

How Much Should We Worry About a Resurrected Russia?

MORE THAN YOU MIGHT THINK

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 685

January 2021

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President Vladimir Putin, in a quote he attributed to Winston Churchill, [declared](#) as early as 2006 that, “Russia is never as strong as she looks, Russia is never as weak as she looks.” The new Biden administration should heed this warning. Too often, however, even in the wake of its seizure of Crimea in 2014, mobilization to Syria in 2015, cyber and “sharp power” interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, and most recently an acknowledgment in December of 2020 by the Trump administration that Russian government hackers penetrated various government agencies and [stole](#) a yet unknown quantity of vital data, we have been told by current and former policymakers that Putin has played a “weak hand” well in the card game of global politics.

But just as a weak hand in poker could be a strong hand in bridge, it is a mistake to assume that power in international politics is one dimensional. If we think of power in terms of only the relative means of money, manpower, and the military that one country has to influence the decisions of others, then recent experience clearly demonstrates that Washington will continuously be surprised what Russia can do. Moscow is clearly more capable than we would expect by a tally of these comparative measures. If we rely on these indicators alone to assess its relative strength, then we are doomed to underestimate Russia’s capacity to disrupt the global order.

A Weak Hand?

To be sure, by traditional measures of international power, with just over 3 percent of the global economy compared to the 16 percent or so that the U.S. commands, Russia is no economic peer power. Its military, though modernized beginning in 2008, remains a

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fraction of the size of the American armed forces (although it has maintained nuclear parity with the United States and far out-matches China in the nuclear realm). Demographically, Russia is frequently depicted as a nation in decline. Indeed, in terms of average life expectancy, the World Health Organization ranks Russia at 110, with Russian men living on average about 13 years less than European men. Compounding the demographic issue is the fact that Russian fertility levels remain low, and this is not completely offset by immigration such that population growth has remained flat to slightly positive. Its 146.5 million people (if one includes Crimea) are still heavy smokers and historically much heavier consumers of hard liquor than most of the rest of the world, although these bad habits are slowly being shed. Still, by these measures, Russia hardly looks like much of a challenger to the United States for global hegemony, nor an obstacle to a rising China.

Even in terms of material strengths, however, by the end of 2019, just as the global pandemic began, Russia had come a long way back in its development from the decrepit, indebted, and lawless country that emerged in the wake of the Soviet collapse. Frequently portrayed as an oil revenue dependent state—deceased Senator John McCain once described it as “a gas station masquerading as a country”—that produced nothing of any value but carbon energy resources, modern Russia is now much more than just that. Contemporary Russia is one of the two biggest global exporters of oil (with Saudi Arabia), but it now does far more than merely sell carbon energy products. It also controls much of the world’s oil pipeline transportation infrastructure. That is the kind of leverage over a host of countries that are not captured through estimates of its relative GDP or the size of the Russian military. Over the last ten or so years, Russia has added significantly to its menu of exports—nuclear power plants in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa, construction materials, nickel, timber, diamonds, mining equipment, wheat, high tech communications equipment, aluminum, chemicals, and of course ever more sophisticated weaponry.

More than Enough Capacity to Disrupt and Damage American Security Interests

But looking only at the relative economic, military, or demographic means of Russian global influence relative to the West (or China) dangerously underestimates its healthy capacity to disrupt and damage American interests abroad. In terms of capability, Russia has not needed the biggest economy or military in the world to forge new relationships globally. Only eighteen months after Russian speaking “Little Green Men” appeared on the Crimean Peninsula in March 2014 to execute Putin’s landgrab from Ukraine, Russian forces performed a snap mobilization by air and sea into Syria, saving Bashar Assad’s regime from imminent collapse. In doing so, Russia changed the balance of power in the Middle East even before President Donald Trump abandoned U.S. Kurdish allies and downsized American forces to only a few hundred personnel. Russian military hardware, including S-300 and S-400 anti-ballistic missile systems, now sit on Turkish soil (a member of NATO), Iran, Syria, and soon Saudi Arabia. It is due to the Syria

campaign that Russia also now controls vital oil transportation infrastructure in the Middle East, in addition to being the major supplier of energy to Germany and part of Europe through the Nord Stream I pipeline, and the (inevitably) soon to be completed, Nord Stream II. These relationships and the leverage that they provide Russia today in the Middle East and Europe are not easily captured by the traditional measures of power projection.

Russia's global influence has spread as the United States has been asleep at the wheel of international politics under Donald Trump. A warlord in Libya, supported by Russia, was able to remain preeminent in the shaky political settlement there because of Russian political and military support; Nicolas Maduro has remained president of Venezuela because of Russia and right-wing politicians in Europe the likes of Marine LePen in France have received millions of dollars in financial support from Russia. In Europe, emerging illiberal populists like Victor Orbán of Hungary openly admire and mimic Putin's dictatorial governance at home, as they inch ever closer toward full-blown autocracy.

At the same time, Russia has used oil and weapon sales to forge an axis of mutual convenience with Xi Jinping's China. While Putin and Xi Jinping boast of their close personal relationship, their two countries increasingly cooperate in joint military exercises. India's reliance on Putin and Russia for advanced weaponry has also increased in the last four years. Of course, Russia saves plenty of weapons for itself and has transformed its military comprised mostly of poorly equipped and badly trained conscripts into an agile, professionalized fighting force. Further, one of Russia's strongest cards is that it is still the only country in the world that can deliver a nuclear-tipped missile to the steps of the White House or the Pentagon in under 30 minutes. Its nuclear modernization includes weaponry that is the stuff of science fiction. One new nuclear powered, nuclear-tipped torpedo, the Poseidon, carrying a 200-megaton warhead, could actually swamp the east coast of the United States should it actually work as designed.

