ASSESSING THE PROSPECTS FOR
GREAT POWER COOPERATION
IN EUROPE AND THE MIDDLE EAST

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About This Report

The 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) starts with the assertion that “Interstate strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.” Even the NDS acknowledges, however, the need for cooperation with competitors, albeit “from a position of strength and based on our national interests.” As part of a larger study of cooperation in an era of strategic competition, we assessed the potential for U.S. security cooperation with China and Russia in Europe and the Middle East. The other volumes in this series are


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## Contents

About This Report ................................................................. iii  
Tables ..................................................................................... vii  
Summary .................................................................................. ix  

### CHAPTER ONE  
Introduction ........................................................................... 1  
Methodology ............................................................................. 2  
Data Sources ............................................................................ 5  
Overview of This Report ...................................................... 6  

### CHAPTER TWO  
American, Chinese, and Russian Overarching Interests in Europe and the Middle East ... 9  
American Interests in Europe and the Middle East ......................... 9  
Chinese Interests in Europe and the Middle East ............................. 14  
Russian Interests in Europe and the Middle East ............................ 21  
Mapping the Trade Space in Europe and the Middle East ................ 28  

### CHAPTER THREE  
Broader Euro-Atlantic Security ................................................ 33  
Understanding the Equities ..................................................... 34  
Space for Cooperation ............................................................ 45  
Second-Order Effects of Cooperation ......................................... 57  
Conclusion .............................................................................. 59  

### CHAPTER FOUR  
Baltic Security ......................................................................... 61  
Understanding the Equities ..................................................... 62  
Space for Cooperation ............................................................ 71  
Second-Order Effects of Cooperation ......................................... 80  
Conclusion .............................................................................. 80  

### CHAPTER FIVE  
Balkan Security and Strategic Orientation .................................. 83  
Understanding the Equities ..................................................... 84  
Space for Cooperation ............................................................ 94  
Second-Order Effects of Cooperation ......................................... 99  
Conclusion .............................................................................. 100
Tables

3.1. Interest in Cooperation on Euro-Atlantic Security ............................................. 53
4.1. Interest in Cooperation on Baltic Security ....................................................... 78
5.1. Interest in Cooperation on Balkan Security and Strategic Orientation .......... 98
6.1. Interest in Cooperation on Turkey ................................................................. 120
7.1. Interest in Cooperation on Resolving the Conflict in Ukraine ..................... 141
8.1. Interest in Cooperation on Promoting Middle East Stability and Peace
     Processes ........................................................................................................... 163
9.1. Interest in Cooperation on Countering Iran and its Proxies ......................... 189
10.1. Interest in Cooperation in Europe and the Middle East ............................... 196
10.2. Obstacles to Cooperation in Europe and the Middle East ............................. 198
10.3. Second-Order Effects of Cooperation in Europe and the Middle East ......... 199
Summary

Issue

As part of a larger study of cooperation in an era of renewed great power competition, we assessed the potential for cooperation on seven issue areas that most directly affect U.S. security interests in Europe and the Middle East.

Approach

We investigated where the United States’, China’s, and/or Russia’s interests might overlap and what the potential obstacles to cooperation might be with regard to salient issue areas in Europe and the Middle East, and we identified key second-order benefits or costs of cooperation that should be considered by decisionmakers. To do so, we drew on primary and secondary source materials in three languages, as well as interviews with 28 government officials, military officers, academics, and think tank analysts.

Conclusions

Our analysis suggests several key conclusions:

- In Europe, the trade space contains hardly any opportunities for cooperation on the core security challenges within each issue area. However, there are opportunities to limit escalation or manage tensions over those core issues that remain the province of competition with Russia (notably, piecemeal arms control, confidence- and security-building measures, and deconfliction and escalation management).
- In the Middle East, substantive opportunities for cooperation exist in principle—more with Russia than China, but some cooperative options exist even with the latter.
- Obstacles complicate even relatively modest steps toward the theoretically present opportunities for cooperation.
- Cooperation is likely to be accompanied by both positive and negative second-order effects, which would have to be weighed by decisionmakers in light of their policy priorities. Although there is at least a potential that the overall benefits outweigh the costs, the net assessment hinges on details, external developments, and policy preferences.

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1 This research was completed in September 2020, before the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and before the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. It has not been subsequently revised.
Assessing the Prospects for Great Power Cooperation in Europe and the Middle East

Recommendations

We recommend the following to the U.S. government:

- If the United States chooses to cooperate, approach cooperation with Russia in Europe and the Middle East through gradual, modest steps.
- In Europe, focus on measures that reduce the risk of competition producing conflict: conventional arms control, confidence- and security-building measures, crisis management, and deconfliction.
- Expand U.S. engagement with Russia on ending the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, using the framework established by the Minsk II agreement.
- Pursue more modest opportunities to limit the most acute consequences of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine for the affected populations and to reduce tensions between the parties.
- Seek opportunities to cooperate with Russia to counter Iranian proxy networks.

We identify further opportunities for cooperation that could advance U.S. interests under certain conditions:

- Monitor developments to identify opportunities to help deescalate potential conflicts in the Balkans (notably, Kosovo’s status).
- Consider seeking cooperation opportunities with regard to Syria through the Geneva process with Russia and China.
- Monitor developments for potential to participate in Syria’s reconstruction in cooperation with Russia (and to a lesser extent, China), should conditions change and a window of opportunity arise.
- Monitor developments for potential to advance peace and stability between Israel and Palestine in cooperation with Russia, should conditions change and a window of opportunity arise.
- Monitor developments for potential to prevent a nuclear Iran in cooperation with Russia and China, should conditions change and a window of opportunity arise.

We recommend the following to the Joint Force, U.S. Department of Defense, and the Department of the Air Force:

- Identify strategies for competition with potential to create incentives for cooperation.
- Maintain and look for opportunities to expand military-to-military engagement for purposes of deconfliction in Syria and establish such channels in Europe.
- Pursue dialogue with Russia to limit sales of S-400 missile systems and other advanced weapon systems to Iran.
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

For years after the end of the Cold War, the United States enjoyed the prerogative of the world’s dominant superpower. Over the past several years, as has been recognized in U.S. strategic documents, that world order has changed, and the international system is once again characterized by great power competition. The 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) and the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) therefore declare that strategic competition with Russia and China has become the United States’ primary focus. Although often described as a “renewal” of great power competition, the present moment differs from the Cold War in one important respect: The United States is now competing with not one but two near-peer powers simultaneously. This distinction has important ramifications for the policy choices that the U.S. government and its military make to achieve U.S. objectives and succeed in a competitive environment. In particular, simultaneous competition with both China and Russia on all fronts at all times is likely unsustainable and costly. And simultaneous competition with both is very likely to keep driving them into a closer and closer partnership with each other. This study was therefore motivated by the proposition that cooperation with one or the other power on some fronts will lessen the severity of these challenges.

There is no undisputed definition of competition; we follow prior RAND research to define it as “the attempt to gain advantage, often relative to others believed to pose a challenge or threat, through the self-interested pursuit of contested goods such as power, secu-

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Assessing the Prospects for Great Power Cooperation in Europe and the Middle East

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Cooperation, then, can be defined as “seeking th[e] same goals through mutual coordination of activities for common benefit.” Even in an era of great power competition, as RAND’s Michael Mazarr and co-authors explain, competition need not characterize the competitors’ approach to every issue of consequence: A state can pick and choose from “a wide array of strategies for gaining absolute or relative advantage,” some of which “will be cooperative, some neutral, and some competitive.” For some issues, U.S. interests would be best served through competitive strategies aimed at gaining advantage over China or Russia. However, U.S. interests do not diametrically diverge from those of its competitors with regard to every issue of importance, and cooperative approaches to these may be most fruitful. Moreover, some security problems, particularly in regions where Chinese or Russian influence outstrips that of the United States, may be difficult for the United States to address without cooperating with China or Russia to some extent. Motivated by these propositions, we examined whether and to what extent the United States should frame and pursue cooperation with China or Russia to advance its important national security and foreign policy objectives in Europe and the Middle East.

Methodology

We proceeded in several discrete steps. First, we defined the issue area for analysis. Second, we assessed the equities of each competitor to determine whether and to what extent a theoretical trade space for cooperation exists for each issue area. Third, we identified salient obstacles and second-order effects to translating those theoretical opportunities for cooperation into practical reality. And fourth, from that analysis, we identified recommendations for the U.S. government, the Joint Force and the U.S. Department of Defense, and the U.S. Air Force.

Defining Issue Areas

To explore the potential for cooperation amid great power competition, we began by identifying key issue areas that most directly affect enduring U.S. security interests and corresponding objectives in Europe and the Middle East, on the basis of major, unclassified strategic documents: We focused on the NSS and the unclassified summary of the NDS and supplemented those with other relevant official sources, such as the National Defense Authorization Acts of the past several years, the U.S. European Command (EUCOM) and U.S. Central

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7 Mazarr, Blake, et al., 2018, p. 5.
8 Mazarr, Blake, et al., 2018, p. 5.
Command (CENTCOM) posture statements, and official U.S. State Department statements. Using these documents, we identified issue areas where the United States has articulated significant interests and objectives consistently across current and previous U.S. administrations. We excluded some key issues—such as nuclear nonproliferation generally—because they are more properly addressed in the context of the companion report on the “global commons.” We excluded other issue areas because of their largely economic character, such as ensuring fair and reciprocal trade practices. And we exclude yet others because they are less central to core U.S. national security interests.

For Europe, this resulted in the following issue areas: broader Euro-Atlantic security; Baltic security; Balkan security and strategic orientation; Turkey’s regional role and strategic orientation; and the future of Ukraine. For the Middle East, the list consists of two general issue areas: Middle East stability and peace processes, and countering Iran and its proxies. Within each issue area we identify, the United States has a number of subsidiary interests and objectives; we do not address all of these in depth but rather focus on interests that both (1) are of high importance to the United States and (2) are most likely to intersect or clash with Chinese or Russian interests.

**Assessing and Measuring Trade Space for Cooperation**

We aim to assess whether and to what extent the United States may be able to advance its interests with regard to each set of issues through cooperation with Russia and/or China in the near term—that is, in the five- to ten-year horizon. To systematically assess whether there is viable trade space for cooperation within a given issue area, we make use of three concepts: stakes, alignment, and cooperation itself. **Stakes** corresponds to the intensity of interests or equities that each of the U.S. competitors has with respect to each issue area. Stakes are defined as “high” when an issue is vital to the state’s or the regime’s survival and/or is identified in strategic documents or official statements as a core national security concern. Stakes are considered “medium” for those issues that touch on the state’s self-conceived sphere of influence or key allies, partners, or economic relationships but do not directly affect the state’s and/or regime’s survival. Stakes are considered “low” for issues that are largely peripheral to a state’s interests and tend to receive less attention in leaders’ public statements and official policy documents.

**Alignment** captures the extent of rhetorical agreement or divergence of U.S. competitors’ objectives with U.S. objectives. We code alignment as “yes” if the expressions of Russian or

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10 We define the Middle East primarily as the countries in the CENTCOM area of responsibility without the Central and South Asian countries—plus Israel. We do, however, also refer to select North African countries in the U.S. Africa Command area of responsibility, for better contextualization.
Chinese objectives and interests in official documents and public statements are largely harmonious with U.S. objectives. We emphasize that alignment is a matter of talk, rather than action, and a finding of rhetorical alignment means only that the two states in question claim to be pursuing mutually compatible goals. We code alignment as “no” if China’s or Russia’s expressed objectives or interests are opposed to or adverse to those of the United States. Finally, alignment is assessed as “mixed” if they are not entirely harmonious or adverse to U.S. objectives. This usually occurs if Chinese and Russian statements suggest harmony on some sub-issues within an issue area but not others or if the statements are contradictory (e.g., if different parts of the government offer different expressions of objectives, or public statements differ from private or less public declarations that nonetheless become known). Alignment may also be mixed if official statements appear to closely resemble the U.S. position, but it can be easily ascertained that the Chinese or Russian interpretation of their own public statements diverges from the U.S. understanding (e.g., all three powers may share the goal of combating terrorism, but their definitions of terrorism diverge considerably, making a finding of even rhetorical alignment implausible). Issue areas on which one or the other power does not articulate a position are coded as “not available” (N/A).

Cooperation is shorthand for potential for cooperation or willingness to cooperate. A declared or demonstrated willingness to bargain or negotiate on an issue is often a first sign that a state is willing to cooperate; willingness to cooperate, however, goes beyond this and requires evidence that a state would be willing to commit resources or effort to back up its representations or promises. We code cooperation potential as “high” if there are concrete signs that the state is willing to incur costs to achieve shared goals—where costs include both tangible resources and intangible, but no less real, political capital, such that a leader would suffer reputation costs if they were to fail to live up to their commitments. We code cooperation as “low” if there are no observable signs to that effect. “Medium” applies to cases in which China or Russia have given unclear or contradictory signals about their commitment on an issue, made a commitment and then retracted it, or have engaged in half-hearted cooperation (for example, by having passively allowed the United States to achieve a given policy outcome but avoided actively aiding its efforts). Finally, “N/A” is reserved for cases where a power does not have much say in the matter one way or the other and could not meaningfully cooperate even if it chose to do so. Chapters Two through Nine each cover one of the issue areas, and in each chapter we summarize our assessment of each factor for both Russia and China in a table. We do not expressly include an assessment of U.S. stakes in those tables (although we do describe U.S. stakes and their intensity in each chapter). We note here that because the issue areas were identified in the first place by reference to important U.S. objectives, U.S. stakes are either high or medium but never low.

An assessment of alignment and willingness to cooperate produce the theoretically available trade space for cooperation. Of course, a theoretical opening for cooperation does not mean that cooperation will necessarily occur, or even that a cooperative strategy on that issue would be an easy proposition. As we explain in the overarching companion report in this set, cooperation in the international system is difficult, all the more so when it is between rival
states engaged in multidimensional competition.\textsuperscript{11} Thus, we further consider what obstacles can be identified that make cooperation within the trade space difficult. Our analysis of this question yielded a number of common obstacles across issues sets: a lack of mutual trust between parties with regard to a particular issue; audience costs, or the domestic political costs that a leader is likely to incur were they to cooperate on a particular issue; the presence of third parties, whose participation or consent is important to the fate of cooperative ventures but whose interests diverge from the competitors’ and/or each other; issue linkages, or cases where issues on which cooperation is possible become tied to an issue on which it is not; a lack of perceived immediacy or urgency to address an issue that may be approached cooperatively; and legal constraints that limit the shape that cooperation may take.\textsuperscript{12}

Furthermore, we consider what second-order effects can be expected should the United States choose to pursue cooperation with respect to some issue. While cooperation on any given issue should be evaluated in the first instance by reference to its direct effects—that is, the extent to which it will advance the U.S. objective with respect to that issue—we think it necessary to consider second-order effects on other issues and considerations, as well as on the interests of third parties. Three broad categories of second-order effects should be considered in weighing cooperation possibilities. First, in view of the simultaneous competition with two rivals, we consider the effect that potential cooperation with one competitor might have on the other—whether these effects are to blunt or sharpen competition with the other, or to boost or undermine the China-Russia strategic partnership. Second, we consider the positive “externalities”—that is, the positive second-order effects that cooperation on one issue might have on other issues, or on parties other than Russia or China. And third, we examine negative externalities, or the cost to other U.S. goals or objectives that might arise from pursuing cooperation on a given issue. Second-order effects are particularly important for cooperative possibilities that in themselves appear of relatively minor value, and can either increase or nullify the expected first-order gains from cooperation.

Data Sources

Our study relied on several data sources. In addition to official documents, public statements of officials, and news media in English, Russian, and Chinese languages, we relied on the abundant expert (academic and policy) analyses produced by U.S., European, Middle Eastern, Chinese, and Russian experts. We initially planned to do a lot of field work in Russia, China, Europe, and the Middle East, but because of the coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pan-


\textsuperscript{12} We considered only legal constraints limiting the menu of actions for the United States and its allies where necessary, and we did not conduct an analysis of either the Russian or Chinese legal landscape.
demic, only the latter part of the plan could be realized. Members of our research team inter-
viewed a total of 28 people in 15 interview sessions in Jordan and Israel, including U.S., Jor-
danian, and Israeli diplomats, military officers, academics, and think tank analysts. Those
interviews focused on the room for potential great power cooperation in the Middle East,
with much of the conversations focused on Syria. We also conducted 11 interviews over the
phone and in person in Washington, D.C., with U.S. experts, Jordanian journalists, and U.S.
military officers and diplomatic officials.

Research for this study was conducted between September 2019 and September 2020.

Overview of This Report

Organization

This report is structured as follows: In Chapter Two, we synthesize the overarching equi-
ties that each of the three powers has in Europe and the Middle East and address at a gen-
eral level the limits and the contours to the cooperation trade space that are evident without
much further analysis. In Chapter Three, we address a set of issues we describe as broader
Euro-Atlantic security, which is intended to capture European security issues that transcend
particular parts of Europe. In Chapter Four, we examine security in the Baltic region, a key
arena of competition between Russia and the United States and its allies. In Chapter Five, we
examine (Western) Balkan security, including the unresolved conflicts in the region and its
orientation. In Chapter Six, we address Turkey’s strategic orientation and its regional role.
In Chapter Seven, we address the future of Ukraine—and more specifically, the future of
the conflict in Ukraine’s East, ignited by Russian actions. In Chapter Eight, we turn to the
Middle East, where great power competition is unsurprisingly unfolding, as each of the three
powers seeks influence over the region. In particular, in Chapter Eight we address the poten-
tial for cooperation on advancing stability and peace processes to some of the Middle East’s
most acute or intractable conflicts. In Chapter Nine, we address the challenges posed by Iran,
whose policies and support for militant actors throughout the Middle East constitute a per-
sistent security threat to U.S. and allied interests.

For each issue area addressed in Chapters Three through Nine, we first review the U.S.,
Chinese, and Russian equities or interests with regard to the fate of the Euro-Atlantic security
architecture to determine whether and where any of the competitors are rhetorically aligned
in their interests. Second, we identify specific avenues of cooperation in the space where
interests are aligned, review the evidence that Russia or China are willing to negotiate and
cooperate along these avenues, and identify salient practical obstacles to actualizing coopera-
tion in the near term. Finally, we identify salient potential positive and negative second-order
effects of pursuing cooperation along these avenues, with attention to the potential effects of
cooperating with one competitor on the China-Russia partnership.

In Chapter Ten, we summarize the findings with respect to each issue area and draw on
that analysis to generate recommendations for the U.S. government, the Joint Force and the
U.S. Department of Defense, and the Department of the Air Force on how to realize some of the theoretical opportunities to cooperate and advance U.S. interests.

Key Takeaways
Unsurprisingly, given the recognition that we have entered a new era of strategic competition, and given the general scarcity of cooperation among states in the international system, *the trade space for cooperation is rather narrow*. Some cooperative approaches are possible with respect to virtually every issue area, but the number of issues on which obstacles can be overcome and where bargaining might actually lead to cooperation in the near term is likely small.

*Obstacles even to what appear to be relatively modest steps toward cooperation loom large.* A lack of mutual trust is pervasive, as are third-party problems: The fact that European problems often call for participation or agreement by multiple European stakeholders is a complicating factor in an era in which relations between the United States and its European allies are not in their best state. Perceptions that issues lack urgency or immediacy, issue linkages, legal constraints on the U.S. side, and domestic audience costs for U.S. decisionmakers also characterize most of the issue areas we address. Cooperation on the issues within the trade space is likely to have both positive and negative second-order effects on other issues and U.S. allies and partners, inevitably entailing trade-offs. However, *injecting tensions into China-Russia relations is rarely a likely second-order effect* of any opportunities to cooperate that emerged from our analysis.

In Europe, the trade space consists primarily of *opportunities to reduce risks of unintended escalation or manage tensions over those core issues that remain the province of competition with Russia*: piecemeal arms control, confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs), and deconfliction and escalation management. Our analysis suggests that cooperation along these lines is not impossible but would be difficult without political will and leadership on both sides to overcome some of the most salient obstacles we identify—a lack of mutual trust, audience costs on the U.S. side, issue linkages on the Russian side, and the numerous interests of third parties with divergent preferences. In the Middle East, *more substantive opportunities for cooperation exist in principle—more with Russia than China, but some cooperative options exist even with the latter.* However, here, too, obstacles likely complicate the prospects of actualizing the more ambitious of these opportunities in the very near term. In particular, the more substantive options for cooperation in the region are unlikely to be possible without a change in the United States’ approaches to advancing its objectives—notably, the United States’ approach to preventing a nuclear-armed Iran or advancing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

We emphasize that we do not conduct a systematic net assessment of the direct and second-order costs and benefits of cooperation on any of the issues within the trade space for cooperation. Instead, the recommendations we offer call out areas where there is at least a nontrivial potential that the benefits outweigh the costs. We emphasize in particular the value of even
modest cooperative steps that may be possible. As other expert analyses observe, in view of the limited space for cooperation, “recommendations that can actually be implemented are in short supply,” and “even small steps would be an achievement.” Such small steps can begin the “process of rebuilding a degree of trust” between the United States and Russia, gradually creating a more hospitable climate for higher-value cooperation. These steps, moreover, are intended not to remedy or normalize relations, but to ensure that relations move out of the “dangerous dead end that threatens the U.S. national interest” and embrace a better balance between “deterrence and détente”—to quote the assessment of some of the United States’ most prominent Russia experts.

American, Chinese, and Russian Overarching Interests in Europe and the Middle East

Some of the most central national security and foreign policy interests of the United States pertain to Europe and the Middle East. These regions are also sites of great power competition, as Russia and China pursue their own interests and strive for influence. More detailed discussion of specific issue areas is set forth in the following chapters, but this chapter provides a brief overview of U.S., Chinese, and Russian overarching interests in Europe and the Middle East, to offer the general contours of where the trade space for cooperation might lie—and where U.S. objectives are in direct opposition to the interests of the competitors. Despite shifting geopolitical currents and emerging challenges in the transatlantic relationship, Europe remains the most integral ally for the United States, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is the primary mechanism for pursuing U.S. security objectives in Europe. U.S. interests in Europe have remained consistent for many decades, but U.S. interests and equities in the Middle East have been in greater flux. In both theaters, the United States seeks to address salient threats to stability and security, maintain its partnerships and alliances, and prevent aggression and curtail influence by Russia and China. To the extent U.S. interests are defined in terms of that opposing its competitors, the trade space for cooperation is a priori limited, and there is no real possibility of “grand bargains” with either one of the competitors. However, some U.S. interests do not diametrically diverge from those of China and Russia, and cooperative approaches to these may be available.

American Interests in Europe and the Middle East

Europe

In the post–World War II era, Europe has collectively been the closest and most important ally to the United States. U.S. national interests have been closely intertwined with European security, with “Europe whole and free . . . and at peace with itself” figuring prominently as
a goal of U.S. foreign policy since the end of the Cold War.¹ The transatlantic relationship is based on shared Western norms and values, by the United States’ extensive political and economic ties with most individual European states and the European Union (EU), and by the United States’ and Europe’s common pursuit of shared security objectives. NATO and the EU are the key institutions that underpin not only the transatlantic relationship but also the U.S.-led international order.² The transatlantic economic relationship is next to none in significance for U.S. and European interests, as the United States and the EU are each other’s largest trading and investment partners.³ European allies and partners have supported U.S. interests in multilateral institutions, such as the United Nations (UN) and World Trade Organization, and their objectives around the world.⁴ Thus, the United States’ stakes in Europe and its relationship with its European allies go far beyond the continent itself, encompassing the many U.S. foreign security and economic interests globally that enjoy the support of the Euro-Atlantic partnership.⁵

For these reasons, strengthening relationships with European allies and partners has been a paramount and enduring goal of U.S. policy.⁶ The United States and Europe have built up a Euro-Atlantic security architecture to pursue their shared objectives, the cornerstone of which is NATO. One of the primary goals of the United States in Europe, accordingly, is to strengthen the NATO alliance. As the latest key strategic documents continue to affirm, the United States seeks to ensure the credibility and unity of collective defense in order to bolster NATO’s deterrent power across Europe.⁷ NATO was originally designed to deter and respond to actions from one potential adversary in particular: the Soviet Union. NATO’s mission has changed and transformed since the end of the Cold War, and its areas of focus have been in some flux: Most recent strategic documents identify violent Islamist extremism, the instability and tensions associated with the migrant and refugee flows stemming from the Middle East and Africa, Russian aggression, and Russian and Chinese influence as the threats that

³ NSS 2017, p. 47; Archick et al., 2020, p. 4.
⁴ For example, the NSS cites the contribution of European allies to the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan and across Africa and the Middle East, as well as to the stabilization of Iraq (NSS, 2017, p. 48).
⁵ For example, shared security objectives also include countering violent extremism and nuclear nonproliferation, which are addressed in a companion volume: Scott W. Harold, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, and Soo Kim, Assessing the Prospects for Great Power Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A597-2, 2023.
⁶ This is the case despite points of tension and frustrations expressed by leaders and officials on both sides of the Atlantic at various times. See Archick et al., 2020, p. 5.
the alliance needs to counter. Although the list of threats is broader than this, U.S. security focus in Europe has once again returned to countering and deterring Russian aggression and subversion. The NSS cites Russia as a threat and states that “the United States and Europe will work together to counter Russian subversion and aggression,” and EUCOM’s 2019 posture statement identifies “a revisionist Russia” as “the primary threat to a stable Euro-Atlantic security environment.” Thus, the U.S. military is currently postured to deter a Russian attack—especially against a NATO member state, because such an attack would trigger the United States’ collective-defense commitments under Article 5 and risk exposing the weakness of the collective-defense guarantee. The United States has also sought to counter Russian gray zone activity and limit Russian interference across the continent. When deterrence has failed, the United States has sought to inflict costs on Russia, such as imposing sanctions in connection with Russia’s aggression toward Ukraine.

Apart from deterring intentional aggression and countering malign influence by Russia, the United States has also had a historical interest in reducing the risk of inadvertent escalation or armed conflict, especially with a nuclear rival. Traditionally, the latter interest has been addressed through arms control, both conventional and nuclear, and CSBMs, which serve to increase transparency and reduce the possibility of misperceptions triggering conflict. Although the United States has reiterated its commitment to ensuring effective conventional arms control (CAC) in Europe in various policy documents and statements, the reliance on this pillar of Euro-Atlantic security architecture has been uneven in recent years. With most of the agreements making up the historic CAC and CSBM regime, and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, undermined or abandoned, U.S. leaders and officials are rethinking how to pursue U.S. interests in reducing the risks of inadvertent conflict with Russia.

12 Scaparrotti, 2019.
13 For example, the Countering Russian Influence in Europe and Eurasia Act of 2017 (Title II of Public Law 115-44, Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), August 7, 2017).
Reducing the risks of armed conflict in Europe, intentional or unintended, also means that the United States has an interest in preventing potential conflict flashpoints from escalating.\textsuperscript{17} Threats to European peace and stability include political conflicts in the Balkans and breakaway regions in Eastern Europe (South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Transnistria, and Nagorno-Karabakh), among others.\textsuperscript{18} To help contain and prevent these potential sources of instability on the continent, some of which have the potential to draw the United States and NATO into conflict with Russia, the United States has sought to strengthen cooperation with key non-NATO countries, including Serbia and Ukraine.\textsuperscript{19} The United States has also generally sought to advance the integration of states into Western institutions, motivated not only by security considerations but also by interests in supporting the spread and entrenchment of Western political and economic values. Thus, the United States broadly supports the ambitions of those countries on the continent that are not members of the EU or NATO. Notably, the United States supports the integration of Balkan countries into the EU and NATO.\textsuperscript{20} The United States has also prioritized preserving the Western orientation of Turkey, a state that is a NATO member but that has often aligned itself more closely with Russia.\textsuperscript{21}

China is a relatively recent entrant into the European continent and has far less of a presence and influence than Russia, but U.S. interests in Europe now also include concerns about China’s influence. Notably, the 2017 NSS expressed concern that “China is gaining a strategic foothold in Europe by expanding its unfair trade practices and investing in key industries, sensitive technologies, and infrastructure.”\textsuperscript{22} This concern stems in particular from Chinese involvement in major European ports, acquisitions of high-tech companies, and the participation of China’s telecommunications giant, Huawei, in building Europe’s 5G wireless networks.\textsuperscript{23} Although a less prominent and a newer strand in U.S. interests in Europe, the need to guard against and counter growing Chinese influence is also becoming a goal.\textsuperscript{24}


\textsuperscript{17} NDS, 2018, p. 9; Public Law 116-92, Title XII, Matters Relating to Foreign Nations, Sec. 1239, Updated strategy to counter the threat of malign influence by the Russian Federation and other countries, December 20, 2019, p. 459.


\textsuperscript{19} NSS, 2017, p. 48.

\textsuperscript{20} U.S. Department of State, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, “U.S. Relations with Serbia,” October 31, 2019c.


\textsuperscript{22} NSS, 2017, p. 47.

\textsuperscript{23} Archick et al., 2020, p. 16.

\textsuperscript{24} Archick et al., 2020, pp. 16–17.
The Middle East
Although less central to U.S. national security than Europe, the United States has longstanding weighty interests in the Middle East, which center on ensuring the free flow of natural resources (or a “stable global energy market”); promoting stability, particularly insofar as it threatens the security of key allies; and maintaining U.S. relationships in the region. Threats to these interests are numerous and translate to the following set of U.S. objectives: promoting peace processes and regional stability, countering Iran, combating violent extremist organizations, and maintaining a freedom of navigation. As General Joseph L. Votel, former commanding general of CENTCOM, emphasized, the U.S. approach and its strategic advantage relies on “the partnerships, alliances and whole-of-government efforts” that the United States has fostered over decades, rather than brute military force. Nonetheless, although a number of U.S. administrations have sought to limit U.S. military involvement in the Middle East, sizable troop deployments in the region remain, making stability of the region of particularly sharp consequence to the United States.

Among its efforts to promote peace processes, the United States has prioritized the pursuit of a relatively peaceful modus vivendi between Israel and its Arab neighbors and efforts toward the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The United States has also pursued a resolution to the Syrian Civil War and is attempting to effect reconstruction in the war-ravaged country, to which U.S. regional partners will almost certainly have to contribute. Additionally, the United States has attempted to leverage its close relations with all members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to ease tensions and avert conflict among the Arab Gulf states.

Countering Iran is the United States’ primary threat-based objective, as defined by contemporary strategic guidance documents. Iran’s expanding influence, its support for regional nonstate armed groups, and its intermittent pursuit of nuclear weapons undermine regional stability and pose acute security threats to key U.S. partners such as Israel. Working through and supporting U.S. partners in the region is part and parcel to the United States’ approach to countering malign and destabilizing Iranian activity in the region.

Alongside other interests and objectives, in an era of renewed great power competition, the United States also has an interest in maintaining a favorable balance of power and striv—

27 Votel, 2019.
28 NDS, 2018, p. 2; NSS, 2017, p. 49.
Assessing the Prospects for Great Power Cooperation in Europe and the Middle East

This means that other U.S. goals are to be pursued while bolstering United States’ ability to preserve its long-standing strategic dominance in the region and compete with China and Russia for influence in the Middle East.30 The United States’ ability to pursue its key strategic objectives, including maintaining influence, relies on maintaining its strategic partnerships.31 The 2018 NDS establishes that “enduring coalitions and long-term security partnerships . . . remain a priority” in U.S. strategic planning and that forming “enduring coalitions in the Middle East” will be a critical component of the United States’ strategic approach to the region.32 Thus, Washington has leveraged key regional partnerships, such as those with Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain, to advance peace processes with Israel.33 U.S. partnerships also facilitate access, basing, and overflight, which are essential to the United States’ pursuit of many of its strategic objectives, including countering violent Islamic extremism, countering Iran, assuring security of navigation for the flow of natural resources, and maintaining regional influence.34

Chinese Interests in Europe and the Middle East

Europe

The People’s Republic of China’s (PRC’s) 2018 white paper on its approach to Europe outlines Beijing’s official views on China’s common interests and main principles for the relationship. It asserts that “As major participants in and contributors to world multi-polarity and economic globalization, China and the EU share extensive common interests in upholding world peace and stability, promoting global prosperity and sustainable development and advancing


30 It is important to note that while maintaining partnerships, promoting peace processes, and strengthening partners to act as a bulwark against malign Iranian activity could help preserve U.S. standing in the Middle East, critics of this approach argue that aggressively countering and containing Iran in reality exacerbates tensions and structural weaknesses that plague U.S. partners—such as Iraq and Lebanon—and exacerbate or prolong conflicts—such as those in Syria and Iraq.

31 Maintaining strategic partnerships is also an avenue by which the United States pursues its other regional objectives as well—countering Iran, combating violent extremist organizations, and promoting stability, freedom of navigation, and the flow of energy resources. Each of these objectives are discussed in their own right—countering Iran in the following chapter and combating violent extremist organizations and promoting stability in the companion volume on the global commons (Cohen, Kepe, et al., 2023).

32 NDS, 2018.

33 Votel, 2019, p. 28.

human civilization.”35 These interests appear broad, but, first and foremost, Europe is viewed
as an important part of China’s economic engine, owing to its status as China’s top export
market and a key source of advanced technology.36 China’s other main interest in Europe is
ensuring continued support for, or at least acquiescence to, China’s rise to global power by
2050, as envisioned by Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Beijing sees Europe primarily as an economic market and an important group of actors on
the world stage that can help or hinder China in achieving its ambitions and securing access
to high-tech products. One of China’s four “guiding principles” for the relationship—i.e., Bei-
jing’s expectations for Europe’s behavior, as outlined in its 2018 Policy Paper on the Euro-
pean Union—is economic cooperation without restrictions (“openness, inclusiveness and
win-win cooperation”).37 Europe’s economic importance to China cannot be overstated. As
noted above, Europe has become China’s largest trading partner, with Chinese 2019 exports
to Europe worth roughly $406 billion and imports worth roughly $222 billion.38 This trade
surplus for China, roughly $184 billion and the highest ever, accounts for roughly 30 percent
of China’s total trade surplus and, along with its $346 billion trade surplus with the United
States (47 percent), makes over three-quarters of its total trade surplus with the world.39 Chi-
na’s importance for Europe, by contrast, is somewhat less significant: China was Europe’s
fourth-biggest trading partner in 2019.40

Beijing’s primary policy objective for Europe is thus deepening economic ties. This is
reflected in that fact that Xi’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, originally
terminated in Europe, signifying the major flow of China’s global trade across the Eur-
Asian continent.41 In a 2014 speech, Xi emphasized opening European markets to China,
increasing trade volume, and boosting the exchange of technology.42 This focus on ensuring
market access to Europe was a major issue in the late 2010s, as Beijing lobbied to be consid-

35 State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “China’s Policy Paper on the Euro-
pean Union,” December 18, 2018.
36 For recent major U.S. speeches on China to European audiences, see Michael Pompeo, “Europe and the
China Challenge,” speech at Copenhagen Democracy Summit via U.S. Department of State, June 19, 2020a;
June 25, 2020b.
39 Data are based on 2017 figures, excluding Hong Kong’s trade surplus with the mainland. For a compar-
ison of EU-China and U.S.-China trade, see John Benedetto, “EU-China and U.S.-China Trade in Goods and
40 Including intra-EU trade as biggest trading partner.
41 Xi Jinping, “Promote People-to-People Friendship and Create a Better Future,” speech at Kazakhstan’s
Nazarbayev University, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, November 7, 2013.
42 Xi Jinping, “Speech at the College of Europe,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of
China, April 1, 2014a.
ered a “market economy” by Brussels, to secure better terms of trade—a bid that Brussels ultimately rejected. More recently, China has hoped that Europe would remain an open economy and not follow the United States’ more protectionist turn. As its 2018 white paper declared, “China and the EU need to stand firmly against unilateralism and protectionism, push for a more open, inclusive and balanced economic globalization beneficial to all.”

Deepening economic ties also includes pursuit of technology acquisition. As Xi put it in his 2014 speech, he hoped for “a bridge linking Chinese investment with European technology.” It is China’s push to invest in or acquire leading technology companies or get a foothold in the European tech sector—such as, notably, with Huawei—that has arguably most raised alarms about Chinese influence in Europe and the United States, and motivated efforts to curtail such influence.

China’s second interest in Europe pertains to furthering China’s rise to global power. In Beijing’s view, Europe’s role as a second center of power in the dominant “Western” world, along with the United States, makes it an important determinant in whether the United States will be able to create a coalition to oppose China’s rise or China will instead be able to find partners willing to work toward reforming the global order in China’s favor. China’s hope for Europe is that it accepts, and even supports, its reform of the global order and current political system. Although Beijing has focused mostly on the developing world for supporting the reform of the global order, reflected in its emphasis on leading the global south, Europe is attractive insofar as it can be pried away from its pro-U.S. stance. China’s 2018 white paper calls for Europe to “join hands to improve the global governance system,” including reforming global internet governance (implicitly away from the U.S.-led unregulated Internet and toward Xi’s goal of cyber sovereignty), strengthening the United Nations as a dispute resolution system (implicitly away from U.S. leadership and U.S. unilateral intervention), reforming the international financial system (e.g., away from the U.S.-led International Monetary Fund and World Bank and toward China’s Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank). This is coupled with continued efforts to induce European countries to accept Chinese Communist Party


45 Xi, 2014a.


American, Chinese, and Russian Overarching Interests in Europe and the Middle East

(CC) rule in China and its claimed territories; to that end, the 2018 defense white paper calls on Europe to respect China’s handling of Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan.48

In the realm of defense, China’s main interests are avoiding strategic antagonism with Europe and advancing defense technology acquisition. China’s 2018 defense white paper clearly argues that “China and the EU have no fundamental strategic conflicts but share much more common ground than differences.”49 Beijing likely fears that if Europe develops a more acute perception of threat emanating from China, then it could join forces with the United States to contain China’s rise. A related goal, therefore, is of weakening the Euro-Atlantic alliance. As for defense technology, Europe has had an arms embargo against Beijing since the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. However, China has still sought advanced military technology from Europe, through targeting dual-use goods, illicit procurement, and scientific cooperation, among other methods.50

China has very few specific tangible interests, however, in the local political affairs in Europe. As a result, it frequently defers to Russia in the latter’s de facto sphere of influence. As China expert Robert Sutter described Beijing’s approach to Europe, “China reciprocated by accommodating Russian interests even at the risk of other Chinese interests.”51 Sutter specifically pointed to Chinese participation in Russian joint military exercises in the Baltic, Mediterranean, and Black Seas in recent years and support for Russia after its poisoning of Sergei Skripal, a former Russian intelligence officer, in London in 2018. Overall, Beijing seeks improved relations with Moscow for their shared anti-U.S. stance, energy security, and military cooperation and is thus willing to acquiesce in Moscow’s interests when there is a major disparity in equities.

Beijing has sought to accomplish these goals through a variety of means, including elite cultivation, targeted diplomatic engagements, and economic pressure—common tools of Chinese diplomacy around the world.52 Beijing’s greatest asset is the perception of China as an ever-rising economic powerhouse that sets the terms of bilateral relations.53 This narra-


tive of a rising China is a key component of its outreach and cultivation of European political elites, which range from a German nonprofit bringing together political and business elites in support of closer Berlin-Beijing ties to developing relationships with European Parliament members.\footnote{For German organization, see Andreas Rinke, “Germany Creates Elite Networking Club to Boost China Ties,” Reuters, January 14, 2020; for the European Parliament, see Peter Martin and Alan Crawford, “China’s Influence Digs Deep Into Europe’s Political Landscape,” Bloomberg, April 3, 2019.}

Beyond personal relationships, Beijing’s diplomatic engagement toward Europe is tailored to address strategic relations with Western Europe and build relations with Eastern Europe. High-level strategic dialogues include the China-EU Summit, China-EU High Level Strategic Dialogue, and China-EU High Level Economic Dialogue. Separately, China created the 16+1 (now 17+1) framework to build ties with Central and Eastern European countries. This effort to build relations with these peripheral European countries stands in contrast to China’s stated position of supporting European integration. As one European researcher put it, Beijing’s true goal is to create

> a strand of economic and diplomatic engagement that runs parallel to European integration, without explicitly doubling or challenging it. Thus, the PRC seeks influence in Europe when encountering little or no resistance—seeking to fill an opening when available, but without confronting established players head-on.\footnote{Horia Ciurtin, “The ‘16+1’ Becomes the ‘17+1’: Greece Joins China’s Dwindling Cooperation Framework in Central and Eastern Europe,” \textit{China Brief}, Vol. 19, No. 10, Jamestown Foundation, May 29, 2019.}

Another common tactic has been to exploit China’s economic importance—or even just perceptions of it—to push for its political goals.\footnote{Philippe Le Corre, \textit{China’s Rise as a Geoeconomic Influencer: Four European Case Studies}, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 15, 2018.} One clear example is Beijing’s support for Huawei, a nominally private company that has links to the Chinese government and is a national champion with strong state support.\footnote{Chuin-Wei Yap, “State Support Helped Fuel Huawei’s Global Rise,” \textit{Wall Street Journal}, December 25, 2019.} The United States under the Trump administration strongly opposes Huawei’s bid to build next-generation 5G cellular networks around the world, on the claim that they are less secure and open to Chinese coercion, pressuring Europe and others to reject Huawei’s equipment.\footnote{For one example, see Michael Pompeo, “Europe Must Put Security First with 5G,” \textit{Political Europe}, December 2, 2019c.} In response, Chinese diplomats threatened Germany that if it does not allow Huawei to build its 5G network, China will in turn punish German car companies, which are highly profitable in their exports to China.\footnote{Bennhold and Ewing, 2020.}
far, Germany has not enacted the kind of ban solicited by the United States and is allowing Huawei to build some systems but not others.\textsuperscript{60}

China has clearly sought to avoid the perception of openly competing with the United States or Russia in Europe. Instead, it has mostly sought to advance its own interests quietly, and, in issue areas where its own interests are not great, it has deferred to Russia. Any disagreement with Moscow—for example, on Moscow’s violation in Ukraine of Beijing’s avowed foreign policy principles of no aggression and territorial integrity—has been buried. Despite Beijing’s efforts toward ensuring Europe’s support for its rise, China has recorded two major failures in recent years. In March 2019, the EU Commission labeled China a “systemic rival” and called for a united approach to China, while noting that there was still a need for cooperation on global common interests.\textsuperscript{61} In November 2020, a report for NATO identified China as a security challenge and recommended that “NATO should enhance its ability to coordinate strategy and safeguard Allies’ security vis-à-vis China.”\textsuperscript{62} It is exactly this European consensus and public identification of China as a “challenge” and emphasis on multilateral coordination (including with the United States) that Beijing was attempting to forestall or eliminate altogether, and now will be of great concern to the Chinese leadership.\textsuperscript{63}

The Middle East

Much like the United States over the past century, China views the Middle East as an important region in the world primarily for its energy resources and thus, in general terms, supports Middle East stability. Unlike the United States, however, China has so far not actually committed many resources toward this goal, largely free-riding off U.S. security efforts (and thus also begrudgingly accepting the outcomes of U.S. actions in the Middle East). Over the past two decades, China’s commitments of limited resources are notable only in the absence of greater actions, such as small pledges to Syrian reconstruction and a contribution to the UN peacekeeping mission in Lebanon, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Under the guise of non-interference, China has militarily remained on the sidelines in the


\textsuperscript{63} For China’s reaction to the NATO report, see Hua Chunying, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on December 1, 2020,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, December 1, 2020b.
Yemeni Civil War, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and the crises in Syria and Libya, although it has offered some conflict resolution proposals with little success. China's multifaceted approach to the Middle East is deeply rooted in its desire to protect and sustain its energy and economic interests—especially within those countries that have a complicated relationship with the West.

