea of Western integration, even accepting U.S. leadership in exchange for some special status within the U.S.-led global system, but in the end it recoiled from the idea.

China, for its part, has only limited experience with international leadership, and Beijing understands that it has to handle Russia with great care.

**DASHED HOPES**

Against such background, there are a very few areas where Russia and the United States can engage each other constructively. For some in Moscow, it had initially appeared that the global crisis provoked by the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic would provide a rare opportunity to try to reengage Washington. Even though hardly anyone else in the Russian leadership expected a fundamental turnaround in Russian-American relations in the foreseeable future, President Vladimir Putin decided not to ignore the opportunity. This was consistent with a historical pattern

in which Russia tries to use a common threat to reset its relationship with the United States and look for areas of cooperation based on mutual interests.

President Putin hoped for a meeting of top world leaders in Moscow in May 2020 to celebrate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the victory over Nazism; he also called for a summit of the P-5 leaders—America, Britain, China, France, and Russia—to discuss pressing world issues; with regards to the latter he had considered making the trip to New York to attend the annual high-level debate at the United Nations. COVID-19, of course, dispelled these hopes and scrapped his plans, but the issues remain. Now Putin is getting ready to try to re-engage with the new American administration.

In a nutshell, what the Kremlin wants from the United States is to resume dialogue based on mutual interests and without preconditions. Moscow's American agenda is currently essentially limited to strategic stability issues. Following former U.S. president George W. Bush's termination of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002 and Donald Trump's withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces accord in 2019, the New START negotiated by Barack Obama is the last

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major agreement in place providing for strategic arms control and inspections. However, the New START is due to expire in February 2021. Russia wanted it to be extended for another five years. The United States suggested attaching conditions to the extension, which in its view should be much shorter in length.

In 2018, when Russian President Vladimir Putin unveiled a range of new advanced strategic weaponry, he hoped that the impressive display would bring the United States to the negotiating table. Mindful of the experience of the Cold War, the Kremlin would much prefer to limit the U.S.-Russian arms race and preserve strategic stability rather than to engage in an unconstrained arms race with a much stronger rival. Make no mistake, though: Putin considers Russia's nuclear deterrence of the United States to be effective and assured for at least a couple of decades, and is not turning to Washington as a supplicant. Should the New START Treaty be allowed to expire, strategic stability will be only based on mutual deterrence.

**DASHED OPPORTUNITY**

The coronavirus outbreak, however, did create an opportunity of sorts. The American public's attention was immediately focused on China as the source

of the pandemic. Trump, for whom Beijing, rather than Moscow, has always been the main adversary, was tempted to drive wedges between Russia and China. At the same time, Trump was also concerned by the plight of the U.S. shale industry amid the steep drop in global demand for oil, exacerbated by the Saudi-Russian price war. To deal with the problem, Trump leaned hard on Riyadh in spring 2020 and also reached out to Moscow. This caused a brief spike in direct top-level contacts between the White House and the Kremlin.

Putin readily seized this overture. On China, Trump's efforts was predictably in vain. Although the Russian establishment espouses a healthy realist view of China, it would be ridiculous to expect it to alienate Beijing on Washington's behalf. On oil, Russia cooperated with the United States and was rewarded by becoming part of the newly-emerged global energy troika alongside the United States and Saudi Arabia. Putin also had his own agenda, of course. He made a nod to humanitarian diplomacy by sending a planeload of medical supplies to the United States, but, most significantly, sought to engage Trump in a conversation about arms control. If New START is to be saved, the Trump Administration had to work with the Kremlin on it.

Several working sessions have been held, but despite understanding in principle to extend the treaty by one year and a freeze on nuclear weapons for that period, no final agree has been sealed so far. If the treaty expires without exten-

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sion, there will be no legal grounds for on-site inspections of nuclear arsenals, and both sides will have to rely on their national technical means. The prospects of post-START nuclear arms

talks that Moscow has also proposed are even more uncertain, and largely depend on the outcome of the forthcoming presidential election in the United States. If the winner is backed by a comfortable majority, and accusations of Russian election interference are muted, there might be a small chance for the dialogue to begin—but even that will not occur immediately. One thing is clear: reaching new-era arms agreements will be infinitely more difficult than before. Traditional arms control may be over soon.