New Instruments of Power that Russia Can Afford and that Pack a Big Punch

Under Vladimir Putin, Russia has developed a significant array of new power resources that do not really put much stress on its economy, long thought to be its Achilles' Heel in spreading its global influence. It has used "soft" power—the power of attraction—to promote illiberal values where they are most likely to be received warmly—the already conservative societies in the Middle East, parts of Eastern Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America. Putin's Russia, for some even within the United States, is an alternative socially conservative pole to the purportedly hedonistic overly permissive liberalism of the West. The message has been pushed through RT, Russia's global television mouthpiece, Sputnik, its ubiquitous radio and Internet channel, and

notoriously, through “sharp power” (cyber means) to propagate disinformation meant to confuse vulnerable populations about what is truth and what is fiction.

These are inexpensive tools compared to military expenditures and ones that the Russian economy can easily support even at its pre-epidemic 1.3 percent GDP annual growth. In addition, macro-economically, Russia has a low debt to GDP ratio, significant reserves in its national wealth fund, and a record of low budget deficits. Under targeted sanctions since 2014 by the United States and Europe, attracting foreign investment has been somewhat difficult, though not impossible.

Saudi Arabia, along with Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, has invested in Russia through the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), which was announced following the imposition of European and American sanctions on Russia in 2014. The Saudis pledged \$10 million to the RDIF over a five-year period. In addition, Saudi Aramco, the state-owned oil company, hoped to purchase 30 percent of the Russian gas producer Novatek’s liquefied natural gas project in the Arctic, estimated to be worth about \$21 billion. Reportedly, by 2018, Rosneft and Gazprom had also been in discussions with Aramco on joint research and development projects. The Gulf states are also especially large customers for Russian-made weapons. In 2017, Russia and Saudi Arabia signed an agreement worth about \$3.5 billion for Russia to supply the Kingdom with its S-400 missile defense platform, making Saudi Arabia the third U.S. ally (after Turkey and Greece) to purchase the system.

Putinism’s Vulnerabilities: Opportunities for a New American President

Nonetheless, Russia’s regime has some very deep problems—but not the ones on which we typically focus U.S. foreign policy decisions. Young Russians have increasingly indicated that they intend to emigrate to Europe or the United States—53 percent of those 18-24 years olds polled by the reputable Levada Center in 2019 claimed that they intended to leave Russia permanently. In what analysts refer to as “the Putin Exodus,” some of Russia’s most highly educated scientists and engineers have already departed over the last decade. As far as its recovery has come in the last thirty years, without the labor and creativity of its most talented citizens, it is hard to see how the Russian economy can become an innovation hub as Putin has promised.

The regime faces a simmering legitimacy crisis at home. In the face of ongoing elite corruption, before the pandemic prevented them from doing so, young Russians increasingly took to the streets in protest. Social opposition against the seemingly arbitrary application of the law sustained protests in Khabarovsk in Russia’s far east for months after they began in August of 2020. Thus, even in the face of no real organized opposition party, Putin’s regime faces real societal resistance. While Russia’s leaders may claim that NATO is the regime’s biggest threat, in reality, the true threat to the regime comes from the Russian people themselves.

Putin's rush to change the constitution in the midst of the pandemic last summer such that he could retain the option of remaining Russia's president through 2036 seemed a hasty solution to the succession problem he would have faced when his current term was set to conclude in 2024. Another law adopted at the end of 2020 made it illegal to put a former Russian president on trial for acts in office is another telling indicator of his domestic insecurity. Putin's biggest fear appears to be his own street as well as rival political elites.

U.S.-Russian Relations: The Way Forward

American policy on Russia was largely frozen during the Trump administration, while Mr. Putin has pushed Russia forward globally. President Biden is stuck with Putin or at least Putinism for the foreseeable future, and Russia's resurrection as a truly global power. Washington must, therefore, find a way to cooperate with Putin's regime where it can and constrain it globally where it must. Obvious areas of necessary and urgent cooperation are in **arms control** with the impending expiration of the New START treaty in February of 2021. Next, Biden's administration must move quickly to reestablish strong relations with European allies to work with Russia to find a replacement for the **JCPOA agreement** with Iran.

Other less obvious areas of potential U.S.-Russian collaboration for the Biden administration are equally urgent—areas like **climate change**, where Putin has recently expressed grave concern, especially for **the Arctic**, and also **global public health** where Russia has become increasingly active (and quite capable) while the Trump administration withdrew the United States from the WHO. Regulating and **limiting the further militarization of space** is another avenue for pressing U.S.-Russian cooperation. Reforming U.S. immigration laws that make it easier for talented, young Russians to immigrate to the United States would be beneficial while detrimental to Putin.

Finally, and particularly vital, Washington must work with U.S. allies to find a solution to the **Ukraine** conflict with Russia. This means more than attempting to restore Crimea to Ukraine (at best, a long-term goal), but restoring the security of Ukraine's eastern border with Russia. But beyond this, making Ukraine a success developmentally could demonstrate to an increasingly restive Russian society that democracy can work and that they too would be better off under a more liberal regime that focuses more on solving domestic issues than it does on forays abroad. The seeds of societal discontent have already been planted in Russia by the regime's own failures.

Before all of this, however, U.S. policymakers must restore international respect for the United States' own democratic political institutions. Trump's allegations of unproven fraud in the electoral process have done damage not only at home but to U.S. security interests abroad. He has given new life to aging autocrats like Putin in making the

United States look weak, disorganized, and vulnerable—hardly a model of governing his people might want to emulate.



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