China’s foremost interest in the Middle East is its energy resources and ensuring a stable flow of oil to fuel China’s economic growth. In 2019, global oil imports represented 77 percent of China’s total consumption, and that will only increase in the coming years. Although Russia in recent years has risen to become its second-largest supplier (first in 2018), six of China’s top ten oil suppliers (Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Oman, Kuwait, the UAE, and Iran) are in the Middle East, accounting for 43 percent overall of its imports (up from 40 percent in 2018). Moreover, “China’s reliance on Middle Eastern oil is only likely to increase in the future. The International Energy Agency predicts that China will double its Middle East imports by 2035.” Economically, trade with Middle Eastern countries represents just above 6.5 percent of China’s overall trade, at $260 billion in 2018. Moreover, the Middle East is one component of the BRI that generally flows from China to Europe, meaning instability could jeopardize China’s larger trade relationship with Europe. From a security perspective, Beijing is worried about its Uyghur minority citizens, the focus of major oppression by the CCP because of their non-Han identity, being radicalized and fighting in the Middle East, then returning to China, especially from the Syrian conflict.

Like the United States and Russia, the PRC takes great efforts to balance its own sometimes conflicting partnerships in the Middle East, in the hopes of developing stronger economic and political relationships. China has built a “comprehensive strategic partnership, strategic partnership, or strategic cooperative partnership” with at least eight Arab countries and has created a strategic dialogue mechanism with the GCC to engage the region on a larger scale. This includes official diplomatic ties with Palestine and support for the Palestinian Liberation Organization, along with a refusal to label Hamas as a terrorist organization. This

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64 Yannis Stivachtis, ed., Conflict and Diplomacy in the Middle East: External Actors and Regional Rivalries, Bristol, England: E-International Relations Publishing, 2018, p. 82.
has not hindered its development of a close relationship with Israel, which threatens to undermine a strategic and flagship U.S. partnership in the region. As one 2016 RAND report concluded, China's relationship with Israel may allow it to make “inroads with a key U.S. ally . . . with the intent to undermine global U.S. alliance and partner networks.”\(^7\) Beijing has leveraged Jerusalem for access to U.S. technology for decades, including covert and illicit sales of U.S. military hardware for over two decades worth more than $1 billion, until concerted U.S. pressure forced Israel to stop.\(^7\) Beyond defense ties, China continued to invest in the Israel technology sector as an often-backdoor way to access otherwise prohibited technology from the United States and Europe.\(^7\) Other tricky relationships Beijing has so far balanced fairly successfully are its ties with Tehran and Riyadh.\(^7\) The future potential for China-Iran ties was significantly raised with July 2020 reports of a secret agreement for Tehran to provide China with discounted oil for 25 years in exchange for substantial Chinese investment across a range of Iranian industries and strengthened military cooperation.\(^7\) Although the actual impact of the agreement will have to be closely observed over time, the agreement clearly reflects Beijing's willingness to undercut U.S. pressure on Iran and a broader desire to solidify a regional partnership. Likely reflecting China's long-running balancing act between Iran and Saudi Arabia, reports emerged in August 2020 that Beijing was already assisting Riyadh in expanding its so-far civilian nuclear program.\(^7\)

### Russian Interests in Europe and the Middle East

**Europe**

Europe is central to Russia's core national security interests: preserving the stability of its regime, protecting its homeland from external attack, and pursuing status as a great power. Russia views itself as a major European power, whose sway and influence on the continent

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Assessing the Prospects for Great Power Cooperation in Europe and the Middle East

has historically been greater than it is at present. In general, Russia’s long-term objective, according to its 2016 Foreign Policy Concept, is the creation in Europe of “a common space of peace, security and stability based on the principles of indivisible security, equal cooperation and mutual trust.” Such declarations signal Russia’s intention to remain a part of Europe, but for the time being, they remain mostly aspirational. In the near term, Europe is ground zero in the standoff between Russia and the United States.

To protect its core national security interests, Russia’s foremost objectives on the continent entail maintaining or securing a sphere of “privileged interests” in the “near abroad”—that is, in the territory of the former Soviet Union (minus the Baltic states). These states are routinely identified as regional priorities in Russia’s strategic documents. And most of the states in this set are in Europe: Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Belarus, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. “Privileged interests” does not mean that Moscow has an interest in reconstituting the Soviet Union. Moscow does view these states as essential to Russia’s own security—both the security of the regime and security from external military threats—and to its self-conception as a great power. Geographically, the former Soviet states in Europe offer a “buffer” zone to Russia, which it has historically sought out as protection against external threats. Russia’s great power aspirations, moreover, are incompatible with losing influence in the countries most closely connected to it. Such aspirations also entail the prerogative of protecting ethnic Russian populations that remained across the post-Soviet states. In light of these focal points, “privileged interests” in Moscow’s view means a degree of control over these states’ domes-

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77 See Olga Oliker, Christopher S. Chivvis, Keith Crane, Olesya Tkacheva, and Scott Boston, Russian Foreign Policy in Historical and Current Context: A Reassessment, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-144-A, 2015, pp. 2–4.

78 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации [Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation], November 30, 2016.

79 The phrase “privileged interests” originates in a 2008 speech by President Dmitri Medvedev (Dmitri Medvedev, "Интервью Дмитрия Медведева российским телеканалам [Interview of Dmitry Medvedev to Russian Television Channels]," transcript of interview, Office of the President of Russia (Archives), 2008a. The common exclusion of the Baltics from this list does not mean that Russia has no interest in those states, but simply that its interests there are not on par with the states that have not yet joined NATO. See Dmitri V. Trenin, Post-Imperium: A Eurasian Story, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011, p. 107.

80 See, e.g., Russia’s enumeration of its “regional priorities,” with a focus on the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), ex-Soviet republics outside the Baltics that are not formally part of CIS, and the Russia-centered economic and security blocs to which these states belong (the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016).

81 Russia’s absence of natural borders, as historian Stephen Kotkin explains, encumbered it with a sense of being “perennially vulnerable,” leading it to view “all nominally independent borderland states, now including Ukraine, as weapons in the hands of Western powers intent on wielding them against Russia” (Stephen Kotkin, “Russia’s Perpetual Geopolitics: Putin Returns to the Historical Pattern,” Foreign Affairs, Vol. 95, No. 3, May/June 2016, p. 4).
tic and foreign policies, echoing the notion of “spheres of influence” rejected by the Western vision for the international order.

The particular way in which Russia seeks to influence the near abroad is to keep out, or at least limit, Western institutions and influences. Although NATO and EU leaders have renounced the notion that the West is locked in an inexorable geopolitical contest with Russia, Russia has long maintained that it considers NATO to be an anti-Russian alliance and that NATO expansion is therefore aimed at containing Russia. This position has been buoyed by the Western response to the possibility of Russia’s membership, raised by every post-Soviet leader. At his now-famous speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, which inaugurated a more assertive foreign policy, Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed the view that “NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe.” Instead, according to Putin, it “represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust”—giving Russia “the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended?” Putin’s later words serve as a kind of answer to his previous, rhetorical question: “NATO and the USA wanted a complete victory over the Soviet Union. They wanted to sit on the throne in Europe alone.” Thus, Russia perceives with profound alarm the suggestion by NATO that Georgia and Ukraine, two of the key states that Russia seeks to keep within its orbit, may at some point join the Western alliance.

Russia’s fears about Western influence over these states implicate all of its core security interests. Russia perceives Western involvement in domestic politics of the states in its periphery through the lens of covert efforts at regime change, which, if allowed to proceed, will eventually directly threaten Russia. NATO membership for any of these countries would also mean that NATO military presence would be possible right next to Russia’s border, aggravating Russia’s anxieties about external attack. As the specter of Western institutions, and NATO in particular, looms, Russia has pursued its interests through increasingly aggressive actions. To demonstrate its leverage and to entrench breakaway regions in Georgia—thereby keeping Georgia divided and obstructing its prospects of NATO membership—Russia resorted to force against Georgia in 2008. And in 2014, Russia’s pressed its “privileged interests” by annexing Crimea and fomenting a war in Ukraine’s East. Russia’s aggression toward Ukraine precipitated a downturn in its relations with the West, unprecedented since the end of the Cold War. Yet, Russia views NATO, and increasingly the EU, as responsible

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86 For further discussion, see Chapter Three.
87 For an authoritative account for the roots of these events, see Charap and Colton, 2016.
for the crisis between Russia and the West and its “containment” of Russia as undermining European (and global) stability.88

The growing tensions between Russia and the West are reflected in another Russian objective, which has become more prominent over the course of the past two decades, and especially since 2014: weakening NATO and Western institutions in general, outside Russia’s sphere of interests. Thus, Russia has worked to oppose NATO and, at times, EU expansion to any new members. This objective guides Russia’s actions toward the Balkans, where a number of states are not (yet) members, and actions toward the Western European neutral countries (Austria, Finland, Ireland, Sweden, and Switzerland). In pursuit of this objective, Russia has been waging a multidimensional “hostile” or “malign” influence campaign across the European continent.89 To advance its influence and fuel divisions within NATO, the EU, and individual Western states, Russia has made use of economic, political, diplomatic, and informational tools—such as disinformation and propaganda, economic pressures, financing political actors, and covert support for political actions, including coups.90

But Russia’s objectives in Europe are not wholly destructive. Russia continues to need Europe to underwrite its economic well-being: As Olga Oliker and coauthors observe, “It was, after all, flows of finance and people (especially to and from Europe) that (along with high prices for oil) transformed the Russian economy.”91 Despite sanctions and Russian counter-sanctions, the EU remains Russia’s biggest trading partner, and Russia is the EU’s fourth or fifth biggest.92 Thus, trade and economic ties with the EU features among Russia’s objectives in its strategic documents: In its Foreign Policy Concept, Russia identifies a strategic priority . . . to establish a common economic and humanitarian space from the Atlantic to the Pacific by harmonizing and aligning interests of European and Eurasian integration processes, which is expected to prevent the emergence of dividing lines on the European continent.93

88 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016. As Oliker et al. point out, the EU was not viewed as a threat on par with NATO until about 2013, when Russians began to “voice concerns about the EU’s Eastern Partnership,” which they started viewing as undercutting Russian economic interests (Oliker et al., 2015, p. 7).

89 For a comprehensive treatment of these efforts in Europe, see Raphael S. Cohen and Andrew Radin, Russia’s Hostile Measures in Europe: Understanding the Threat, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1793-A, 2019.


91 See Oliker et al., 2015, pp. 8–9.


Energy relations are singled out as particularly important, given the dependence of Russia’s overall economic prosperity on hydrocarbons. And Russia calls out the importance of bilateral relations with individual European countries (e.g., Germany, France, Italy, Spain). To be sure, Russian political objectives often undercut its own economic interests—of which the damage done by Western economic sanctions imposed in the wake of Ukraine and other malign influence and illegal activities is a prime example. Nonetheless, Russia’s economic equities in Europe are considerable and continue to influence Russia’s policies.

The Middle East

In comparison with Europe, the Middle East is less central to Russia’s interests. In the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, Russia largely withdrew from the region, making a comeback under Putin. Russian strategic documents, such as the Foreign Policy Concept, identify the Middle East in a set of priorities, but they appear to rank relatively low. Nonetheless, since Russia’s intervention in Syria’s civil war in 2015, the importance of the region has arguably become greater than its place in official strategic documents suggests. Russia’s intervention, which decisively shifted the course of the conflict and rescued the faltering regime of Bashar al-Assad, reestablished Russia as a player of consequence in the region. Russia’s interest in the region is to build on its gains and establish itself as a regional power, limit instability that threatens consequences for Russia itself, and advance its economic interests.

Russia’s overarching objective in the Middle East is to deepen and entrench status as a regional power, securing a seat at the table on major decisions and issues. To pursue this objective, Russia has built, and often rebuilt, ties with multiple governments in the region. Russia has engaged states and nonstate actors across the Levant, North Africa, and the Persian Gulf, often courting parties on opposite side of regional conflicts and rivalries. Russia’s approach to winning friends in the region is often underwritten by U.S. disengagement, which created a vacuum that Russia was eager to fill. For instance, the Gulf states’ dismay over the U.S. response to the Arab Spring facilitated a rapprochement with Russia. Likewise, a downturn in U.S. relations with Egypt that suspended arms sales motivated the latter to look to Russia for the same needs. In building ties with regional rivals—e.g., the Gulf states

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95 See Oliker et al., 2015, p. 8.
96 In the Foreign Policy Concept’s regional priorities, Middle East priorities appear after Canada, Arctic, and Asia-Pacific interests (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016).
98 See discussion in Chapter Eight.
Assessing the Prospects for Great Power Cooperation in Europe and the Middle East

and Iran, Israel and the Palestinians—Moscow presents itself as a responsible actor, ready to mediate problems and conflicts among the region’s rivals.99

But the Middle East is not just another part of the world where Russia seeks to spread its influence. The Middle East’s proximity to Russia makes it of obvious consequence to Russia: Instability and terrorism in the region can easily spill over into Russia, a consistent concern to Moscow. Russia contains a large Muslim population, borders Muslim-majority states in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and has struggled to suppress Islamic uprisings in Chechnya. The threat of foreign support and influence for Russia’s Muslim groups is not merely hypothetical to Moscow, as prior links existed between Chechen groups and actors in the Middle East.100 Moscow thus views terrorism and extremism gaining ground across the Middle East as a potential problem domestically. Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov, for example, in explaining Russia’s interest in Syria, opined that if the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) were to gain strength and spread, Russia “would have had to confront that force in our own territory,” as such groups “would be operating in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Volga region.”101 As RAND analysis of the dynamics producing Russia’s intervention in Syria suggests, this statement may have been hyperbolic; yet, Russia’s perception of the link between the terrorist threat in Syria and in Russia’s homeland—as well as of the link between the potential fall of the al-Assad regime and terrorism—was, and remains, genuine.102

Apart from the threat of Islamic extremism as such, instability has another face to Moscow, which also drives its interest in the region. Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept explicitly connects the threat of terrorism to that of “external interference,” arguing that “values and prescriptions imposed from outside . . . in an attempt to modernize their political systems” have “exacerbated the negative response of their societies to current challenges,” which were exploited by “extremist forces.”103 Moscow views actual and suspected actions of Western governments—the United States first and foremost—through the lens of such destabilizing external interference. This applies to Moscow’s reaction to Western military interventions in the region in Iraq and Libya, and it applies to the perceived instigation by the West of events such as the Arab Spring. An important aspect of Russia’s objectives in the Middle East, then, is to resist the Western, and especially American, penchant for such interventions. The desire


102 Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, Understanding Russia’s Intervention in Syria, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3180-AF, 2019, pp. 4–5.

to avoid what Russians called the “Libya scenario” was a major driver of Russian support for the al-Assad regime. ¹⁰⁴ Russia's competition for influence with the West in the Middle East, therefore, should be viewed with this interest in mind.

Russia’s objectives in the Middle East also include economic interests—notably with regard to the arms trade, the fate of the global oil and gas markets, and prospects for other trade and investment. Trade with the region as a whole has been modest, but arms trade is becoming more important. The Middle East is the not the largest buyer of Russian arms, accounting for only 19 percent of Russia's arms exports, but it has been the fastest-growing since about 2014; in Egypt and Iraq, two of the major arms recipients in the region after Algeria, deliveries went up by 191 and 212 percent respectively, relative to 2010–2014 levels. ¹⁰⁵ More importantly, Russia has a crucial stake in the future of the hydrocarbons market. What Middle Eastern energy producers do has a direct bearing on Russia’s economic fortunes, and disputes with these producers can have serious economic consequences for Russia, as the 2020 Saudi Arabia–Russia oil price war demonstrated. ¹⁰⁶ Russia’s Foreign Policy concept thus unsurprisingly calls for “enhance[d] cooperation with the leading energy producers,” and its National Security Strategy includes a need to increase energy security. ¹⁰⁷ Finally, Russia is also courting regional actors to invest in the Russian economy—in particular, Gulf nations with their large sovereign wealth funds. ¹⁰⁸ While Middle Eastern investment is still not significant, some states have expressed an interest. The impact of these considerations on Russia’s equities in the region should not be overlooked, in view of Russia’s struggle to attract investment faced with U.S. and EU sanctions. ¹⁰⁹

In both Europe and the Middle East, Russia and Russians have not been shy about identifying core disagreements with the United States, NATO, and/or Europe. It is commonplace to observe that Russia’s approach to its objectives in Europe has been aggressive and adversarial, especially since 2014. Given the importance of Russia’s objectives in Europe to its core security interests, it is highly unlikely that Russia will cooperate on terms that require compromise on its core objectives there. Nonetheless, Russia’s key strategic documents and the public statements of its leaders and elites claim to welcome cooperation, generally and with regard to

¹⁰⁴ See Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019.
¹⁰⁶ See, e.g., Steven A. Cook, “Russia Losing the Oil War—and the Middle East,” *Foreign Policy*, April 9, 2020.
¹⁰⁸ For example, Henry Foy, “Russia Looks to Translate Gulf’s Warm Welcome to Cold Cash,” *Financial Times*, October 23, 2019.
specific issues—within certain parameters. For instance, the Foreign Policy Concept declares Russia’s interests in

building mutually beneficial relations with the United States of America, taking into consideration that the two States bear special responsibility for global strategic stability and international security in general, as well as vast potential in trade and investment, scientific and technical and other types of cooperation.

The same paragraph, however, contains caveats about what Russia claims are unacceptable aspects of U.S. policy—items such as “extraterritorial jurisdiction beyond the boundaries of international law,” and “attempts to exercise military, political, economic or any other pressure” on other states.110 Similarly, where Russia calls out specific issues on which it declares an interest in cooperation—from arms control to the Arctic—it is often caveated with an indication that conditions attach.111 The sense this conveys of Russia’s position on cooperation amid competition is that Moscow is interested in at least bargaining toward cooperative solutions, but its conditions for cooperation may well be quite demanding to the other side.

Mapping the Trade Space in Europe and the Middle East

As the summaries of each power’s equities in Europe and Middle East above imply, cooperation that would advance each power’s key interests appears challenging at first blush. In Europe, cooperation between the United States and Russia, the competitor with greater stakes in the region generally, is obviously limited by the fact that many U.S. objectives are specifically aimed at countering Russia. Across the Middle East, great power competition is unsurprisingly playing out with both Russia and China seeking influence in the region in large part to counter U.S. influence. All three states seek to secure partnerships or cooperative relations with Middle Eastern states, with Russia and China often seizing opportunities to align with states bypassed or alienated by the United States.

Still, many experts and decisionmakers view simultaneous competition with two rivals on every issue as unsustainable, and some have offered proposals for how the United States can cooperate with one or the other rival—with an eye toward weakening the China-Russia strategic partnership. In particular, proposals of this kind that concern key issues in Europe and the Middle East are almost always for cooperation with Russia, rather than China—which is explained by the latter’s generally lower stakes in these parts of the world. Before we turn to a more focused examination of each issue area in Europe and the Middle East in subsequent chapters, we briefly review some of these proposals that take on some of the same issues we address—and situate our analysis by reference to these.


111 See, e.g., Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016, provisions 62, 65, 70, 72, 74, and 76.
Following the election of Donald Trump, talk of a “grand bargain” that would reconcile the United States and Russia—and implicitly, unite the two powers against China—was common in policy circles and the media. The contours of such a bargain were opaque, based more on conjectures about the U.S. president’s intentions than any analytical blueprint for remediying the state of U.S.-Russia relations. Common elements in a grand bargain that never materialized included joining forces against the Islamic State in Syria, countering the North Korean threat, and taking a more accommodationist approach to settling the Ukraine crisis. In one iteration of the hypothetical bargain, the United States would ease or lift sanctions on Russia over Crimea in exchange for Russia’s rolling back Iranian influence in Syria. As events unfolded, however, it became apparent that there was no clear vision behind such bargains, nor would they be within the realm of the plausible.

Since Russia’s annexation of Crimea, some voices have also placed at least some blame on the West for Russia’s aggression. Such views were articulated by, among others, John Mearsheimer, a towering figure of the realism school of thought in international relations. As Mearsheimer has argued, NATO’s and the EU’s attempted expansion into Russia’s backyard, combined with Western democracy promotion, drew precisely the kind of reaction that realist thought would predict when a state’s core strategic interests are threatened. The prescription follows directly from this diagnosis: To reverse the downward spiral in relations and solve the Ukraine crisis, NATO and EU expansion, as well as democracy promotion within Ukraine must be explicitly taken off the table. Other analyses made similar, if less starkly put, proposals to shelve Ukraine’s prospects for NATO membership.


113 Prior to assuming office, Trump has declared his intention to “see if we can make some good deals with Russia.” After the election, commentary about what such a deal would entail abounded (Michael Gove, “Donald Trump: I’ll Do a Deal with Britain,” The Times (London), January 16, 2017).


118 For example, George Beebe, “Groupthink Resurgent,” National Interest, December 22, 2019. An even more softened version of the proposal was articulated by Henry Kissinger, who suggested that “Ukraine should have the right to choose freely its economic and political associations, including with Europe,” but “Ukraine should not join NATO” (Henry A. Kissinger, “Henry Kissinger: To Settle the Ukraine Crisis, Start at the End,” Washington Post, March 5, 2014).
Such proposals, which overlap on the essential point of ruling out a future in NATO for Ukraine (and implicitly, Georgia), cannot serve as a basis for any explicit, public bargain between the United States and Russia—for at least one basic reason. As historian Stephen Kotkin explains,

The real challenge today boils down to Moscow’s desire for Western recognition of a Russian sphere of influence in the former Soviet space (with the exception of the Baltic states). This is the price for reaching accommodation with Putin—something advocates of such accommodation do not always acknowledge frankly.\(^{119}\)

Washington is unlikely to pay such a price and unilaterally sacrifice another state’s sovereign freedom to make decisions without the latter’s consent. The principle at stake is articulated in the Helsinki Final Act, a bedrock of the Euro-Atlantic post–Cold War order, which recognizes every state’s right “to belong or not to belong to international organizations, to be or not to be a party to bilateral or multilateral treaties, including the right to be or not to be a party to treaties of alliance.”\(^{120}\)

In more recent years, there have not been many voices on the U.S. side calling for any plausible grand bargain or comprehensive cooperation with Russia or China in Europe or the Middle East. However, more studied and comprehensive proposals have been made that do not require such unacceptable compromises—but that are nevertheless more ambitious about the prospects of cooperation on the core issues that divide the West and Russia than the present reality could accommodate. Notably, a group of experts from the West, Russia, and the former Soviet states has articulated a comprehensive proposal that reimagines the regional order for the so-called “in-between states” that constitute the “primary battleground for the Russia-West competition”—that is, Ukraine, but also Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.\(^{121}\) Western and Russian visions for these states are at present incompatible. In their stead, expert coauthors forward a four-part proposal: defining and agreeing to a non-aligned status for the in-between states and creating a new regional consultation mechanism, a set of applicable norms of behavior (including respect for the affected state’s non-alignment by major powers), and multilateral security guarantees.\(^{122}\) Unlike the proposals to renounce possibility of NATO membership for Ukraine, this approach “would not cross any state’s

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\(^{119}\) Kotkin, 2016, p. 8.


\(^{122}\) Charap, Shapiro, et al., 2019.
declared red lines, and thus might plausibly be acceptable to all of them.”123 However, the authors of the proposal are explicit that the current state of the relationship

make negotiation of a revised regional order highly unlikely in the short term . . . a tremendously fraught endeavor . . . because [it] would touch upon subjects that have never been openly negotiated with both Russia and the Western powers at the table alongside the states of the region.124

Therefore, this and similar proposals for a comprehensive renegotiation of the regional order await a future “a window of opportunity.”125

Other experts and officials have also voiced a perspective at the opposite extreme of the grand bargain, denying the possibility for any kind of cooperation with Russia that benefits the United States and its allies. This perspective maintains that, to quote a recent piece by several former CIA officials, Putin does not want to cooperate with the United States—“he just wants to beat us.”126 The policy prescription that goes along with this set of views is to curtail—or, more accurately, continue curtailing—most forms of cooperation with Moscow.127 While the latter view may turn out to be the most sensible conclusion with respect to most issue areas, we approach each issue area on its own merits and seek to more systematically identify opportunities for cooperation—even if, ultimately, obstacles mean that such opportunities are highly unlikely. The subsequent chapters contain that analysis.

123 Charap, Shapiro, et al., 2019, p. 7.
124 Charap, Shapiro, et al., 2019, p. 5.
125 Charap, Shapiro, et al., 2019, p. 5.
Some security issues of importance to both the United States and at least one of its strategic competitors are not confined to a country or group of European countries, but apply to all of Europe. Broadly understood, Euro-Atlantic security is a function of the evolution of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. This chapter focuses on the prospects for cooperation on issues pertaining to two major pillars of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture: the future of NATO and the future of Europe-focused arms control—which includes CAC control and related CSBMs, as well as the fate of intermediate-range weapons formerly limited by the INF Treaty. The clash between U.S. and Russian visions of the post–Cold War security architecture in the Euro-Atlantic region is at the root of the downturn in U.S.-Russia relations. In light of this, the space and opportunity for meaningful cooperation with Russia on core issues in this area is quite limited. Nonetheless, nearly all the trade space for cooperation that does exist is with Russia rather than China and is limited to measures aimed at managing a tense rivalry in a way that reduces risk of unintentional conflict. China, by contrast, views most European and Euro-Atlantic security issues as too low of a priority—even were the United States and its allies to solicit a greater Chinese role in transatlantic security.

In this chapter, we first review the U.S., Chinese, and Russian equities or interests with regard to the fate of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture to determine whether and where any of the competitors are at least rhetorically aligned in their interests. Next, we identify specific avenues of cooperation in the space where interests are aligned, review the evidence that Russia or China are willing to negotiate and cooperate along these avenues, and identify obstacles to actualizing cooperation. Finally, we identify salient potential second-order effects of pursuing cooperation.

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Assessing the Prospects for Great Power Cooperation in Europe and the Middle East

Understanding the Equities

U.S. Equities

The Euro-Atlantic security architecture forged between the United States and Europe since the end of World War II has been the primary mechanism for protecting both U.S. and European security against a variety of threats and challenges. The set of threats to European and U.S. security that call for joint action includes the risks of Russian aggression, Russian and Chinese influence, violent Islamist extremism, and the instability and tensions associated with the migrant and refugee flows stemming from the Middle East and Africa. The future of Euro-Atlantic security architecture is a matter of great importance to the United States, even if the United States’ preferences about the contours of that future are not always clear or uncontroversial.

The strength, breadth, and institutionalized nature of U.S. alliances is an important advantage that the United States has over potential adversaries such as Russia and Iran. NATO is therefore the cornerstone of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture, and strengthening collective defense under NATO is a key U.S. policy objective. Accordingly, the 2018 NDS follows prior U.S. policy documents in calling to “fortify the Trans-Atlantic NATO Alliance.” Strengthening the Euro-Atlantic alliance means, first and foremost, bolstering credibility of the collective-defense commitment under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, as NATO’s primary deterrent power stems from the notion that an attack on one member of the alliance will be considered an attack on all members and responded to as such.

A strengthened NATO is important to jointly address a number of “forces threatening to undermine our common values, security interests, and shared vision”—a list that includes threats posed by North Korea and Iran but also Russian subversion and aggression. The United States, therefore, has consistently sought to bolster NATO’s military capabilities, improve interoperability among member states and transatlantic defense policy coordination to effectively counter transatlantic threats, and foster cohesion among members to enable rapid decisionmaking and strategic planning. To advance those goals, the United States has

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4 NSS, 2017, p. 47.

5 NDS, 2018, p. 9.

6 NDS, 2018, p. 9; Public Law 116-92, Title XII, Matters Relating to Foreign Nations, Sec. 1239, Updated strategy to counter the threat of malign influence by the Russian Federation and other countries, December 20, 2019, p. 459.


8 For example, Public Law 116-92, 2019, p. 459. The NDS (2018, p. 9) further indicates the U.S. intention to “expand regional consultative mechanisms and collaborative planning” by “developing new partnerships around shared interests to reinforce regional coalitions and security cooperation . . . [and] provid[ing] allies
called for greater defense and modernization spending by its NATO allies, and has in turn increased its own spending on NATO and on the forces that the United States can supply to NATO.9 Notably, the United States has acted on its commitment to enhancing deterrence along NATO’s eastern flank by increasing funding for the European Deterrence Initiative from $4.5 billion in fiscal year 2018 (FY18) to $5.9 billion in FY20 and sending additional troops to Poland.10 This increase in budget and rotational force posture has also been accompanied by a great deal of discussion within U.S. policy circles, and between U.S. officials and allied governments, on how best to bolster deterrence on the Eastern flank.11 Although NATO is the main pillar of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture, the United States also seeks to ensure that EU defense initiatives—particularly those of France and Germany—cohere with rather than undermine NATO activities and capabilities.12

Strengthening NATO’s capability would enable the Euro-Atlantic alliance to better deter intentional aggression and defeat adversaries if necessary. However, the United States has also consistently sought to stem instability or reduce the risk of unintended conflict or escalation of existing conflicts on the European continent. Apart from the intrinsic harm to European security posed by the eruption of armed conflicts on the continent, conflicts that pit NATO and non-NATO member states might require U.S. intervention—or risk exposing the weakness of collective defense.13 The potential for escalation to such conflict—whether intentional or unintended—is particularly high in areas of Europe where states with clashing interests and varying NATO status are in close proximity. To help constrain potential sources of conflict, the United States has sought to strengthen its bilateral relationships with European countries outside of NATO in areas such as Serbia and Ukraine. Much of this cooperation occurs through NATO’s Partnership for Peace program, wherein non-NATO states engage in


11 For further discussion on deterrence on the Eastern flank, see our chapter on Ukraine.

12 France and Germany have been vying for dominance of the EU and the European contingent of NATO, and France in particular has established a large number of initiatives that may conflict or detract from NATO priorities given France’s limited defense resources. See Robin Emmott, “Germany and France Vie for European Leadership at NATO,” Reuters, November 20, 2019; Jacopo Barigazzi, “France Dominant in New Flurry of EU Military Projects,” Politico, November 13, 2019; Jeffrey Mankoff, “Reforming the Euro-Atlantic Security Architecture: An Opportunity for U.S. Leadership,” Washington Quarterly, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2010. In addition, the Trump administration called on the EU to enhance its capabilities and take a more active role in European defense through initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defense Fund (EDF) (Kirk Bennett, “NATO and European Security in the Trump Era,” The American Interest, July 5, 2018).

13 Bondareva, 2016.
security cooperation and capacity-building efforts with NATO members. Historically, the United States and Europe also sought to reduce the risks of armed conflict on the continent by means of CAC and associated CSBMs, another pillar of Euro-Atlantic security architecture.

Since the end of the Cold War, several key agreements have constituted that pillar: notably, the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces (CFE), Vienna Document, and Open Skies Treaty. Signed at the conclusion of the Cold War in 1990, the CFE eliminated the Soviet Union’s overwhelming quantitative advantage in conventional weapons in Europe by setting equal limits on the number of tanks, armored combat vehicles, heavy artillery, combat aircraft, and attack helicopters that NATO and the Warsaw Pact could deploy between the Atlantic Ocean and the Ural Mountains.

The CFE was intended to prevent both NATO and the Warsaw Pact from “amassing forces for a blitzkrieg-type offensive, which could have triggered the use of nuclear weapons in response.” The CFE is commonly deemed to have contributed significantly to European stability at an uncertain time. The Open Skies Treaty, signed in 1992 and entered into force in 2002, allows member states to conduct unarmed reconnaissance flights over the others’ entire territories to collect data on military forces and activities. The Vienna Document, signed in 1990 but updated since, contains politically binding set of CSBMs that center on the exchange and verification of information about military activities and forces.

Although the United States declares a continuing commitment to CAC, the U.S. interest in upholding the historical and existing instruments of arms control and related measures is not as clear as its interest in fortifying NATO. This is because the agreements undergirding the CAC regime have largely unraveled. The United States does maintain support for the Vienna Document, and has called for its full implementation and modernization in accordance with a proposal put forth by a number of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) states. By contrast, the Agreement on Adaptation of CFE, intended to amend and update the treaty, was signed in 1999 but never entered into force because Russia has not removed its military forces from Georgia and Moldova. Russia suspended implemen-

16 Reif, 2015.
17 Charap et al., 2020, p. 1.
19 Dinanno, 2019.
20 Keil and Arts, 2020; Charap et al., 2020.
tation of the CFE in 2007 (and withdrew in 2015). And the United States withdrew from the
Open Skies Agreement in June 2020.22

The United States has also withdrawn from the INF Treaty, which is not commonly
grouped with the CFE, the Open Skies Treaty, and the Vienna Document because it covered
both nuclear and conventional missiles. However, the demise of the INF regime also con-
tributed to the emptying out of CAC architecture that served to manage risks of conflict (in
addition to the ramification for nuclear arms control and strategic stability). The withdrawal
came after years of U.S. and NATO claims that Russia has violated the treaty by testing land-
based cruise missiles in excess of the permissible range. U.S. experts and officials have been
divided on the value of the INF Treaty to U.S. interests and the wisdom of withdrawing from
it.23 Likewise, opinion is not uniform about how best to pursue U.S. interests pertaining to
this class of weapons going forward. U.S. interests with regard to these are multifaceted: In
the European theater, the United States has an interest in addressing threats presented by
Russia’s arsenal, including the missile system that precipitated U.S. withdrawal, supporting
NATO allies, and avoiding costly arms races.24 Interests beyond the European theater are
implicated as well: Another rationale for withdrawing from the INF Treaty, offered by some
officials, is to remedy the asymmetry with China, whose growing arsenal of intermediate-
range missiles are argued to afford it an advantage over the United States.25 At the same
time, in its announcement of withdrawal from the treaty, the United States has reiterated
its commitment to “effective arms control that advances U.S., allied, and partner security;
is verifiable and enforceable; and includes partners that comply with their obligations,” also
contending that the United States “stand[s] ready to engage with Russia and China on arms
control negotiations that meet these criteria.”26 In sum, although Washington pursued cer-
tain U.S. interests in exiting the aforementioned treaties, it also retains an interest in limit-

22 Reif, 2015; John Hudson and Paul Sonne, “Trump Administration to Withdraw from Open Skies Treaty

23 For an argument that withdrawal was a mistake, see Jon Wolfsthal, “Killing the INF Treaty Was a Gift to
Russia,” National Interest, February 7, 2019; for an opposite argument, see Jacob Cohn, Timothy A. Walton,
Adam Lemon, and Toshi Yoshihara, Leveling the Playing Field: Reintroducing U.S. Theater-Range Missiles in
a Post-INF World, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019. For an analysis
of whether withdrawing from the INF Treaty (conducted prior to withdrawal) would help “extend Russia”
and benefit the United States in strategic competition, see James Dobbins, Raphael S. Cohen, Nathan Chan-
dler, Bryan Frederick, Edward Geist, Paul DeLuca, Forrest E. Morgan, Howard J. Shatz, and Brent Williams,
Extending Russia: Competing from Advantageous Ground, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-


25 See, e.g., Admiral Harry B. Harris, Jr., U.S. Navy Commander, U.S. Pacific Command, “Statement Before

26 Michael Pompeo, “U.S. Withdrawal from the INF Treaty on August 2, 2019,” U.S. Department of State,
October 10, 2019.
ing the potential risks to European stability that result from the weakening of former arms-
control and transparency measures.27

**Chinese Equities**

China's equities in transatlantic security architecture are mostly indirect, and we therefore
assess these to be of low importance. The shape of Euro-Atlantic security architecture does
not affect China's ability to trade with Europe and does not directly drive European political
decisionmaking regarding China's rise. China has little direct interest in the future of Euro-
Atlantic security—so long as a Euro-Atlantic alliance is not targeted at Beijing—but it shares
an interest in stability with the United States, which suggests that the rhetorical alignment
with U.S. goals is mixed.

In the past, Beijing supported NATO—during the 1980s when Deng Xiaoping leaned
toward the United States against the Soviet Union.28 In some respects, strong transatlantic
security continues to benefit Beijing, even if Beijing will not admit this: By providing stabil-
ity in Europe, it supports trade with China; and by antagonizing Russia, strong transatlantic
security drives Moscow closer to China. Beijing's official statements are accordingly diplo-
matic and anodyne: For example, Beijing welcomed NATO Secretary General Jens Stolten-
berg's statement in June 2020 that China is not a rival and declared that “China is ready to
enhance dialogue with NATO on the basis of equality and mutual respect.”29

At the same time, there are distinct reasons why China’s position on the future of NATO
is adverse to that of the United States. Insofar as Europe’s security dependence on the United
States undergirds transatlantic political relations, NATO’s existence could be a hindrance
to China—notably, if NATO can be leveraged by the United States to contain China’s rise.
NATO’s recent discussion of focusing more on China is likely to cause unease in Beijing, and
moves in this direction are likely to bring more forceful Chinese opposition to transatlantic
security cooperation.30

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27 As experts warn, “without any conventional arms control agreement limiting Russian and NATO forces
in place, Europe has lost a great deal of military predictability and transparency” (Ulrich Kühn, “The End
of Conventional Arms Control and the Role of US Congress,” *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*,

No. 2, Fall 1980.

29 Hua Chunying, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on June 10,

Sets Its Sights on China,” *The Economist*, June 9, 2020. For NATO leadership statements on China, see
Vicky McKeever, “U.S. Needs Europe to Tackle the Rise of China, NATO Chief Says,” CNBC, February 15,
2020; “NATO's Jens Stoltenberg Sounds Warning on China's Rise,” *DW*, June 13, 2020. For analysis, see
Jens Ringsmose and Sten Rynning, “China Brought NATO Closer Together,” *War on the Rocks*, February 5,
2020; Nad’a Kovalcikova and Gabrielle Tarini, *Stronger Together: NATO’s Evolving Approach Toward China,*
More generally, Beijing has long criticized NATO in principle on the grounds that an alliance is in essence exclusionary and adversarial. As one U.S. scholar summarized over a decade ago, China’s principled issues with NATO include “a long-standing opposition to the enlargement of military blocs and strengthening of military alliances, interference in the internal affairs of other countries, fear of containment, and opposition to ballistic missile defense systems.”31 Xi has made clear that China opposes all alliances as vestiges of “outdated,” “Cold War” era, and “zero-sum” thinking, forswearing any alliances for China (even as it keeps one with North Korea and engages in security “partnerships” that lack only the mutual defense commitments of alliances).32 The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson made this clear in 2014: “The Chinese side always opposes the establishment and expansion of military blocs, objects to the forming of spheres of influence and rival camps.”33 In Europe, China has blamed NATO for driving the early 2000s “color revolutions” and causing the Ukraine crisis through its expansion.34

China has also been very critical of NATO’s military operations abroad, whether it be in Kosovo, Afghanistan, or Libya.35 China generally viewed these operations as interfering in other countries’ internal affairs and destabilizing these countries—China also holds an alarmist view of U.S.-led overthrows of authoritarian regimes, as they strike fear of similar actions against the CCP leadership.36 To this point, the accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 was one of several turning points in China’s perception of the United States and has remained a negative narrative in the relationship ever since.37

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PRC’s perspective, security architecture should be global, should seek resolution of disputes through dialogue rather than confrontation, and should emphasize partnership rather than alliance.38

Looking to the future, China is also wary of the U.S. ability to assist Europe in preparing for impending challenges from China, as well as its ability to help strengthen Europe’s democratic institutions, freedom of the press, and rule of law.39 Ultimately, Chinese activities in Europe with regard to NATO are intended to limit or undermine any shifting of NATO’s focus away from Russia and toward China. For U.S.-China strategic competition, this means denying the United States global support for what Beijing perceives as a campaign of containment.

Russian Equities

For Russia, the Euro-Atlantic security architecture and the future of NATO has consistently been a core national security concern, making this issue area of high importance. Russia’s broad view of Euro-Atlantic security is formed by its opposition to NATO, and to a lesser extent the EU—therefore, there is little common ground to be found between United States and Russia in this issue area. At the same time, Russia does have some interest in greater stability on the European continent—notably, insofar as it implicates the likelihood of a Russia-NATO conflict—placing it in mixed alignment with U.S. interests. Concerns about the latter translate into an interest in Europe-focused arms control and CSBMs with the United States and/or NATO.

Russia’s worldview articulates an opposition to U.S.- or Western-led alliances in principle, which Russia views as anathema to the “the emergence of a polycentric world architecture.”40 Beyond principle, Moscow blames the “the geopolitical expansion” by NATO, along with the EU, for the “serious crisis in the relations between Russia and the Western States.”41 NATO’s and the United States’ present policies, according to the Russian official view, are unjustifiably aimed at a Cold War-type containment of Russia—in lieu of a productive cooperation.42 Particularly problematic from Moscow’s perspective is NATO’s potential expansion into countries that Moscow considers to be in its backyard and vital to assuring its own

38 Xi, 2015.
security, and NATO posture enhancements. Although Russia’s reaction to earlier rounds of NATO enlargement into Eastern Europe was rather muted, movements toward integrating post-Soviet Eurasia are perceived to more centrally threaten Russia’s interests. Since at least 1995, Russian leadership has made it clear that the former Soviet countries are central to Russia and that Russia was to play a leading role in the post-Soviet space. This position has not changed substantially to date. NATO’s offers of Membership Action Plans (MAPs) to Georgia and Ukraine in 2008 were met with a warning that Russia would view this as a “strategic challenge with serious strategic consequences.” The subsequent decision at the 2008 NATO Bucharest summit to forgo MAPs and to declare that the two countries “will become” members at some unspecified time was likewise interpreted as a “direct threat” to Russia’s security. Although there are no concrete paths toward NATO membership for Georgia or Ukraine, the very prospect is deeply problematic for Russia. So long as the possibility of enlarging NATO to these states remains on the table, Moscow’s view on this pillar of Euro-Atlantic security architecture will remain adverse to the positions of the United States and its allies.

 Especially in light of the potential for future NATO expansion to Russia’s borders, NATO posture enhancements along its Eastern flank are perceived as directly threatening to Russia’s security. Positioning “military infrastructure of NATO members in proximity to the

43 The enlargement to Eastern Europe included Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic in 1999; the three Baltic States, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia in 2004; and Albania and Croatia in 2009.

44 Notably, the CIS states, which then encompassed all but the Baltic former republics, were expected to “refrain from participation in alliances and blocs aimed against any of the CIS states” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Стратегический курс России с государствами—участниками Содружества Независимых Государств [Strategic Course of Russia Towards Member States of the Commonwealth of Independent States],” September 12, 2005. See discussion in Charap and Colton, 2016, loc. 1022.