The ceasefire in Ukraine's Donbas region negotiated in 2020 should remain stable and allow for humanitarian and economic exchanges across the line of contact. These measures are absolutely vital, but there is little that is to be expected beyond that: they represent the most that can be done. The Ukrainian body politic never liked the 2015 Minsk agreement, which stipulates amnesty

for the separatists and near federal-level autonomy for Donbas. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky does not have enough political capital to overrule them. Russia, for its part, will not abandon Donbas for a vague and most probably empty promise of an end to sanctions. A solution to the frozen conflict in eastern Ukraine will likely remain out of reach for a long time.

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1994 Russian-mediated ceasefire was finally broken in September 2020. In formal terms, Russia and the United States are on the same page, calling, as co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, for an end to hostilities. However, the situation now is more complicated due to the material support given to Azerbaijan by Turkey, and the Western-leaning tendencies at the top of the Armenian government, installed after the 2018 revolution. There are growing concerns in Russia that it is being completely displaced by the West and Turkey from the South Caucasus region. The more recent brokerage by Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov of a ceasefire to swap prisoners and war dead may quiet these concerns, at least for a time, should it go on to kickstart substantive peace negotiations.

#### NEGATIVE OUTLOOK

The longer-term consequences of the coronavirus will significantly impact the global context of Russia-U.S. relations. The most important factor will be the further intensification of U.S.-Chinese rivalry, and the emerging Sino-American bipolarity. America's ongoing refocusing on itself at the expense of its global leadership, together with the rise of nationalism in Europe, will continue to transform transatlantic ties and the nature of the European Union. In this environment, Russia's top priority should

#### OTHER CRISES

Recent months have seen the eruption of two other crises in Russia's post-Soviet neighborhood. In Belarus, disgruntlement over President Alexander Lukashenko's 26-year-long rule, exacerbated by his cavalier attitude and passive policy toward COVID-19, produced political turbulence following the flawed presidential election of August 2020. While the United States supported the Belarusian opposition, Russia used the situation to make Lukashenko move to integrate the country closer with Russia, which heretofore he had been unwilling to do. The crisis however is not over. Should Belarus become destabilized, this would produce an even more acute showdown in terms of security in Europe's east than the situation in Ukraine.

In Nagorno-Karabakh, a territory in the South Caucasus, disputed by the Armenians and the Azerbaijanis, the

be to carefully maintain equilibrium—though not equidistance—between the United States and China.

Another priority should be to reduce concerns in Europe about the threat from Russia itself, and enhance relations with those EU countries that are more open to such a prospect. That being said, the poisoning of Russian opposition activist Alexei Navalny in August 2020 brought Moscow's relations with Berlin to the lowest point since the end of the Cold War. The Russian-German partnership, long a mainstay of post-Cold War stability and cooperation on the European continent, which had been visibly suffering during the past decade, is finally over. Moscow's relations with other EU countries, including France, have also plunged to very low levels. The daylight between the U.S. and the EU as regards policy toward Russia has narrowed to the absolute minimum in recent times.

Besides worrying about the fate of the almost completed Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline across the Baltic Sea, which may fall victim to the collapse of German-Russian relations, Moscow will also have to draw a lesson from

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the spectacular fall in oil prices early in 2020 caused by the pandemic-linked global economic recession and Europe's decision to reduce its reliance on hydrocarbons. Potentially, this undermines the economic basis of Russia-EU trade.

The share of the European market currently held by Russian gas may be taken over by LNG imports from the United States.

While the context of Russian-American relations is changing as a result of the second- and third-level consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, the core relationship between Moscow and Washington is unlikely to be substantially altered by it. No new reset is in the offing, and the outlook remains negative, if generally stable. The U.S.-Russian confrontation will continue. The only solace is that, for now, there is a safety net installed beneath it. High-level military and security contacts; 24/7 communications; agreed protocols for dealing with incidents and other emergencies so that these do not escalate to dangerous levels—all these measures are designed to make sure that confrontation between America and Russia does not lead to collision. That at least remains the hope. ●