45 See, e.g., the declaration in Russia’s 2016 Foreign Policy Concept that, “While respecting the right of its partners within the CIS to establish relations with other international actors, Russia expects the CIS member States to fully implement their obligations within integration structures that include Russia, as well as further promote integration and mutually beneficial cooperation in the CIS space” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016).

46 Charap and Colton, 2016, loc. 1775.

47 Vladimir Putin, “Заявление для прессы и ответы на вопросы журналистов по итогам заседания Совета Россия – НАТО [Statement for the Press and Answers to Journalists’ Questions on the Results of the Russia-NATO Council Meeting],” April 4, 2008; see also Charap and Colton, 2016, loc. 1799.

48 Underscoring the zero-sum nature of the stakes, both Georgia and Ukraine exited Russia-dominated CIS: Georgia in 2009, observing (years earlier) that in view of its intentions toward NATO, it “cannot be part of two military structures simultaneously” (“Georgia Opt out of ex-Soviet Military Cooperation Body,” Pravda, February 3, 2006). Georgia completed its withdrawal from the CIS in August 2009, one year after officially announcing its withdrawal in the immediate aftermath of the Russo-Georgian War. Ukraine, which has always been an informal participant in CIS, formally terminated its participation in 2018 (Nicholas Waller, “Poroshenko Officially Ends Ukraine’s Membership in CIS,” New Europe, May 28, 2018). Both countries exited CIS in the wake of Russian aggression toward them.
borders of the Russian Federation” is the first “military danger” in Russia’s 2010 and 2014 Military Doctrines. Because Moscow does not distinguish between NATO and U.S. capabilities and intentions, Putin has denounced U.S. plans for strengthening NATO’s capabilities in Europe contained in the 2017 U.S. NSS. 49 Similarly, the deployment of foreign military forces in any country bordering Russia and its allies is the third “military danger” identified in Russia’s 2014 Military Doctrine. 50 Russia’s 2015 National Security Strategy echoes these points, emphasizing the “the unacceptability for the Russian Federation of the alliance’s increased military activity and the approach of its military infrastructure toward Russia’s borders,” as well as of NATO’s “global functions.” 51

Top Russian officials have also been consistent in their objections to NATO deployments on these grounds. 52 Although NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence battalions in the Baltics and Poland are not themselves viewed as threatening, the opportunities they create for additional deployments in the future are. 53 NATO expansion is closely linked to the threat presented by NATO capabilities: Thus, Putin has indicated that Ukraine’s NATO membership would not be tolerated by Russia because of the prospect that NATO military capabilities would be positioned there. 54

However, while Russia’s interests with respect to the future of NATO are at odds with those of the United States and its allies, Russia shares an interest in avoiding unintended conflict with NATO in Europe. Thus, for example, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has declared Russia’s openness to “de-escalating tension, restoring mutual trust, preventing any misinterpretations of one another’s intentions, and reducing the risk of dangerous incidents.” 55 In particular, Russia’s concern about U.S. and NATO capabilities in Europe gives Russia an interest in limiting such capabilities and reducing the likelihood of their use against Russia. 56

50 Government of Russia, “Военная доктрина Российской Федерации [Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation],” April 5, 2010. A “military danger” in the doctrine is a situation with potential to lead to a “military threat,” or a situation with a real probability of a military conflict.
52 For example, see statements by Defense Minister Shoigu in Government of Russia, “Expanded Meeting of the Defense Ministry Board,” Kremlin, December 22, 2017.
53 For a synthesis of Russian views, see Charap et al., 2020.
54 For example, President of Russia website, “Interview with Austrian ORF Television Channel,” Kremlin, June 4, 2018.
Thus, Russia has officially declared its interest in both nuclear and conventional arms control in Europe. The 2017 Russian National Security Strategy identifies the “improvement of the mechanisms of arms control specified by international treaties” and “confidence-building measures” as two of the five most important areas for cooperating with the United States.57 Russia’s 2016 Foreign Policy Concept states that Russia “strictly abides by its international arms control obligations” and that it “participates, on the basis of the principles of equal rights and indivisible security, in devising new arms control agreements”—with the caveat that the latter “serve Russia’s national interests and contribute to strategic stability.” In a 2020 address, Putin declared that “the world has no future, if there are no limitations of some kind with regard to arms races.”58

Russia views at least some aspects of CAC as relevant to strategic stability. Thus, its National Security Strategy further states that

> To preserve strategic stability the Russian Federation . . . contributes to the strengthening of regional stability through participation in processes of a reduction and limitation of conventional armed forces, and also through the development and application of confidence-building measures in the military sphere.59

The Foreign Policy Concept further links the “efforts to strengthen regional stability in Europe” to Russia’s aim of bringing “the conventional arms control regime in Europe in line with present realities, as well as ensuring unconditional compliance by all States with the agreed confidence and security-building measures.”60

Although Russia declares an interest in CAC, not unlike the United States, it is not enthusiastic about the three core individual existing CAC and CSBM agreements. Russia suspended implementation of the CFE in 2007 and stopped participating in meetings of the CFE Joint Consultative Group in 2015, essentially rendering the treaty defunct—and Russia has no intentions of returning to the agreement. Instead, Russia has proposed the creation of a new CAC regime, one that better “corresponds to modern needs.”61 And Russian officials have stated that dialogue on a CAC regime would be possible only if the United States and NATO stop their policy of containment and renew military cooperation with Russia.62

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the Vienna Document, Russia’s official position is that parties should focus on implementing the 2011 update.63 Putin has claimed Moscow’s interest in retaining the Vienna Document privately, at the Helsinki summit between him and Trump in 2018.64 But Moscow has also rejected the modernization of the Vienna Document proposed by 32 OSCE states, on the grounds that “the strategy for the military ‘containment’ of Russia, which is being implemented by NATO . . . makes it impossible to reach agreements on the modernization of the Vienna Document.”65 Instead, Russia calls for the “creation of necessary conditions for the renewal of constructive discussions in the future.”66 After the United States withdrew from the Open Skies Treaty, Russia restated its position that it has not failed to implement that treaty, contrary to U.S. claims—and that insofar as the United States disagreed, Russia is always ready “to find mutually acceptable solutions to technical problems at the negotiating table.”67 The Russian ambassador to the United States described the Open Skies Treaty as important and “still relevant” as “one of the last legally binding agreements between nuclear superpowers promoting mutual understanding and transparency amidst a deep crisis in arms control.”68

While Russia’s interest in nuclear nonproliferation and nuclear arms control is addressed more fully in a companion volume,69 Russia’s interests in a specifically Europe-focused regime governing nuclear and conventional intermediate-range missiles should be noted here. Officially, Moscow claims to support the INF Treaty, denies ever violating the treaty, and condemns the U.S. withdrawal.70 There are certainly good reasons to believe that Russia has

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64 Yelena Chernenko, “Меры по контролю над соглашениями [Measures for Agreement Control],” Коммерсант, December 26, 2018b.


long been dissatisfied with the INF Treaty and deemed it to be disadvantageous to Russia.\(^{71}\) Likewise, public pronouncements by Russian leadership in this regard are doubtless crafted with propagandistic purposes in mind. At the same time, Moscow has been consistent and clear that such weapons constitute a significant threat to its national security interests and consistent about its concerns about arms races.\(^{72}\)

**Space for Cooperation**

In our assessment, there is no trade space for cooperation with either Russia or China that would advance U.S. interests with respect to the key pillar of Euro-Atlantic security architecture, the future of NATO. However, there is *some trade space for cooperation* aimed at reducing the risk of inadvertent escalation between NATO and Russia, based on either existing or hypothetical new instruments of CAC and CSBMs, and we assess Russia’s *overall willingness to cooperate in that latter trade space to be at the medium level.*

**The Future of NATO**

With regard to NATO’s future and its role in shaping the Euro-Atlantic security architecture, the United States and Russia have adverse interests. To a lesser extent, this is also true of the United States and China: Even if China’s opposition to NATO is not as stark as Russia’s, China is not aligned with the United States and has rather low stakes in the transatlantic security architecture, thus diminishing China’s motivation to seek any common ground.\(^{73}\) Within this subset of issues central to Euro-Atlantic security, therefore, there is an absence of even rhetorical alignment, and no meaningful trade space—at least in the foreseeable future.

We do note that it is theoretically possible to find cooperative approaches, and several prominent experts on U.S.- and Europe-Russia relations have advanced the notion of non-aligned status for countries whose membership in NATO and the EU most troubles Rus-

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72. For example, Vladimir Putin, “Заявление Владимира Путина о дополнительных шагах по дезскалации обстановки в Европе в условиях прекращения действия Договора о ракетах средней и меньшей дальности (РСМД) [Statement of Vladimir Putin on Additional Steps to Deescalate the Situation in Europe After the INF Treaty Ceases to Be in Effect],” October 26, 2020c; Government of Russia, 2020; Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, “Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces—First Deputy Minister of Defence General of the Army Valery Gerasimov Meets with Representatives of the Military Diplomatic Corps Accredited in Russia,” December 12, 2019c.

73. China’s remoteness from this issue area means that its willingness to negotiate or cooperate is not wholly relevant and is largely unknown. Only limited cooperation has occurred in the past, such as close consultation between NATO countries and China on Afghanistan and joint anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden (Benner and Wright, 2018).
The United States has left open the option of expanding NATO membership, though it remains an open question whether doing so would serve U.S. interests in strengthening collective defense or would actually weaken the alliance by placing additional burdens on the United States (and the alliance as a whole) if these new members would not meaningfully enhance the alliance’s overall capabilities and could elevate the risk of an Article 5 scenario being triggered.75 At present however, agreement on nonalignment or other cooperation with regard to the future of NATO should not be realistically expected.76

**Reducing Risks of Unintended Conflict**

More substantial space for bargaining or cooperation exists between the United States and Russia with regard to reducing risks of conflict—notably as a result of unintended escalation. As a team of American and Russian experts observe,

> Europe, Russia, and the United States have benefited from military-political stability and mutual transparency in Europe over the past decades and share an interest in preventing a new arms race. The recent intensification in Russian and Western military activities in sensitive areas along the lines of direct contact and the return to mutual deterrence postures increase the risk of unintended or inadvertent escalation and military confrontation.77

There is not universal agreement on the policies that would best address such risks, but at least some experts argue that finding cooperative avenues to revive or rebuild aspects of the CAC regime would serve enduring U.S. interests, as well as those of Russia and Europe.78 Measures to reduce the risk of such conflicts are necessary precisely because fundamental disagreements will continue to divide the United States and NATO from Russia. Reducing the risk of conflict through arms control, CSBMs, and deconfliction or crisis management measures could serve both sides’ interests—even as “Each will remain convinced that the other is to blame for the deterioration of the relationship.”79

As the discussion of the equities above suggests, there is a degree of *rhetorical alignment* between the United States and Russia in this regard, as well as reasons to believe that the

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74 Charap, Shapiro, et al., 2019; for more modest steps toward cooperation that do not require a full-scale revision of the regional order, see also Ellehuus and Zagorski, 2019.

75 For further discussion of NATO expansion with regard to Ukraine (and Georgia), see Chapter Seven.

76 See, e.g., Charap, Shapiro, et al., 2019, p. 9.

77 Ellehuus and Zagorski, 2019.


79 Kubiak, 2019, p. 4.
rhetoric reflects a degree of genuine interest in avoiding inadvertent escalation of hostilities. Russian official documents declare a readiness to engage with the United States and NATO in the interests of strengthening security, albeit conditional on the extent to which Russian interests are accommodated. Below, we assess to what extent the rhetorical alignment at the general level corresponds to potential for cooperation at the more concrete level in a way that advances U.S. interests—namely, with regard to intermediate-range missiles, broader CAC and CSBMs, and less ambitious deconfliction or crisis management measures. With regard to each, we assess whether there is indication that Russia could be willing to cooperate.

Intermediate-Range Weapons

Notwithstanding the mutual recriminations characterizing the recent history of the INF Treaty, the United States and Russia may still retain a shared interest in limiting the risk of miscalculation and inadvertent escalation that could accompany intermediate-range missiles—even if a cooperative remedy to that risk may not ultimately be practically attainable. Recent RAND research finds, for example, that Russia and NATO members alike assess long-range precision-strike capabilities as salient potential triggers for unintentional conventional conflict in Europe. Numerous experts therefore argue that, even if U.S. withdrawal from the INF Treaty were justifiable because of Russia’s violations, the presence of such weapons in Europe would likely raise the risk of misperception and miscalculation. Indeed, intermediate-range missiles have precipitated crises in the early 1980s, including the Soviet Union’s mistaken conclusion that a NATO exercise was preparation for nuclear war—in the shadow of the deployment of Pershing II intermediate-range ballistic missiles and the Gryphon cruise missile to bases in West Germany. Because of the widespread concerns about the destabilizing potential of these weapons, the U.S. Congress has so far declined to appropriate funds to them, even though U.S. construction of such weapons is no longer constrained by the INF Treaty.

81 Charap et al., 2020 pp. 36–37.
82 For example, as one expert describes a post-INF future with both sides fielding formerly prohibited weapons now under development:

> All these weapons, when deployed, will share one trait: relatively short flight times (about 7 minutes compared to around 35 minutes for intercontinental and submarine-launched ballistic missiles, depending on the launch positions) and somewhat concealed road-mobile launchers. No matter what official missions are assigned to them, their existence in the region would make adversaries extremely nervous and prone to miscalculations, especially in times of crises. (Dmitry Stefanovich, “How to Address the Russian Post-INF Initiatives,” European Leadership Network, January 20, 2020)


In this regard, Russia has shown some willingness to negotiate and potentially to cooperate. Although the tone of Russian official statements on U.S. withdrawal is strident, Russia persistently maintains a readiness for dialogue. Putin has publicly proposed a first-use moratorium on deployment of intermediate-range missiles, stating that “Russia will not deploy intermediate-range or shorter-range weapons, if we develop weapons of this kind—neither in Europe nor anywhere else until U.S. weapons of this kind are deployed to the corresponding regions of the world.” This cooperative proposal is coupled with threats of targeting the United States with its own missiles, should the United States choose to deploy in Europe, in effect threatening higher chances of misperceptions and conflict. Moscow’s moratorium proposal has been consistently repeated by various Russian officials, and a written proposal has been made to NATO and other states to this effect. Russia’s initial proposal, however, excluded the prospect of addressing the 9M729 missile system, which the United States identified as violative of the INF Treaty. The proposal was widely perceived to be one-sided and purely symbolic, intended to bolster Russian messaging that the United States is to blame for the demise of the INF regime; NATO has therefore dismissed the Russian proposal as “not credible.” However, Russia’s second articulation of the proposal signals that it may be more amenable to negotiation. In an October 2020 statement, the Kremlin declared readiness to end the deployment of the 9M729 missile in Kaliningrad, Russia’s western exclave in Europe. At the same time, the Kremlin raised the need to address its own reciprocal concerns about the potential for the United States’ Aegis Ashore Mk-41 systems to be used in offensive modes, through mutual inspections.

There are distinct doubts as to whether taking up this proposal as a basis for negotiations would advance U.S. interests. First, the United States has been unwilling to compromise with

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85 For example, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Comment by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the U.S. Report on Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments (ACNPD),” September 20, 2019c.
88 For example, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2020b.
90 Russia consistently maintains that it is not in violation. See interview with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov in Yelena Chernenko, “США для себя уже все решили [The U.S. Have Decided Everything for Themselves],” Kommersant, December 19, 2018a.
92 Putin, 2020c.
93 Putin, 2020c.
Broader Euro-Atlantic Security

regard to the Mk-41 launchers in the past.\textsuperscript{94} Second, nondeployment of the 9M729 missiles in Kaliningrad alone does not sufficiently address U.S. or NATO concerns. Third, Russia’s history of noncompliance with the INF Treaty, and other arms control agreements, might mean that Russia’s repeated overtures are continuing to seek advantage at the expense of the United States and its allies. Nonetheless, whether a deployment moratorium might preserve some of the advantages of the former INF Treaty for the United States and its allies without the drawbacks that led to its demise is at least an open question. Notably, limits on land-based missiles of this range are commonly thought to favor the United States, owing to its superiority in air and sea launch platforms for such missiles.\textsuperscript{95} For this reason, some experts have argued that the development and fielding of land-based intermediate-range missiles is militarily unnecessary, and thus warrant an engagement with Russia on the issue.\textsuperscript{96} Moreover, with a Europe-focused arrangement on intermediate-range weapons, the United States could get the benefit of a mutual limit on deployment in Europe while retaining the ability to develop and deploy such missiles in other theaters.\textsuperscript{97} Other prominent Russian and Western experts and officials also express the opinion that the proposal is at the very least worth considering and entering into dialogue on.\textsuperscript{98} An American arms control expert observed that without entering into negotiations on the issue, the United States will never find out whether cooperation on its terms can be had.\textsuperscript{99} At the very least, as prominent Russia experts Eugene Rumer, Dmitry Trenin, and Andrew Weiss argue, the United States could benefit from seeking a dialogue to clarify the positions of the respective sides.\textsuperscript{100} U.S. arms control experts have offered thoughts for what a viable compromise might contain—which appears less far-fetched in view of Mos-


\textsuperscript{96} For example, Countryman and Reif, 2019. To be sure, there is not a clear consensus among U.S. officials or experts on whether mutual limitations on INF missiles in Europe would advance US interests, with much of the doubts about this appears to stem from a suspicion that Russia’s behavior is largely unaffected by any agreements and that the United States will be the sole complying party. See, e.g., Esther Owens, “Trump Is Right About the INF,” \textit{Foreign Policy}, October 24, 2018; and Cohn et al., 2019.

\textsuperscript{97} See Dobbins et al., 2019, pp. 243–244.

\textsuperscript{98} This includes former NATO Deputy Secretary-General Rose Gottemoeller (Stefanovich, 2020; interview with U.S. expert, phone, May 1, 2020; Countryman and Reif, 2019).

\textsuperscript{99} Interview with U.S. expert, phone, May 1, 2020.

Assessing the Prospects for Great Power Cooperation in Europe and the Middle East

cow’s October 2020 position. And as Rose Gottemoeller, former U.S. Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, observes, the risk of future noncompliance with agreements is not a decisive reason not to negotiate, but is rather an argument for thorough monitoring of compliance.

Conventional Arms Control and Confidence- and Security-Building Measures
There is further potential trade space for limiting the risk of unintended conflict, even if neither side embraces each of the traditional pillars of the withering CAC and associated CSBM regime. Evidence for Russia’s willingness to negotiate or cooperate in this regard is mixed. And assessing Russia’s willingness to cooperate on these aspects of the security architecture is complicated by the question of what particular agreement or forum can serve as a basis for cooperation. Most, if not all, of the traditional pillars of European CAC are not very promising candidates for cooperation. As noted, reviving the CFE itself is likely outside the viable trade space in light of Russia’s rejection of the treaty. The Adapted CFE and further CFE talks failed because of Russia’s military presence in Georgia and Moldova without the latter’s consent, violating CFE principles. Moreover, as expert analysis suggests, the CFE approach to arms control no longer corresponds to the changed security environment on the continent. Similarly, pursuing transparency or other confidence-building measures through the Open Skies Treaty is likely implausible, in view of the recent U.S. withdrawal.

In contrast to the CFE and Open Skies Treaty, there is a degree of rhetorical alignment between the United States and Russia on updating the Vienna Document, and Russia has shown some willingness to negotiate on this front. Modernizing the Vienna Document could help increase transparency and mitigate potential misperception related to Russian exercises near NATO territory (or vice versa). Pursuing cooperation on modernizing the Vienna Document could also help bolster the CAC regime, as changes to the document could help “prevent rapid and covert concentrations of forces capable of conducting offensive cross-

101 For example, Countryman and Reif argue that because “the United States and Russia dispute the range of [Russia’s] missile, they could agree to bar deployments west of the Ural Mountains,” in exchange for allaying “Russian concerns that the United States could place offensive missiles in the Mk-41 missile-defense interceptor launchers currently deployed in Romania and that will soon be deployed in Poland as part of the European Phased Adaptive Approach.” 2019.


103 Charap et al., 2020. Indeed, snap exercises can be a major source of unintentional escalation; these exercises tend to put both sides on high alert, particularly since Russia has previously used these type of exercises to facilitate military operations against Ukraine (either by distracting from ongoing operations or helping preposition equipment and troops). See, e.g., Johan Norberg, “The Use of Russia’s Military in the Crimean Crisis,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 13, 2014.
border operations in sensitive areas along the NATO-Russia border.” Indeed, some experts have contended that “increasing the transparency and predictability of military activities in the OSCE area by closing the loopholes in the Vienna Document would increase trust and hard arms control.”

Prior to 2014, Russia made numerous proposals to update the Vienna Document; more recently, Moscow claims that it has been, and continues to be, ready to go beyond the letter of the Vienna Document with regard to notification of OSCE about military exercises below the stipulated threshold. Despite disagreements surrounding the Vienna Document, it has remained operational throughout the turbulent post-2014 period, and some U.S. and Russian experts assess that it is working decently in spite of shortcomings.

However, evidence of Russia’s willingness to negotiate and ultimately cooperate on this agreement is decidedly mixed. For one thing, even if Russia is complying with the letter of the Vienna Document, it violates its spirit. For example, the Vienna Document requires states to notify each other in advance about military exercises that exceed certain thresholds in terms of the number of troops (approximately 13,000) involved, and to allow observation of such exercises. The United States and NATO have accused Russia of exploiting the wording of these stipulations by “consistently report[ing] the numbers of troops involved in its exercises to be just shy of those thresholds, only for Russian officials to later state that the exercises were far larger than declared.” And Russia has so far been unresponsive to U.S. and NATO proposals to lower the thresholds for notification and observation of snap exercises. Russia has blocked the 2016 reissuance of the Vienna Document and has since rejected a 2019 German OSCE proposal for modernizing it. Generally, Russia has linked revisions to the Vienna Document to broader CAC issues in Europe, and to Russia’s grievances about

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106 Ellehuus and Zagorski, 2019.
107 Ellehuus and Zagorski, 2019.
108 OSCE, Forum for Security Co-operation, 2019b, p. 5. It should be noted that Russia’s claims to go beyond the Vienna Document requirements are consistent with U.S. and European complaints of Russian violations of the spirit and/or the letter of the Vienna Document on other occasions.
109 See Shakirov, 2019a, observing that the Vienna Document could be a sort of a substitute for both the defunct CFE and the NATO-Russia Council. A U.S. conventional arms-control official assessed that “VD is working better than all the rest [of the CAC and CSBM pillars,] even with all of its issues” (interview, July 30, 2020).
the broader U.S. and NATO strategy toward Russia. As recent RAND work concludes, “CFE follow-on negotiations became entangled with other (seemingly intractable) political and political-military disputes between Russia and other states-parties,” and “modernization of [the Vienna Document] has become linked to those negotiations, and thus is hostage to the ongoing deadlock.”

The prospects for overcoming the deadlock in the immediate future are likely not very bright. However, in view of rhetorical alignment—and indeed, the alignment of U.S. and Russian interests in preventing unintended escalation or conflict outbreaks—as well as Russia’s mixed record, progress on this front at some point may become possible. As the U.S. delegation to the OSCE Forum for Security Cooperation declared, pertaining to the modernization of the Vienna Document, “We in the United States are not discouraged by reluctance by any of the 57 countries” and deem negotiations worthwhile in order to seize the moment “when the window of opportunity opens.”

Beyond the Vienna Document, expert analyses do point to other potential vehicles for cooperation through arms control and/or confidence-building through increased transparency. Most notably, the Russia-NATO Council remains a viable venue for negotiation and the resumption of regular military-to-military contacts, although it has not been a site of substantive engagement below the ambassadorial level since 2014. Resuming military-to-military contacts would increase transparency, and new risk-reduction measures outside existing agreements may be discussed and negotiated. Moreover, the NATO-Russia Founding Act, negotiated in 1997 to help improve relations between NATO and Russia, can serve as a kind of CAC. As Russian and Western experts point out, “The NATO-Russia Founding Act and Russia’s 1999 pledges can serve as an important point of departure for agreeing on new measures in order to prevent an arms race in Europe”: The provisions against “additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces” in the region by both sides remain in force, although Russia and the United States interpret the terms differently. There are, to be

113 Charap et al., 2020, p. 2; see also OSCE, 2019b; Anton Mazur, “Remarks by Anton Mazur, Head of the Russian Delegation at the Vienna Talks on Military Security and Arms Control at the Annual Security Review Conference,” Vienna, June 27, 2018.

114 OSCE, Forum for Security Co-operation, October 2019c.


117 Wolfgang Zellner, et al., Reducing the Risks of Conventional Deterrence in Europe Arms Control in the NATO-Russia Contact Zones, Vienna: OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions, 2018. For other arguments that the NATO-Russia Founding Act can serve as a basis for security cooperation with Russia, see Kimberly Martens, Reducing Tensions Between Russia and NATO, New York: Council on Foreign Relations, Council Special Report No. 79, March 2017; and Ellehuus and Zagorski, 2019. For Russia’s
sure, other mechanisms to reduce the risk of unintended conflict, consisting of more modest deconfliction, deescalation, or crisis-management measures. These we consider in connection with more regionally specific sources of risk (such as in the Baltic, Black, and Eastern Mediterranean Seas in the subsequent chapters).

Table 3.1 summarizes our assessment of the theoretically available cooperation space in terms of the stakes for the two U.S. competitors, the rhetorical alignment between each and the United States, and their willingness to cooperate.

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<th>TABLE 3.1</th>
<th>Interest in Cooperation on Euro-Atlantic Security</th>
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<td></td>
<td>China</td>
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<tr>
<td>How important is the issue area</td>
<td>Low</td>
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<tr>
<td>Space for cooperation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Rhetorical alignment</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demonstrated willingness to cooperate</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Obstacles**

Multiple obstacles complicate the paths from potential to actual cooperation on any of the avenues for reducing the risk of unintended conflict. First, a significant obstacle to any progress in this arena is a lack of **mutual trust** in each other’s intentions or proposals. A degree of mistrust is to be expected in conditions of strategic competition, but levels of distrust appear higher than they were during certain parts of the Cold War. The United States has repeatedly criticized Russia for noncompliance or for providing incomplete implementation of every treaty and agreement that constitutes the present-day CAC and CSBM regimes, as well as the INF Treaty.118 This has led the United States and NATO to discount the credibility of Russian proposals.119 Russia has also accused the United States of noncompliance with multiple treaties, including of long preparing for a withdrawal from the INF Treaty by producing prohibited weapons, thus validating Russia’s concerns while the INF Treaty was in force.120 This has led some experts to pessimistic conclusions that “the preconditions for initiating negotiations on arms control in the OSCE are not in place at this particular point in time.”121 Mistrust complicates even more routine deconfliction efforts: Russia’s track record of intentional

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118 See compilation of compliance reports and fact sheets provided by the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Arms Control, “The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty,” undated.


120 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2019c.

121 Engvall et al., 2018.
Assessing the Prospects for Great Power Cooperation in Europe and the Middle East

brinkmanship has contributed to the reluctance among U.S. decisionmakers and military to cooperate even in this relatively unambitious manner.122

Second, although reducing the risk of unintended U.S.- or NATO-Russia conflict is in the United States’ interest, the political will to engage in arms control or related CSBMs appears very low on the U.S. side, as of the end of 2020. The United States had pulled out of a number of treaties in this space in a short period of time—and turning around to negotiate replacements or new agreements, even if these are not formal treaties, would likely incur audience costs in the form of political backlash.

Third, for most continent-wide arrangements on CAC or CSBMs to be meaningful, multiple third parties must take part. And different members of the Euro-Atlantic community of states have different preferences on most avenues for cooperation. European states differ in their assessments of the risks of potential escalation that call for such cooperation, as well as the appropriate remedies.123 Some states see little point in negotiating new CAC agreements in view of Russia’s violations of existing ones, while others assess the need for such agreements as pressing.124 Different OSCE states harbor different views on the Vienna Document.125 As one expert analysis puts it, “The prospects are constrained by the sheer variety of states participating in the dialogue. Indeed, what are technical issues for some states will be existential ones for others, depending on size, geography, historical experiences and domestic politics.”126 Similarly, on Russia’s INF proposal, different states appear to have different positions.127 Third-party problems are particularly salient for this issue area because, given that it is security on the European continent that is most directly implicated, some U.S. officials believe that the United States should not be in the driver’s seat.128

Fourth, although the substantial erosion of the current CAC and CSBM regime in Europe increases risks of unintended conflict, it coexists with a perceived lack of urgency to solve these problems. This is especially the case at the tactical and operational levels. According to one U.S. Air Force officer, the risk of escalation from air space incidents is addressed routinely at the operational level with individual pilots, even without any overarching agree-

125 For example, see statements on the proposed modernization of the Vienna Document in OSCE, Forum for Security Co-operation, “928th Plenary Meeting of the Forum,” October 23, 2019a.
126 Engvall et al., 2018.
127 While NATO issued a formal statement that as long as Russia’s 9M729 weapon remains in existence, there will be no discussions, individual members of the alliance hold more nuanced positions. See Stepanovich, 2020.
ment, so the incentive to enter difficult negotiations to reduce such risks may be diminished.\textsuperscript{129} From the Russian side, the interest in arms control is now wholly dominated by the imminently expiring New START treaty (as of early 2021). Until the fate of that treaty is decided, Moscow is unlikely to view any other arms control, CSBM, or deconfliction issues as compelling focused attention.

Fifth, as we observed above, Russia views progress on CAC and CSBMs as closely linked to broader relations between the West and Russia—and to the intractable aspects of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture in particular. Moscow has repeatedly stated that discussing CAC in Europe is pointless until NATO and the United States drop their policy of “containment” or “deterrence” of Russia.\textsuperscript{130} As we noted above, this is also true about modernization of the Vienna Document, the most viable of the three historical agreements comprising European CAC and CSBM regime. Part of the linkage for Russia is also of conventional to nuclear arms control: As a U.S. official points out, any Russian representative at the negotiating table seeks to engage on the broad set of conventional and nuclear weapon systems, which is not reciprocated on the U.S. side.\textsuperscript{131} Moscow seeks to touch every arms control issue, and as experts Rachel Ellehuus and Andrei Zagorski conclude, “Moscow would give preference to hard arms control instead of security- and confidence-building measures, whereas the West wants to see a show of good faith before moving to a discussion on hard arms control.”\textsuperscript{132} In short, successful cooperation on arms control and CSBMs would likely require concessions from the United States and NATO on issues that are presently nonnegotiable. For example, experts and officials point out that Russians can certainly agree to a new CAC arrangement—but it would include provisions such as “a veto on NATO enlargement, especially in its immediate neighbourhood,” “an embargo on additional U.S. military bases, including U.S. missile defence (BMD),” or negotiations to revive the Anti–Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty.\textsuperscript{133}

Finally, legal constraints complicate the landscape. The FY 2015 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) disallows bilateral military-to-military cooperation between Russia and the United States until the Secretary of Defense certifies that Russia “has ceased its occupation of Ukrainian territory” and “aggressive activities.” These provisions have been renewed annually since, but the constraint is not absolute. The law was later amended to clarify that it does not limit military dialogue aimed at “reducing the risk of conflict”; moreover, the Secretary of Defense may determine that a “waiver is in the national security interest of the United States.” Notwithstanding these provisos, the law still poses a considerable constraint

\textsuperscript{129} Interview with U.S. Air Force officer, phone, June 26, 2020.

\textsuperscript{130} PIR Center, 2017; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2019c.

\textsuperscript{131} Interview with U.S. military official/conventional arms control expert, phone, July 30, 2020. For this reason, this official concludes that the chances of dialogue are very low, as “no one [from the U.S. side] at the table can answer all of the Russians’ questions.” See also OSCE, Forum for Security Co-operation, 2019b.

\textsuperscript{132} Ellehuus and Zagorski, 2019, p. 5.

\textsuperscript{133} Engvall et al., 2018; interview with U.S. military official/conventional arms control expert, phone, July 30, 2020.
on the space for cooperation. Furthermore, all “practical civilian and military cooperation” with Russia under the NATO-Russian Council has also been suspended as a result of Russia’s aggression toward Ukraine.

The obstacles make it clear that translating the theoretical space for cooperation into any actual successes is challenging and not very likely in the near term. However, not every obstacle is insuperable, and some aspects of this issue space may be more promising than others. In general, both audience cost and immediacy problems may be overcome with political will on both sides, and legal constraints may be accommodated to an extent. Moreover, as a U.S. arms control official suggested in an interview, political will on the U.S. side can create incentives for Russia to engage—through, for example, the U.S. exploitation of loopholes in agreements such as the Vienna Document that mirrors Russia’s tactics. To mitigate mutual distrust, at least with regard to arrangements on intermediate-range missiles, cooperative initiatives may begin with dialogue that is not aimed at a comprehensive solutions. As a trio of longtime American and Russian experts suggest, “If conducted in good faith, [such a dialogue] could clarify each side’s position and concerns and, potentially, lead to the development of a conceptual framework for resolving the dispute[s]” that preclude cooperation.

Issue linkages on the Russian side suggest that negotiating outside the historical pillars of the conventional-arms control and CSBM regime may be more likely to yield progress, with the possible exception of the Vienna Document. Third-party problems suggest that vehicles with fewer stakeholders may present more feasible options. For example, the NATO-Russia mechanisms, with 30 members, have fewer third parties than OSCE-based agreements (e.g., the Vienna Document has 55 signatories).

Second-Order Effects of Cooperation

Some possibilities for cooperation identified here may appear modest in their direct effects. But cooperation on this issue area also carries likely second-order effects, negative and positive, which should be taken into account.

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136 Interview, U.S. military official/conventional arms control expert, phone, July 30, 2020. The official observed that if the United States adopted some of the same practices that Russia employs—such as structuring military exercises to spread a large number of troops across multiple countries to avoid notification requirements, which violate the spirit if not the letter of the Vienna Document—Russia might more acutely feel the incentive to renegotiate the agreement.

137 Rumer, Trenin, and Weiss, 2018.

First, although there are no true wedge issues between Russia and China, China will pay close attention to what happens with regard to intermediate-range weapons. Washington and Moscow’s previous bilateral agreement to limit missile ranges eliminated that specific military threat to China at no cost, since China is not a party to the INF Treaty. Beijing has strongly condemned the U.S. withdrawal from the INF Treaty, implicitly siding with Moscow by blaming Washington for its collapse.\textsuperscript{139} Indeed, Beijing likely already assumes that U.S. deployment of intermediate-range missiles will be intended for Asia, especially because of explicit senior U.S. Department of Defense leadership statements to that effect.\textsuperscript{140} Beijing has declared that any U.S. deployments of INF-range missiles in Asia will be destabilizing, even as China has built its own counter-intervention strategy on exactly these missiles. The possibility of the United States and Russia reaching a bilateral agreement on deployments in Europe, rather than limiting the development of intermediate-range weapons more generally, will certainly not assuage China’s perceptions of threat. Moreover, a Europe-focused agreement will also leave Russia free to deploy its INF weapons in Asia, a prospect not lost on China.\textsuperscript{141} Although this might not be enough to drive a wedge into the China-Russia strategic partnership, it might introduce an additional point of tension, and at least avoid driving the two closer together.\textsuperscript{142}

Second, there is potential for positive externalities of cooperation within the trade space identified here for other, more core issues of broader Euro-Atlantic security, as well as issue areas addressed in other chapters and companion volumes. In general, successful bargaining and cooperation build some degree of trust and creates conditions more conducive to further cooperation. Measures aimed at managing risk of conflict in conditions of otherwise contentious relations are often offered as among the most plausible starting steps that might contribute to a more fertile ground for future cooperation.\textsuperscript{143} Both American and Russian experts have singled out negotiations pertaining to intermediate-range weapons as a crucial issue, with consequences for nuclear arms control more broadly and the broader relationship.\textsuperscript{144} Because the INF Treaty applied to both conventional and nuclear weapons, leaving it

\begin{footnotes}
\item[142] For an optimistic take on this opportunity for driving a wedge between China-Russia cooperation, see Franz-Stefan Gady, “INF Withdrawal: Bolton’s Tool to Shatter China-Russia Military Ties?” \textit{The Diplomat}, October 24, 2018.
\end{footnotes}
without replacement may “undercut the credibility of future discussions about arms control and strategic stability,” as Rumer puts it.\textsuperscript{145} Similarly, other analyses point out that progress on Ukraine in particular is tied to broader European security issues, and that even the “willingness to come to the table, acknowledging Russian concerns while also voicing their own, could send an important signal,” with the potential to “temper antagonistic rhetoric on all sides.”\textsuperscript{146}

U.S. participation in some agreements also creates a kind of a public good for its allies; by contrast, U.S. nonparticipation would create motivations for Russia to curtail cooperation not only with the United States but also its allies. For example, the U.S. exit from the Open Skies Treaty may have negative effects on its allies. The United States may not lose much from its withdrawal because, as opponents of the treaty argue, “Over the past thirty years, commercial satellites have developed capabilities, such as camera resolution, similar to or better than the equipment carried on Open Skies aircraft,” which “makes observation flights unnecessary and redundant.”\textsuperscript{147} Some U.S. allies, however, might value observation flights more because “few countries possess the sophisticated space-based reconnaissance capabilities that the United States and Russia have.”\textsuperscript{148} After U.S. withdrawal, as Putin indicated, Russia might itself withdraw or limit U.S. allies’ overflight rights further—because Russia believes they will be sharing intelligence with the United States, so the United States will get the benefit of the treaty regime without itself being subject to it.\textsuperscript{149} Thus, some U.S. allies, including Germany, France, and Britain, have disfavored U.S. withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty.\textsuperscript{150}

U.S. allies have expressed similar concerns about the demise of the INF Treaty. European states generally sided with the United States on withdrawal, but key allies such as the UK, France, and Germany expressed concern that the arms race in intermediate-range missiles that will ensue without some replacement for the INF Treaty will harm European security.\textsuperscript{151} French President Emmanuel Macron, for example, has been particularly blunt, observing that although it is the United States that has revoked the INF Treaty, “it’s our security which is at stake,” and that “the absence of dialogue with Russia” has made Europe less safe.\textsuperscript{152}

\textsuperscript{145} Rumer, 2020.


\textsuperscript{147} Steven Pifer, “Is This the End of the Open Skies Treaty?” Brookings Institution, March 9, 2020.

\textsuperscript{148} Pifer, 2020.

\textsuperscript{149} Government of Russia, 2020; Antonov, 2020.

\textsuperscript{150} Pifer, 2020.


Third, even modest cooperative steps are attended by drawbacks, as any arms control agreement comes at the cost of the ability to affect a rival’s decisionmaking through the development and deployment of certain capabilities. This might reduce the U.S. ability to deter Russian aggression, with the capabilities subject to some hypothetical limits. Differing views among members and partners of the Euro-Atlantic alliance also mean that some states—notably, those in Eastern Europe that perceive the threat of Russian aggression most immediately—will view particular agreements as detrimental to their security because they might reduce the cost of aggression to Russia. Similar trade-offs may attend CSBMs: The increased transparency that attends such measures may reduce chances of unintended escalation, but trades off advantages of concealment. This too may weaken U.S. and allied ability to deter Russian intentional aggression.

Conclusion

The potential cooperation with regard to Euro-Atlantic security broadly speaking is limited to Russia, owing to China’s relatively low stakes in the region and to the overlapping interests between the United States and Russia in preventing unintentional escalation to conflict. Even with regard to that limited issue area, almost no expert or official on either side expresses an abundance of optimism about cooperation. Cooperation based on the current pillars of the CAC and CSBM regime is particularly fraught and beset by obstacles.

Nonetheless, the potential for cooperation is not absent. Of the avenues for potential cooperation reviewed, obstacles appear least severe with regard to the Vienna Document (relative to the other two pillars of the traditional CAC regime), intermediate-range weapons, and a more speculative possibility of relying on less traditional vehicles such as the Russia-NATO Council or Russia-NATO Founding Act. In view of the stakes involved, our analysis suggests that even the relatively modest steps toward cooperation identified in this chapter would serve enduring U.S. interests in Euro-Atlantic security. Assessments are not uniform, but many U.S., European, and Russian voices warn about the magnitude of such risks in absence of any efforts “to prevent an incident from turning into unimaginable catastrophe.” Cooperation in this domain is most likely if it begins with relatively modest steps, which might create further openings down the line.

To be sure, we emphasize that either pursuing or forgoing any of the available avenues for cooperation would be attended by second-order effects, some of which we identify in this

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155 Browne et al., 2019.

156 Interview with U.S. military officer/former CFE inspector, phone, August 4, 2020.
chapter. A comprehensive assessment of whether the positive or the negative second-order effects dominate is beyond the scope of this analysis and will necessarily depend on precisely which cooperation possibilities are pursued and in what form. However, we do emphasize the need to assess and balance these considerations.
CHAPTER FOUR

Baltic Security

The Baltics have historically been a key arena of competition between Russia and the United States and its allies. The United States and its fellow NATO allies view potential Russian aggression and subversion as major threats to Baltic security. Threats to Baltic security are in effect threats to the alliance as a whole, as attacks on the Baltics could trigger Article 5 and prompt calls for NATO involvement. Subversion of the sort that would not trigger Article 5 also presents concerns, as it can destabilize U.S. allies. In addition to countering threats of intentional aggression, Baltic security also hinges on controlling the risks of unintended escalation. Because U.S. interests vis-à-vis the Baltics are usually defined in terms of deterring Russia (or defeating it in case of conflict), the trade space for any cooperative initiatives is necessarily narrow.

In this chapter, we first review the U.S., Chinese, and Russian equities or interests with regard to Baltic security, demonstrating that (1) unlike Russia’s and the United States’, China’s stakes in the issue area are low and (2) the United States has at least partial rhetorical alignment with Russia and to a lesser extent China. Next, we identify specific avenues of cooperation in the space where U.S. and Russia interests are aligned, consider the evidence that Russia is or could be willing to cooperate along these avenues, and identify obstacles to actualizing cooperation. Finally, we identify salient potential second-order effects of pursuing cooperation within the viable trade space.

\footnote{We recognize that the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia are three distinct states with their own interests, unique dynamics, and individual agency, but we consider them collectively throughout this chapter because U.S. and NATO objectives focus on the importance of preventing Russian aggression or gray zone activity in the Baltic region as a whole. Moreover, because discussion of U.S. interests and objectives pertaining to the Baltics is nearly always framed in policy documents in terms of the potential threat from Russia, the areas for potential cooperation with Russia are largely the same across the three Baltic states. We do not presume the Baltic states have the same exact view of the Russian threat and would be completely aligned on every measure, but the particular areas we focus on for potential cooperation would likely not be areas of strident disagreement among the three countries. As such, across all chapters, we do not conduct a systematic review of how the third-party countries involved in each suggested area of cooperation might react to these proposals.}
Understanding the Equities

U.S. Equities

The United States has weighty interests in protecting the security, stability, and Western orientation of NATO allies Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The three Baltic states are symbolically important allies for the United States, as they “represent something much bigger geopolitically: They are staunch defenders of economic freedom, liberal democracy, and human rights.”\(^2\) Indeed, since gaining their independence from the Soviet Union, the Baltic states have firmly aligned themselves with the West and are the only post-Soviet states that have joined both NATO and the EU. The relationship has deeper historical roots: The United States has never recognized the political annexation of the three states into the Soviet Union in 1940, strongly advocated their independence in 1991, and facilitated their accession to NATO and the EU in 2004.\(^3\) More recently, the Baltic states have also been important, if symbolic, allies in the War on Terror, contributing troops to support NATO-led missions in Afghanistan and participating in the Global Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State.\(^4\) Reflecting the importance of this relationship, the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate both have groups—the House Baltic Caucus and the Senate Baltic Freedom Caucus, respectively—dedicated to strengthening U.S.-Baltic relations.

Preventing aggression in the Baltics has emerged as a crucial U.S. foreign policy objective in recent years, driven in part by the trend of increasing Russian revanchism that came to international attention with the 2014 annexation of Crimea.\(^5\) Within the context of strategic competition, the United States has a clear interest in preventing an attack on the Baltic NATO members, and the ability to deter or otherwise prevent an attack on these states is thus directly linked to the credibility of the NATO alliance as a whole.\(^6\) Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are particularly vulnerable to possible Russian aggression because they all border...

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\(^4\) Mix, 2020, p. 12.


\(^6\) The ability to effectively deter Russian aggression—and, relatedly, to be prepared to win a conflict with Russia in the event that deterrence fails—are both cited in the NDS as key elements of the strategic competition with Russia, as they confer a military advantage upon the United States (NDS, 2018, p. 4). For reference, previous RAND work defines strategic competition as follows: “Competition in the international realm involves the attempt to gain advantage, often relative to others believed to pose a challenge or threat, through the self-interested pursuit of contested goods such as power, security, wealth, influence, and status” (Mazarr, Blake, et al., 2018, p. 5).
Russian territory, are largely dependent on Russian energy sources, and have limited military capabilities to defend themselves from a conventional military threat. Accordingly, the United States has sought to strengthen these capabilities and deter an attack against the Baltics, which could trigger Article 5 and obligate the United States and its NATO allies to come to the Baltics’ defense. This includes changes to U.S. and NATO force posture in the region and efforts to improve capabilities in air defense, intelligence, command and control, cybersecurity, and electronic warfare. The United States, along with several NATO allies, also maintains an “enhanced forward presence” (or “eFP”) along the Eastern Flank as part of NATO’s Operation Atlantic Resolve; the goal of these eFP units is “to deter Russian aggression and emphasize NATO’s commitment to collective defense by acting as a tripwire that ensures a response from the whole of the alliance in the event of a Russian attack.”

How best to advance the U.S. interests in deterring Russian aggression in this region is a contested question. There are divergent views as to the likelihood of Russian aggression, and as to how best to array troops and capabilities to reinforce deterrence in this theater. Some policymakers and scholars believe that current NATO force posture is adequate to deter Russia, arguing that Russia has little motivation to invade the Baltics and risk a conventional war with the United States and NATO. However, others contend that the possibility of Russia invading the Baltics cannot be dismissed given “Moscow’s aggressive foreign policy and pattern of military intervention along its borders, combined with the strategic vulnerability of NATO’s eastern allies, particularly the Baltic States.” There is a corresponding divide on the question of the most effective deterrent force posture in the Baltic theater:

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8 For example, Public Law 116-92, 2019, p. 464.
Some policymakers and scholars argue for permanent basing of U.S. troops in Poland and elsewhere on the eastern flank, whereas others view these moves as highly provocative.

Apart from the concern about intentional Russian military action, there is a considerable risk of unintended escalation. The risk stems from the geography of the region: Russia’s enclave of Kaliningrad is separated from Russia by the Baltic states, and U.S. and NATO forces are present near the Suwalki Gap, the land corridor connecting Kaliningrad to Russia’s ally Belarus and the only land corridor for NATO troops to reinforce the Baltics in the event of a conflict. Owing to the close proximity of NATO and Russian forces and assets in the region and heightened tensions in the region, the possibility for misinterpreted signals and unintentional escalation is not trivial. Given the high stakes involved if conflict were to break out between the United States and Russia in the Baltics, the United States has an interest in preventing such accidental escalation.

In addition to limiting the risk of armed conflict, the United States also seeks to limit Russian interference through gray zone activity, which may threaten internal stability and the Western orientation of the Baltic states. The Baltic states have been targets of Russia’s hostile influence operations, including “daily Russian strategic information operations and propaganda activities that are part of campaigns designed to undermine trust in their institutions, foment ethnic and social tensions, and erode confidence in NATO collective defense commitments.” EUCom statements indicate concern over such Russian attempts “to intimidate [the Baltic states], both politically and militarily,” noting that “Russia also tries to influence ethnic Russian populations, especially in Estonia and Latvia, and both countries remain...
mindful that in Crimea, Russia used these ethnic groups as a justification for intervention.”

In pursuit of its objectives of preventing aggression, interference, or accidental escalation in the Baltics, the United States has provided great deal of security assistance to and engaged in security cooperation with the Baltic states, both on a bilateral basis and through NATO.

**Chinese Equities**

The Baltics are of *low importance* to China, long considered by Beijing to be part of Russia’s de facto sphere of influence on its periphery. China’s direct interests in the Baltics relate mainly to facilitating trade through infrastructure with broader Europe and developing political relations to generate support for China’s rise on the international stage. Because stability is conducive to its economic interests, as in the case of broader Euro-Atlantic security, China is in *mixed alignment* with the United States.

China’s trade interest is mainly driven by the potential of Arctic shipping that would take Chinese goods through the Baltics to Europe, but also may include overland shipping through Russia. When Xi launched the BRI in 2013, he specifically referenced the Baltics as a transportation corridor for Chinese global trade, and there are indications that Beijing is starting to explore this more seriously under its grand BRI plan. The most recent senior Chinese official visit to the Baltics, Premier Li Keqiang’s visit to Latvia in 2016 for the 16+1 summit, included discussion on “transportation, logistics and infrastructure construction,” and in 2018 Li described it as an “important logistic hub.” There have been reports of Chi-

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18 Scaparrotti, 2019.

19 In 2017, for instance, the United States signed Defense Cooperation Agreements with Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and in 2019 it also signed Security Cooperation Roadmaps with these states. For more detail on security assistance, see U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, “U.S. Security Cooperation with the Baltic States,” June 11, 2020.

20 As one scholar recounted,

> In the late 1980s, when the Balts awakened to the possibility of regaining sovereignty, the PRC’s sympathy was firmly on the Soviet side. Fearful that the Baltic struggle for independence might spur on similar movements among ethnic minorities in China, the Chinese leadership backed Gorbachev’s efforts to reestablish central rule. The Baltic republics’ independence . . . came as a surprise and an inconvenience. (Czeslaw Tubilewicz, *Taiwan and Post-Communist Europe: Shopping for Allies*, New York: Routledge, 2007, p. 88)


23 These comments were for Latvia, but similar comments have been made regarding Estonia and Lithuania. For Latvia, see Hu Yongqi, “Premier Li: China Willing to Help Build Infrastructure Projects in Baltic Sea Area,” *China Daily*, November 5, 2016; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Li Keqiang Meets with Latvian Prime Minister Maris Kucinsks,” July 8, 2018c; For the others, see “Li Keqiang Meets with Prime Minister Taavi Roivas of Estonia,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of
nese interest and investment proposals for Rail Baltica, though nothing has formalized yet. 24 The economic component of the relationship is certainly the most talked about but in reality, economic ties are not at present vital to either side. 25 Similarly, Chinese foreign direct investment is very limited, representing less than 1 percent of the three countries’ total in 2018 at roughly $120 million total. 26 Although Chinese economic activities in the Baltics are not typically viewed as equivalent to Russia’s hostile influence efforts, they have met with opposition and concern by the United States and European countries, focused on “strategically motivated investment, massive state subsidies, forced technology transfer, and cyber-attacks and espionage.” 27 Politically, China has sought to cultivate pro-China politicians and ensure that the Baltic states follow Beijing’s propaganda line on core issues such as Tibet and Taiwan. 28 The main forum for engagement with the Baltics has been the so-called 17+1 framework, China’s initiative to expand its cooperation between 17 Central and Eastern European countries. The limited nature of the relationship is evident in the fact that only one Chinese leader, Jiang Zemin, has ever visited (in 2002), and the last senior Chinese official to do so was Li Keqiang in 2016 to Latvia to attend the annual then-16+1 dialogue, but he skipped visiting Estonia and Lithuania.

Without specific pressing interests at stake, Beijing’s interests and activities in the Baltics provide a useful window into the baseline agenda the CCP pursues around the world. These are well known but have come under the spotlight only recently in the Baltics through a combination of investigative reporting and government reports: influence operations through political lobbying and soft power organizations (Confucius Institutes), coercive diplomatic pressure on domestic issues (hosting Dalai Lama or supporting Taiwan), and pushing Chinese technology (Huawei 5G). 29 The Latvian and Estonian security services both called out...
Chinese activity along these lines in 2019 and 2020. These activities are intended to solidify (or rather, lock in) European support for China and enable it to shape (or rather, have veto power over) countries’ decisionmaking. For U.S.-China strategic competition, this means denying Washington the Baltics’ support for perceived opposition to Beijing’s rise.

Though the PRC has an interest in Baltic stability (as it does in stability in Europe more broadly), it has not taken a public stance on the issue. Rhetorically, China supports the Baltics’ integration into the EU and, at least in the past, into NATO. However, the Baltic region was not mentioned in China’s 2018 white paper on the European Union. And China’s military involvement with Russia, including its decision to join Russia for a joint naval exercise in the Baltic Sea in 2017, undermines earlier public messages of support for the Baltic states’ Western strategic orientation.

**Russian Equities**

By contrast with China, Russia’s stakes in the region are high. Russia no longer considers the Baltic states as within its sphere of influence alongside other former Soviet republics, and largely acquiesced to their accession to NATO in 2002–2004. However, the Baltic countries were part of the former Soviet empire, share a border with Russia, and host considerable

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ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking populations. Crucially, as noted above, Russia’s only land access to its exclave of Kaliningrad, the headquarters of the Russian Navy’s Baltic Sea Fleet, is through a narrow land corridor separating Lithuania from Poland (the Suwalki Gap), and its vulnerability has been of growing concern to Russia. Although many of Russia’s interests in the Baltics are adverse to those of the United States, the two states are in *mixed alignment* because of a shared interest in reducing the risk of unintended conflict.

Aspects of Russia’s interests in the Baltic states are mirror images of American objectives. Where the United States aims to prevent Russian aggression, Russia seeks to limit the perceived risk of NATO aggression against Russia, facilitated by U.S. and NATO capabilities in these neighboring countries. Where the United States aims to prevent or counter Russian hostile measures below threshold of conflict triggering Article 5, Russia seeks to use such measures in to retain influence, destabilize, and advance narratives favored by the Kremlin. Some other dimensions of Russia’s interests concerning the region are not mirror images of American objectives: notably, Moscow’s often-declared interests in protecting Russians in the Baltics and avoiding unintended outbreak of a military conflict with NATO.

Russia’s most important interest in the region is in preventing serious military threats from accumulating near its borders, which predominantly means the threat of NATO and U.S. military presence. Russia’s 2015 National Security Strategy calls NATO’s growing military potential and placement of its military infrastructure near Russian borders a threat to national security. Russia’s Military Doctrine identifies “military infrastructure of NATO members in proximity to the borders of the Russian Federation” and the deployment of foreign military forces in any country bordering Russia as top “military dangers.” Russian leaders and experts have made it consistently and abundantly clear that they view the U.S. and NATO buildup in the Baltics as provocative, and view the official reasons for the buildup as pretextual. To be sure, some expressed fears of NATO attacks on Russia are almost certainly exaggerations for messaging effects. Nonetheless, the perceptions of threat emanating from U.S. and NATO presence in the Baltics are genuine to Russia. Although Moscow does not harbor many illusions about NATO abandoning the Baltic states, its interests lie in reducing NATO’s militarization of the region and undermining NATO’s commitment to these members.

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35 Russia and Estonia have an unratified border treaty, with Estonia claiming that some of Russia’s territories belong to it (“Estonia Has No Territorial Claims to Russia—President,” Tass, February 24, 2020).

36 Zellner et al., 2018.

37 On the ambiguity of Russia’s interests in the region, see Kühn, 2018.

38 Government of Russia, 2010.


40 For example, Rojansky, 2017.
Moscow also consistently proclaims the goal of protecting Russians and Russian speakers "wherever they may be," as former President Dmitry Medvedev put it, including by promoting the Russian language and culture.\textsuperscript{41} The Russian populations in Latvia and Estonia are not insignificant, in view of the small size of the total populations. Russia’s “compatriot” policy was established to advance those goals, and a government agency, Rossotrudnichestvo, carries out that policy abroad, including in the Baltics. Some experts doubt that Russia’s declared objective to protect compatriots is an end in itself, and view it as instrumental to other ends—notably, to retain influence over states that have formally escaped Russia’s orbit.\textsuperscript{42} Whether instrumental or not, Russia consistently raises the issue, vehemently criticizes Baltic governments for violating the rights of their Russian speakers, and exerts multiple tools of influence to target Russian speakers.\textsuperscript{43}

Notwithstanding generally poor relations with the Baltic countries, Russia retains economic and business interests in the Baltics, owing to historical linkages. Historically, the Baltics served as transport routes of Russian products to Europe, and in the post–Cold War era they have served the same function for Western imports. Trade has declined since the early 2010s—in part because of the EU’s Ukraine-related sanctions and in part because of the Baltic states’ own efforts to diversify economic ties—and Russia itself has been working to decrease its reliance on the Baltic states.\textsuperscript{44} The Baltic states have been taking steps to reduce energy reliance on Russia, but Gazprom retains stakes in local gas companies.\textsuperscript{45} Nonetheless, Russia remains an important trade partner (more so for Latvia and Lithuania than Estonia) and has been a key provider of oil and natural gas to the region.\textsuperscript{46} And although steps are being taken to make Kaliningrad energy self-sufficient, Russia relies on Lithuania to supply Kaliningrad with power.\textsuperscript{47} Moreover, Russian business actors also have interests in Latvia and Estonia—infamously including corrupt interests (e.g., using the banking system for money laundering).\textsuperscript{48} Even with efforts to reduce mutual reliance, economic and business linkages

\textsuperscript{41} Dmitry Medvedev, “Interview Given by Dmitry Medvedev to Television Channels Channel One, Rossiya, NTV,” Kremlin, August 31, 2008.


\textsuperscript{43} For examples of such statements, see Anna Dolgov, “Russia Sees Need to Protect Russian Speakers in NATO Baltic States,” Moscow Times, September 16, 2014.

\textsuperscript{44} Emily Ferris, “Unplugging the Baltic States: Why Russia’s Economic Approach May Be Shifting,” Russia Matters, July 1, 2020.

\textsuperscript{45} Mix, 2020, pp. 17–18.


ensure that Russia has reason to seek influence over decisionmaking in Riga, Tallinn, and Vilnius.\textsuperscript{49}

Other Russian interests in the region cannot be reduced to security or economics, but may be described as \textit{symbolic}. Adjunct to its view of itself as a great power, Russia is invested in perpetuating certain narratives regarding its history and role in the world. The Baltic countries resist and contradict Russia’s version of World War II, in which Soviet Russia liberated the Baltic states from the Nazis, causing numerous quarrels between the Baltic states and Russia. Baltic resistance to Russian historical narratives also undercuts Russia’s contemporary claims to power and influence in the region, which are already eroded by the Baltic escape from Russia’s orbit. Russia is likewise invested in undermining the appeal of Western institutions, values, and culture: Fomenting turmoil or division in the Baltic region and painting Baltic societies in an unflattering light, as Russian hostile measures are assessed to do, is intended to reveal the weakness or hypocrisy of Western institutions. Turmoil within Baltic countries would send a message both to the West, with the intention of sowing doubt about the commitment of Western institutions to such states, and to the other former Soviet republics, warning them about the consequences of straying too far westward.\textsuperscript{50}

Russia’s stakes in the region—in particular, the interest in limiting or countering U.S. and NATO military presence in the Baltics—are thus reasonably high. There has been a debate in recent years as to whether Russia’s interests would be served by an outright attack on the Baltic states. Some American and European experts believe that the prospect is at least plausible because Russia has an interest in discrediting the robustness of NATO: Were Russia to test NATO’s collective-defense commitments—e.g., by acting swiftly and effect a \textit{fait accompli} before NATO could decide on and mobilize a response—the Baltic states are the most strategically vulnerable of the NATO members.\textsuperscript{51} However, recent RAND research concludes that the scenario is unlikely. For example, one analysis concludes that “There is little in the Russian public discourse to suggest that attacking the Baltic States would hold some strategic value,”\textsuperscript{52} and another concludes that such an attack “would not appear to come out of any

\textsuperscript{49} Conley, 2016.

\textsuperscript{50} For instance, Russian experts emphasize the economic damage to the Baltic countries from reorienting against Russia (e.g., Zverev and Mezhevich, 2016).

\textsuperscript{51} See, e.g., Ted Galen Carpenter, “Are the Baltic States Next?” \textit{National Interest}, March 24, 2014; Shlapak and Johnson, 2016, p. 3.

existing vein of Russian strategic thinking.” Many well-known Russian analysts agree. Importantly, Russia has not, to date, used or come close to using military force against a NATO member.

While Russia’s interests are not likely to be well served by a military attack on the Baltics, “measures short of war,” “hostile measures,” or “subversion” are certainly a part of advancing all of the aforementioned interests in the region and generally supporting Russia’s influence within Baltic countries. At the same time, Russia has an interest in avoiding unintended escalation that might draw it into direct military conflict with NATO as a result of dynamics in the Baltic region. Like many of their European and American counterparts, Russian officials point to the need for regular military-to-military communication as a prerequisite for deescalation of tensions and prevention of incidents. And Russian officials have consistently claimed that Russia is interested in lowering tensions and thus opportunities for misunderstandings over the Baltic air space. Although the full sincerity of its rhetorical positions are doubtful, Moscow understands very well that the balance of power is not in its favor. Just as it is unlikely that the Kremlin harbors serious intentions to advance its interests via intentional aggression against any of the Baltic states, the prospect of being inadvertently drawn into a military exchange with NATO countries is something Russian leaders seek to avoid.

Space for Cooperation

In our assessment, there is no space for cooperation with either China or Russia when it comes to the core U.S. security objectives in the Baltics. This is unsurprising in view of U.S. objectives of preventing Russian aggression and limiting Russia’s interference or influence activities. Although U.S. interests are not directly adverse to China’s, no cooperation with latter is likely because Beijing’s stakes in the Baltic region are low and focused on economic opportunities. Moreover, China would prefer to see U.S. and Western influence weakened in the Baltics, as

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53 Frederick et al., 2017, p. xiii. Other research agrees with this conclusion; see, for example, Christopher S. Chivvis, Raphael S. Cohen, Bryan Frederick, Daniel S. Hamilton, F. Stephen Larrabee, and Bonny Lin, NATO’s Northeastern Flank Emerging Opportunities for Engagement, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1467-AF, 2017; Kühn 2018.


56 “НАТО навязывает нам схему обеспечения безопасности времен холодной войны [NATO Is Imposing on Us a Scheme for Security Provision from the Cold War Era],” 2019.


58 See, e.g., Rojansky, 2017.
in Europe more broadly; therefore, China is likely to passively support Russian efforts in the region by contributing to anti-Western propaganda and gray zone activity of its own.

In contrast to China, both the United States and Russia consider the Baltics to be an area of high importance. And as with broader Euro-Atlantic security, we conclude that there is some trade space for cooperation with Russia stemming from the mutual interest in reducing the risks of unintended escalation, arising as a result of dynamics in this region—including the risks of potentially triggering collective defense under Article 5.\textsuperscript{59} We assess Russia’s willingness to cooperate in this regard to be at the medium level.

**Reducing Risks of Unintended Conflict**

The potential for escalation has grown over the past several years following the outbreak of conflict in Ukraine, as there has been a marked increase in military activity in the Baltic Sea and incursions into Baltic airspace on the part of Russia. Increased military activity includes military buildup by both sides—i.e., NATO’s eFP and Russia’s strengthening of its forces in the Western military district—and the scale of military exercises and increase in no-notice snap exercises by Russia.\textsuperscript{60} And it includes increased reconnaissance and patrol flights by both Russia and NATO members over the Baltic Sea (as well as the Black and Barents Seas).\textsuperscript{61} NATO members have consistently called out and documented Russian violations of the Baltic states’ airspace for years, which combined with the “complexity of the environments . . . increases the risks of miscalculation and unintended escalation,” in the assessment of the European Leadership Network (ELN).\textsuperscript{62} Even if the risks of serious escalation remain low in an absolute sense, the dangers are significant enough that constituencies on both sides take them seriously.\textsuperscript{63}

Given the overlapping interests in reducing these risks, there is potential trade space for cooperation along several related lines of effort between the United States and Russia. Notably, there is a theoretical possibility of pursuing CAC and CSBM measures on a subregional

\textsuperscript{59} There are other, more general areas in which the United States and Russia could theoretically cooperate, such as counterterrorism—specifically through intelligence sharing regarding any transnational threats or foreign fighter flows—or border management and policing—since both Russia and the United States have separate agreements with Frontex (the European Border and Coast Guard agency) focused on fighting transnational crime and threats. These issues do not manifest themselves strongly in the Baltics and are areas in which Russia and the United States have loosely cooperated, or at least not directly competed on, elsewhere in the world. Thus, we do not cover them in depth here.

\textsuperscript{60} See Charap et al., 2020, p. 23.


\textsuperscript{62} Frear, 2018, p. 1.

\textsuperscript{63} See, e.g., Ivan Timofeev, “Russia and NATO in the Baltic,” Russian International Affairs Council, December 2, 2016.
(rather than continent-wide) basis, and a more grounded possibility of developing deconfliction mechanisms to assist with escalation management.

Subregional Conventional Arms Control and Confidence- and Security-Building Measures

As we discuss in Chapter Three, the CAC regime and related CSBM measures have eroded significantly over the past decade or so. The potential for cooperating on updating and closing some of the loopholes in the Vienna Document discussed there would have particularly significant effects in the Baltics in view of military activities by Russia and NATO in close proximity in the region, in addition to promoting greater transparency and mitigating operational risk continent-wide. The obstacles to continent-wide CAC and CSBM measures however, have led some experts and international bodies to propose more narrowly tailored options limited to the Baltic region. For example, CFE-style provisions concerning limits on the presence of ground forces and enabling capabilities in the region might be beneficial to NATO as well as Russia—though constructing such provisions is no simple matter. European and Russian experts of the OSCE Network, an independent OSCE-affiliated Track II initiative, put forth a proposal to establish a “Baltic contact zone” composed of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Belarus, as well as parts of Germany and the Western Military District of Russia. Within this zone, “The permanent and temporary deployment of armed forces as well as the size and character of military exercises would be limited . . . [and] all measures would be subject to a strict transparency regime.” The network of experts further suggest building on the Vienna Document to create “a much stricter transparency regime for the contact zones than we now have.”

It is challenging to identify evidence of Russia’s willingness to cooperate in this regard: Russian officials have proposed confidence- or security-enhancing steps focused on the Baltic region in the past, such as decreasing military exercise activities or suspending these altogether in “sensitive contact zones” of the Baltic and Black Sea regions or during the coronavirus pandemic. Although subregional arms control or CSBM proposals have not been

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64 See, for instance, “Russia Holds Military Exercises in Baltic in Response to NATO,” Reuters, June 12, 2014.

65 Engvall et al., 2018, p. 37. For example, U.S. and European experts have noted that such proposed restrictions under such sub-regional arrangement would likely “favor Russia because of its short supply lines and should therefore be rejected in their current form, but there is ample scope to explore new measures for limiting the size of military activities” (Dick Zandee, The Future of Arms Control and Confidence-Building Regimes, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 28, 2019).

66 Zellner et al., 2018, p. 21.

67 Zellner et al., 2018.

68 Zellner et al., 2018, p. 23.

69 NATO appears to have doubted the sincerity or the meaningfulness of these proposals; nonetheless, such overtures should not be wholly ignored in evaluating Russia’s willingness to engage. See Igor Ivanko,
officially proposed or discussed to our knowledge, such measures should be considered to be at least theoretically located within the trade space for cooperation, if not very likely in the near term.

Deconfliction and Escalation Management Mechanisms
Despite the risks posed by Russia-NATO incidents in the air and on the seas, NATO does not currently have any communication channels that would allow for quick consultation and action between NATO and Russia in a crisis in the Baltics: The only mechanism for discussions of this variety has been meetings of the NATO-Russia Council, which are broad in nature, not geared toward responding to crises, and have grown even sparser following the Ukraine crisis. In this respect, the trade space for U.S.-Russia cooperation accommodates bolstering deconfliction and deescalation mechanisms. Potential cooperative steps to enhance airspace and waterways deconfliction include several possibilities, some of which have been discussed in Track II dialogues.

First, the United States could work with NATO to “re-establish military-to-military crisis communications channels with the Russian General Staff at the working level.” As U.S. Air Forces in Europe Commander General Jeffrey Harrigian has suggested, a “direct line of communication between NATO air commanders and their Russian counterparts could be helpful in de-escalating tensions, especially when Russians fly too close to NATO aircraft and ships.” At present, as Harrigian explained in 2019, an incident between Russia and NATO must be relayed through EUCOM, which would then decide whether to address the issue through NATO, the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, or other channels. There are, according to Harrigian, “few opportunities to personally talk to someone to de-escalate a situation.” Multiple experts have suggested that such a deconfliction channel could emulate the hotline established between CENTCOM and Russian forces in Syria—because “neither side [is willing to cease its military activities]” in the Baltic (as well as Black Sea) region, and “yet evidently


Kühn, 2018.


Kühn, 2018. As noted above, this kind of communication channel is consistent with the NDAA restrictions on military-to-military dialogue with Russia.


Tirpak, 2019.
not interested in an outright collision.” Although U.S.-Russia deconfliction efforts in Syria are not an unqualified success, they are viewed as reasonably successful by experts and have thus far proven effective in avoiding larger-scale escalation.

Second, cooperative initiatives can take the form of updating the “patchwork of bilateral agreements between NATO member states and Russia that aim to manage military-military encounters in international airspace and on the high seas.” In particular, the European Leadership Network has called for the need to revise these to “account [for] changing technology and operational methods,” and to include states that are currently uncovered by such agreements. Some NATO and European states have not participated in any agreements or mechanisms designed to control dangerous incidents: For example, many states have not published their principles of due regard, or the “national regulations detailing the expected behaviour of state aircraft when in close proximity to civilian aircraft.” Many NATO members have no agreements with Russia, and NATO itself has no multilateral agreements on preventing dangerous military incidents with Russia (or the Collective Security Treaty Organization).

Cooperation may be possible to fill these gaps. For example, the United States could facilitate the establishment of a NATO-Russia version of the U.S.-Russia Agreement on the Prevention of Incidents on and over the High Seas (INCSEA) and the Agreement on the Prevention of Dangerous Military Activities (DMA). The INCSEA and DMA are Cold War-era bilateral agreements “designed to regulate military forces operating in close proximity so as to reduce the risk of accidents and miscalculations.” These agreements also provide regular military-to-military communications channels. Some NATO members also have arrangements with Russia similar to the INCSEA, but Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Poland do not. Though U.S. naval experts broadly agree that the INCSEA—which was adopted in 1972 when Russia was still the Soviet Union—is valuable and necessary, they have called for updating the contents of the agreement in order to better reflect current capabilities on both sides and increase Russian buy-in and compliance with the document. Experts have pointed to

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75 Rumer Trenin, and Weiss, 2018.
76 Interview with U.S. military officer/former CFE inspector, August 4, 2020; Weiss and Ng, 2019; Rumer, Trenin, and Weiss, 2018.
77 Frear, 2018, p. 6.
78 Frear, 2018, p. 6.
79 Frear, 2018, p. 2.
81 Kühn, 2018.
82 Kühn, 2018.
83 Kühn, 2018.
the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea—which addresses incidents in the Asian Pacific and includes both the United States and Russia as signatories—as a potential model for the updated INCSEA. The DMA has been relatively underutilized, with the U.S.-Russia consultation commission reportedly only convening twice since the adoption of the agreement in 1989; however, it remains an available basis for broadening and updating deconfliction efforts, or a model for similar provisions to govern military behavior in border or other sensitive areas. Some experts believe the best course of action would be to pursue an agreement between NATO as a whole and Russia rather than individual bilateral agreements between the regional actors and Russia, whereas other experts have suggested that the United States should primarily focus on encouraging the Baltic states and Poland to “conclude individual incident prevention mechanisms with Moscow.” Another argument for opting for a broader NATO-Russia agreement on deconfliction mechanisms specific to the air domain is that there are several NATO members—not including the Baltic states themselves—that deploy pilots and aircraft on a rotational basis to conduct the Baltic Air Policing mission. Specific format aside, it is clear that pursuing expanded or additional deconfliction arrangements would be prudent and beneficial for both the United States and Russia.

Russia has previously demonstrated a mixed willingness to negotiate and cooperate in the deconfliction space, beyond its rhetorical declarations noted above. For example, as part of voluntary military transparency to reduce civil-military incidents, Russia is among the ten European states that have published principles of due regard. The history of the U.S.-Russia INCSEA provides some evidence of past and continuing cooperation: U.S.-Russia INCSEA review meetings have been held on an annual basis, and deconfliction through INCSEA channels appears to have been fairly successful to date, with dangerous encounters between the two militaries addressed through the communication and redress channels. Russia has reportedly made proposals to reduce dangerous incidents in the Baltics: For example, at a 2016 NATO-Russia Council meeting, Russian diplomats proposed a plan to require Russian and all other planes flying over the Baltic Sea to switch on their transponders, which enables aviation authorities to track flights. This plan was reportedly adopted as of 2017, although the degree of Russian compliance is in some dispute, with Estonian officials, for example,
denying that Russian military aircraft turn their transponders on more often. Russian officials have also made proposals to decrease or suspend exercises in sensitive contact zones. During the COVID-19 crisis, Russia decided to suspend all exercises in its Western military district and along NATO borders in response to NATO canceling a large-scale exercise of its own because of pandemic-related concerns. The COVID-19 crisis represents an extreme circumstance, but it does suggest that there may be room in future to negotiate on risk management measures.

Some of Russia’s statements and proposals certainly have elements of propaganda in service of Russia’s narrative that portrays itself as cooperative and NATO as less so. Moreover, Russia has also demonstrated a willingness to violate some agreed-upon norms and engage in intentional brinksmanship in the Baltic region, such as using aggressive intercepts as a form of area denial. This has justifiably made the United States and its allies skeptical about Moscow’s interest in deconfliction. Russia’s brinksmanship vis-à-vis NATO in the Baltic air space since the Ukraine crisis may suggest that Russia is intentionally courting conflict. However, that is likely not the best explanation for Russian behavior. There is no indication that Russia is seriously seeking to create a pretext for its own overt military actions (or a military response from NATO) with its violations of the Baltics’ airspace. Moscow understands very well that the balance of power is not in its favor. It is much more likely that, as several experts conclude, brinksmanship over past several years was intended to demonstrate to NATO the consequences of supporting troublesome members such as the Baltic states or Poland—via what RAND’s Samuel Charap describes as “compellence” and “coercive bargaining.”

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93 “НАТО навязывает нам схему обеспечения безопасности времен холодной войны [NATO Is Imposing on Us a Scheme for Security Provision from the Cold War Era],” 2019; Ivanko, 2020; “На поле штаммы грохотали: В НАТО не расслышали предложения России отказаться от военных учений на время пандемии [NATO Did Not Hear Russian Proposal to Abstain from Exercises During the Pandemic],” 2020.


96 See, e.g., Rojansky, 2017.

Russia’s own actions raise the probability of escalation, it is nonetheless highly probable that Russia does not wish to become embroiled in a direct military confrontation with NATO.\textsuperscript{98}

Table 4.1 summarizes our assessment of the theoretically available cooperation space in terms of the stakes for the two U.S. competitors, the rhetorical alignment between each and the United States, and their willingness to cooperate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.1</th>
<th>Interest in Cooperation on Baltic Security</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>China</td>
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<tr>
<td>How important is the issue area</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space for cooperation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical alignment</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demonstrated willingness to cooperate</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Obstacles**

Multiple obstacles, many of which echo those facing broader Euro-Atlantic security, also complicate cooperative opportunities in the Baltics.

First, progress in implementing additional CSBMs or CAC agreements is obstructed by mutual distrust.\textsuperscript{99} There is a particular wariness surrounding the Baltic theater. The United States is postured as though Russia is intent on invading the Baltics. And Russia, concerned by the ever-expanding NATO presence in the Baltics, reinforces U.S. and NATO perceptions: Russia repeatedly engages in brinkmanship in the Baltic airspace, and it has demonstrated noncompliance with or at least evasion of the spirit of the Open Skies Treaty in the Baltic region (especially over or in the vicinity of Kaliningrad). Accordingly, NATO has thus far dismissed any Russian initiatives.\textsuperscript{100} Given these dynamics, the prospects of good-faith, meaningful negotiations are not overwhelming. Although the deconfliction mechanisms discussed above may be more viable than substantive steps in the CAC or CSBM space, they are still subject to these complicating factors.

\textsuperscript{98} A number of prominent Western and Russian expert analysts converge on this conclusion. For example, Engvall et al., 2018, p. 38; Kühn, 2018, p. 15; Frear, 2018, p. 5; Timofeev, 2016; Zeverev and Mezhevich, 2016, p. 20.


\textsuperscript{100} Russian officials claim that they have been stonewalled by NATO in response to proposals to curtail exercises, while NATO denies receiving such proposals (Ivanko, 2020; “На поле штаммы грохотали: В НАТО не расслышали предложения России отказаться от военных учений на время пандемии [NATO Did Not Hear Russian Proposal to Abstain from Exercises During the Pandemic],” 2020).
Second, cooperation over the Baltics is further complicated by the involvement of a multiplicity of third-party stakeholders with divergent interests and perceptions. The Baltic states view Russian aggression on their borders, airspace, and in the Baltic Sea as an existential threat. Poland and other Eastern Flank states also view Russia as a severe or even existential threat. The United States and NATO more broadly, while recognizing the threat that Russia poses to its neighbors in the region, do not share the same level of urgency. Therefore, while the United States may be willing to bargain with Russia on deconfliction mechanisms with the goal of reducing overall risk in the area, any sort of cooperation with Russia may cause the Baltic states and others in the region to feel less secure. This dynamic is reflected in the Baltics’ and Poland’s desire to increase NATO presence in the region as much as possible, with the idea that the stronger the force is in the region, the less likely Russia is to invade; on the flip side, NATO as a whole is concerned that a permanent presence or an increased presence would provoke further escalation with Russia in the region. In short, it is difficult to arrive at a consensus among the various actors on the best course of action and acceptable level of cooperation with Russia, given the different perceptions of threat and different equities involved.\footnote{As one U.S. Air Force officer observed, the United States and Russia may also differ on their preferences for which third parties should be included in an arrangement: The United States may prefer NATO-wide agreements, but Russia may prefer to enter into more bilateral agreements so it can negotiate more favorable terms with relatively weaker counterparts (interview with U.S. Air Force officer, phone, June 26, 2020).}

Third, despite the increasing potential for unintentional escalation in the Baltics, there is a perceived lack of urgency to address these issues on both the U.S. and Russian sides. Russia currently benefits from the military imbalance in the region in its favor, and is thus unlikely to seek cooperation with the United States on CAC measures in the Baltics, unless it believes it can extract concessions from the United States and NATO on their force posture and capabilities on the broader European continent (where the balance of forces favors the United States and NATO). As noted with respect to continent-wide risk-reduction measures, lack of urgency is also felt at the operational levels, as de facto deconfliction already happens routinely without explicit agreements.\footnote{Interview with U.S. Air Force officer, phone, June 26, 2020.} As one U.S. official observed, although the Syria deconfliction model may be adapted to the European setting, there is no comparably intense motivation to set up such a channel in absence of actual combat.\footnote{Interview with U.S. military officer/former CFE inspector, phone, August 4, 2020.}

Fourth, as explained in Chapter Three, Russia has linked negotiations on traditional instruments for CAC and CSBMs to the broader state of political and military relations between the West and Russia. Although proposals limited to the subregional level have not been the focus of official attention, it is likely that it would be difficult to make progress in one specific geographic region or on one issue without addressing issues in the broader relationship.
Finally, the same legal constraints previously noted—the FY15 NDAA limitation on bilateral military-to-military cooperation between Russia and the United States—may complicate efforts.

Second-Order Effects of Cooperation

Apart from their direct effects, the potential avenues for cooperation with Russia on this issue area could be expected to have some second-order effects that echo those addressed in the context of broader Euro-Atlantic security. First, since China’s interests in the Baltics are very cursory and China has low stakes in the region, U.S. efforts to cooperate with Russia in the Baltics likely would have little effect on either country’s relationships with China. Second, cooperation with Russia in the Baltics, even if limited in nature, could help boost the chances of successful negotiations on more fraught issues and with respect to other parts of Europe with broadly similar risks (i.e., Black Sea, Eastern Mediterranean Sea). Any such positive externalities, however, would have to be balanced against the potential negatives. Notably, the difference in threat perceptions among U.S. allies and partners would cause some states to view any agreements between the United States and Russia as being detrimental to their security. The Baltic countries view Russia as a much more immediate, and greater, threat and prefer a heavier thumb on the deterrence side of the scale; thus, the United States risks creating a perception of weakening support for these countries even with regard to the more modest cooperative steps.

Conclusion

The trade space for cooperation in the Baltics is narrow, stemming entirely from the United States and Russia’s mutual interests in avoiding unintended hostilities and escalation. China has virtually no role to play in determining the trade space or affecting the net assessment of whether particular cooperation avenues advance U.S. interests on balance. Of the two sets of measures within the trade space we identified, deconfliction and deescalation measures appear more plausible than subregional CAC agreements or CSBMs modeled on the historical broader European agreements (i.e., CFE, the Vienna Document). Although obstacles significantly complicate progress even on the least ambitious of these measures, they are not insuperable: Obstacles such as distrust and urgency deficits, as well as issue linkages, may be overcome with sufficient political will on both sides. Moreover, the multiplicity of parties with stakes in the issue need not translate into a large set of veto players: For many deconfliction measures, bilateral U.S.-Russia arrangements and arrangements with a handful of states whose planes and ships Russia is most likely to encounter in the European space would be

104 See, e.g., Timofeev, 2016.
most consequential.\textsuperscript{105} In sum, even if modest, the possibilities for cooperation within this issue area should not be overlooked. U.S. decisionmakers must take into account both positive and negative second-order effects—and in particular, seek to allay the concerns of the Baltic states themselves as well as other allies less amenable to cooperative approaches to risk reduction.

\textsuperscript{105} Interview with U.S. Air Force officer, phone, June 26, 2020.
Balkan Security and Strategic Orientation

The Balkans as a region faces myriad sources of instability and security challenges and has emerged as a theater where multiple countries are vying for power and influence. While the set of issues material to determining Balkan stability and security is large and diverse, this chapter focuses on salient challenges, including the unresolved legacies of the Yugoslav wars—notably, the future of relations between Serbia and Kosovo—and the integration of Balkan countries into NATO and the EU. At present, the region contains NATO and non-NATO countries as well as EU and non-EU members; thus, although official pronouncements identify the Balkans as important to U.S. interests and the United States conducts many bilateral engagements with NATO members in the region, the United States has historically deferred to European powers to take the lead on confronting Balkan security and political challenges. However, the United States may soon be assuming a more active role with regard to some of these issues, as we elaborate on below. The Balkans have also emerged as an arena for competition with both Russia and China, with these powers generally assessed as having influence out of proportion to their material contributions to the region.

In this chapter, we first review the U.S., Chinese, and Russian equities or interests with regard to Balkan security and the strategic orientation of Balkan countries—focusing on Serbia and Kosovo since they are the two states where U.S., Russian, and Chinese equities most directly intersect. Next, we identify specific avenues of cooperation in the narrow space where U.S. and Russian interests are aligned, consider the evidence that Russia is or could be willing to cooperate along these avenues, and identify obstacles to actualizing cooperation. Finally, we identify salient potential second-order effects of pursuing cooperation within the viable trade space.

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1 For purposes of this report, we view the Balkans as being composed of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, and Serbia.

Understanding the Equities

U.S. Equities

Since the end of the Cold War, stabilizing the Balkans has figured prominently in the vision of a Europe “whole and free . . . and at peace with itself.” U.S. strategic and policy documents have consistently acknowledged the security challenges stemming from regional dynamics. Broadly speaking, U.S. interests in the region revolve around the related goals of constraining or resolving potentially destabilizing conflicts and integrating the region into Western institutions. Moreover, although many threats to regional stability and integration into Western institutions are internally driven, Russian malign influence exploits and magnifies these threats, which gives the U.S. and NATO allies an interest in countering Russian influence in the region. Russian malign influence has been of greater concern, but the United States has also expressed concerned about Chinese involvement in the region.6

The United States has upheld a state of national emergency concerning the Western Balkans since 2001: A 2021 continuation of Executive Order 13219 (Blocking Property of Persons Who Threaten International Stabilization Efforts in the Western Balkans, 2001) calls out “extremist violence” and obstructions of regional conflict resolution agreements (namely, the Dayton Accords in Bosnia, United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1244 in Kosovo, and the Ohrid Framework Agreement of 2001 relating to the Republic of North Macedonia) as “hostile to United States interests and . . . [an] extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States.” Despite the rhetorical recognition of threats, the United States has in recent years had “little sustained high-level engagement [with the Balkans] and relied on the Europeans to advance the region.”8 In this supporting role, U.S. engagement has primarily consisted of encouraging membership of select states into NATO and the EU; championing states’ rights to territorial integrity; promoting democracy, good governance, and adherence to other Western values; and strengthening bilateral security cooperation with individual states. Despite its less active role, the United States has

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7 Joseph R. Biden, Jr., “Letter to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President of the Senate on the Continuation of the National Emergency with Respect to the Western Balkans,” June 8, 2021; see also John Vandiver, “EUCOM Chief: ‘We Are Not Keeping Pace’ with Russia in Balkans, Arctic,” Stars and Stripes, March 8, 2018.
had an enduring interest in promoting regional stability in the Balkans—in part to avoid entanglement in a potential armed conflict between NATO and non-NATO states—and the region's integration into Western institutions.\(^9\)

Balkan security over the coming decade hinges on a range of factors, including Greece–North Macedonia relations, continued Serbia–Kosovo gridlock, escalating tensions between Serbia and Montenegro over the Orthodox Church,\(^10\) and Bosnia's ethnoreligious divisions, all of which maybe destabilized by Russia's increasing interference designed to divide and undermine the West. Although the U.S. interest in regional security encompasses other conflicts and sources of tensions, here we focus on the most high-profile of these conflicts: the ongoing Serbia–Kosovo conflict. The Serbia–Kosovo conflict is a persisting threat to regional stability—in part because the NATO Mission in Kosovo, known as Kosovo Force (KFOR), is still active. An escalation in tensions between one of the NATO states in the region and Serbia, a non-NATO state, raises the possibility of direct NATO involvement in a regional conflict.\(^11\) If such escalation prompted a direct attack or spillover of the conflict into a NATO member state, the United States may be called on to defend its allies under Article 5. The conflict is also closely linked to Serbia's prospects of joining the EU, therefore implicating the other U.S. interest in integrating the Balkans into NATO and the EU; currently, Serbia–Kosovo gridlock is the primary obstacle to both countries gaining EU membership and fully integrating into Euro-Atlantic institutions.

In contrast to its relative retrenchment from the rest of the region, the United States has remained consistently engaged in Kosovo since the 1990s conflict. Kosovo continues to be

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9 To date, the Balkans as a whole have made little headway on integration into the EU; so far, only Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia have been granted EU membership, and most of the Western Balkans have not even begun accession negotiations. Albania, the Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia are official candidates, but progress has been slow because of persisting issues with rule of law, corruption, and freedom of expression and the media. (See European Commission, “European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement: Montenegro,” webpage, undated-b; Velina Lilyanova, “Montenegro: A Lead Candidate for EU Accession,” European Parliamentary Research Service, September 2018; European Parliament, “Fact Sheets on the European Union: The Western Balkans,” webpage, undated-a.)

10 The ongoing dispute between Montenegro and Serbia over legislation (the law on Religious Freedom) that effectively strips the right of property ownership from the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro has the potential to spark further instability and violence between Serbia and Montenegro. This dispute is unlikely to result in large-scale armed conflict, but it has already provoked violent protests and clashes between opposing sides; this instability could afford Russia with yet another means of increasing its influence and destabilizing Montenegro (a NATO ally). Russia has already voiced support for the Serbian Orthodox Church, its primary vector of influence in Montenegro. Although as of 2021 there does not seem to be an opportunity for U.S. intervention on this issue, the United States should nevertheless monitor the situation, as it is presents another potential flashpoint for conflict in the region.

11 Simmering political tensions have been a driving force behind military acquisitions in the Western Balkans—as evidenced by the recent spate of air acquisitions (e.g., Mistral missiles and MiG-29s) by Balkan nations. Resolving some of these issues would in turn reduce the need for Balkan countries to engage in arms racing, which would further contribute to stabilizing the region. (See Jaroslaw Adamowski, “Balkan Countries Boost Their Air Defense Capabilities, Albeit for Different Reasons,” Defense News, August 5, 2019.)
the closest U.S. ally in the region; the United States has been at the helm of KFOR since its inception in 1999 and continues to champion Kosovo’s territorial integrity and sovereignty. U.S. support for Kosovo entails an interest in resolving its long-standing conflict with Serbia, which continues to view Kosovo as a part of Serbia that illegally declared its independence in 2008. The U.S. Department of State emphasizes the importance of U.S. support for “a multiethnic, democratic Kosovo, fully integrated into the international community,” which “remains a key pillar of U.S. efforts to stabilize the Balkan region and ensure a Europe that is strong and free.” The resolution of the Serbia-Kosovo conflict would not only advance U.S. interests in regional stability but would also “decrease Serbia’s dependency on Russia and with it, Russia’s leverage, as well as further consolidate Serbia on a trajectory of European integration, if not NATO integration.”

Accordingly, the United States provides Kosovo with foreign assistance that prioritizes “the full implementation of international agreements to normalize Kosovo-Serbia relations and works to build transparent and responsive government institutions.” Beyond KFOR, the United States also engages in security cooperation activities with Kosovo through the State Partnership Program with the Iowa National Guard, long considered to be one of the most effective partnerships within the program. The U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Serbia and Kosovo Peace Negotiations and a Special Representative for the Western Balkans is therefore “focused on encouraging Kosovo and Serbia to accelerate efforts to reach a normalization agreement, ideally centered on mutual recognition, which would benefit citizens of Kosovo and Serbia, contribute to regional stability, and enable both countries to realize their full potential and further integrate into the West.” As part of that effort, the United States has focused an increasing amount of attention on strengthening its security relationship with Serbia, though U.S. efforts continue to be constrained by lingering tensions over historical events, as NATO’s legacy in Serbia is defined and marred by the bombings of Yugoslavia conducted as part of NATO’s 1999 Operation Allied Force.

U.S. engagement with Serbia is also driven by the objective of countering Russian, and to a lesser extent Chinese, influence: As the rest of the Balkan states have more clearly aligned themselves with the West through joining or striving to join NATO and the EU, Serbia has become the most overt theater of competition between the United States and Russia (and, to

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15 U.S. Department of State, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, 2019b.
17 U.S. Department of State, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, 2019c.
a lesser extent, China). Under Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, this trend seems to be slowly reversing, and relations between the United States and Serbia have markedly, if quietly, improved, even as Serbia opportunistically maintains its relations with Russia and China.

According to the State Department,

> The United States wants Serbia to be part of a stable Balkan region, and we pursue this by supporting Serbia’s integration into European institutions, helping normalize Serbia’s relations with Kosovo, strengthening the rule of law, partnering on security issues, and promoting economic growth.

### Chinese Equities

The Balkans represent another avenue for China’s broader ambitions in Europe, with China viewing the Balkan states as international friends to support its rise. Overall, China has low stakes in the Balkans, and its objectives are in mixed rhetorical alignment with those of the United States. Ultimately, Beijing’s actions in the region are intended to build and solidify the Balkans’ support and thereby deny the United States global support for its perceived campaign of containment.

China has not historically been very involved in the region, but increased engagement since the 2010s has now positioned Beijing as a player there. China’s interests in the Balkans mainly relate to economics and garnering support for China’s rise. The Balkans, similar to the Baltics, provide another transit corridor for Chinese trade with Europe. As one U.S. analyst asserted, “Chinese leaders view the Western Balkans as a key door to Europe’s broader market, and Serbia as the geographic and strategic heart of this critical region.”

Indeed, when Xi visited Serbia in 2016, the first visit to the Balkans by a Chinese leader, he called for both sides to “make persistent efforts to steadily push forward cooperation in major transportation infrastructure projects” under the BRI framework. The Balkans’ weak governance is

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18 Some critics have claimed the United States has a tendency to treat Serbia as though it is “Little Russia” or “the authoritarian, chauvinist Serbia of 1999,” and that this approach has hampered otherwise positive progress in U.S.-Serbia relations. See, for instance, Vuk Vuksanovic, “Serbs Are Not ‘Little Russians,’” American Interest, July 26, 2018.


20 U.S. Department of State, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, 2019c. U.S. efforts to improve security cooperation with Serbia have primarily fallen under the auspices of NATO’s Partnership for Peace program and Individual Partnership Action Plan, as well as the State Partnership Program with the Ohio National Guard.

21 David Shullman, “China’s Growing Influence in the Western Balkans,” testimony to U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, September 17, 2019.

22 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Xi Jinping Meets with Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić of Serbia,” June 18, 2016a. Reflecting this push, one of the highest-profile Chinese
a factor in China’s calculus, because it creates “fertile soil . . . on which BRI and Chinese state-owned companies can easily put down roots.”

China’s direct economic stake in the Balkans, however, is relatively minimal. China’s bilateral trade with all Balkan countries totaled $13 billion in 2018, representing less than 0.5 percent of China’s total trade with the world. Total trade volume is also driven largely by Romania, China’s largest trading partner in the region (ranked 67th-biggest for bilateral trade volume for China), and Bulgaria, China’s 90th-biggest trading partner. Serbia ranked number 130 at $953 million, though Chinese investment totaled $4.2 billion over 2014–2019, along with another $6 billion in construction contracts since 2010.

Politically, Beijing seeks to generate support for its rise in the Balkans. This includes legitimizing its authoritarian model of government, shaping European policies when possible, and creating support for Chinese policies in international forums. As one U.S. expert testified to Congress on the Balkans, “The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is amassing potential political leverage and bolstering China-friendly illiberal leaders, threatening to undermine democratic development and pulling countries away from the United States and the European Union (EU).” China’s relationship with Serbia is perhaps the best example of this approach. As Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić has slowed Belgrade’s embrace of the EU

investments in the Balkans is the $3 billion Belgrade-Budapest railway, touted as a signature project of the 16+1 framework; however, in reality it was a loan, not pure commercial investment, and researchers have concluded that the project “has made remarkably little progress since it was first agreed upon” in 2013 (Matt Ferchen, “Hungary-Serbia Railway Case Study and International Comparisons,” in Matt Ferchen, Frank N. Pieke, Frans-Paul van der Putten, Tianmu Hong and Jurriaan de Blécourt, eds., Assessing China’s Influence in Europe Through Investments in Technology and Infrastructure: Four Cases, Leiden, Netherlands: Leiden Asia Centre, December 2018). Also see Agatha Kratz and Dragan Pavličević, “Belgrade-Budapest via Beijing: A Case Study of Chinese Investment in Europe,” European Council on Foreign Relations, November 21. For other infrastructure projects under scrutiny, see Madalin Necsutu, “Romania Cancels Deal with China to Build Nuclear Reactors,” Balkan Insight, May 27, 2020; and Samir Kajosevic, “Montenegrin Highway to Serbia Faces Fresh Funding Doubts,” Balkan Insight, April 29, 2020.


24 World Bank, undated.


27 Shullman, 2019.

and weakened the country’s democratic traditions, Beijing has served as a preferred alternate partner for Serbia. The impression of an economic push was made by Chinese state-owned enterprises. This was accompanied by an information push by Beijing to build its soft power, including Confucius Institutes, pro-Beijing think tanks, and media agreements. Beijing’s efforts to shape the information environment have been at least somewhat successful, as a significant share of Serbs believe that China’s economic contributions to Serbia are greater than the EU’s or that of the United States. On the military side of the relationship, Serbia has been one of the few European countries with any tangible defense ties with China, as it was the first European country to buy Chinese unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), in September 2019. Serbia has also begun adopting Chinese surveillance systems, such as “safe cities” and broader technology, such as Huawei 5G. These ties paid off in March 2020 during Beijing’s global COVID-19 propaganda campaign, when Vučić derided “European solidarity” as “non-existent . . . [a] fairy tale on paper” and welcomed China as “the only ones who can help us in this difficult situation.” Most recently, Serbia has also agreed to participate in COVID-19 vaccine trials for a major Chinese biotechnology company, China National Biotec Group, providing a benefit for Serbia’s close ties with Beijing. Chinese investment in Serbia comes with what the Financial Times describes as “foreign policy and political alignment.” Contrary to the U.S. position and in harmony with Russia’s, Beijing supports Belgrade’s “refusal to recognize Kosovo,” in return for Serbia’s support for China’s stance on Taiwan and terri-


29 Shullman, 2019.

30 One survey found that nearly 40 percent of Serbs believed that China has given the most foreign aid to their country, with the EU ranking second, far behind at 18 percent. However, in reality the EU gave $2 billion over 2010–2020 and the United States gave $180 million, while China has only promised $63 million and delivered merely $7.5 million total (Ljudmila Cvetkovi, Maja Zivanovic, and Andy Heil, “Red Flag: Ahead of Serbian Vote, Vučić and Allies Lean on China Ties,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, June 16, 2020). Similarly, the reality is that despite some high-profile Chinese investments, between 2010 and 2018, 70 percent of foreign direct investment into Serbia came from EU countries and less than 3 percent came from China (6 percent if including Hong Kong) (Delegation of the European Union to Serbia, “FDI to Serbia,” webpage, undated).


32 Bojan Stokjkovski, “Big Brother Comes to Belgrade,” Foreign Policy, June 18, 2019.


tories in the South China Sea.\textsuperscript{36} Serbia’s support for Chinese policies has gone even further: In 2019, for example, “Serbia’s top official for Kosovo lauded China’s ‘level of protection of minority rights’ in Xinjiang.”\textsuperscript{37}

Rhetorically, Beijing supports the Balkans’ integration with the EU and does not outright oppose their joining NATO. Beijing’s 2018 white paper on the EU, also echoed by other official statements, declared that “China welcomes a united, stable, open and prosperous Europe, supports the European integration process, and remains committed to developing ties with EU institutions, member states and other European countries in a comprehensive, balanced and mutually reinforcing manner.”\textsuperscript{38} In practice, however, China does not support the Balkan alignment with the EU and United States or the expansion of NATO. As noted in Chapter Three, China opposes NATO in principle, reflecting Beijing’s rejection of military alliances, and opposes NATO in practice, for its foreign involvement and potential challenge to China’s rise. China’s ties with the Balkan states challenge their integration with Europe in multiple ways.\textsuperscript{39} The 17+1 framework has raised concerns in the EU Parliament and elsewhere that it is a way to divide Europe and push Beijing’s agenda bilaterally.\textsuperscript{40} This led the EU in May 2020 to redouble its efforts to welcome the Balkan countries into the union.\textsuperscript{41} China’s political and economic model for engaging with the Balkan (and other) states is based on principles adverse to Western political and economic values that make up preconditions of EU accession. Notably, some describe China’s political approach as cultivation of authoritarian governments: As one U.S. expert asserted, “Beijing’s influence plays a clear role in encouraging democratic backsliding in certain Western Balkan countries, most notably Serbia,” as Chinese trade and investment, plus cooperation on domestic surveillance, “lend credence to illiberal actors’ claims that they can deliver economic development, security and stability through increasingly authoritarian policies.”\textsuperscript{42} Economically, China’s engagement with the Balkans, as with other countries, does not foster market economy principles nor open com-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{36} Hopkins, 2020.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Hopkins, 2020.
\item \textsuperscript{38} State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2018; Tsvetelia Tsołova and Angel Krasimirov, “China Backs European Integration, Li Says Before Summit with Eastern States,” Reuters, July 6, 2018.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Jonathan Hillman and Maesea McCalpin, “Will China’s ’16+1’ Format Divide Europe?” Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 11, 2019.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Robin Emmott, “EU Offers More Aid, Membership to Balkans in Riposte to China, Russia,” Reuters, May 5, 2020; David Felsen and Dennis Feltwell, “China’s Balkan Investments Are Paradoxically Speeding Region’s EU Integration,” Balkan Insight, May 7, 2020.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Shullman, 2019; see also Vuk Vuksanovic, “Light Touch, Tight Grip: China’s Influence and the Corrosion of Serbian Democracy,” War on the Rocks, September 24, 2019b.
\end{itemize}
petition. Instead, it has increased the Balkans’ load, which both undermines the countries’ financial position against EU requirements and exposes them to Chinese pressure on diplomatic issues, such as Taiwan and Xinjiang (sometimes known as “debt-trap diplomacy”). Moreover, Chinese investments may fail to meet EU environmental regulations, such as a new coal-fired power plant in Serbia. The EU and other NATO states have thus questioned some Balkan states’ commitment to EU rules and standards, such as the Energy Community Treaty. Broader Chinese economic engagement also fosters, or at least tolerates, corruption that goes against EU standards.

**Russian Equities**

Russia’s equities in the region concern its self-conceived sphere of influence and key partners, but Balkan security and orientation of Balkan states do not directly affect core Russian interests, translating into *medium importance* of this issue area. Russia’s many links to the Balkan countries date to the Soviet era, but Russia’s interest in the Balkan region has deepened in recent years, and in particular since the Ukraine crisis. While then-President Boris Yeltsin cooperated with NATO, however reluctantly, to end the conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia, NATO’s 1999 bombing campaign against Serbia to protect Kosovar Albanians derailed that cooperation and brought Russian and NATO forces close to direct confrontation. Since then, Russian and Western interests in the region have generally diverged—but insofar as Russia seeks to preserve influence over states that seek to engage the United States, its interests are in *mixed alignment* with those of the United States.

Russia’s equities in the Balkans are very different from its equities in former Soviet states. Moscow’s official declarations consistently emphasize the pursuit of stability and security in the region. Russia also commonly appeals to shared cultural and religious ties to fellow Slavs in the Balkans. Thus, its closest relations are with Serbia, a “strategic partner,” with which Russia has a defense cooperation agreement and which has an observer status within Russia’s

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44 Doehler, 2019.


46 The ECT is designed to bring the environmental policies and pollution standards of these countries in line with those of the EU (Doehler, 2019; Dusan Stojanovic, “China’s Spreading Influence in Eastern Europe Worries West,” Associated Press, April 10, 2019).


Owing in part to shared cultural affinities, religious commonality, and resentment toward NATO, Russia and Putin enjoy widespread support.\footnote{For example, Vladimir Putin, "Интервью сербским изданиям «Политика» и «Вечерние новости [Interview to Serbian Publications Politics and Evening News], Kremlin, January 16, 2019a; on support for Russia, see Dimitar Bechev, “Making Inroads: Competing Powers in the Balkans,” in Fruscione and Magri, 2020.}

However, Moscow does not view any part of the region as a sphere of its privileged interests. Western experts assess the importance of the region to Russia in instrumental terms, as “a bargaining chip in Russia’s strategic competition with Western powers.”\footnote{Bechev, 2019; see also Mark Galeotti, Do the Western Balkans Face a Coming Russian Storm? Berlin: European Council on Foreign Relations, ECFR/250, April 2018, p. 16.} Accordingly, Russia uses its influence in large part to undercut Western institutions and erode Western influence, although economic and cultural interests in the region also play a role.\footnote{Leading Western experts tend to see Russia’s geopolitical motives to compete with the West as primary to other interests. See, e.g., Bechev, 2020. For a summary of Russian gray zone tactics in the Balkans, see Pettyjohn and Wasser, 2019, pp. 39–41.}

The Balkan region is the frontier of NATO and EU enlargement, which offers Russia occasion to resist that expansion, or alternatively, to establish leverage over future collective decision-making by these institutions.\footnote{For example, a collective of experts argues that the goal is “not to roll back NATO or EU enlargement but to build influence in countries that are either part of Western clubs, or are well on their way to joining them, and are therefore useful ‘door openers’” (LSEE Research on South Eastern Europe and SEESOX South East European Studies at Oxford, Russia in the Balkans: Conference Report, London School of Economics, March 13, 2015 p. 2). See also Mihail Naydenov, “The Subversion of the Bulgarian Defence System—the Russian Way,” Defense and Security Analysis, 2018).} Moscow has been explicit that it sees NATO expansion to the region as inimical to regional stability and security.\footnote{For example, Putin, 2019a.}

Western analysis, by contrast, demonstrates that it is Russia that has sought to destabilize the region, in part in an attempt to obstruct the incorporation of Balkan countries in the Western institutions. The starkest illustration of such goals is Russia’s attempts to help thwart NATO membership for Montenegro, where evidence suggests Russian support for the anti-Western, pro-Russian Democratic Front and protests in the run-up to the 2016 parliamentary election, as well as the involvement of Russian military intelligence agents in a coup attempt.\footnote{See, e.g., Bechev, 2020, p. 58; Ambassador Vesko Garcevic, “The Impact of Russian Interference on Germany’s 2017 Elections,” testimony before the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, June 28, 2017, p. 18.} Another illustration is Russia’s courting of Milorad Dodik, president of Bosnia’s
Republika Srpska, coming close to encouraging Serbian secessionism, while claiming to keep its relationship within the terms of the Dayton Accords.  

Since Kosovo’s declaration of independence in 2008, Russia has opposed and worked to prevent its full recognition by the international community. Then-President Medvedev denounced Kosovo’s “unilateral” declaration of independence as contrary to international law and pledged Russia’s support for Serbian sovereignty. This campaign has further entrenched its political and economic influence in Serbia. Russia’s official position has been and remains UNSCR 1244, adopted in 1999, which called for an end to violence and withdrawal of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia’s forces from Kosovo, authorized the UN Mission Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo and KFOR and affirmed sovereignty and territorial integrity of the states in the region. U.S. and Western assistance and support for Kosovo has since been described as destabilizing and a provocation by Russian officials.

Beyond currying influence in Serbia, Kosovo has come to occupy a prominent place in the Russian narrative of Western hypocrisy and U.S.-sponsored military actions as a source of destabilization. In his declaration recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Medvedev pointedly referenced the “unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo” as precedent—with the implication that Western failure to similarly recognize Georgia’s breakaway regions represents a cynical double standard. Putin has also pointed to Kosovo as a symbol of U.S. and Western hypocrisy in the latter’s reaction to Crimea. In this way, Kosovo serves somewhat incongruous ends in Russia’s geopolitical rhetoric, with

57 For Putin’s statement regarding relations with Republika Srpska, see Putin, 2019a. Because the Dayton Accords do not permit the entity to have its own military, Russia’s security cooperation with Republika Srpska involves cooperation with the police force. See, e.g., Paul Stronsky and Annie Himes, “Russia’s Game in the Balkans,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 26, 2019. Some Western analysts suggest that “by encouraging Dodik, Putin can extract concessions from the West regarding Ukraine, Belarus and economic sanctions” (Ivana Stradner, “Stop Russia from Sparking Another Bosnian War,” American Enterprise Institute, March 9, 2020).


59 For example, U.S. and EU support for transforming the Kosovo Security Force into “armed forces” is described by the Russian Representative to the OSCE as encouraging a “provocation,” while “ignor[ing] not only commitments under international law but also the opinion of many of its NATO allies” (Alexander Lukashevich, “On the Creation of the ‘Armed Forces’ of Kosovo,” Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, December 20, 2018).

60 See, e.g., Dimitar Bechev, Rival Power: Russia’s Influence in Southeastern Europe, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2017, p. 237; see also LSEE Research on South Eastern Europe and SEESOX South East European Studies at Oxford, 2015, pp. 2–3.

61 Government of Russia, “Дмитрий Медведев выступил с заявлением в связи с признанием независимости Южной Осетии и Абхазии [Dmitry Medvedev Made a Statement in Connection with the Recognition of Independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia],” Kremlin, August 26, 2008.

Moscow both rejecting its independence and at the same time appealing to the international recognition of its independence as precedent justifying breakaway regions in the former Soviet Union and the Crimean annexation. As Serbian leadership has made moves toward settling the Kosovo issue (as further discussed below), Moscow has reiterated its position that any resolution on the Kosovo question must be based on UNSCR 1244. However, Putin also stated that Russia will “support Serbia unconditionally”—including support for a compromise, were one to be reached by Belgrade and Pristina.63

Experts tend toward the view that Russia’s equities are largely driven by geopolitics, but Russia does have economic interests in the region. As Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept declares, the “Balkan region is of great strategic importance to Russia, including its role as a major transportation and infrastructure hub used for supplying gas and oil to European countries.”64 Notably, Russia’s main project in the Balkans is the construction of the Turk-Stream gas pipeline, which would pass through Bulgaria and Serbia. Some experts conclude that the project may be more important to Russia than geopolitical considerations.65

Space for Cooperation

In our assessment, there is scant space for cooperation with Russia or China across most of the Balkan issue area. Each of the powers is competing for influence with the United States and its allies: Russia’s goals are directly adverse to the U.S. goals of Western integration, and China’s goals are suspected of the same, as Beijing is seeks to orient some Balkan states toward China, such as through the 17+1 framework and its economic investments.66 However, we find that there is trade space for cooperation with Russia—though somewhat speculative—on one aspect of regional stability, the Serbia-Kosovo conflict. Although Russia has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to destabilize the Balkans through activity below the threshold of armed conflict, Russia’s desire to maintain influence in the region may, paradoxically, give it an interest in resolving or negotiating toward resolution of at least the Kosovo-Serbia conflict in cooperation with the United States. Because this space is somewhat speculative and Russia has shown very little willingness to cooperate in this regard in the past, we assess this potential for Russia to cooperate to be low.

The Serbia-Kosovo Conflict

The Serbia-Kosovo dispute likely necessitates external arbitration, particularly from the United States, since it is arguably the only country with the influence to persuade Kosovo

63 Putin, 2019b.
64 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016.
65 Samorukov, 2019.
to agree to a resolution.\footnote{Indeed, Kosovo is “often described as the most pro-American country in the world” (Amy Mackinnon, “Why the United States Is Stoking a Crisis in Kosovo,” \emph{Foreign Policy}, April 17, 2020).} Within Serbia, it is difficult to overstate the extent to which all strategy and policy hinges on the Kosovo question.\footnote{For example, Serbia’s Defence Strategy identifies the “unlawfully and unilaterally proclaimed independence of the territory covering the administrative territory of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija” as “the biggest political and security challenge for the Republic of Serbia” (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia, “Defence Strategy of the Republic of Serbia,” December 27, 2019).} Vučić has reportedly been “striving to pivot towards the United States . . . undoubtedly to convince Washington to help mediate an equitable, politically feasible, and sustainable solution to the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo.”\footnote{Milic, 2020b.} To be sure, there are still some factions within Serbia that remain opposed to any progress on the Kosovo issue, as it would necessitate some form of compromise short of reclaiming Kosovo as part of Serbia.\footnote{See, e.g., Leon Hartwell, “Meeting with Ex-General Sheds Light on Serbia President’s Options,” \emph{Balkan Insight}, September 3, 2020.} However, in general, there seems to be a recognition among Serbia’s top leadership, particularly by Vučić, that Serbia must find some solution to this conflict to advance its prospects of joining the EU.\footnote{Beata Huszka, “The Power of Perspective: Why EU Membership Still Matters in the Western Balkans,” European Council for Foreign Policy, January 7, 2020.} In the words of Vučić, despite cooperation with Russia and China on a pragmatic basis, “Serbia’s strategic objective was, is and will remain full membership in the EU and to become an even more dynamic stakeholder in the community of European nations.”\footnote{Aleksandar Vučić, “‘Coronavirus Diplomacy’ Won’t Change Serbia’s Path,” \emph{U.S. News}, May 7, 2020.} Given this pro-Western shift in Serbian strategy and sentiment—at least rhetorically when it comes to bargaining over Kosovo and EU membership—there is an opportunity for U.S. involvement in helping to reach a solution to the Serbia-Kosovo conflict.\footnote{For further evidence of a pro-Western shift, see Vuk Vukasnovic, “Belgrade’s New Game: Scapegoating Russia and Courting Europe,” \emph{War on the Rocks}, August 28, 2020.}

The United States has already taken significant steps to normalize Serbia-Kosovo relations. In January 2020, U.S. officials brokered a symbolically important deal between Serbia and Kosovo to resume flights between Belgrade and Pristina, which had been suspended since 1999.\footnote{Melissa Eddy, “Serbia-Kosovo Flights to Resume Under U.S.-Brokered Deal,” \emph{New York Times}, January 20, 2020.} Additionally, Vučić, Kosovo’s Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti, and former Kosovo President Hashim Thaçi have all participated in U.S.-led mediation efforts, with some combination of these leaders meeting for talks at the White House on at least two occasions—in March and September 2020.\footnote{“Kosovar, Serbian Presidents Hold ‘Goodwill’ Meeting at White House,” \emph{Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty}, March 2, 2020.} On the latter occasion, in the course of talks with Presi-
dent Trump and other U.S. officials, Vučić and Hoti agreed to normalize economic relations between Serbia and Kosovo.\(^\text{76}\) This step of normalizing economic relations, taken together with facilitating the resumption of flights between Serbia and Kosovo, mark two major U.S.-brokered achievements that could lay the foundations for an eventual Serbia-Kosovo resolution, however far in the future. In short, Serbia has demonstrated its openness to U.S. involvement in brokering a resolution to the Kosovo conflict, and it is in the clear interest of the United States to seize this opportunity.

The Russian half of the equation is more difficult, but there are faint glimmers of hope that Russia may be willing to take some cooperative steps. As we note above, Russia has an interest in maintaining Kosovo’s status as a “frozen conflict,” as it affords Russia leverage and influence that Russia would lose should U.S.-Serbia relations improve.\(^\text{77}\) As one expert sums up the Kremlin’s calculus, “Russia has very little to gain and, potentially, everything to lose if the Kosovo conflict is resolved.”\(^\text{78}\) However, Serbia’s own decisions may force Russia’s hand, because Russia would find it difficult to oppose steps toward conflict resolution desired by Serbia. Thus, Russia has declared that it “will support all steps and initiatives that will really help Belgrade and Pristina reach a mutually acceptable solution based on the UN Security Council Resolution 1244,” in at least partial alignment with the U.S. position.\(^\text{79}\) Russia has at times voiced its support for the proposed land swap compromise, “an agreement in which Serbia recognizes Kosovo in exchange for four municipalities in the north, the Community Serb Municipalities in the south and the extraterritoriality of the Serbian Orthodox Church monasteries.”\(^\text{80}\) Moreover, as Dimitry Bechev, a leading expert on Russian policy on the Balkans, suggests, Moscow may actually be “agnostic” on Serbia-Kosovo normalization, because “resolution could create a welcome precedent to use vis-a-vis Crimea.”\(^\text{81}\)

To that end, Russia has sought to paint itself as neutral, capitalizing on the U.S. and EU failure to broker a deal thus far and stepping in when the United States has been preoccupied with other international issues. For instance, Putin met with Thaçi in November 2018, after which Thaçi “pointed out that Russia is supportive of a political deal between Kosovo and Serbia to resolve the long-standing sovereignty dispute.”\(^\text{82}\) Russia’s ulterior motive in playing  

\(^{77}\) Milic, 2020a.  
\(^{78}\) Samorukov, 2019.  
\(^{79}\) Mustafa Talha Öztürk, “Russia Supports ‘Acceptable’ Solution on Kosovo,” Ananolu News Agency, June 18, 2020. Granted, the wording of this statement leaves Russia plenty of flexibility given the stipulations in UNSCR 1244, which are subject to interpretation.  
\(^{80}\) “Serbia and Kosovo Should Follow Good Examples of Solving Disputes in the Region,” European Western Balkans, November 16, 2019.  
\(^{82}\) Dimitar Bechev, “The Kosovo Quandary Is a Win for Russia,” Al Jazeera, November 18, 2018.
the role of mediator appears to be to move Kosovo negotiations from under the auspices of the EU—which has at the behest of Serbia presided over Kosovo negotiations since 2010 after the International Court of Justice ruled in favor of Kosovo’s independence—back to the UN Security Council, where it holds veto power.\textsuperscript{83} Russia’s preferences notwithstanding, should Serbia continue to press for U.S. assistance in brokering a resolution to the Kosovo dispute, Russia would likely be well served to play a role in the negotiations. Continuing to oppose a resolution against Serbia’s wishes would remove some of Russia’s clout in Serbia, as it would appear that Russia was not being a good ally.\textsuperscript{84} As a result, as some experts have suggested, the Western Balkans could thus become a site of trust/confidence-building between the United States and Russia because a success there could impact bilateral relations more broadly, but a failure would not be a great loss. Addressing the Serbian-Kosovar dispute in a collaborative manner could be undertaken in the short-medium term . . . [wherein] the United States and Russia [could] stay in touch with each other to cooperate on a deal initiated in the region while not presuming that it will be the final solution.\textsuperscript{85}

Of course, Russia’s potential willingness to participate in negotiating the resolution of this conflict may be less than wholehearted: Moscow could well opt to nominally voice support for Serbia’s decision while continuing to covertly foment instability and unrest, both within Serbia—by supporting pro-Russian elements like the Serbian Orthodox Church—and beyond. Russia could, for instance, encourage Kosovo Serbs to rebel against any proposed resolution to the Kosovo conflict, provide support to jihadist factions in Kosovo and Bosnia to incite attacks on Kosovo Serbs, or take other actions to destabilize the region and undermine Kosovo-Serbia negotiations.

China has demonstrated no interest in being involved in resolving the Kosovo question, and there is no evidence suggesting that China would be willing to cooperate with the United States or any other party on this matter. In fact, China could serve as an obstacle to Serbia-Kosovo resolution efforts if, following a hypothetical reconciliation between Serbia and Kosovo, it still refuses to recognize Kosovo’s independence and uses its UN Security Council veto power to block any future attempts for Kosovo to join the UN.\textsuperscript{86} China, like Russia, strongly opposes Kosovo’s independence, largely because of the precedent it might

\textsuperscript{83} Bechev, 2018.
\textsuperscript{84} Interview with U.S. expert, Washington, D.C., February 26, 2020.
\textsuperscript{86} Vučić has acknowledged the need for Russian and Chinese acceptance of any resolution to the Kosovo issue, stating, “We have the problem of Kosovo. Who hasn’t recognized Kosovo so far? Do we need their support during our negotiating process with Pristina, with the United Nations Security Council? Yes, we do” (quoted in Amy Mackinnon and Robbie Gramer, “Vučić: Most Serbs Prefer a ‘Frozen Conflict’ with Kosovo,” Foreign Policy, March 4, 2020.)
set for its own ongoing political conflicts regarding Hong Kong and with Taiwan. Compared with Russia, though, China’s interests and ties to Serbia are not as deep, giving China little incentive—beyond a potential desire to align with Russia—to shift course on Kosovo even if Russia were to back a Serbian decision to recognize Kosovo’s independence. Given these dynamics, we postulate that China is unlikely to cooperate on this issue and could, at worst, serve as a spoiler for Serbia-Kosovo reconciliation efforts (whether in conjunction with Russia or on its own). However, a lack of Washington engagement with Beijing on the issue means it is difficult to assess definitively how willing Beijing may be to cooperate on any of the issues implicating Balkan stability or its strategic orientation.

Table 5.1 summarizes our assessment of the theoretically available cooperation space in terms of the stakes for the two U.S. competitors, the rhetorical alignment between each and the United States, and their willingness to cooperate.

<table>
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<th>Obstacles</th>
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<td>Many of the obstacles identified with respect to previously addressed issue areas are present here as well. First, it is difficult to imagine a sufficient degree of trust to underlie cooperation between the United States and Russia, when Russia’s conduct in Serbia has to date been oriented away from conflict resolution and aimed at undermining U.S. and Western influence. They are on opposite sides of the Kosovo-Serbia conflict.</td>
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<td>Second, there is a perceived lack of immediacy: The current conditions and tensions certainly present risks to Kosovo, but because NATO’s presence seems to have served as an effective deterrent to escalation into armed conflict thus far, Washington does not perceive time pressures to intervene politically to push for a resolution to the conflict. Russia has very little, if anything, to gain from the Kosovo-Serbia conflict being resolved—as it would be a reluctant cooperator at best, with involvement driven entirely by Serbia.</td>
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<td>Third, the most salient obstacle is the presence of third-party actors. Notably, the possibility for cooperation here is wholly conditional on Serbia and Kosovo. Only a Serbian request would compel the United States and Russia into some level of cooperation. As discussed above, there are reasons to believe that this is possible, but Serbia has yet to formally request mediation of the conflict through channels that would involve both U.S. and Rus-</td>
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sian participation. While Kosovo has also thus far demonstrated willingness to participate in U.S. efforts to bring an end to the conflict, it may balk at deeper U.S.-Russia-Serbia cooperation. Depending on the suggested parameters of the compromise over its status, Kosovo may grow concerned that increased U.S. cooperation with Russia and Serbia could translate into the United States lessening its commitment to protecting Kosovan security and sovereignty. Moreover, given recent Russian destabilizing actions in the region and doubt over the credibility of the U.S. commitment to defending Balkan NATO members, other regional actors such as Montenegro would likely view U.S.-Russia cooperation in the region as a threat, and could thus complicate the prospects of U.S.-Russia cooperation in this theater. The United States must thus ensure that it firmly and clearly maintains its commitments to all allies in the region while seeking cooperation with additional actors.

Second-Order Effects of Cooperation

In view of the very hypothetical and conditional nature of the opportunities for cooperation in this region, the second-order effects are likewise rather speculative—with conceivable, but not weighty, impacts of U.S.-Russia cooperation on China and some foreseeable positive and negative externalities. First, cooperating with Russia in the Balkans would not necessarily directly affect the Russia-China relationship, but could inject tension between the two countries over the Kosovo issue. Because China has also been staunchly against the recognition of Kosovo, Russian involvement in brokering a resolution could prompt some irritation in Beijing. As Hodges and Milic point out, any “Serbia-Kosovo deal . . . would also lessen Chinese influence” (Ben Hodges and Jelena Milic, “The Right Stuff,” Center for European Policy Analysis, May 8, 2020).

Second, here as in any area, successful cooperation with Russia could have positive spill-over effects in that it would help reestablish a baseline level of trust. Successful cooperation would have an added benefit: Depending on the nature of the resolution, bringing an end to the Kosovo conflict may mean that the presence of KFOR is no longer necessary. If this proves to be the case, NATO could reallocate these forces elsewhere, reducing the overall

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87 As Hodges and Milic point out, any “Serbia-Kosovo deal . . . would also lessen Chinese influence” (Ben Hodges and Jelena Milic, “The Right Stuff,” Center for European Policy Analysis, May 8, 2020).

burden on U.S. and NATO forces. More broadly, though, resolving the conflict would eliminate a major barrier for Kosovo’s and Serbia’s integration into the EU.

Third, as for negative externalities, the difference in threat perceptions among the Balkan NATO members and other partners in the region could cause some states to view any cooperation or agreements between the United States and Russia as detrimental to their security. Cooperation among the United States, Serbia, and Russia could raise concern in countries such as Montenegro or Kosovo itself. Washington has previously made statements that created doubts as to whether it would defend Montenegro in the event of an attack. Cooperation with Russia in this region may thus heighten these concerns and undermine perceptions of the credibility of the U.S. commitment to all of the Balkan U.S. allies.

Furthermore, any progress toward a resolution to the Kosovo conflict would likely not bring an end to all tension between Kosovo and Serbia. Anything less than full recognition of Kosovo’s sovereignty and territorial integrity would displease Kosovo; in parallel, anything less than fully reclaiming Kosovo as part of Serbia would displease at least some sectors of society in Serbia. This may generate further unrest among certain elements of society that fall on the extreme ends of the spectrum (e.g., Serbian nationalists)—who would likely remain attractive targets for Russian subversive influence efforts in the region. In this regard, Russia is unlikely to give up on building and maintaining influence in Serbia and the Balkans more generally—and will likely exploit any fissures and tensions that result from any Kosovo settlement through the same panoply of gray zone activities that it currently employs. More straightforwardly, Russia would surely use the precedent of Kosovo recognition to construct a narrative to legitimize its annexation of Crimea.

Conclusion

The potential cooperation with regard to Balkan security or the strategic orientation of Balkan states is extremely limited, owing to the generally opposing interests of the three powers, all of whom compete for influence in the region. Neither Russia nor China may be reasonably expected to cooperate so as to advance U.S. goals of entrenching Western influence and institutions in the Balkans. The only prospect for cooperation with Russia relates to the Serbia-Kosovo conflict, based on Russia’s own desire to maintain influence—and we emphasize that this prospect is speculative and wholly contingent on actions and preferences of third parties. China’s relatively low stakes in the region and absence of interest in cooperation even on the speculative prospect of Serbia-Kosovo conflict resolution likely puts cooperation with China outside the realm of the plausible.

89 This benefit would be wholly contingent on a satisfactory resolution to the conflict; otherwise, the removal of KFOR would arguably reduce NATO’s deterrent power against Russia in this theater and raise perceptions of threat among some allies.
Progress toward the resolution of this long-standing conflict would almost certainly be a positive development from the perspective of Balkan security and stability, and would likely facilitate the integration of the region into Western institutions. Russian participation might even cause a dose of irritation for China. However, engaging Russia in this respect introduces its own risks, which should be considered carefully by decisionmakers: notably, the risks of legitimizing Russia’s influence, which it could then use for subversive goals, as well as raising perceptions of threats among other U.S. allies and partners. Nonetheless, the United States should avail itself of Serbia’s current openness to dialogue with Kosovo and U.S. mediation efforts. In tandem with pursuing mediation efforts, there may be a path for the United States to tread carefully and reassure its allies in the region by affirming its NATO commitments and the credibility of collective defense.
Turkey’s Regional Role and Strategic Orientation

Turkey’s strategic orientation and its role in Europe and the Middle East are important to the United States and both of its competitors. Turkey’s location and capabilities make it a key player in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Its military and economic power also make its future course consequential in any great power competition. Yet Turkey’s strategic orientation is more uncertain than its NATO membership would suggest, as it has on occasion cooperated with Russia more closely than with its NATO allies. Moreover, its domestic politics compromise the prospects of its EU membership and at times align its views with those of Russia and China rather than Western democracies. Because the United States, Russia, and China have generally opposing preferences for Turkey’s place in the international order, the trade space for cooperation on issues surrounding Turkey’s role and orientation is a priori narrow. However, as this chapter explores, a limited space for cooperation might exist with regard to reducing the risk of unintended escalation of incidents involving Turkey and one or more of the competing powers.

In this chapter, we first review the U.S., Chinese, and Russian interests regarding Turkey’s role and strategic orientation. Next, we identify specific avenues of cooperation in the narrow space where U.S. and Russian interests are aligned—focusing on European, rather than Middle Eastern security issues—and consider the evidence that Russia is or could be willing to cooperate along these avenues, and identify obstacles to actualizing cooperation. Finally, we identify salient potential second-order effects of pursuing cooperation within the viable trade space.

Understanding the Equities

U.S. Equities

Turkey has the second-largest military of all the NATO member states; in combination with its key geostrategic position, this makes it a very important partner for the United States and

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1 While the distinction is somewhat artificial, we reserve treatment of Middle Eastern issues for Chapters Eight and Nine.
NATO. U.S. interests of fortifying NATO and Euro-Atlantic security entails improving the U.S. and NATO security relationship with Turkey. As the U.S. Department of State confirms, “Turkey is a key NATO Ally and critical regional partner, and the United States is committed to improving the relationship between our two countries. It is in our interest to keep Turkey anchored to the Euro-Atlantic community.” Beyond general improvement of U.S.-Turkey relations, the United States has four key security interests related to Turkey: (1) keeping Turkey oriented toward the West and solidifying its position as a NATO ally, (2) preserving access to Turkish-controlled waters and military bases to support U.S. operations, (3) preventing an accidental clash between Turkey and Russia that could lead to a NATO-Russia conflict, and (4) limiting Turkish military interventions in Middle East conflicts that distract the United States’ local partners from conducting counterterrorism operations.

The first two interests are closely related, as bringing Turkey more firmly into NATO would best assure U.S. access to Turkish-controlled waterways. Turkey occupies a strategically vital position, straddling Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, bordering both the Black and Mediterranean Seas, and controlling the Straits of Bosporus and the Dardanelles (often referred to collectively as the Turkish Straits). Signed in 1936, the Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits places the straits under Turkish military control and effectively gives Turkey the authority to regulate naval access to the Black Sea, allowing Turkey to decide to allow or deny access to any country. Historically, despite its status as a NATO member, Turkey has used this leverage against both NATO and Russia, affecting operations in Syria and Ukraine. Despite Turkey being an active member of NATO since 1952, many have noted a trend of Turkey becoming “NATO in name only,” as it has often acted against NATO interests and appeared to align itself more closely with Russia than the West. In recent years, Turkey has backtracked from core Western political values and its NATO commitments in several ways, including adopting authoritarian domestic policies such as the suppression of freedom of the press, civil society, and minority groups; opposing

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3 We focus here on interests and issues that center on the European theater; we note the important U.S. interests in Turkey’s conduct in the Middle East, but do not seek to identify the potential for cooperation in that regard. For treatment of cooperation potential in the Middle East, see Chapters Eight and Nine of this report; for a discussion of cooperation on countering violent extremism around the globe, see the companion report (Cohen, Kepe, et al., 2023).
U.S. interests in Syria;\(^6\) cooperating with Iran; and acquiring Russian military systems.\(^7\) The United States rebuked Turkey for the latter, asserting that the acquisition violated U.S. sanctions and foreclosing F-35 exports to Turkey.\(^8\)

The United States’ and other NATO members’ frustration with Turkey is mirrored by Turkey’s frustration with NATO members. In particular, Turkey perceives that the United States has withheld the sale of missile defense systems and insufficiently fulfilled its mutual security commitments at a time when Turkey felt threatened by Russian and Syrian regime threats to its northern border in the context of the Syria conflict.\(^9\) Turkey has also bristled at the U.S. choice of counterterrorism partners and approach to defeating the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Finally, many in Turkey genuinely believe that the United States sympathizes with, and may have even urged on, military officers that conspired to overthrow President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2016.\(^10\)

Despite the many issues emerging in Turkey’s relations with the United States and NATO, the United States remains committed to improving the security relationship. Given its prime location, Turkey has provided the United States with crucial access to military bases and served as a hub for NATO and U.S. operations in the region, including U.S. Air Force-led operations during Operation Inherent Resolve. The U.S. Department of State’s Integrated Country Strategy for Turkey underscores Turkey’s strategic importance for U.S. operations, noting that “U.S. personnel are currently stationed around Turkey including U.S. forces deployed as part of the NATO Land Forces Command in Izmir, U.S. Air Force personnel and aircraft at Incirlik Air Base, and the Kurecik missile defense radar facility.”\(^11\) However, U.S. access to Turkish bases is not a given; Just as Turkey has used its control over the Turkish Straits as leverage, it has on occasion suspended or otherwise restricted U.S. access to key bases such as Incirlik.\(^12\)

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\(^{6}\) U.S. collaboration with the Kurds in Syria, as well as the abrupt cessation thereof, has been a major source of tensions between the United States and Turkey. See Michael A. Reynolds, “Turkey and Russia: A Remarkable Rapprochement,” *War on the Rocks*, October 24, 2019.


\(^{9}\) For discussion, see Townsend and Ellehuus, 2019.


\(^{11}\) U.S. Department of State, 2020, p. 10.

Turkey has participated in several NATO operations, contributing to or leading missions such as NATO’s Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan. Given that Turkey’s basing infrastructure and control of key access points into Syria and Iraq made it an effective veto player in coalition operations against ISIS, Turkey was afforded a major role as a member of the Defeat ISIS Coalition. Thus, while admonishing Turkey for straying from NATO goals and democratic ideals, the United States has also sought areas for increased cooperation or diplomatic engagement. For instance, in a bid to draw Turkey closer to the West and cement its European identity, the United States has championed Turkey’s candidacy for EU membership.

Although the United States is interested in weakening Turkey’s relationship with Russia and strengthening its relationship with NATO, U.S. interests are not well served by a hostile and tense relationship between Turkey and Russia. Instead, the United States has a stake in managing the risks of accidental escalation between Turkey and Russia, which might spiral into a NATO-Russia conflict. Such a risk can and has arisen in the Middle East, in the context of Syria, but it is also present in the European theater in the Black and Eastern Mediterranean Seas.

The Black Sea has long been a contested region and has emerged as a theater of strategic competition, as it is encircled by a potentially dangerous mix of NATO and non-NATO countries. Russia’s history of incursions into Black Sea countries—most notably including Russia’s occupation of Transnistria (in Moldova) in 1991, South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008 (in Georgia), and Crimea and the Donbas in 2014 (in Ukraine)—raises the potential for an armed clash between Russia and Turkey as the two countries pursue their often competing interests. The risk of conflict has only increased as the region becomes more heavily militarized by both Russia and NATO. Russia’s annexation of Crimea allowed it to gain full control over Sevastopol Naval Base, greatly strengthening its naval presence in the Black Sea. And “the increasingly close proximity of weapon systems, notably advanced short-range missile systems, is shortening early-warning and reaction times,” thereby raising the risks of misperceptions and miscalculations. At the same time, a panoply of simmering political issues could provide the spark for the conflict between Turkey and Russia in the Black Sea, includ-

14 Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh, “Turkey,” webpage, undated.
16 Iulia-Sabina Joja, Black Sea and Strategic Volatility: Players & Partners, Foreign Policy Research Institute, October 2019.
ing the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and Ukraine. Indeed, incidents in the air over the Black Sea—such as Russian jets “buzzing” U.S. warships and intercepting NATO planes and Russian violations of NATO airspace—and even naval incidents have become more common since 2014. In short, the Black Sea is a flashpoint for a Russia-Turkey (and, by extension, Russia-NATO) conflict, and the United States and NATO interests would be served by reducing the risk of conflict in this region.

More recently, the Eastern Mediterranean has emerged as a theater of strategic competition—in this case, not only between NATO and Russia but also between Turkey and other NATO members, such as Greece and France. The United States has not typically prioritized the Eastern Mediterranean, but increased activity by several NATO states produced upticks in tensions, raising the risk of unintentional escalation and calling for more attention to the region. Turkey has been behind a lot of the unrest, as it proceeded with gas exploration around Cyprus, mostly in contested waters, and sought to redefine maritime boundaries via a treaty with Libya at the expense of Greece and Cyprus. Turkey also announced in August 2020 that it would be holding air and sea military exercises in the Eastern Mediterranean, while France, Greece, Italy, and Cyprus announced they would hold their own joint exercise. Turkey’s Navy has engaged in hostile conduct with the French, triggering a NATO enquiry. Other non-European actors in the region include China, Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. Russia, too, has grown increasingly active in the region (see the discussion of Russian equities below for further details). The sheer number of actors with naval assets in the region spikes the risk of accidental escalation. The increasingly volatile situation in the Eastern Mediterranean endows the United States with an interest in reducing the risks of two types of unintended conflicts: incidents between a NATO member and Russia that could lead to a NATO-Russia conflict, and clashes between NATO members (e.g., between Greece and Turkey) that could undermine and weaken the alliance and the U.S.-Turkey relationship.

Chinese Equities

Overall, China has low stakes in Turkey’s regional role and strategic orientation. In some contrast with Chinese interests in the rest of Europe that are largely economic, China views Turkey more through a security lens. China also views Turkey as a middle power over which China and the United States are in competition, where one of China’s goals is to garner support for its global rise. Although substantive cooperation with Turkey thus far has been scant, China does not share any of the major U.S. interests with regard to Turkey’s future course and its orientation, marking an absence of rhetorical alignment.

19 For sources of tension and conflict between Russia and Turkey, see the section below on Russian equities.
China’s interests in Turkey relate mainly to China’s domestic stability and generating international support for its rise. In recent years, the Chinese leadership has become increasingly concerned about its control over the Uyghur ethnic minority group, a Turkic people who live mainly in the Xinjiang autonomous region. Bordering Central Asia, Xinjiang and its Uyghur population were loosely incorporated into the Chinese state in the pre-1911 dynastic era, but the CCP has sought to increase control. This is especially true under Xi and in the wake of several terrorist incidents inside China over 2013–2015 that Beijing linked to the Uyghur independence movement. As the center of the global Uyghur diaspora with an estimated 45,000 Uyghurs, Beijing views Turkey as having important influence over the wider Uyghur population, resulting in two priorities. First, China seeks cooperation with Istanbul on Uyghur issues under the guise of counterterrorism. This includes stopping Uyghurs from leaving the country, suppressing criticism of China by Uyghurs living in Turkey, extraditing those designated as “terrorists” back to China, and at least tolerating Chinese government overseas public validation of its Uyghur policies. Ankara has occasionally criticized China’s handling, as in 2019 when the Turkish Foreign Ministry called on Beijing to end its internment camps. However, more often Turkey has generally acquiesced to Chinese requests, even as China has placed Turkish citizens in its internment camps. Nonetheless, Turkey has been the most outspoken critic among Muslim leaders—especially compared with other authoritarian Muslim leaders, such as the Saudis—and China’s treatment of Uyghurs is a strain on the relationship.


25 For one example, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Xi Jinping Holds Talks with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey,” July 2, 2019b.


28 Ben Westcott, “Erdogan Says Xinjiang Camps Shouldn’t Spoil Turkey-China Relationship,” CNN, July 5, 2019; Jun Mai, “Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s ‘Happy Xinjiang’ Comments ‘Mistranslated’ in
Turkey's Regional Role and Strategic Orientation

On the global stage, Beijing seeks Ankara's support for China's continued rise to global influence. Turkey's status as a middle power and unique position astride both Europe and Asia give it weight in regional affairs, and thus China seeks its support. As one Chinese scholar explained in 2013, Turkey has close ties with three important world centers of power that are important to China: It is a Middle Eastern country, a NATO member state, and was then a quasi-member of the EU. China has sought to deepen political ties with Turkey. The two became “strategic cooperative partners” in 2010, and Turkey has joined several of China's high-profile international initiatives, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a “dialogue partner” in 2012; the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), China's alternative to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, as a founding member in 2015; and Xi's prestige project, BRI, in 2016. Erdoğan's increasingly authoritarian turn also finds support in Beijing, which supported Erdoğan after the attempted coup in 2016 and has been silent on Turkish domestic issues.

Turkey's status as a NATO member also makes it an attractive partner for Chinese security cooperation. The two have occasionally flirted with increased bilateral military cooperation, notably a 2010 joint exercise that was Beijing's first with a NATO member and a 2013 plan for Beijing to sell its HQ-9 surface-to-air missile (SAM) system. Both of these events raised concerns in the United States about China's access to U.S. and NATO technology—and seeking opportunities to train against U.S.-styled militaries as a way to learn how to defeat the U.S. military. However, China and Turkey have not held another major bilateral military exercise since, and in 2016 Turkey reversed its decision on SAM procurement, opting instead for Russia's S-400. More broadly, China has been slowly increasing its military presence in the Red Sea area, and this has occasionally extended to the Mediterranean, including the 2015 iteration of the “Joint Sea” China-Russia joint naval exercise.

China,” South China Morning Post, July 22, 2019.

29 Xiao Xian, “China and Turkey: Forging a New Strategic Partnership,” Contemporary International Relations (现代国际关系(英文版)), January/February 2013.


34 Ben Blanchard, "China, Russia to Hold First Joint Mediterranean Naval Drills in May," Reuters, April 30, 2015; James Holmes, "Why Are Chinese and Russian Ships Prowling the Mediterranean?" Foreign Policy,
Far less important from Beijing’s perspective is the economic relationship. Turkey was China’s 35th-largest trading partner in 2018, and only its sixth-largest trading partner in the Middle East, with a total trade volume of roughly $22 billion, with a $14 billion surplus. By contrast, China is Turkey’s third-largest trading partner overall, and largest in East Asia. Chinese investment is currently minimal, however, estimated at between $2 billion and $5.5 billion total, mainly in energy and infrastructure. Despite constant refrains for aligning China’s BRI with Turkey’s “Middle Corridor” economic development strategies, the China-Turkey economic relationship has not been doing well in recent years, with bilateral trade decreasing since its high of $28 billion in 2013. More important to China is Turkey’s geographic location as the nexus of Asia and Europe, as the BRI continues China’s emphasis on Turkey as a “gateway to Europe.”

China seeks to woo Turkey away from the United States under their common identity as developing countries in Asia, in opposition to the United States’ goals for Turkey’s strategic orientation. During Erdoğan’s July 2019 visit to China, Xi called for the two countries to “keep in contact and coordination in regional affairs and jointly advance political settlements for hotspot issues, to contribute to regional peace, stability and development.” This reflects China’s general support for Turkey to play a regional role, with the expectation that Ankara would orient itself toward Beijing, granting the latter latitude to influence Turkish policies when desired. Erdoğan has largely embraced Chinese rhetoric, although without adopting Xi’s overarching “community of common destiny” idea thus far.

May 15, 2015.

35 World Bank, undated.
36 “China, Turkey Sign 2 MoUs to Boost Trade,” Xinhua, September 6, 2019; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, “Turkey–People’s Republic of China Economic and Trade Relations,” undated.
37 Turkey’s government gives $2 billion, while AEI gives $5.45 billion in investments, plus another $10.5 billion in infrastructure contracts (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, undated; American Enterprise Institute, undated).
39 Xi, 2012.
40 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Xi Jinping Meets with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey,” June 15, 2019a.
41 In an op-ed published during his 2019 visit to Beijing, Erdoğan said, Turkey shares China’s vision when it comes to serving world peace, preserving global security and stability, promoting multilateralism, and upholding the principle of free trade. The world seeks a new, multipolar balance today. The need for a new international order, which will serve the interests of all humanity, is crystal clear. Turkey and China, the world’s most ancient civilizations, have a responsibility to contribute
However, it seems that Erdoğan views Beijing primarily as an economic opportunity and secondarily as a convenient partner to leverage as a counterweight against the West, rather than a true long-term strategic partner. As a recent RAND report noted, Erdoğan has “not given up on the West,” but appears to hope that his balancing efforts with Russia and China will elicit “favorable policy changes” for Turkey. Ankara’s forward-leaning moves toward Beijing so far have often been short-lived and come at moments of weakened ties with Europe and the United States: The initial decision to buy a Chinese SAM system in 2013 may well have been an attempt at leveraging the United States to offer more technical cooperation on its PAC-3 offer, and Erdoğan’s musing of joining the SCO in 2016 came as the EU was moving to deny Turkey its long-sought entrance. Moreover, foreign analysts have noted that Turkey’s and China’s views of each other, and the relationship, are not aligned: China views Turkey through the lens of security issues, whereas Turkey views China through the lens of economic opportunity. This asymmetrical view was evident in the leaders’ remarks during their June 2019 meeting, where Xi said, “Under the current circumstances, the two sides should firmly support each other’s core interests and major concerns and strengthen counter-terrorism cooperation.” Xi touted bilateral cooperation through the BRI, multilateral coordination in the G20, and other international forums but did not actually mention economics. Erdoğan, by contrast, called for “expand[ing] cooperation in a wide range of fields such as economy, trade, finance and infrastructure construction.” As one Turkish scholar noted in 2018, ultimately,

> It is not possible for Turkey to replace the West with China as its major partner and it is not trying to do so. . . . Turkey’s approach to a rising China is not much different than that of the EU countries. . . . Turkish policymakers aim, as their European counterparts do, to capitalize on China’s boom while avoiding excessive dependence on it.”

Nevertheless, Beijing would welcome deeper cooperation with Turkey if its fallout with the West ever becomes irreconcilable.

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43 Flanagan et al., 2020.

44 On missile defense, see Townsend and Ellehuus, 2019.


48 Atli, 2018.
Russian Equities

Because Turkey is important to multiple Russian national security interests, Russia has a considerable stake in its role and strategic orientation, which we assess to be at a medium level of importance. Although the relationship between Russia and Turkey is a turbulent one, Turkey is Russia’s neighbor, one of its biggest economic partners, and pivotal to multiple Russian objectives. Notably, Russia’s pursuit of dominance or freedom of action in the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean region and its regional strategy in the Middle East, among other objectives, require Turkish cooperation. Cooperation between Russia and Turkey along multiple fronts is underwritten by a shared interest in limiting U.S. and Western influence and a sense of grievance against the West and Western values. Because Russia is unlikely to acquiesce in Turkey’s potential decisive turn back to the West in the foreseeable future, Russia’s rhetorical alignment with U.S. interests is mixed at best.

Dominance or freedom of action in the Black Sea has historically been and remains of immense importance to Russia. The nature of Russia’s interests in the Black Sea is only generally addressed in its main strategic documents: The Maritime Doctrine (2015), for example, declares that Russian maritime policy in the Black Sea and Sea of Azov is “based on expedited restoration and comprehensive strengthening of the strategic positions of the Russian Federation as well as maintaining peace and stability in the region.” Experts converge on the view that the Black Sea is key to Russia’s strategy of restoring influence in the region that was diminished after the collapse of the Soviet Union—while limiting Western influences. The Black Sea is also pivotal to Russia beyond the immediate Black Sea region: It is “the springboard, and the Turkish straits are the gateway, to Russian military power projection into the Eastern Mediterranean and the Levant.” This included Russia’s use of the Bosphorus for its so-called Syria Express, the naval supply line from its Black Sea ports to the Syrian battlefield. Accordingly, Russia has been gradually increasing its control over the Black Sea

49 As Jeffrey Mankoff puts it, “Today’s Russo-Turkish entente grows out of a shared alienation from the West and its institutions, resulting in an ‘axis of the excluded’” (Jeffrey Mankoff, “Don’t Forget the Historical Context of Russo-Turkish Competition, War on the Rocks, April 7, 2020, using a phrase coined by Fiona Hill and Ömer Taşpınar, “Turkey and Russia: Axis of the Excluded?” Brookings Institution, March 1, 2006.


51 See Stephen Flanagan and Irina A. Chindea, “Russia’s Strategy in the Black Sea: How NATO Can Up Its Game,” RAND Blog, September 24, 2019, reporting the discussion with a group of 24 experts and former officials from Europe and the United States; see also Nikolas Gvosdev, “Russia’s Strategy in the Black Sea Basin,” War on the Rocks, August 2, 2018. Russia’s Foreign Policy doctrine states: “Russia’s approaches to working with partners in the Black Sea and Caspian Sea regions will be designed so as to reaffirm the commitment to the goals and principles of the Charter of the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation and taking into account the need to strengthen the mechanism of cooperation among the five Caspian States based on collective decision-making” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016).

52 Flanagan and Chindea, 2019, p. 3.

coastline, by splitting Abkhazia from Georgia and annexing Crimea, as well as augmenting its military capabilities there.\textsuperscript{54} Moreover, as Russia and national security expert Nikolas Gvosdev puts it, Russia has been positioning itself as “the best arbiter for pressing regional issues,” sending the message that “Black Sea countries do not need the United States to get involved.”\textsuperscript{55} Turkey’s control over the Turkish Straits means that Russia’s continuing pursuit of Black Sea dominance requires Turkey’s cooperation.\textsuperscript{56} As Russian experts Sergei Markedonov and Alexander Dubowy observe, Russia therefore needs Turkey not to “blindly follow Washington’s lead on all matters . . . especially when it comes to the ‘internationalization’ of the Black Sea, which the United States, of course, sees as the strengthening of its positions.”\textsuperscript{57}

Russia’s relationship with Turkey is most relevant in context of Russia’s interests in the Black Sea region, but it is also relevant to Russia’s interest in the Eastern Mediterranean, which is becoming of greater strategic consequence to Russia.\textsuperscript{58} Russia has used both the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean as strategic hubs for its military operations in Syria, Libya, and Ukraine, and recently it has been building up military presence to enable “more access and freedom of movement in the Mediterranean region.”\textsuperscript{59} Moreover, as various powers compete for natural energy sources in the Eastern Mediterranean—and particularly as Turkey seeks control over oil and gas sources off the coast of Cyprus—Russia has been aiming to increase its presence and influence in the Eastern Mediterranean to ensure that these new energy supplies do not undercut its status as the EU’s largest gas supplier.\textsuperscript{60} Turkish ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean may thus serve as a nuisance or obstacle to Russia; but, just as in the Black Sea, Russia relies on Turkey for access to the Eastern Mediterranean and thus must maintain friendly enough relations with Turkey to ensure its continued access and freedom of navigation.

Turkey is likewise important to Russia’s regional ambitions in the Middle East.\textsuperscript{61} Most centrally, Russia’s decisive role in the Syrian conflict and Syria’s future assures that it must contend with Turkey. As of early 2021, the focal point of the Russia-Turkey relationship is Idlib, one of the last regions in Western Syria not under President Bashir al-Assad’s control,

\textsuperscript{54} Flanagan and Chindea, 2019, pp. 6–8; Gvosdev, 2018.

\textsuperscript{55} Gvosdev, 2018.

\textsuperscript{56} Binnendijk, 2020, p. 130.


\textsuperscript{61} See Binnendijk, 2020, p. 130.
and Turkey’s control over the northern stretch of the province assures its importance to Russia’s goals of reclaiming the “sovereignty and territorial integrity” of Syria—under Assad’s regime. In Idlib, Russia and Turkey have agreed to joint patrols on a major road that bisects the main line of contact; a similar approach is underway in northeast Syria, where Turkey’s incursion also requires coordination with Russia to avoid heightened Turkey-Syria regime fighting. Partnering with Turkey serves Russia’s goal to reduce U.S. influence in Syria and in the region more broadly. Along with Iran, Turkey and Russia have asserted leading roles in the attempt to reach a political settlement in Syria through the Astana process, which intentionally excludes the United States. In addition, bilateral agreements between Russia and Turkey on cease-fires in Syria (outside Astana) have been a major part of determining the course of the conflict.

Unsurprisingly, Russia is manifestly opposed to the prospect of Turkey being a better NATO member or conforming to Western political values in its domestic regime. Accordingly, Russian policies and actions have sought to exacerbate the tensions between Turkey and the United States, NATO, and the EU. To that end, and to stabilize its own relationship with Turkey, Russia has pursued arms sales—most notably, of the S-400 air defense system, though this was largely driven by Turkey’s request for the system rather than Russia pushing for the sale—and deepened economic cooperation, in particular with regard to energy—with the TurkStream gas pipeline beginning operations in January 2020 and the construction of the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant.

A key feature of the Russia-Turkey relationship is its turbulence, which stems from several incompatible interests and ambitions. At present, the most volatile conditions for conflict are created by the site of the most significant Russia-Turkey cooperation, Syria. Turkish and Russian interests in Syria have diverged from the outset of the conflict, with Turkey favoring Assad’s ouster and Russia seeking to preserve the regime. Russia seeks to maintain ties with the Kurdish communities in Syria, a portion of which (the Syrian PYD) Turkey views as syn-

62 Vladimir Putin, Заявления для прессы по итогам российско-турецких переговоров [Statements to the Press on the Results of the Russo-Turkish Talks]," Kremlin, March 5, 2020a.
63 According to an expert assessment by a French diplomat, the entire Astana process was “built mainly around Turkey in order to pull Ankara further away from its Western partners” (Charles Thépaut, “The Astana Process: A Flexible but Fragile Showcase for Russia,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 28, 2020a).
64 See, e.g., Katherine Costello, Russia’s Use of Media and Information Operations in Turkey: Implications for the United States, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-278-A, 2018.
65 Gazprom, “TurkStream,” webpage, undated; Selcan Hacaoglu, “Erdogan, Putin Build Trade Ties as Proxies Face Off in Libya,” Bloomberg, January 7, 2020. For a discussion of how Russia has been advancing these goals, see Flanagan and Chindea, 2019.
66 Russia’s interests in Syria are addressed in more detail in Chapter Eight. See also Alexey Khlebnikov, interviewed in “Of Russian Prospects in the Middle East,” Russian Roulette, Episode 94, December 17, 2019.
onymous with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, which Turks consider a terrorist organization. Although the two view each other as indispensable to an eventual settlement, which they have pursued through the Astana diplomatic process, Russia and Turkey remain at odds about the future of Syria. Their differences translate into the risk of unintended clashes at the operational level. In a prominent incident in February 2020, after Russia’s months-long offensive against rebels backed by Turkey in Idlib, Russia bombed Turkish positions in Idlib province in Syria, precipitating a crisis that brought the world as close as ever to a use of force scenario between a NATO member and Russia. How great a risk a direct Russia-Turkey conflict Syria presents is uncertain, however. Putin has emphasized that the two states have always found a compromise to their disagreements. Some experts also conclude that Russia and Turkey are very much invested in keeping conflict at bay: Russian experts Malashenko and Khlebnikov doubt that escalation is likely—at least not over incidents such as the 2020 bombing of Turkish positions near Idlib. Jeffrey Mankoff, an authoritative American expert on Russian foreign policy, concludes that the lengths to which Russia and Turkey have gone to avoid escalation to date “indicate the importance that Erdoğan and Putin assign to keeping their competition in Syria manageable while they focus on their more fundamental quarrels with the West.”

However, Syria is not the only point of tension that makes hostilities possible. Seeds of conflict between Russia and Turkey are present throughout. Russia and Turkey are backing opposing sides in Libya, with Turkey sending troops to support the current Libyan government and Moscow proxies supporting militia strongman Khalifa Haftar. At a certain point, Turkey may begin to perceive Russia’s Black Sea ambitions as seeking to diminish its own prerogatives. Turkey does not recognize Russia’s annexation of Crimea, has signed a comprehensive defense cooperation deal with Kyiv, and objects to Russia’s treatment of the


69 Putin, 2020a.


71 Mankoff, 2020.


73 Binnendijk, 2020, p. 130.
Turkic Crimean Tatars. Turkey and Russia backed opposing sides in the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s and, more centrally to Russia’s interests, in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. As we observed in the discussion of U.S. equities above, all of these areas of opposition contribute to the risk that a NATO member becomes involved in a conflict with Russia. Avoiding such a conflict is arguably in the interests of all parties involved—Russia, Turkey, and NATO members.

Space for Cooperation

In our assessment, there is no trade space for cooperation with either Russia or China that would advance U.S. interests with respect to most U.S. interests regarding Turkey. Both Russia and China seek to push Turkey further away from NATO and the West, although Turkey is of greater consequence to Russia than China. We assess that a relatively narrow trade space for cooperation does exist in theory between the United States and Russia, centered on reducing the risks of unintended conflict or escalation as in the rest of Europe. The same trade space is likely absent for China, because of China’s lack of meaningful interest. However, although the space for cooperation exists, there is not much evidence that Russia is willing to cooperate in theaters that centrally involve Turkey, leading to our assessment that its willingness to do so is low.

Reducing Risks of Unintended Conflict

As is the case in the Baltic region discussed in Chapter Four, the potential for rapid, unintended escalation between Turkey and Russia in the Black Sea region and to a lesser extent in the Eastern Mediterranean—in addition to Syria and the Middle East more broadly—has been in evidence since 2014. Turkey’s allegedly accidental downing of a Russian aircraft over Syria in November 2015, the 2016 assassination of the Russian ambassador in Turkey, and Russia’s 2020 bombings of Turkish positions in Idlib province in Syria could well have escalated further, even potentially sparking NATO-Russia conflict. In the 2020 clash, the risk of conflict was sufficient for some NATO allies to join with Turkey to demand a cease-


75 Mankoff, 2020.

76 Mankoff, 2020.

77 Syria is also an obvious theater for accidental escalation between Turkey and Russia, but given this chapter’s geographic focus on Europe, issues related to Turkish and Russian operations in Syria are addressed in Chapter Eight.

78 Browne et al., 2019.
fire and prompted efforts by Angela Merkel and Macron to defuse the crisis. Because the potential avenues for cooperation—if not the assessment about the likelihood of such—look very similar to those previously discussed in relation to the Baltics, we treat these very briefly in this chapter.

Subregional Conventional Arms Control and Confidence- and Security-Building Measures

Similar to proposals for the Baltic region, the United States and Russia could consider crafting subregional CAC agreements specific to the Black or Eastern Mediterranean Seas, modeled on the limits on conventional weaponry and the level of forces specified in the now-obsolete CFE. In the Black Sea in particular, Russia might have some notional incentive for a reciprocal reduction of capabilities and force levels: Russia has vocally opposed NATO’s “Tailored Forward Presence” in the Black Sea region, which since its implementation in 2016 has consisted of frequent exercises and the deployment of a “multinational brigade” to Romania.80 On the other hand, Russian objections to NATO’s activities around the Black Sea might only go one way, without a corresponding readiness to scale back its own military footprint. Despite playing an active role in the Tailored Forward Presence, Turkey itself has opposed Romanian proposals for a permanent NATO presence in the Black Sea region in the form of a regional naval command, indicating potential Turkish willingness to consider limits on conventional capabilities in the Black Sea—as long as it feels protected against Russian incursions.81

As in the Baltics, experts have also called for updating the Vienna Document to close existing loopholes regarding notification and observation of Russian snap exercises to increase transparency and avoiding misperception of activities in the Black Sea.82 Russia has employed snap exercises in the Black Sea to intimidate Turkey in the past and to facilitate military operations against Ukraine (either by distracting from ongoing operations or helping preposition equipment and troops).83 The same CSBMs previously raised in the context of the Baltics and broader Euro-Atlantic security could also reduce the risks in these theaters, such as cooperation through the NATO-Russia Council.

In addition to the same proposals as are made for the Baltics, and beyond the Black and Eastern Mediterranean sea regions, expert proposals have been put forth to manage escalation risks in other sites where Russia and Turkey might clash—notably, in the context of the

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83 Norberg, 2014; Melvin, 2018.
dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. Prior to the recent outbreak of armed conflict over the territory, some experts had suggested that the United States, Turkey, and Russia could cooperate more through the OSCE Minsk Group to reduce the risks of escalation due to the increasing militarization around Nagorno-Karabakh—for example, through "restricting the supply of heavy and advanced arms to the conflict parties." 84 The 2020 outbreak of hostilities, preceded by considerable militarization, dates such proposals somewhat. However, as the resurgence—and the terms of the ceasefire agreement—of the conflict indicate, Nagorno-Karabakh will continue to represent a potential flashpoint that could provoke escalation between Russia and Turkey. Although a fuller discussion of the issue is beyond the scope of this analysis, Russia’s role as the “security guarantor of this Armenian-inhabited territory of Azerbaijan against reincorporation by the same Azerbaijan,” which is firmly backed by Turkey, appears to entrench potential for tensions and clashes. 85 It may therefore serve the interests of the United States and NATO allies to consider how to lower these risks in the future—whether through more energetic Minsk Group activity or other channels.

Deconfliction and Escalation Management Mechanisms

The same hypothetical avenues for reducing risks of unintended clashes and escalation as were discussed in the Baltics chapter could be tailored to the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean: reestablishing military-to-military crisis communications channels, which are currently lacking between NATO and Russia at the working level, 86 and updating the bilateral agreements between NATO member states and Russia to manage military-military encounters in the air and on the seas, potentially modeled on the INCSEA, the DMA, and/or the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea. On the crisis communication front, in addition to possible NATO-Russia channels involving Turkey, the United States could encourage Turkey to institute more robust deconfliction and communication channels with Russia to mitigate the risk of escalation bilaterally. 87 On the agreements front, none of the NATO Black Sea

84 Melvin, 2018, p. 69.
86 As one analyst cautioned in relation to the Black Sea, “While existing channels of communication have so far enabled [NATO and Russia] to mitigate unintended consequences, the layer of engagement between parties remains thin” (Igor Istomin, “Not Your Father’s Arms Control: Challenges for Stabilizing Military Confrontation in Europe,” Green Political Foundation, April 29, 2020).
87 A three-way discussion along these lines would not be unprecedented in recent years, as similar discussions occurred in the Syrian context (Michael R. Gordon, “Top U.S. General Discusses Syria with Counterparts from Russia and Turkey,” New York Times, March 7, 2017).
states currently have bilateral agreements with Russia similar to the INCSEA. Accordingly, the United States could encourage Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria to enter into individual agreements with Russia while also seeking to implement a collective NATO-Russia INCSEA-style agreement. In the Eastern Mediterranean, clashes are probably more likely between NATO members than between Turkey and Russia. Thus, deconfliction mechanisms should, at minimum, include NATO members Turkey, France, Greece, and Italy—plus potentially Cyprus—as these are the states most likely to encounter each other in this area.

Although Russia has generally acted in ways that demonstrate some willingness to engage on some measures that limit conventional arms and build confidence and security in Europe more broadly, there has been less discussion of measures focused squarely on the two regions at hand. Russian officials have proposed—though, as previously noted, the meaningfulness of these proposals is debatable—security-enhancing steps at a more regional level, including decreasing or suspending military exercises in the Black Sea region. And Russia has historically cooperated on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with the United States and other European powers through the Minsk Group. However, both Russia and Turkey manifestly prefer to manage their relationship without the involvement of Western powers, which is playing out both in the context of Syria and, most recently, in the context of the negotiated ceasefire over Nagorno-Karabakh, which sidelined the Minsk Group. Although we assess that there is some trade space to seek cooperative ways of reducing risks of unintended conflict, evidence that Russia is willing to engage on measures aimed at managing risks associated with its relationship with Turkey is not abundant—and we therefore assess it as low.

Table 6.1 summarizes our assessment of the theoretically available cooperation space in terms of the stakes for the two U.S. competitors, the rhetorical alignment between each and the United States, and their willingness to cooperate.

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88 Prior to the downturn in relations, there were cooperative initiatives between NATO and Russia on the Black Sea, including the Vigilant Skies exercise in 2011, designed to enhance “cooperation on airspace surveillance and air traffic coordination against terrorist attacks using civilian aircraft” (Atlantic Council, “NATO and Russia Conclude Training Exercise, Vigilant Skies 2012,” November 15, 2012). See also Chuck Paone, “‘Vigilant Skies’ Brings ESC-Infused NATO, Russian Effort to Fruition,” U.S. Air Force, June 24, 2011.

89 See discussion of same in Chapters Three and Four.

TABLE 6.1
Interest in Cooperation on Turkey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How important is the issue area</th>
<th>China</th>
<th>Russia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Space for cooperation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical alignment</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrated willingness to cooperate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Obstacles

The obstacles facing U.S.-Russia cooperation with regard to Turkey also largely mirror the obstacles facing cooperation in the Baltics.

First, the lack of mutual trust plagues initiatives at arms control agreements, CSBMs, and deconfliction measures, as the United States mistrusts Russia’s commitments based on a record of noncompliance and brinksmanship.

Second, any prospective cooperation in the Black and Eastern Mediterranean Seas would involve multiple third-party stakeholders with divergent interests and threat perceptions. Key among these is Turkey, without whom it is nearly impossible to engage in any U.S.-Russia cooperation in the Black Sea. Turkey has a very different view of Russia than do the other NATO actors in the Black Sea region (or, of course, than Ukraine). Turkey views Russia as a threat in the Black Sea, but it also values and needs a good relationship with Russia.91 Turkey likely prefers as limited a NATO presence or role as possible—just enough to deter Russia from encroaching on Turkish interests and freedom of operation in the Black Sea, while allowing Turkey freedom of action to shape the relationship with Russia.92 Over time, Turkey has vacillated in its preferences on NATO involvement in the Black Sea. At times when Turkey deems Russian activity in the Black Sea to pose a particularly acute threat, it has indicated interest in availing itself of NATO’s deterrent power to hedge against Russian power projection in the Black Sea.93 However, at other times, Turkey’s interest has cooled—for example, as it rejected Romanian proposals for a permanent NATO presence.94 Because Turkey’s priority is to retain dominance over the Black Sea, it seeks to minimize both NATO and Russian

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91 Reynolds, 2019.

92 Interview with EUCOM official, phone, August 6, 2020.


presence whenever possible, playing the two off each other. Whether or not Turkey would be amenable to NATO-Russia cooperation in the Black Sea depends on the situation at a given point in time. Outside the Black Sea context, as noted above with regard to Syria and the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire, Turkey prefers to deal with Russia without Western involvement. In contrast to Turkey’s mercurial position, Romania and Ukraine would all like to see heavier NATO presence in the region, which they view as needed to prevent Russian aggression in and by means of the Black Sea. Bulgaria, which has traditionally had friendlier relations with Russia, might welcome efforts to ease U.S./NATO-Russia tensions in the Black Sea. These different views of the threat once again make it difficult to come to a consensus on the best course of action or acceptable level of cooperation with Russia for the region, even if they are aimed at reducing the threat of accidental escalation.

Third, despite the increasing potential for unintentional escalation in the Black and Eastern Mediterranean Seas, neither the United States nor Russia have prioritized addressing these issues. The perceived lack of immediacy means that political will and attention to engage in arms control or escalation management in the Black and Eastern Mediterranean Sea is even lower than in the Baltics, given that the United States does not view Russian aggression as a severe threat in the Black Sea—and even less so in the Eastern Mediterranean. Russia views both its ability to operate in the Black Sea and its relationship with Turkey as crucial strategic elements; and, to the extent that urgency appears, Russia is more likely to engage in direct dialogue with Turkey than to engage in multilateral efforts with the United States or NATO.

Fourth, the same issue linkages that complicate negotiations on traditional instruments for CAC and CSBMs addressed in the context of broader Euro-Atlantic security (Chapter Three) would complicate negotiations on subregional measures—although subregional proposals have not been the focus of official attention.

And, finally, the same legal constraints discussed in relation to the Baltics and broader Euro-Atlantic security (the limits on bilateral military-to-military cooperation) constrain options for U.S.-Russia cooperation regarding Turkey.

Second-Order Effects of Cooperation

Cooperating with Russia in the Black and Eastern Mediterranean Sea region would have a negligible effect on relationships with China, given the relatively low stakes it has in the region. It is conceivable that U.S.-Russia-Turkey cooperation could irritate China, given its desire to pull Turkey away from Western influence, but such cooperation is unlikely to prompt strong reactions from China given the limited scope of the proposed measures for cooperation.


Second, as is the case for most avenues for cooperation, building trust could facilitate future cooperative endeavors: For example, successful initiatives might reduce risks enough to allow NATO to shift some of its focus back to combating threats such as terrorism and illegal trafficking, on which it was focused prior to 2014 and where there may be some room for cooperation with Russia (explored in a companion report on the global commons). Moreover, cooperation on deconfliction mechanisms between NATO and Russia in the Eastern Mediterranean could potentially also have the positive effect of reducing the risk of accidental intra-NATO clashes in the region.

Third, however, cooperation may come at the potential reduction of options for bolstering U.S. and NATO deterrence of Russia in the Black and Eastern Mediterranean Seas. And as in the Baltics, the difference in threat perceptions among the Black Sea states and others in the region could potentially cause some states to view agreements between the United States and Russia as being on the net detrimental to their security. A number of recent proposals for increasing Black Sea security bank heavily on the deterrence side of the balance, which would be at least in tension with pursuing cooperative approaches. Similar concerns animate policy arguments in favor of greater U.S. and NATO military presence in the Western Mediterranean to deter aggressive or risky Russian actions and to reassure allies. However, the contours and magnitude of such adverse second-order effects depend entirely on the precise nature of the cooperative initiative and on whether and to what extend the United States succeeds in reassuring and address allies’ concerns.

Conclusion

In our assessment, the trade space for cooperation concerning Turkey is narrow—and Russia’s willingness to engage within that space is likely low, chiefly because subregional initiatives have not enjoyed much official attention and because Russia very likely prefers to manage the risks in its relationship with Turkey bilaterally. Nonetheless, it is worth keeping the options on the menu for consideration by both the United States and Russia. Both the Black and Mediterranean Seas are environments prone to accidental escalation, and an incident between any NATO member and Russia in these regions could result in escalation into a full-scale NATO-Russia conflict—an outcome neither the United States nor Russia wants. Therefore, pursuing additional or enhanced CAC- and CSBM-related measures and deconfliction mechanisms could be mutually beneficial to the United States and Russia. As in other

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98 Interview with EUCOM official, phone, August 6, 2020.
99 See Chapter Four for a more complete discussion of these dynamics.
theaters, progress on any smaller-scale issues could translate into improved U.S.-Russia relations and the capacity to cooperate in more ambitious ways. However, while the proposed cooperative measures for this region are similar in scope to those we suggest for the Baltics, the lack of perceived urgency and interest and the third-party problems (namely, Turkey’s grip over U.S.-Russia relations in the region) are more severe here than in the Baltics. Therefore, although some of the discussed measures may be in the mutual interests of the United States, Russia, and Turkey and therefore at least merit consideration, the current severity of the obstacles likely precludes any such cooperative ventures in the near term.
The Future of Ukraine

The conflict in Ukraine has been ongoing since 2014 and has claimed more than 10,000 civilian casualties, according to UN estimates. The conflict has entered a stalemate, but limited violence periodically breaks out. The future of the conflict in Ukraine’s east is of immediate and obvious interest to Russia, which views Ukraine’s orientation as vital to its own national security. The simmering conflict on the European continent is also of serious concern to European countries and, because Ukraine is a long-time NATO partner, the United States. Russia’s aggression against Ukraine triggered a virtual breakdown of relations between the Western world and Russia, but the course of the conflict will of necessity depend on Russia’s actions. The power imbalance between Russia and Ukraine would allow Russia to force its preferred outcomes in the absence of Western participation or pressure. In this chapter, we stay away from the issues surrounding the broader rift in relations (and from the contentious question of Ukraine’s NATO membership in the future) and focus on the potential for cooperation in the interest of stabilizing and ultimately ending the conflict in Ukraine’s east. To be clear, as those with the deepest expertise on the subject argue, there can be no long-term, sustainable, and secure future for Ukraine without a resolution of the broader questions on Euro-Atlantic security that divide Russia and the West. Thus, here we explore an inherently less permanent and more conditional set of solutions to the continuing harms and risks created by the simmering conflict in the Donbas.

In this chapter, we first review the U.S., Chinese, and Russian interests regarding Ukraine’s future—most centrally, insofar as involves the course of the ongoing conflict. Next, we identify specific avenues of cooperation in the narrow space where U.S. and Russian interests are aligned, consider the evidence that Russia is or could be willing to cooperate along these avenues, and identify obstacles to progress in this regard. Finally, as with the preceding chapters, we identify salient potential second-order effects of pursuing cooperation within the viable trade space.


2 See, e.g., Charap and Colton, 2016.
Understanding the Equities

U.S. Equities

Russia’s annexation of Crimea and aggression in Eastern Ukraine sparked debate among policymakers over the extent and nature of U.S. equities in Ukraine. Russia’s actions in the country marked the first time in recent history that a European state’s territorial integrity was violated by another state, upending the U.S. and Western vision of a post–Cold War Europe whole, free, and at peace. Although aspects of U.S. policy have been inconsistent, high-level strategic and policy documents make clear that the enduring American interests entail support for Ukrainian sovereignty, territorial integrity, and stability.³

Ukraine is not a member of NATO, but it has been a key NATO partner since the end of the Cold War and has contributed to NATO missions through NATO’s Partnership for Peace and other forums. To that end, the existing members of NATO reached an agreement at the Bucharest Summit in 2008 that Ukraine (and Georgia) would join NATO in future.⁴ The Bucharest Summit Declaration does not give a timeline for Ukrainian accession to NATO, however, stating rather vaguely that “NATO welcomes Ukraine’s and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO,” “agree[s] . . . that these countries will become members of NATO,” and notes that it supports the two states’ applications for a Membership Action Plan, which is “the next step for Ukraine and Georgia on their direct way to membership.”⁵

Despite this declaration of support, Ukraine has not yet been permitted to join NATO’s Membership Action Plan, and progress on this front has stalled amid the politically volatile situation generated by Russia’s military action in Ukraine in 2014. Still, NATO officially maintains that “a sovereign, independent and stable Ukraine, firmly committed to democracy and the rule of law, is key to Euro-Atlantic security” and as recently as April 2019 affirmed its “open door” policy for aspirant countries.⁶ Ultimately, even if NATO membership for Ukraine is not viable, the United States still seeks to preserve Ukraine’s pro-West orientation and ensure that it works as closely with NATO as possible.

U.S. public declarations and documents roundly condemn the Russian intervention in Ukraine, declaring U.S. commitment to protecting Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Ukraine Freedom Support Act of 2014, for instance, states that “It is U.S. policy to assist the government of Ukraine in restoring its sovereignty and territorial integrity in order to deter the government of the Russian Federation from further destabilizing and

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³ U.S. interests in Ukraine have been occasionally questioned. See, for instance, Reid Standish and Robbie Gramer, “Behind Pompeo’s Big ‘We Care’ Trip to Ukraine,” Foreign Policy, January 29, 2020.
invading Ukraine and other independent countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.”

The 2017 NSS also identifies the violation of Ukrainian sovereignty as a threat.8 The FY 2020 NDAA similarly declares that “Russia’s violations of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia and Ukraine, and Russia’s ongoing destabilizing and aggressive behavior, has undermined peace, security, and stability in Europe and beyond.”9 The United States has been clear that it does not recognize Russia’s claims to Crimea, which was reaffirmed in 2018 when former Secretary of State Michael Pompeo issued the “Crimea Declaration.”10 The Countering Russian Influence in Europe and Eurasia Act of 2017 (CRIEEA) also states that it is the policy of the United States “to never recognize the illegal annexation of Crimea by the Government of the Russian Federation or the separation of any portion of Ukrainian territory through the use of military force.”11

The United States has also expressed its interest in promoting democratic and economic reform in Ukraine as part of its efforts to integrate Ukraine into pro-Western, Euro-Atlantic institutions. Accordingly, the 2018 NDS focuses on the threats to democracy in Ukraine, calling out Russia not only for the militarized aggression against its neighbors, but also for the “use of emerging technologies to discredit and subvert democratic processes in Georgia, Crimea, and eastern Ukraine.”12 The U.S. Department of State declares that because of the “great importance” that the United States attaches to “the success of Ukraine as a free and democratic state with a flourishing market economy,” U.S. policy “support[s] Ukraine in the face of continued Russian aggression as it advances reforms to strengthen democratic institutions, fight corruption, and promote conditions for economic growth and competition.”13 The United States has trade relations with Ukraine, as reflected in the creation of the U.S.-Ukraine Council on Trade and Investment; ensuring a democratic, open Ukraine thus also protects U.S. economic interests. Additionally, the United States has articulated an interest in supporting a “secure, democratic, prosperous, and free Ukraine, fully integrated into the Euro-Atlantic community,” as the United States, together with the EU, has over the past few decades helped Ukraine in crafting a decidedly European, pro-Western identity for itself.14

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8 NSS, 2017.
11 Title II of Public Law 115-44, Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), August 2, 2017.
12 NDS, 2018, p. 4.
14 U.S. Department of State, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, 2019a.
Pursuant to these goals, the United States has provided significant security assistance to Ukraine in the form of financial aid, military equipment, and training.\(^\text{15}\)

In view of the above, as well as the evident humanitarian concerns, the United States has an interest in seeking an end to the current conflict or, failing that, at least preventing the conflict from escalating. Ukraine borders several NATO members that could be negatively affected by the unrest in Ukraine; moreover, should the conflict spill over into NATO countries, the United States may be called to assist its allies. As an OSCE Network of experts observe, “Full war between Ukraine and Russia would change the entire politico-military situation in Europe dramatically and push it to an escalation level not experienced since the worst periods of the Cold War.”\(^\text{16}\) The United States has an interest in avoiding such scenarios by seeking a cessation of hostilities and a diplomatic solution to the conflict.

Conflict resolution in Ukraine has focused on the Minsk II agreement, a set of measures developed in 2015 by the “Normandy Four”—Russia, Ukraine, Germany, and France—to replace the failed Minsk I agreement. The Minsk II agreement includes measures that would end hostilities, including a ceasefire and withdrawal of heavy weapons and foreign fighters, release and exchange of prisoners, and OSCE monitoring and verification.\(^\text{17}\) Measures also include restoration of Ukraine’s control over the Ukraine-Russia border, which is to be implemented concurrently with measures aimed at political settlement—i.e., the holding of local elections and granting a special status to the non-government-controlled areas.\(^\text{18}\) The United States supports the Normandy Four process and the efforts of the Trilateral Contact Group (representatives from Russia, Ukraine, and the OSCE) to implement Minsk II, which is also endorsed by the UNSCR 2202). Between 2017 and 2019, U.S. policy was pursued through the office of the U.S. Special Representative for Ukraine Negotiations Kurt Volker, whose mission was to advance “U.S. efforts to achieve the objectives set out in the Minsk agreements” and “to hold regular meetings with Ukraine and the other members of the Normandy Format.”\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{15}\) Most notably, the Support for the Sovereignty, Integrity, Democracy, and Economic Stability of Ukraine Act of 2014 (Public Law 113-95), passed in response to Russia’s intervention in Ukraine, provided loan guarantees, “authorized aid to help Ukraine pursue reform, provided security assistance to Ukraine and other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, required the U.S. government to assist Ukraine to recover assets linked to corruption by the former government, and established a variety of sanctions.” More recently, the FY 2020 NDAA extends and provides additional funds for the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, a program initially created by Congress under the FY 2016 NDAA to provide military equipment and training to Ukraine. Another initiative, the U.S.-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership, focuses on deepening security cooperation between Ukraine and NATO (U.S. Department of State, 2019a).

\(^{16}\) Zellner et al., 2018, p. 13.


\(^{19}\) U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Tillerson Appoints Ambassador Kurt Volker Special Representative for Ukraine Negotiations,” July 7, 2017.
Because the Minsk II Protocol of 2015 is the only document in which Russia formally recognizes Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, the United States has called for the “full and faithful implementation of the Minsk agreements by Russia.”\(^{20}\) The U.S. understanding of what full implementation means, as Special Representative Volker points out, has diverged somewhat from that of France and Germany, who have generally called on both sides to take measures. The United States, by contrast, has called more forcefully for Russia to fulfill its obligations under Minsk, which entails Russia returning control over the Ukrainian side of the international border to Ukraine, withdrawing its forces, and disbanding illegal armed groups in the two “People’s Republics.”\(^{21}\) The same message was echoed in the lead-up to the Normandy talks in 2019, when the U.S. Embassy in Ukraine issued a statement of “unwavering support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity” and “commit[ment] to working with [its] Allies and partners to keep pressure on Russia to live up to its commitments and to begin the process of peacefully restoring Ukraine’s full sovereignty over the Donbas.”\(^{22}\)

**Chinese Equities**

China’s *stakes in Ukraine are low*, and its noncommittal position on Ukraine’s future means it is not clearly adverse to U.S. goals, but is rather in *mixed rhetorical alignment*. Ukraine is a good example of where China’s rhetorical foreign policy principles come into conflict with its more realpolitik approach to global affairs. Russia’s actions in Ukraine have violated China’s declared principle of prioritizing sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference in foreign affairs, but China recognizes Russia’s significant interests in Ukraine and has therefore deferred to Moscow in this case and avoided setting any precedents that would undermine its more important interests back home.\(^{23}\) However, ultimately, for U.S.-China competition, Ukraine does not factor in much except perhaps as a potential distraction for Washington and as another avenue toward accessing key foreign defense technology.

Overall, Ukraine is a minor player in China’s larger Europe strategy. Economically, Ukraine is China’s 54th-largest trading partner, and 15th-largest in Europe, according to 2018


\(^{23}\) For example, the idea that residents of a contested territory (Crimea) could vote to join another country (Russia) might be unsettling to Beijing, which is already concerned about irredentism in its border regions and opposes any self-determination for its citizens (e.g., Tibet, Xinjiang, and even ethnic Korean areas near North Korea).
data. Politically, Kiev’s limited influence in European affairs and even more constrained global role (plus pro-West orientation) dim its utility for supporting China’s rise. Despite this, Beijing is pursuing its primary interests to the extent possible in Ukraine. Under the framework of the BRI, Beijing is improving its economic ties with Kiev. China has overtaken Russia as Ukraine’s top individual trading partner in 2018, and in 2019 traded $12.8 billion, with a $5.6 billion surplus for China. This is still far short of Ukraine’s trade volume with the EU, however, which was $46 billion in 2019 (41 percent of Ukraine’s total trade volume). Beijing is also working to build more political influence in Ukraine, through a variety of soft power programs and propaganda. Yet, Ukraine is not included in the 17+1 dialogue between China and Central and Eastern European countries, likely reflecting a lower priority for Beijing. China likely favors the end of hostilities in Ukraine in order to further develop economic and political relations there, but China is not willing to pursue this goal at the cost of its broader relationship with Moscow. Instead, if anything, the Ukraine crisis has pushed Moscow closer to Beijing and improved China’s overall geopolitical standing.

Beijing’s lack of criticism does not mean, however, that it is not finding opportunity at Moscow’s expense—Ukraine’s newly independent defense industries are now prime targets in China’s quest for improved and cheaper military technology from abroad. China’s limited immediate interests in Ukraine are concentrated on defense technology acquisition. China has long relied on Russia for military technology that China could not develop on its own and could not buy or otherwise procure from the West, including recently the Su-35 fighter and S-400 SAM system. One major continued dependence on Russian military technology is for engines, which are largely built in Ukraine. A good example is China’s attempted purchase of Motor Sich, the world’s largest producer of aerospace engines. After losing its Russian export market, Motor Sich now sells mainly to China, including for several People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) warships and the upcoming aircraft carrier, and in 2017 a Chinese company concluded an initial takeover deal. However, the 2017 deal has been frozen by the

24 World Bank, undated.
28 World Bank, undated.
Ukrainian government on national security grounds, and the United States is pressuring Ukraine to cancel the deal.\(^{31}\)

The largest intangible interest at stake for China in Ukraine is its adherence to its own foreign policy principles. Since the 1950s, China’s foreign policy has been defined by the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence, which include non-aggression, non-interference, and respect for territorial integrity.\(^{32}\) Nominally, then, Russia’s seizure of Crimea—internationally recognized sovereign territory of Ukraine—and continued fomenting of conflict in Eastern Ukraine violates these principles. In practice, however, China has been mostly quiet on these principles in deference to Moscow’s more significant interests. Although a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson “condemn[ed] the recent extreme and violent acts” in Ukraine at the outset in 2014, Beijing’s balancing act was evident in the fact that it did not specifically condemn Russia and touted its relations with both, as Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasized that “As Russia’s strategic partner and Ukraine’s good friend, China sincerely hopes that the Ukraine-Russia relations can gradually return to normal.”\(^{33}\) Indeed, the spokesperson said, “It is China’s long-standing position not to interfere in others’ internal affairs. We respect the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. There are reasons for why the situation in Ukraine is what it is today,” and even added that China “take[s] into account the historical facts and realistic complexity of the Ukrainian issue.”\(^{34}\)

Perhaps its strongest rebuke of Russia’s actions was its decision to abstain from Ukraine-related votes in the United Nations, not siding with either the West or Russia (and thus, from Ukraine’s perspective, against it).\(^{35}\) With respect to conflict resolution, China has not been an active participant, limiting its role to rhetorically supporting the various cease-fires while casting itself as providing “a number of positive and constructive suggestions.”\(^{36}\)

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\(^{35}\) Zhang Lihua, “Explaining China’s Position on the Crimea Referendum,” Carnegie Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, April 1, 2015.

Russian Equities

Since the Soviet collapse, Moscow has viewed the newly independent Soviet republics (apart from the Baltics) as of high importance to its interests. 37 Although Russia’s interests are mostly adverse to those of the United States, Russia’s interest—though certainly conditional—in resolving the conflict resulting from its own actions in the Donbas puts it in mixed rhetorical alignment with the United States.

Russia was to play a leading role in the post-Soviet space, with particular weighty equities in Ukraine, even by comparison with other ex-Soviet republics. Russians have historically considered Ukraine to be part of Russia and believed in a close relationship between ethnic Ukrainians and Russians. Russians and Ukrainians, according to Putin, are “one people” or “one nation.”38 There is undeniably a close connection between the people of the two countries: There is a still-considerable share of ethnic Russians in Ukraine, and Russians and Ukrainians have a shared language (with most Ukrainians speaking Russian), culture, religion, and history. Under the Soviet command economy, Ukraine became firmly integrated economically with the rest of the Soviet Union, with its eastern regions home to an important heavy industrial and defense production. These ties survived the Soviet collapse: Prior to the conflict, Russia was an important trade partner for Ukraine and supplied most of its gas, and Ukraine served as a transit route for Russian gas westward. Ukraine is also important to Russia militarily: Russia’s Black Sea Fleet is based in Crimea, and Russia is clearly seeking to establish greater freedom of action and control over the waterways around Crimea and the Donbas—i.e., the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait, which connects the Azov and Black Seas.

Russia unequivocally views Ukraine as within its sphere of “privileged interests” and considers its core security threatened by a Ukraine that is insufficiently accommodating to Russia’s dominance of the region. And a Ukraine that threatens to enter Western institutions or a Ukraine whose governance emerged as a result of a perceived Western-backed coup is perceived by Russia to be overthrowing Russia’s influence. The specter of Western influence was potent enough to precipitate the first annexation of a large territory in Europe since the end of World War II. First, the prospect of an association agreement with the EU threatened Russia’s ability to keep Ukraine within its orbit: Apart from the general orientation toward the West that this move portended, pursuing closer economic relations with the EU would have pulled Ukraine out of Russia’s nascent Eurasian Economic Union.39 Second, Russia cast, and probably sincerely viewed, the uprising against former Ukraine President Viktor Yanukovych as a Western-backed coup. To Moscow, if successful, such a coup would erect a pro-Western government, threaten the ethnic Russian population in Crimea, and displace the

Russia Black Sea Fleet from Crimea.\(^4\) Finally, although NATO membership for Ukraine was not then immediately on the table, this prospect was not unrelated to Russia’s annexation of Crimea and fomenting of conflict in eastern Ukraine.\(^4\) In sum, while the United States and its allies view Russian annexation of Crimea and fomenting separatist rebellion in the Donbas as aggression, Russia presents—and likely actually perceives—these actions as defensive, necessary to forestall the threat of Western expansion.\(^4\)

Although Russian actions have been unsuccessful at keeping Ukraine within its orbit, Russia’s goals in this regard have not changed dramatically. Russia’s official position is to seek a resolution of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. As per its 2016 Foreign Policy Concept, “Russia undertakes to make every effort to promote political and diplomatic settlement of the internal conflict in Ukraine in cooperation with all the interested States and international agencies.”\(^3\) The conflict is not costless to Moscow, imposing the burden of supporting the Donbas regions, in addition to the cost in lives, military operations, and sanctions.\(^4\) Accordingly, Putin and other high officials have repeatedly restated Moscow’s commitment to the Minsk II agreements. Minsk II, after all, was the agreement Russia framed and which it sees as the price that Ukraine should pay for being the weaker side in the conflict.\(^3\) While favoring Russia, Minsk II does contain Russia’s recognition that the Donbas is Ukrainian territory, by contrast with Crimea, with regard to which Russia does not believe there is a conflict or problem to resolve.

Although Russia’s desire to resolve the conflict offers a sense of alignment with the U.S. objective, Moscow’s views on what is an acceptable resolution differ considerably from the U.S. view. As noted above, Minsk II is not a straightforward document, and it contains inconsistencies, ambiguities, and omissions, notably with regard to sequencing of key events.\(^3\) Unsurprisingly, Moscow’s position on the agreement diverges from the position of Washington and Kyiv, which generally hold that the reestablishment of Ukraine’s control over the

\(^{40}\) For comprehensive studies of the conflict in Ukraine, see Charap and Colton, 2016.

\(^{41}\) Putin was rather explicit on this point in his public statements, recalling the alleged promise to Russia not to enlarge NATO eastward after German reunification, and declaring that when the military infrastructure of the alliance moves ever closer to Russia’s borders, “this compels us to some kind of countering actions. . . . By the way, our decision regarding Crimea was connected to this, in part” (author’s translation; see Putin, 2014; and International Crisis Group, 2020, p. 5).

\(^{42}\) For example, Sergei Karaganov and Dmitry Suslov, “A New World Order: A View from Russia,” Russia in Global Affairs, October 4, 2018. To be clear, some Western experts dispute the extent to which NATO expansion contributed to Russia’s aggressive actions.


\(^{44}\) One estimate, for example, puts the annual costs of supporting the Donetsk People’s Republic and Luhansk People’s Republic (unrecognized quasi-states located in the Donbas region), not inclusive of military operations, at over 2 billion euros (International Crisis Group, 2020, p. 6).

\(^{45}\) Putin had said that there are “no alternatives” to the Minsk agreements—see Minakov, 2019.

\(^{46}\) Allan, 2020.
Donbas, which requires a ceasefire and a Russian withdrawal of men and equipment, must precede a political settlement (i.e., elections and a decentralization of power to the regions via a special status). Russia, by contrast, has insisted on political settlement before Ukraine can reclaim control of the Donbas, which would prevent Kyiv from exercising full sovereignty and control over the country’s foreign policy.

Russia’s overarching goal remains to return Ukraine to its orbit. Failing or pending that outcome, Moscow seeks to keep the country divided and weak—and importantly, out of Western institutions. Thus, Russia has initially sought de jure autonomy for the Donbas within Ukraine, which would have allowed Russia to maintain de facto control over a large chunk of Ukraine’s territory—handing Russia an effective lever over Ukraine’s future course. Russia is unlikely to be satisfied merely with a veto over Ukraine’s future membership in NATO or the EU; instead, Moscow seeks a say in Ukraine’s foreign policy more broadly. As Fyodor Lukyanov, a well-known Russian expert, explains,

The ideal option would be the implementation of the Minsk Accords, which would mean reintegrating Donetsk and Lugansk regions into Ukraine with considerable powers of autonomy, enabling them to maintain special relations with Russia. However, Moscow is not hard-pressed to achieve this immediately through any means possible.

This means that Russia is unlikely to compromise significantly on its position to end the hostilities and reach a comprehensive resolution to the conflict. A simmering conflict, the course of which Russia can seek to shape to influence Ukraine’s decisions and fate, is more conducive to Russia’s preference.

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47 This appears to reverse the order stipulated in the Minsk agreement. For further discussion, see Allan, 2020, p. 12.

48 Western and Russian experts alike make such an assessment. For a view by a traditionally oriented Russian analyst, see Vladimir Chernega, "Какой будет внешняя политика России в 2030 года [What Will Russia’s Foreign Policy Look Like in 2030?]," Russia in Global Affairs, December 1, 2019. For an American analysis, see, e.g., Pifer, 2019.


50 Fyodor A. Lukyanov, “Normandy Four Summit on Ukraine’s Future: What’s at Stake?” Russia in Global Affairs, December 9, 2019.

51 See Pifer, 2019; Stanovaya (2019) states that “whatever other concessions Russia can make, its red line will remain firm: The Kremlin will continue to hold a political foothold in the Donbass that will provide it with leverage to influence Ukraine’s foreign policy. And even smaller concessions are off the table as long
Space for Cooperation

In our assessment, although there is no trade space for cooperation when it comes to the ultimate visions for Ukraine’s future (i.e., pertaining to its prospects of EU or NATO membership), there is some space for cooperation to advance conflict resolution based on the Minsk II agreements, even if prospects for comprehensive solutions are dim. There is likewise space for cooperation with Russia on more modest goals of limiting hostilities and the worst humanitarian consequences of the conflict and constraining the potential for the conflict to escalate or spill over. We assess that Russia’s willingness to cooperate on the issue area overall to be at the medium level.

As for China, despite some commonality of interest with the United States in limiting Ukraine’s instability and avoiding further Russian destabilizing behavior in Eastern Europe, China’s lack of significant interests in Ukraine means it will likely continue deferring to Russia. And because China is only tangentially involved, neither the United States nor its allies have sought to meaningfully engage China on the future of Ukraine; thus, Beijing’s willingness to cooperate cannot be meaningfully assessed.

Conflict Resolution Based on Minsk II

Rhetorically, as outlined above, all parties are interested in settling the conflict to some extent and declare commitment to Minsk II. Although much of the Minsk II agreement remains unfulfilled, Russia has shown some willingness to engage with the parties involved in the formal negotiations within the context of the Normandy Format, the Trilateral Contact group, and bilateral engagements with Ukraine itself and other parties. Diplomacy aimed at ending the conflict has been reinvigorated after the election of Volodymyr Zelensky and has revived the Normandy Format talks after a nearly three-year hiatus and produced a set of written conclusions setting out next steps for stabilization and eventual political settlement. Russia has also shown some willingness to negotiate with the United States in particular, under the auspices of the U.S.-Russia “Ukraine track,” spearheaded initially by former Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and from 2017 to 2019 by Volker. The Ukraine track was intended to support negotiations within the Normandy Format, which has eclipsed the U.S.-Russia channel as the main forum for crisis management.

Some of the steps made by Russia go beyond rhetoric. For example, in the lead-up to the 2019 Normandy Four talks, Russia and Ukraine withdrew armed forces and weapons from three frontline “disengagement areas.” Russia and Ukraine have also conducted several

as Russia fears a hawkish West.” See also Tatyana Malyarenko and Stefan Wolff, “The Logic of Competitive Influence-Seeking: Russia, Ukraine, and the Conflict in Donbas,” Post-Soviet Affairs, Vol. 34, No. 4, 2018.


53 Welt, 2020, p. 20.
detainee exchanges since 2017. And Russia has been providing aid to the non-government-controlled areas, as called for by Minsk II, although observers express doubts about how much of the aid reaches the people in need.54 Through the Trilateral Contact Group, in July 2019, the parties agreed and implemented the most extensive ceasefire yet, even if it did not hold indefinitely.55

To be sure, Russia’s willingness to cooperate on ending the conflict is mixed at best. Russia has not fulfilled parts of the Minsk agreements, which at least non-Russian observers largely agree are under Russian control—in particular, a durable ceasefire.56 Numerous observers have accused Russia of subversion and deception in its approach to the conflict: For example, while the Russian government delivers aid to Luhansk and Donetsk, there are reports of concealing weapons in the aid supplies.57 Russia’s use of extensive information warfare and subversion patently seeks to undermine the Kyiv government and exacerbate divisions within Ukrainian society, which obstruct the country’s prospects of stabilization. Russia has taken steps that suggest it is not prepared to allow Ukraine to assert control over the Donbas—notably, by providing expedited Russian citizenship to nearly 200,000 residents of eastern Ukraine.58 And Russian conduct in negotiations, punctuated by accusations against Ukraine and other participants in the process, does not convey a genuine desire for diplomatic progress.59 On the whole, Russian conduct creates doubts that Moscow is serious about conflict resolution in the near term.

Nonetheless, a degree of rhetorical alignment and the apparent willingness to negotiate and act on select points should put conflict resolution based on Minsk II within the trade space. In 2018, Volker claimed that in spite of all the disagreements between the United States and Russia, resolving the conflict in eastern Ukraine “is one [issue] where, at least on paper, there is a basis on which we could potentially make progress,” because “Russia, by signing the Minsk agreements, has affirmed Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.”60 However, to have a chance to lead to cooperation, the bargaining process would require the United States or its allies to induce Russia or Ukraine—and most likely both—to back down from their current positions. While signals from both Russia and Ukraine on acceptable terms have varied somewhat, their positions remain largely incompatible.

57 Arutunyan, 2019.
None of the diplomatic engagements thus far have produced particularly encouraging results. The Ukraine track engagements between Volker and Vladimir Surkov, his Russian counterpart, had limited results. The Normandy Format meeting in 2019, brokered by France and Germany, appeared to signal the greatest possibility for progress to date, with Zelensky’s willingness to sign onto the Steinmeier formula. The Steinmeier formula seeks to resolve the ambiguities in Minsk II and proposes the special status for the Donbas regions to come into effect on a temporary basis at the close of local elections; if international observers then deem the elections to be free and fair, special status would become permanent. The announcement of Zelensky’s agreement, however, was met with protests amid concerns that Russia will manipulate the process or refuse to withdraw forces after elections. Ukraine has not withdrawn its acceptance of the Steinmeier formula, but Russia and Ukraine still disagree on its interpretation and the terms of Minsk II. In particular, even as he endorsed the Steinmeier formula, Zelensky emphasized that Ukraine would not accept elections in the Donbas prior to Russian withdrawal from the territories. Kyiv’s position reverses the order stipulated in Minsk II, and Russia has thus far rejected such an approach. This makes any breakthrough compromises in the near future unlikely, as a 2019 analysis by a Russian think tank, headed by an expert reported to be connected to Surkov, concluded. And as long-time Russia experts explain, because Moscow views control over Ukraine’s foreign policy as non-negotiable, it is highly unlikely to accept any terms that return to Ukraine its control to seek integration with the West. These dynamics are continuing to play over the course of 2020


62 The written communique issued as a result of the meeting stipulates that the parties “consider it necessary to incorporate the ‘Steinmeier formula’ into Ukrainian law” (President of Ukraine, 2019). Many commentators interpreted this as an encouraging sign for conflict resolution, see, e.g., Minakov, 2019; and International Crisis Group, "A Possible Step Toward Peace in Eastern Ukraine," October 9, 2019.


65 As a Russian think tank connected to Surkov assessed months after the declarations of the 2019 Normandy Format remain unfulfilled, notwithstanding periodic fluctuations in the dynamics of negotiations, Russia and Ukraine have not changed their views on the provisions pertaining to political settlement (Center for Political Conjunctures, “Донбасский кейс [Donbas Case],” June 16, 2020). For detail on the Center for Political Conjunctures, see Yelena Mukhametshina, "Близкие к Суркову эксперты назвали четыре сценария российско-украинских отношений [Experts Close to Surkov Identify Four Scenarios for Russian-Ukrainian Relations]," Vedomosti, April 22, 2019.


68 Center for Political Conjunctures, "Минские соглашения: итоги пяти лет реализации и перспективы на будущее [Minsk Agreements: Results from Five Years of Realization and Perspective for the Future]," December 16, 2019.

to date: Among other contested issues, Moscow’s point men on negotiations have pressured Kyiv to accept representatives of Donetsk and Luhansk (rather than Russia itself) as counterparties to negotiations, and parties have stumbled in attempts to make progress on the contested question of “special status” for the Donbas.\textsuperscript{70}

The United States’ own position on the Steinmeier formula is not entirely clear, but in 2019 then–Special Envoy Volker stated that it could only be applied after free and fair elections—which would only be possible if Russia were to withdraw forces and disarm its proxies, as Zelensky maintains.\textsuperscript{71} Volker also supported Ukraine’s earlier call for UN peacekeepers and strongly suggested that Russia is the party whose behavior and position must change for Minsk II to be a basis for conflict resolution.\textsuperscript{72} Generally, the United States has supported Ukraine’s positions: For example, addressing both Crimea and the Donbas, then–Deputy Secretary of State John J. Sullivan said in 2018 that “[w]e will never accept trading one region of Ukraine for another. We will never make a deal about Ukraine without Ukraine.”\textsuperscript{73} In sum, the United States appears to be less willing than France and Germany to put pressure on both sides to resolve disagreements.

In view of the divergent positions of Minsk II and the Steinmeier formula, the potential for a U.S.-Russia engagement to lead to cooperative outcomes on resolving the Ukraine conflict is rather low at present. It should not, however, be discounted from the menu of U.S. options for engaging Russia. As noted, positions on particular points have shifted somewhat with shifting personalities at the helm of decisionmaking. The change in leadership from Poroshenko to Zelensky has been important on the Ukrainian side, as Zelensky and his administration are likely the most amenable to negotiating a resolution to the conflict.\textsuperscript{74} On the Russian side, some observers have suggested that the shift of the Ukraine portfolio to Dmitry Kozak from Surkov might inaugurate a somewhat more flexible approach (even if such has not materialized to date).\textsuperscript{75} Changing domestic politics on all sides might shift positions as well.


\textsuperscript{72} See Volker, 2018.


\textsuperscript{75} Stanovaya, 2019.
Moreover, the prospects of an alternative basis for stabilizing the Donbas other than Minsk II is highly unlikely. As one analyst reasonably concludes, after conceding that Minsk II is flawed and advantages Russia, “all relevant actors should remember how unlikely it is that a new agreement could be reached—still less a better one—and how dangerous it would be if there were none at all.”76 Thus, this narrow space for bargaining should not be discounted.

Limiting the Worst Consequences of the Conflict and Reducing Tensions and Escalation Risks

Yet other proposals for cooperative approaches aim at results more modest than the full implementation of Minsk II or a comprehensive political settlement. Although these steps themselves would not end the conflict, and thus are not a replacement for Minsk II or equivalent, there is likely space for cooperation on limiting the most acute consequences of the conflict for the affected populations and reducing tensions between the parties so as to create a more favorable climate for conflict resolution and manage the risk of unintentional conflict or escalation. Experts such as Dmitri Trenin opine that such measures, limited to maintaining a stable ceasefire that “allow[s] for humanitarian and economic exchanges across the line of contact” are likely, but also exhaust what is possible.77 The Euro-Atlantic Security Leadership Group (EASLG), an independent and informal group of former and current officials and experts of Euro-Atlantic states, developed a set of 12 concrete “steps” in this vein.78 These steps are explicitly not intended as a comprehensive political resolution of the conflict: They seek to reduce harm from the conflict and, as the EASLG states, “help reduce tensions between Russia and the West and help build a sustainable architecture of mutual security in the Euro-Atlantic region.”79

The proposals were developed by dozens of experts—including Igor Ivanov, the former Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Andrey Kortunov, the Director General of the influential Russian International Affairs Council.80 The proposal is a result of considerable and broad-reaching consultations and has also gathered more than 40 signatories across the Euro-

Atlantic region, including eminent former military and foreign policy leaders. Although the proposal has proven controversial, even prominent critics agree that a subset of the recommendations are “constructive and would serve as confidence-building measures while alleviating some of the misery this Russia-Ukraine conflict has inflicted on the people of the Donbas.” These less controversial recommendations include security steps such as restoring the Joint Centre for Control and Coordination, which was established by Ukraine and Russia to focus on a ceasefire and stabilization of the contact line but which Russia left in 2017; establishing a military-to-military crisis management dialogue among Russia, Ukraine, Germany, and France; and improving unrestricted access and freedom of movement for civilians in eastern Ukraine, including for the OSCE monitors. Humanitarian steps focus on the problems of missing persons and demining initiatives, and economic steps include proposals for a starting point for reconstruction of the Donbas addressing radiological hazards. These steps largely build on the record of prior or similar endeavors, on which all involved parties have already attempted some cooperation.

Proposals that proved more controversial included an exploration of a free-trade area for Ukraine with both the EU and Russia, setting out a road map for partial sanctions relief on the way to Minsk implementation, establishing a broader dialogue on Euro-Atlantic security, and launching a national dialogue about Ukrainian identity. All of these proposals would require some retrenchment from the dominant understanding of U.S. objectives (as articulated in the relevant subsection above) and are thus likely outside the cooperation trade space. Insofar as the less controversial measures could help reduce the risk of escalation or spillover of the conflict beyond Ukraine and insofar as they avoid the core disagreements about resolving the conflict in the Donbas, they should be in the interests of all involved. To the extent that the United States is able to participate or support such initiatives, such steps are likely within the trade space for potential cooperation.

Table 7.1 summarizes our assessment of the theoretically available cooperation space in terms of the stakes for the two U.S. competitors, the rhetorical alignment between each and the United States, and their willingness to cooperate.

Obstacles

Even if bargaining based on the Minsk II agreements is within the plausible trade space, the prospects for such bargaining leading to robust and sustainable cooperation are dim. This is due to numerous obstacles, some of which pertain to the intractability of the conflict itself, irrespective of U.S. participation, and some to the dynamics attending U.S. involvement in conflict resolution.

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81 See Browne et al., February 2020.
83 Browne et al., February 2020, p. 1.
84 See Atlantic Council, 2020; and Munich Response, 2020.
First, as with most contentious issues on the European continent and beyond, issues of trust bedevil conflict resolution. The United States, and other parties to the negotiations, do not fully trust Russia to comply with any agreed-upon terms that Russia finds disadvantageous, based on prior conduct we note above in connection with Russia’s mixed track record on resolving the Donbas conflict. The trust deficit goes both ways. Moscow, for its part, does not trust the United States or European powers to act as honest brokers of the conflict. For example, it views conditioning sanctions on implementation of Minsk II a thin cover for continuing to punish Russia, because Moscow views Kyiv as the party holding up the agreement.85

Second, the extent of political will in Washington at present to participate in conflict settlement is debatable at best, in part because of audience costs. Owing to the unfortunate centrality of Ukraine to recent U.S. domestic politics, Washington has largely curtailed action on Ukraine since Volker resigned.86 Any significant policy initiative with regard to Ukraine risks backlash from varied audiences. The impeachment of Trump centered on allegations that he illegally pressured and sought assistance from Ukraine to win reelection by investigating his then-likely challenger for the presidency, Joe Biden.87 Combined with the widespread perception that Trump was unduly solicitous of Putin, any visible initiative vis-à-vis Ukraine will be subject to intense scrutiny and likely mired in controversy. In the event that Joe Biden wins the presidential elections in November 2020, in view of the association created by the impeachment proceedings between him and Ukraine, irrespective of the facts of the matter, the probability of controversy will likely remain.88

Third, the presence of third parties complicates prospects. Ukraine’s preferences are obviously paramount to any cooperative solution. Although Zelensky came to power on the promise to end the war with Russia, strong pushback from domestic constituencies has made the prospects for fulfilling this promise tenuous. Minsk II provisions are deeply unpopular in

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85 See interviews with Russian officials, policymakers, and experts in International Crisis Group, 2020, p. 6.
86 See Kurt Volker’s own statement (Volker, 2020).
88 As noted in Chapter One, research for this study was conducted between September 2019 and September 2020.
Ukraine, and Zelensky has had to retrench. Zelensky’s acceptance of the Steinmeier formula, even with the caveats noted above, prompted significant protest. Thus, the draft law that Zelensky submitted to Rada in December 2019 dealing with the status of the Donetsk People’s Republic and Luhansk People’s Republic (unrecognized quasi-states located in the Donbas region) fell short of what is demanded by Minsk II.89 And Zelensky’s concession in March 2020 to the Russian demand to enter into direct negotiations with the two separatist People’s Republics prompted backlash. Insofar as Ukraine’s prospects of joining Western institutions are key to Russia’s behavior even on measures short of a comprehensive political settlement, Ukraine’s preferences are a stumbling block. Although Ukrainian politics are liable to remain turbulent, many Ukrainian leaders express their deep desire to continue en route to NATO and EU membership.90 In sum, for conflict resolution to center on Minsk II in its current form, Western powers would have to pressure Ukraine to accept unpopular terms.91

France and Germany, who have assumed a leading role in the process, do not fully share U.S. preferences or approach. As noted, both of these powers are likely more willing to pressure both sides to reach an agreement and adopt a kind of flexibility toward the Russian position that would be untenable for the United States—at least at present. Moreover, France and Germany would not necessarily welcome a more active U.S. role in the process (at least at present).92 And more broadly, some NATO members, including France and Germany, are not as overtly supportive of Ukraine’s NATO aspirations.93

Fourth, resolving the conflict in the Donbas is of utmost urgency to Ukraine. Unfortunately, it appears to command no such sense of immediacy for any other state actors involved. As noted, a simmering conflict is preferable for Russia to settlement that entails an unacceptable degree of compromise, and Russia does not feel pressured to change the status quo in the short term. The issue certainly commands no urgency for Washington. As a result of entanglement with U.S. domestic politics, Washington has scaled back its support for the Ukraine track process, leaving Volker’s position unfilled, with little progress made since.94

Fifth, issue linkages of conflict resolution with the broader standoff between Russia and the West is a big obstacle to cooperation above the most minimal measures. For both Russia and the United States (and of course, Ukraine), an agreement on conflict resolution in the Donbas is about more than that conflict. And both sides tend to view any concession as a potential open door to further demands and pressure. For Russia, as we explain in the equi-

89 Allan, 2020, p. 15.
91 See Center for Political Conjunctures, 2019.
94 Amy Mackinnon and Robbie Gramer, “State Department Expected to Scrap Post of Special Envoy to Ukraine,” Foreign Policy, November 7, 2019.
ties section, at stake is control over what it considers its zone of privileged interests, which is threatened by U.S. and Western efforts to contain and roll back Russia’s influence. As a result, Russia will not cooperate in any way if it believes that a strong and functional Ukraine, integrated into Western institutions, will emerge as a result. Russia therefore will be loath to delink parameters of conflict settlement from broader stakes in Ukraine’s future. As Russian analyst Stanovaya concludes, “Whatever other concessions Russia can make, its red line will remain firm: The Kremlin will continue to hold a political foothold in the Donbass that will provide it with leverage to influence Ukraine’s foreign policy. And even smaller concessions are off the table as long as Russia fears a hawkish West.” This means that even the Russia-favoring Minsk II agreement may not be sufficient: For example, the Donetsk and Luhansk representatives made an additional demand, widely understood to be pursuant to Moscow preferences, that a “neutrality clause” be adopted into the Ukrainian constitution, ruling out NATO accession.

Many in the United States view Russian aggression in Ukraine as just one front in its “hybrid war against Ukraine, Europe, and the United States.” In this view, concessions to Russia—even if narrow—risk emboldening its broader hybrid war efforts. Thus, the United States may be unwilling to wholly delink conflict resolution in Donbas from broader issues (notably, the status of Crimea, and Ukraine’s freedom to choose its strategic orientation) or otherwise pressure Ukraine to accept less advantageous terms. To some extent, this is also true of some other European countries.

Finally, even if Washington were to summon political will to refocus on Ukraine, legal constraints limit the amount of leverage it can bring to bear in bargaining. Both Brussels and Washington have claimed that sanctions are tied to Russia’s fulfillment of the Minsk II accords, but the U.S. representation is not wholly credible. The promise of lifting sanctions...
tions is the most obvious lever of influence, but not a credible one because the U.S. Congress codified sanctions into national legislation (CAATSA), and because Ukraine-related sanctions are intermingled with sanctions for other causes (e.g., Russian interference in U.S. elections). And EU sanctions are insufficient in themselves, because EU actors will continue abiding by U.S. sanctions, as Moscow learned from watching the Iran experience. As Trenin comments,

Guided by the memories of the Jackson-Vanik amendment limiting trade relations with countries that restricted human rights, which survived the end of the Soviet Union by just over two decades, Russians believe that the current sanctions are ‘forever,’ meaning that the current generation of politicians will never see the end of them.

Second-Order Effects of Cooperation

Potential U.S.-Russia cooperation on resolving the conflict in the Donbas is unlikely to have a serious impact on China. However, both positive and negative externalities should be considered in weighing U.S. policy options.

Negotiating over this issue area is a challenging proposition, and the implications of engagement—and of failure to engage—should be taken into account. Russia’s aggressive actions and the crisis in Ukraine are at the root of the rapid deterioration of relations between Russia and the United States and the West. As a pair of experts from both sides point out, “Moscow and Washington need to remember that the fate of their relationship is tied to the Ukraine crisis. If negotiations on Ukraine remain stalled, we should expect the broader relationship to continue to deteriorate.” Other prominent experts likewise emphasize the positive spillover value of even modest steps on issues where the United States and Russia have fundamental disagreement such as Ukraine, emphasizing “the cumulative effect that measured and phased steps forward can have on the overall relationship, and in turn the opportunity an improving relationship creates for further steps forward.” In sum, expert assessments foresee likely, if dispersed, positive externalities from progress on Ukraine for other issue areas.

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102 Center for Political Conjunctures, 2019. Charap and Kortunov (2019, p. 3) observe that The Iranian case is watched closely in Moscow, and the evidence so far has undercut the factions in the Russian political establishment lobbying for some kind of reconciliation with Kyiv. Their opponents can justifiably claim that EU sanctions relief would be essentially meaningless unless the United States were onboard.

103 Trenin, 2020; Gottemoeller et al., 2020.

104 Charap and Kortunov, 2019, p. 3.

105 Gottemoeller et al., 2020.
At the same time, significant trade-offs are highly likely with any form of cooperation with Russia on Ukraine. Commentators who are opposed to such cooperation suggest that it appeases Russia and legitimizes Russia’s claims to Crimea and sphere of influence in the near abroad, further emboldening Moscow’s aggressive behavior. Diplomatic isolation was one of the consequences that the international community sought to impose on Russia for Ukraine, but also for a host of other actions, including interference in other countries’ domestic politics and assassinations. To the extent that engaging Russia on conflict resolution appears to normalize relations, it might create the sense that the United States and its allies are willing to close their eyes to the former’s unacceptable behavior. Moreover, while narrowing focus to tractable issues related to the Donbas conflict may facilitate progress, it may also send an unintended signal—that the United States will tolerate further aggressive actions, such as the Russian military buildup in Crimea—to U.S. allies and partners along the Black Sea, as well as to Russia itself.

Conclusion

U.S.-Russia cooperation with regard to Ukraine’s future is both very difficult, because of the narrow trade space and multiple significant obstacles, and necessary. U.S. and/or European participation in conflict settlement is vital: As the International Crisis Group aptly observes, Ukraine alone “lacks both sufficient carrots and sufficient sticks to independently change Russia’s cost-benefit analysis and render peace preferable to war.” Western participation in the form of pressure on Russia—notably, stricter and broader sanctions, and diplomatic isolation—has not, to date, ended the conflict. In the meantime, Ukraine’s east remains the site of the only shooting war in Europe, with casualties mounting even during relatively quiet periods.

At the highest strategic level, the visions for Ukraine’s future of the two states with greatest equities in the domain—the United States and Russia—are mutually incompatible. That is, Russia and the United States are not likely to agree on Ukraine’s future latitude to pursue NATO or EU membership, or Ukraine’s freedom of action in its foreign policy more gener-
ally. Cooperation on comprehensive conflict resolution is possible but not likely in view of the differences in positions and Russia’s preference for the simmering of the conflict over its cessation on terms that deprive Russia of leverage. The obstacles identified above do not support excessive optimism about the possibility of cooperation on conflict resolution in Ukraine in the near term. To make any progress on conflict resolution, the United States and/or European states would have to pressure Ukraine to accept provisions of Minsk II that are presently very unpopular in that country. For the United States to have a venue to affect negotiations and seize the little space for cooperation that exists, it would need to revive the Ukraine track—or explicitly involve another forum (e.g., Russia-NATO Council). For the United States to be able to successfully bargain with Russia, it needs a source of leverage other than the lifting of currently imposed sanctions. For this reason, some experts have called for restoring flexibility to the U.S. sanctions regime, which would make it easier to incentivize concrete cooperative steps by Russia.\(^{110}\) None of these developments are very likely at present however, because of audience costs, a perceived lack of urgency, and diverging preferences of other third parties participating in negotiations around the Donbas conflict. And Russia is unlikely to make nontrivial compromises without a credible promise of anything valuable in return (whether that is sanctions relief or credible guards against Ukraine’s future westward course).\(^{111}\) In the near term, then, cooperation on narrower subsidiary goals of limiting hostilities and the most acute consequences of the conflict and constraining the potential for the conflict to spillover—such as some of those proposed by the EASLG—is plausible, although not presently being pursued. In the somewhat longer term however, the obstacles may be overcome or remediated.

We emphasize that even the best-case scenario for cooperation on conflict resolution would not assure for Ukraine security and stability in the future. We share the assessment by the International Crisis Group (and numerous other experts) that for “Ukraine-specific solutions to be sustainable, they will need to be paired with and bolstered by geostrategic progress involving not just Kyiv and Moscow, but the EuroAtlantic community as a whole.”\(^{112}\)

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111 See, e.g., the prognosis of a think tank connected to the Kremlin: Center for Political Conjunctures, 2019.

112 International Crisis Group, 2020, p. 5.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Middle East Stability and Peace Processes

Although the Middle East is an arena of competition for influence, stability in the Middle East is valued by the United States and both of its competitors—even if the three diverge in their diagnoses of the key threats to stability and peace. In this chapter, we investigate the extent to which there is space for cooperation on advancing stability and peace processes to some of the region’s most acute or intractable conflicts. Focusing on the prospects for resolving the Syrian civil war and postconflict reconstruction and supporting the Arab-Israeli peace and resolving the Israel-Palestine issue, we find that space for cooperation exists. However, the space is relatively limited, characterized by several obstacles, and poses a mixture of potential second-order effects for regional developments, both positive and negative.

In this chapter, we first review the U.S., Chinese, and Russian equities or interests with regard to select issues bearing on stability and the fate of the peace processes in the Middle East, to determine where there exists at least rhetorical alignment among competitors. Next, we identify specific areas of cooperation in the space where interests are aligned, review the evidence that Russia or China are willing to negotiate and cooperate on issues of overlapping interests, and identify obstacles to actualizing cooperation. Finally, we identify salient second-order effects of pursuing cooperation.

Understanding the Equities

U.S. Equities

A key U.S. strategic objective in the Middle East is promoting stability across the broader region. Promotion of stability prominently includes support for the Arab-Israeli peace process and bringing an end to the Syrian civil war while also promoting the security of U.S. partners and maintaining a favorable balance of influence in the region. (To be sure, the U.S. interest in Middle East stability is implicated by other conflicts and sources of instability in the region—notably, the threat of violent extremism. This study, however, is limited to the

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1 We do not address every issue relevant to stability and peace processes; instead, we focus on the most salient sources of instability that raise the question of cooperation with Russia and/or China.
most salient conflicts with regard to which the United States supports peace processes, with a companion report addressing the important objective of countering violent extremism.\(^2\)

The United States was the first country to recognize a sovereign Israeli state, in 1948, and broadly views Israel its first and foremost partner in the Middle East. As the U.S. Department of State declares, Israel “has long been, and remains, America’s most reliable partner in the Middle East,” and to promote Israeli security, the United States provides more than $3 billion in foreign military financing, annually—the largest such program in the world.\(^3\) Accordingly, the United States has sought to maintain peace agreements between Israel and other Middle Eastern states. The United States has been one of the key international actors in attempting to diplomatically resolve the Israel-Palestine issue. In 2002 and following the Second Intifada, for instance, the United States formed the so-called Middle East Quartet—comprising the United States, Russia, the EU, and the United Nations—which produced a roadmap for resolving the Israel-Palestine issue and has worked to promote the two-state solution. Under the Obama administration, then–Secretary of State John Kerry sponsored an intense, nine-month series of negotiations between representatives from Israel and the Palestinian Authority in an attempt to rejuvenate the peace process and advance the two-state solution.\(^4\) More recently, the Trump administration promoted its own path toward resolving the Israel-Palestine issue, and in January 2020 released its Peace to Prosperity plan.\(^5\)

The United States has also pursued and supported a diplomatic resolution to the long-running conflict in Syria, ever since Assad’s regime began violently suppressing initially peaceful protests and the country descended into civil war. Since 2012, the United States has served as a leading participant of the so-called Geneva Process—the UN-sponsored forum to promote a political transition of the regime and diplomatic resolution to the Syrian conflict. U.S.-supported diplomatic initiatives, such as the December 2015 UNSCR 2254, failed to engender the desired political and constitutional reforms or lasting cessation of hostilities. Nevertheless, the United States continues to support a diplomatic resolution to the conflict, particularly one that ensures the gains made against ISIS by the United States and its Syrian partners. Indeed, in his 2019 CENTCOM Posture Statement, General Joseph L. Votel reiterated his desire to “negotiate a secure future for the people of northeast Syria liberated from ISIS,” affirming that “a political resolution is key to the lasting defeat of ISIS.”\(^6\)

emphasized the need to bring the long-running conflict to a close to address Syria’s humanitarian crisis, and he highlighted U.S. humanitarian support to over 4 million Syrians.\(^7\)

The United States has sought to leverage its military presence in eastern Syria to influence the conflict and steer the long-running civil war toward a settlement that provides for displaced populations to “return home and rebuild their lives in safety.”\(^8\) However, as the regime has consolidated its hold on the majority of the country, forcing Assad’s removal from power via military means and providing support to the Syrian opposition is no longer a viable option. The United States’ reduced and uncertain presence in eastern Syria also limits Washington’s capacity to shape the resolution of the Syrian conflict.\(^9\) The United States’ ability to inhibit the flow of desperately needed reconstruction funds might give Washington a more substantial form of leverage and influence over Syria’s future.\(^10\)

The United States does not want Syria to remain broken or descend into another bout of conflict and chaos, a breeding ground for extremists and source of instability for the rest of the region. However, from Washington’s perspective, Syria’s conflict cannot be resolved and the country rebuilt without addressing its cause, Assad’s bloody and repressive regime. Thus, the United States has taken measures to apply pressures on the regime: The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, which provides for some of the most expansive sanctions against both Syrian and international commercial enterprises seeking to conduct business in Syria, embodies an acute mechanism for pressuring the regime and its international backers to undertake political, social, and economic reforms. The Caesar Act also includes a list of criteria—including the de facto cessation of hostilities, release of all political prisoners, cooperation with human rights investigators, and pursuit of accountability for perpetrators or war crimes in Syria—that, if met, would allow for the partial or total suspension of the sanctions regime.\(^11\) The sanctions aim to further isolate Damascus and inhibit any foreign investment—be it from Russia, Iran, China, or regional Arab powers—in commercial sectors vital for Syria’s reconstruction and revitalization.\(^12\)

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\(^7\) Votel, 2019, p. 25.

\(^8\) NSS, 2017, p. 49.


Chinese Equities

Overall, because of its heavy dependence on energy resources from the region, China does have some stake in Middle East stability and its peace processes—stakes that we assess to be at a *medium level of importance* to China. China's statements show a shared interest in stability and, therefore, some interests in peace processes. However, China is manifestly uninterested in endeavors that would maintain U.S. influence and strengthen its partnerships in the region, seeking instead to undermine them, which means that the *rhetorical alignment of its public goals with those of the United States is mixed*. In the context of U.S.-China competition, the Middle East overall represents an opportunity for Beijing to increase its influence in a traditional region of U.S. dominance and access key energy resources that it needs for economic growth.

Insofar as conflict and endemic state fragility threatening its commercial interests in the region, China supports Middle East stability and ongoing peace processes—but has different visions for the solutions than the United States. According to its 2016 policy paper, China supports “seeking political resolution to hotspot issues, and promoting peace and stability in the Middle East.” However, Beijing believes much, though not all, of the instability in the region can be blamed on the United States, including its role in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan along with its support for regime change in Syria and Libya. Additionally, China believes that instability is a symptom of underdevelopment. Because of this, Beijing generally believes that less U.S. involvement and more Chinese economic engagement in the Middle East would enhance stability.

China understands the costs of instability in the Middle East, even if it does not publicly pronounce on these issues. China’s actions, however, have shown that various sources of instability are sufficiently concerning to warrant the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA’s) overseas presence in recent years. The PLA’s first continuous overseas operation in decades came in 2008 when it deployed a PLAN counterpiracy task force to the Gulf of Aden, and its first major overseas operation came in 2011, when it evacuated Chinese citizens from Libya during the civil war there. In 2015, the PLAN evacuated almost 1,000 people from Yemen as the country broke into civil war, shortly after the PLAN supported the elimination of Syria’s

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15 This is also very likely because the region (and other powers) tolerated a Chinese military presence there. For further discussion of China’s growing security role in the region, see Joel Wuthnow, *The PLA Beyond Asia: China’s Growing Military Presence in the Red Sea Region*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, January 2020.

16 We address the counterpiracy operations in depth as a freedom of navigation issue in a companion volume to this report (Cohen, Kepe, et al., 2023).
chemical weapons in 2014 amid its civil war.\footnote{“Chinese Navy Completes Escort Mission of Transporting Syria’s Chemical Weapons,” 

China’s degree of interest in the peace processes that are at the top of U.S. attention—Israel-Palestine and Syria—is moderate. The CCP has stated that the Israel-Palestine issue is “the root cause of the turmoil in the Middle East.”\footnote{Andrew Scobell and Alireza Nader, \textit{China in the Middle East: The Wary Dragon}, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1229-A, 2016, p. 6.} And as noted, China’s economic interests would be threatened were armed conflict to break out. Yet China’s involvement in the peace process has been negligible. China has proposed some general peace plans, but they lack specific details. Historically, Beijing has supported the Palestinian cause and provided military support to various Palestinian armed groups, and China recognized the State of Palestine in 1988. Conversely, China did not establish formal ties with Israel until 1992, and, ever since, China’s official policy has been the establishment of a sovereign Palestine. In July 2017, Xi proposed a limited four-point approach promoting a political settlement of the Israeli-Palestine issue, broadly calling for a resolution via development and cooperation between the Palestinians and Israel.\footnote{Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Xi Jinping Holds Talks with President Mahmoud Abbas of Palestine: The Two Heads of State Stress to Promote the Comprehensive Development of China-Palestine Friendly Cooperative Cause,” July 18, 2017. This updates an earlier 2014 Chinese proposal: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “China Raises Five-Point Peace Proposal on Settling Israel-Palestine Conflict,” August 4, 2014a.} Xi proposed a China-Israel-Palestine trilateral dialogue mechanism shortly afterward—neither of which has done much to surge the peace process forward.\footnote{Stivachtis, ed., 2018, p. 82.} Overall, Xi reiterated China’s position that it “firmly supports the two-state solution and the establishment of an independent State of Palestine, enjoying full sovereignty on the basis of the 1967 borders and with East Jerusalem as its capital.”\footnote{Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2017. This communiqué exhibited the same language as the 2016 white paper: State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2016.}

While having largely taken a back seat on Syria-related issues, China has generally aligned with Russia, particularly in the UN.\footnote{Giorgio Cafiero, “China Plays the Long Game on Syria,” Middle East Institute, February 10, 2020.} China supports a political settlement without outside interference—which refers to U.S. pressure against Assad—putting it at odds with the U.S.
approach. Specifically, Foreign Minister Wang Yi in January 2020 stated that China believes that

> the political transition process in Syria must be led by the Syrian people, and the future of Syria, ultimately, can only be decided by the Syrian people themselves . . . without being partial to any particular party, to create favorable conditions and a necessary environment for a political transition plan and avoid imposing any political solution from the outside.”

China has pledged to support Syrian reconstruction. As Xi said in 2019, “China stands ready to participate in Syria’s reconstruction within its own ability and do the best [it can] to help the Syrian people resume their normal life and production soon.” Nevertheless, not a single expert we interviewed believed that China would contribute substantive reconstruction funds for Syria, citing Beijing’s wariness of rampant corruption in Syria and the myriad armed actors—both affiliated and unaffiliated with the regime—that hinder trade in the country and would impede Beijing’s return on investment. Thus far, Beijing has committed little concrete funding for reconstruction, and its contributions are likely to be in the form of loans, trade, and other revenue-generating engagements, not aid. In this, China’s approach to Syrian reconstruction may echo its approach to other reconstruction efforts elsewhere: Beijing has shown a willingness to support reconstruction efforts in Iraq, but it does so through the lens of investment, establishing an “oil for reconstruction” program whereby Iraq provides China with 100,000 barrels per day in exchange for Chinese firms conducting reconstruction efforts in Iraq.

**Russian Equities**

Because of Russia’s involvement in Syria, its concern about violent extremism and terrorism, and a broader resurgence of interest in the Middle East driven in part by the goal of countering U.S. influence, Russia does have a considerable stake in Middle Eastern stability—which we assess to be at a medium level of importance. Although in competition with the United States and its allies for influence, Russia is in at least mixed rhetorical alignment with the United States with regard to interest in stability broadly and the salient peace processes addressed here.

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As noted in Chapter Two, Russia’s overarching goals in the Middle East are building regional influence and asserting the role of a regional power broker. Russia’s official strategic documents express a general interest in stability in the Middle East, including support for peace processes in the region. Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept declares its aspiration for “a meaningful contribution to stabilizing the situation in the Middle East and North Africa,” which includes “promot[ing] political and diplomatic settlement of conflicts in regional States while respecting their sovereignty and territorial integrity and the right to self-determination without outside interference.”

Moscow’s interest in stability is rooted in several key national security and foreign policy interests. Russia has serious concerns about extremism and terrorism and is concerned about the spillover of Middle Eastern conflicts into Russia itself. Moscow is also deeply preoccupied with instability rooted in “external interference”—that is, the alleged Western instigation of events such as the Arab Spring, as well as Western military interventions such as in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya. Moscow sees Western-backed regime change as intimately tied to the threat of terrorism and broader Middle Eastern stability and so has declared its support for “political and diplomatic settlement of conflicts in regional States while respecting their sovereignty and territorial integrity and the right to self-determination without outside interference.”

In that light, Russia’s interest in Middle Eastern stability encompasses containing current conflicts as well as an ambition to undermine Western influence in the region and prevent the United States and the West from interfering with standing regimes—a tendency that Russia views as threatening to its own regime.

Russia’s declared interest in resolving Middle East conflicts includes the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Russia declares its intention to “strive to achieve a comprehensive, fair and lasting resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in all its aspects consistent with international law.” That is, Russia supports the two-state solution and supports UN-led Israeli-Palestinian talks. Russia is part of the Middle East Quartet, along with the UN, EU, and the United States, formed in 2002 to help mediate peace negotiations and support Palestinian development. Moscow’s ambition to be in the position of broker is supported by maintaining relationships with all involved parties.

Russia restored relations with Israel in 1991, after the Soviet-era break of relations following the 1967 Six-Day War, but the relationship became particularly important after Putin’s rise to power and has generally improved since—and in particular, since Russia’s intervention

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29 For discussion, see Cohen, Kepe, et al., 2023; see also Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019, pp. 4–5.
33 For example, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Deputy Foreign Minister and Special Presidential Representative for the Middle East and Africa Mikhail Bogdanov’s Interview with Egyptian Newspaper Al-Ahram, Published on June 9, 2020,” June 9, 2020a.
in Syria. Putin became the first Russian president to visit Israel in 2005 and has referred to Israel as a “special state,” and the Kremlin has consistently reiterated its commitment to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian and Arab-Israeli issues. As Russia expert Eugene Rumer observes, this relationship is “the most important development in Russia’s Middle East policy since the end of the Cold War.” Moscow has also cultivated ties with the Palestinians, and has attempted to push disparate Palestinian movements to unify, in order to facilitate negotiations.

Russia also has other interests that would not benefit from conflict involving Israel: Notably, it has economic and security interests in Egypt and Lebanon, which an all-out conflagration between either state and Israel would threaten. Renewed hostilities between Egypt and Israel—dormant since the 1978 signing of the U.S.-brokered Camp David Accords—is highly unlikely. However, clashes between Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) and Israel are a distinct possibility, given the two actors’ history of conflict and LH’s continued buildup of military capabilities, with Iranian support. Furthermore, such a conflict would almost certainly spill over into Syria, where LH is active and Iran is entrenching proxy armed groups on Israel’s northeastern border. Russia has an interest in preventing another large-scale conflict between Israel and Syria, which would further disrupt efforts to conclude Syria’s brutal civil war and would likely put Russian service members in harm’s way.

Russia also has a significant interest in ending the Syrian armed conflict. Since its intervention in 2015, Moscow has stabilized the Assad regime and provided critical air support to regime forces as they reclaim lost territory. Moscow’s direct intervention has given it considerable sway within the Syrian regime, its security apparatus, and sectors of the local economy.

34 Rumer concludes that the “view that ‘for Israel Putin is definitely the best person who ever sat in the Kremlin,’ as expressed by former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak, is apparently shared by many in the Israeli leadership,” which produced the steady improvement in relations between the two states (quoting “Putin as Bismarck: Ehud Barak on West’s Russia Blind Spots, the Middle East and More,” Russia Matters, November 28, 2016).


36 Rumer, 2019, p. 12.

37 For example, in February 2019, Moscow was hosting 12 Palestinian movements to help reconcile their divisions (Maxim A. Suchkov, “Intel: Why Russia’s Warming Ties with Israel May Lead Moscow to Embrace Trump’s Peace Plan,” Al-Monitor, January 30, 2020a).


Russia has been consistent in its support for a political settlement of the Syrian conflict, even as it intervened militarily:

Russia stands for a political settlement in the Syrian Arab Republic and the possibility for the people of Syria to determine their future based on the Geneva communiqué of June 30, 2012, statements by the International Syria Support Group and relevant UN Security Council resolutions. Russia supports the unity, independence and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic as a secular, democratic and pluralistic State with all ethnic and religious groups living in peace and security and enjoying equal rights and opportunities.40

Although hostilities on the ground have not been extinguished, numerous actors—Russia foremost among them—are attempting to negotiate Syria’s political future, which is linked to the state’s ability to recover from the immense economic damage that the country has sustained. As Aleksandr Aksenenok, Russia’s former ambassador and current vice president of the Russian International Affairs Council, observed, “a new military reality”—that is, regime victory and reassertion of sovereignty—“cannot be sustainable without economic reconstruction and the development of a political system that will rest on a truly inclusive approach and international consent.”41 Thus, Russia’s efforts to influence the course of Syria’s future involves reconstruction.

What Moscow seeks is an internationally accepted government in Syria—and the international assistance for reconstruction that would come with it.42 Rebuilding Syria is important to Russia because it hopes to continue benefiting from Syria militarily and economically, seeking a role for Russian companies in reconstruction projects.43 Moscow has made it clear that it seeks Western participation in Syria’s reconstruction, including the United States. And Russia has criticized Western nations for their conditional positions on the issue. For example, Lavrov has claimed the Western position to be “counterproductive,” contrary to international legal norms, and harmful to the Syrian refugees who are returning or would like to return to the country.44 At the same time, Moscow has approached governments around the world to invest in Syria—including a written proposal to the United States.45 Russia has also attempted to use the issue of refugee returns to attract Western interests—and to link the

42 Interview with U.S. think tank researcher, phone, May 1, 2020.
issue to the Western willingness to pay for reconstruction, with little success.\textsuperscript{46} However, how much resources and energy Russia is willing to devote to rebuilding Syria—especially without considerable international cooperation—is a very open question.\textsuperscript{47} Although Russia keeps up the campaign, it certainly understands that the United States and the West are unlikely to entertain paying for the reconstruction presided over by the Assad regime, without a political transition.\textsuperscript{48} Apart from Russia’s formal commitment to a political transition, there are circumstantial indications that at least some among Russia’s foreign policy elite may not be behind the perpetuation of Assad’s rule.\textsuperscript{49}

\section*{Space for Cooperation}

In our assessment, there is potential trade space for cooperation with Russia and, to a lesser extent, China on intersecting areas of interest—which include seeking a resolution to the Israel-Palestine issue, stabilizing and rebuilding Syria, and maintaining deconfliction channels with Russia. \textsuperscript{50}We emphasize that we do not here address the important issue of potential cooperation on countering terrorism and violent extremism in the region, which is addressed in a companion volume on the global commons.\textsuperscript{50} We assess willingness or potential for cooperation to be at the medium level for both countries, although we note that it is still relatively higher for Russia than China. However, whether the opportunities to cooperate may be seized is in large part contingent on future policy choices and future developments—notably, U.S. policy choices about how to pursue objectives on which there is some alignment with Russia and/or China.


\textsuperscript{47} Interview with Israeli think tank researcher, Tel Aviv, February 16, 2020; interview with Israeli diplomat, Jerusalem, February 17, 2020. See also Jones, 2020, p. 68.

\textsuperscript{48} Belenkaya, 2020.

\textsuperscript{49} Notably, a pessimistic assessment of Russia’s former ambassador to Syria, Aleksandr Aksenov, about the Assad regime’s ability to preside over a transition to a normal economy and arrest corruption, as well as a publication of material critical of al-Assad in a paper owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin:

In the course of military de-escalation it is becoming increasingly obvious that the regime is reluctant or unable to develop a system of government that can mitigate corruption and crime and go from a military economy to normal trade and economic relations. According to prominent Syrian economists, the central government in Damascus is failing to restore control over economic life in the more remote provinces (Aksenov, 2020).

For an American expert assessment of these signs, see Alexander Bick, “Assad the Spoiler: Russia’s Challenge in Syria,” Wilson Center, April 30, 2020.

\textsuperscript{50} Cohen, Kepe, et al., 2023.
Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process

All three powers share common strategic interests in the region related to stability, including rhetorical alignment in their support for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process; all three states also have interests in maintaining the relatively peaceful modus vivendi between Israel and its Arab neighbors, particularly Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria. And there is some evidence to conclude that each may be willing to cooperate, even if conditionally. Russia and, to a lesser extent, China have consistently displayed a willingness to negotiate with the United States on issues concerning Israel. When then-U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry undertook a year of shuttle diplomacy in an attempt to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian issue, China provided nominal political support. China has been willing to commit some resources toward Middle East stability in the past, even if modest and not in direct cooperation with the United States: Most significantly, China has contributed troops to UNIFIL since 2006, with 419 noncombat troops primarily deployed in southern Lebanon as of mid-2020. China has also appointed a special envoy for the Israeli-Palestine issue in 2002. According to some expert assessments, U.S.-China cooperation may still be at least possible: for example, Andrew Scobell and Ali-reza Nader have argued that although China seeks to balance against U.S. regional influence, it does not seek to oppose Washington, especially not through military means. Rather, China “seeks to cooperate with the United States because Beijing considers Washington a critical force for stability in the region.” However, Washington has not substantively engaged Beijing in recent years, so it is ultimately difficult to judge China’s willingness to bargain or cooperate on these issues further.

As for Russia, there is a history of cooperation between Moscow and Washington on efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian issue and Arab-Israeli conflict. For instance, U.S. President George H. W. Bush and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev co-hosted the 1991 Madrid Conference, which sought to “put an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict.” In 2003 and following the second Palestinian Intifada, the United States, Russia, the EU, and the United

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51 Guy Burton, “China, Jerusalem and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” Middle East Institute, February 20, 2018.
54 Scobell and Nader, 2016, p. 20.
55 Over 2012–2013, the Obama administration held at least two iterations of the U.S.-China Middle East Dialogue at the Under Secretary of State level, where “developments in the Middle East, with particular attention to Syria, Iran, and Middle East Peace” were discussed (U.S. Department of State, “U.S.-China Middle East Dialogue,” August 14, 2012; U.S. Department of State, “U.S.-China Middle East Dialogue,” June 20, 2013). For one discussion on this topic, see Paul Haenle, Marwan Muasher, Wang Suoloao, Brett McGurk, and Wang Yu, “Reshaping Middle East Policy: U.S. and Chinese Approaches,” Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, April 16, 2019.
Assessing the Prospects for Great Power Cooperation in Europe and the Middle East

Nations—the so-called Quartet on the Middle East—cooperated to craft the Road Map for Peace, which aimed to achieve a comprehensive settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Since unveiling its Road Map for Peace, the quartet has continued to meet and cooperate on the Israel-Palestine issue. Even in recent years, amid a downturn in U.S.-Russia relations, both powers have continued to meet to discuss Israel-relevant issues. For instance, in July 2019, the U.S., Russian, and Israeli national security advisers held trilateral meetings in Jerusalem to discuss, among other things, Israel’s security and mutual concerns over Iran’s expanding presence in Syria. In May 2020, Moscow’s Special Envoy to the Middle East conducted a phone conference with the U.S. Special Representative for International Negotiations to discuss prospects for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

Although Russia and China have shown a willingness to engage with the United States and to expend resources on Israel-related political and security issues, comprehensive policy cooperation is less likely, at least at present. The two powers share the U.S. interest in an Israeli-Palestinian peace, but, at present, they largely disagree on the path to such an outcome. China has voiced its support for the two-state solution while denouncing the U.S. government’s 2017 decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem and recognize the city as Israel’s capital. The Trump administration’s peace plan also did not enjoy much success with Moscow, with the Russians in effect denying its viability after it was rejected by a broad set of Arab states. In response to Israel’s declaration of intentions to annex the West Bank in July 2020 pursuant to the U.S. plan, Russia sought to dissuade Israel from the move, pushing instead for an international conference with the participation of the quartet, several Arab nations, and the Palestinians. Russia has also offered to host a meeting between President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Moscow. Therefore, Russia

60 Maxim A. Suchkov, “Russia’s Playbook on the Trump Peace Plan,” Middle East Institute, May 22, 2020b.
62 For example, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in February 2019 that “the information we have shows that this future ‘deal’ will destroy everything that has been accomplished so far” (quoted in Suchkov, 2020a; see also “Russia: Trump’s Mideast Plan Contradicts UN Resolutions,” Haaretz, February 2, 2020).
may seek to assert itself as the preferred interlocutor of the Arab-Israeli peace process, subverting the United States' influence in the peace process.\textsuperscript{65} Moreover, as a long-time Israeli expert on Russia's foreign and military affairs warned, in view of Russia's aspiration to be a regional power broker, it may not want to “solve” all the problems in the region—“because once solved, they don't have any role in the region. They want to manage them.”\textsuperscript{66} Subsequently, even though the United States and Russia may be working toward similar strategic objectives—supporting Israel's security and promoting the resolution of the Israel-Palestine issue—they do so on parallel tracks, with little to no state-to-state cooperation.

Neither China nor Russia played a direct role in the U.S.-brokered Abraham Accords between the UAE, Bahrain, and Israel, but both powers did tacitly express support for the normalization of relations between the two Arab states and Israel, voicing their hopes that such measures would improve regional security. Both Russia and China emphasized with approval Israel stepping back from annexing parts of the West Bank as part of the accords, which, in Moscow's and Beijing's view, would have imposed a major obstacle to achieving progress on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.\textsuperscript{67}

In sum, there are reasons to believe—though the prospects are mixed—that Russia and China would cooperate with the United States, depending on the U.S. approach to conflict resolution. Whether such cooperation would advance U.S. interests with regard to the issue is not wholly unambiguous, however. Notably, even if the United States and China were more closely aligned on the particular policy toward the Israel-Palestine issue, China might have only modest impact on progressing the process toward peace, playing a token role for optics and to maintain ties on the issue with regional partners—particularly Israel and Egypt.\textsuperscript{68} However, given its permanent position on the UN Security Council and its historical support to the Palestinian cause, Beijing could obstruct a peace progress if it were sidelined or excluded from negotiations, possibly providing cover or encouragement for Palestinian intransigence or even vetoing a resolution in the Security Council. Cooperation with Russia, by contrast, might be more consequential for advancing the peace process, in view of its greater footprint and influence in Israel and the neighborhood—again, assuming alignment on the particular policy approach.

\textsuperscript{65} Bijan, 2020.

\textsuperscript{66} Interview with Israeli academic, Tel Aviv, February 17, 2020.


\textsuperscript{68} Efron et al., 2019, p. 35.
Cooperation in Syria: Diplomatic Resolution, Deconfliction, and Reconstruction

Diplomatic Resolution

Diplomatically resolving the Syrian Civil War is one of the most salient trade spaces for cooperation in the Middle East among all three great powers: There is partial rhetorical alignment on the goals of resolution and some evidence that Russia and China might be willing to cooperate. Russia is arguably the most prominent international arbiter of Syrian affairs and plays an influential role in multilateral efforts to resolve the conflict—namely, the United Nations' Geneva peace process and the parallel Astana process. The United States and Russia has previously made cooperative steps toward diplomatic resolution, primarily working through the Geneva process to broker ceasefires—even if such steps could not be deemed successful. In December 2015, for instance, U.S.-Russia cooperation in Geneva led to the passage of UNSCR 2254, which called for a cessation of hostilities and established a roadmap for a political transition in Syria.69 Additionally, following the Astana process's 2017 establishment of four deescalation zones—Idlib Province in the northwest, northern Homs Province and Eastern Ghouta in west-central Syria, and Dar'a Province in the southwest—Russia, the United States, and Jordan brokered a ceasefire in the southern zone and created the trilateral Amman Monitoring Center to enforce compliance of the ceasefire.70

Although the Geneva processes has thus far failed to achieve constitutional reforms, it remains a potential venue for cooperation. As part of the diplomatic roadmap laid out by UNSCR 2254, international parties involved in the Syrian conflict pursued reforms to the Syrian constitution, and numerous parties—including the United States, Russia, and European and regional actors—are still pursuing such reforms within the UN-sponsored process. Indeed, in January 2018, Russia, Iran, and Turkey—the three major parties of the Astana process—proposed a constitutional committee.71 The United States and other relevant parties accepted the Astana trio's proposal while stipulating that the committee and reform efforts remain within the Geneva process, to which the trio acquiesced. There are reasons to doubt that there are strong preconditions for robust cooperation here: Skeptics argue that Russia is using the Astana process specifically to subvert Geneva, where the United States has a role, and enabling the Assad regime to exploit the process for political cover to reconquer

69 Jones, 2020, p. 54.

70 Several years later, it is unrealistic to expect that UNSCR 2254 will be implemented, and all of the deescalation zones have failed, save for Idlib—which has remained intact largely because of the Turkish military presence in the area. Yet, both the Geneva process and the de-escalation zones at least reflected U.S. attempts to cooperate with Moscow on the Syria file (Jones, 2020, p. 56; interview with Jordanian defense official, Amman, February 12, 2020).

opposition areas and bide time until Syria’s 2021 presidential elections, which Assad will almost surely rig and win.72

Nevertheless, the constitutional reform effort arguably represents the last medium in which Moscow and Washington are cooperating on Syria-related issues at a strategic level; the UN Special Envoy for Syria, for one, urged the need for the United States and Russia to cooperate in this manner.73 In view of Russia’s key role in Syria, a cooperative approach is likely to be more consequential than a lack thereof—even keeping in mind prior failures.

China is obviously less involved and has less influence over outcomes. China has traditionally aligned with Russia on Syrian matters and has had a special envoy for Syria since 2016.74 Beijing has also regularly called for and participated in international dialogue, particularly through the Geneva track, to promote a political settlement to conflict.75 The gains to the United States of cooperating with China in this respect are more speculative than is the case for Russia, because Chinese participation in the diplomatic process may not significantly improve prospects of diplomatic successes. However, engaging China may provide greater incentives for China to deliver on its representations (and those by Chinese businesses) for Syria’s reconstruction—if U.S. policymakers determine this to be a desirable development. We further discuss reconstruction efforts below, but we note here that both this possibility and the consequences of cooperating with Russia are attended by considerable downsides—which we identify below as negative second-order effects.

Deconfliction

Pending diplomatic resolution of the conflict, the United States and Russia can continue building on existing military-to-military cooperation to deconflict their ongoing operations in Syria. At the operational level, the United States and Moscow maintain a 24-hour hotline between mid-level officers at the U.S. Combined Air Operations Center in Qatar and the Russian Hmeimim Air Base in Syria to deconflict air operations in eastern Syria. Additionally, both powers also maintain a communication line at the three-star level between the U.S. director of strategic plans at the Joint Staff with his Russian counterpart, as well as a similar line at the three-star level between the U.S. commanding general of the counter-ISIS campaign, Operation Inherent Resolve, and his Russian counterpart in Syria.76

Assessments of the success of this mode of cooperation vary: Extant deconfliction channels have not eliminated all accidental clashes between U.S.- and Russia-backed forces and Russia, but many participants and experts assess this to have had positive practical effects.

72 Thépaut, 2020b.
76 Weiss and Ng, 2019.
Moreover, it was viewed as valuable enough by both parties that its operation was maintained throughout otherwise low points in the relationship and in spite of Russia’s threats to discontinue. As the conflict continues, Washington and Moscow could at least maintain the deconfliction lines to avoid incident and escalation. Furthermore, as discussed below, the communication lines at higher levels could be broadened to facilitate dialogue on strategic-level Syrian issues, in addition to tactical deconfliction.

Reconstruction

Washington, Beijing, and Moscow all have an interest—in varying forms and to different extents—to begin reconstruction efforts for a Syria devastated by nearly a decade of war. International efforts to help reconstruct Syria have been estimated to cost upward of $400 billion. Despite signing memoranda of understanding and assuring the Assad regime of Russian-funded reconstruction projects once the guns fell silent, economic difficulties and limited political will make it unlikely that Moscow will be able to follow through on its promises. Thus, Russia has made a variety of efforts to invite U.S. and Western cooperation on reconstruction, and it is the fate of the Assad regime that is the key stumbling block to cooperation. In 2018—using the line of communication maintained between the two generals—Russian Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov reportedly sent a communiqué to U.S. General Joseph Dunford, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, proposing coordination between the powers on reconstruction and repatriating Syrian refugees. However, Washington has been adamant that Western reconstruction funds are contingent on genuine political reforms within the regime and likely entailing Assad’s removal from power, here-tofore a red line for Moscow, which sees such an imposition as a Western attempt at regime change. Subsequently, the United States and Russia have shown little in the way of genuine cooperation concerning Syria’s reconstruction.

Beijing’s interest in reconstruction is lukewarm at present. Financially, China has committed roughly $50 million toward Syrian humanitarian causes, including a 2017 pledge by Xi for $30 million for refugees. More broadly, China has touted itself as a leading investor in postwar Syria, including a reported 2017 pledge for $2 billion toward an industrial park, though it is unclear exactly how much has actually been invested so far. The lopsided bal-

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77 Weiss and Ng, 2019.
79 Interview with U.S. Department of State official, Amman, February 12, 2020; interview with Israeli think tank researcher, Tel Aviv, February 16, 2020.
81 Calabrese, 2019.
82 Liu Zhen, “U.S. Withdrawal from Syria Leaves China’s Plans for Investment up in the Air, Analysts Say,” South China Morning Post, December 29, 2018. For more on China and Syrian reconstruction, see Nicho-
ance of promised investments and loans versus tangible aid is evident in Xi’s 2018 pledge for $20 billion of loans to the Middle East but only $15 million in actual aid for Palestine and $91 million split among Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Jordan.  

U.S.-Russia cooperation, and to a lesser extent cooperation with China, on Syrian reconstruction remains conceivable, if not immediately possible. Amid the ongoing war, COVID-19 pandemic, and neighboring Lebanon’s financial crisis, the Syrian regime neared economic collapse by mid-2020 and arguably thrust Assad into his weakest position ever. Assad has not shown willingness to compromise or concede to mounting economic and social pressures, even within loyalist camps. Nevertheless, Western-led investment in Syria’s reconstruction is vital for Russia to recoup the blood and treasure spent in support of the Syrian regime, as well as to avert regime collapse in Syria amid an economic upheaval, which would again threaten Russian access to its two major bases in Syria, which partially drove Russia’s 2015 intervention in the first place. Russia may be increasingly willing to deal with the United States and other Western actors to foster political and economic reform within the regime—perhaps in exchange for sanctions relief and opening the taps for reconstruction funds. Beijing’s interest in reconstruction might pick up depending on developments: In particular, Beijing’s limited support for both Moscow and Damascus likely reflects a certain wariness of U.S. sanctions. Were the conditions placed by the sanctions fulfilled and the threat of sanctions recede, Beijing may proceed more energetically.

Table 8.1 summarizes our assessment of the theoretically available cooperation space in terms of the stakes for the two U.S. competitors, the rhetorical alignment between each and the United States, and their willingness to cooperate.

| TABLE 8.1 Interest in Cooperation on Promoting Middle East Stability and Peace Processes |
|----------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| How important is the issue area   | China | Russia |
| Space for cooperation            | Medium | Medium |
| Rhetorical alignment             | Mixed | Mixed |
| Demonstrated willingness to cooperate | Medium | Medium |

Obstacles
Multiple obstacles impede the paths to cooperation between the United States and China or Russia on issues of regional stability and promoting peace processes, some of which are evident in the delineation of the trade space above.

First, apart from general lack of trust between the United States and its competitors, Russia’s record on Syria entrenched skepticism in Washington about prospects of cooperating with Moscow on the conflict. Among the Astana process’s hallmark achievements are the four deescalation zones established between the regime and opposition, which provided these areas a respite from what had been years of violence. However, the Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian backers exploited the deescalation zones to concentrate their overextended resources and systematically violated and reconquered the deescalation zones. In addition to these deescalation violations, Russia also failed to honor its 2013 agreement to facilitate the dismantling and removal of the Syrian regime’s chemical weapons, and media outlets linked to the Kremlin have spread disinformation, promoting false-flag narratives that the opposition, not the regime, was responsible for chemical attacks that have killed hundreds of civilians.86 Russia’s track record of upholding its end of bargains which it itself negotiated is mixed at best, contributing to the lack of trust between Moscow and Washington, which may impede genuine cooperation on resolving the Syrian conflict.87

Second, a U.S. administration that cooperates with Russia on Syria-related issues—particularly reconstruction—might also have to overcome or, at the very least, take into consideration audience costs. Congress passed the Caesar Act with broad bipartisan support, reflecting a united resolve to pressure the Assad regime to pursue political reforms and to punish the regime for its brutal tactics and targeting of civilians over the course of the civil war. An attempt by a U.S. administration to cooperate with Russia without the regime first having met the Caesar Act’s criteria for sanctions relief would likely be met with staunch opposition in Congress. Moreover, even if the Caesar Act’s criteria for cooperation were to be met, cooperation with Russia, the crucial abettor of the Assad regime’s crimes, might be met with considerable domestic resistance.

Third, multiple third parties hold power to affect the possibilities of cooperation on this set of issues. While we do not identify every state involved, we highlight the decisive role that Iran and the Assad regime and Israel and the Palestinian Authority themselves play in the respective conflicts. Russia may be the arbiter of Syrian affairs among the international actors involved in the conflict, but Iran has established its own spheres of influence within multiple sectors of the Syrian regime and also plays a prominent role. In the long run, Moscow and Tehran are competing for influence and the spoils of war in Syria. Their positions diverge at


87 Interview with U.S. Department of State official, Amman, February 12, 2020. See also Weiss and Ng, 2019.
times, and Iran may impede U.S.-Russia efforts to diplomatically resolve the conflict, particularly if a tentative resolution sought to curtail Iranian influence in the country.

Moreover, despite being relatively beholden to its foreign backers, the Assad regime still has a say. Multiple experts and government officials interviewed for this study argued that Russia would prefer to diplomatically resolve the Syrian conflict, at least nominally pursuing the political and constitutional reforms laid out in UNSCR 2254.88 Nevertheless, Moscow’s ability to deliver Damascus, pressuring Assad to enact reforms in exchange for desperately needed reconstruction aid, is circumspect, as the regime has heretofore refused to reform in any substantive manner. It is possible, for example, that Moscow legitimately supported the four Astana-produced deescalation zones. However, Assad’s determination to reclaim all of Syria from the opposition neutralized any genuine Russian desire to maintain the de-escalation zones. Furthermore, as long as Damascus sees U.S. policies in Syria as tantamount to regime change or threatening the regime’s future stability, it will likely continue to undermine, or even wholly refuse to participate in, efforts to resolve the conflict.

Similarly, Israel and the Palestinian Authority will ultimately determine whether and how the Israel-Palestine issue is resolved. Traditionally, Washington, Beijing, and Moscow have all aligned on issues such as support for the two-state solution; despite this, the conflict has remained unsolved for decades, in large part because of the willingness to use violence among both Israelis and Palestinians.89 Nevertheless, given their historical and relatively warm ties with all three powers, Israel and the Palestinian Authority are not likely to balk at U.S.-China-Russia cooperation to resolve the Israel-Palestine issue.

Fourth, although all three great powers have intersecting interests in diplomatically resolving the Syrian conflict, U.S. and Russian policy priorities have inhibited substantive conflict resolution thus far because of issue linkages. As noted, the United States mandating that Assad step down from power as any part of a diplomatic resolution or reconstruction in Syria, as well as Russia’s resolute political and military backing of Assad, will preclude cooperation—unless one or both of the parties step away from their positions, or developments render the linkages moot. Moreover, since guaranteeing the regime’s stability and reclaiming the majority of the country, Russia’s foremost objective in Syria is, arguably, expelling the United States’ remaining military presence in Syria.90 Washington is unwilling to fully withdraw from eastern Syria and along the Syria-Iraq-Jordan border until it can ensure, to some degree, its gains made against ISIS and that group’s territorial defeat. Diplomatic attempts to resolve the conflict might remain frustrated.

Finally, legal constraints apply at least in the immediate term: The Caesar Act greatly curtails the possibility of United States cooperating with Russia or China on reconstruction

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89 Middle East Quartet, 2016, p. 2; Efron et al., 2019, p. 52.

efforts in Syria. As mentioned above, the Caesar Act may impose “secondary” sanctions on foreign individuals or entities seeking to do business in Syria, which will almost certainly minimize international actors’ desire to engage in reconstruction efforts, lest they be subjected to sanctions. The act provides seven criteria that the Assad regime must meet to be eligible for sanctions relief, and it is unlikely that the regime will comply with all of these; critics of the act have argued that the regime has weathered decades of sanctions thus far and will likely continue to do so. The Caesar Act has a five-year sunset clause, and Congress is unlikely to relax that constraint through legislation. Thus, it is unlikely that the United States will legally be able to cooperate with Russia on reconstruction in the near term, barring cardinal changes of circumstances.

Second-Order Effects of Cooperation

With regard to cooperation with China or Russia on issues relating to stability and promoting peace processes in the Middle East, second-order effects of potential cooperation opportunities should be also taken into account.

First, there are no clear ways in which U.S. pursuits of cooperation with one or the other power can create significant friction in that partnership. Both China and Russia, to differing degrees, seek to undermine and balance against U.S. influence in the Middle East, exploiting turbulent U.S. relations in the region. However, potential tension points between Russia and China in the Middle East can arise—notably, through the potential for increasing economic competition. There is a modest and somewhat speculative possibility that U.S.-cooperation with Russia on reconstruction might sharpen those tensions down the line. Russia benefits from China’s growing investments throughout the region: Chinese investment and the accompanying prospect of job creation, even if limited and uneven, embody a potential life-line to some regional governments that might otherwise succumb to mounting popular dissatisfaction with failing social contracts, as was the case during the 2011 Arab uprisings. Investment and prospective job creation also present an effective means of Beijing curryng favor in the region, partially at Washington’s expense, which benefits Moscow’s zero-sum game. However, Moscow is also interested in reaping financial benefits in the region, particularly through oil and natural gas concessions and reconstruction contracts, for which it may have to compete with China. In Syria in particular, substantial Chinese investment remains unlikely in the near term so long as U.S. sanctions under the Caesar Act remain in place. However, in the event of genuine U.S.-Russia cooperation on this issue, which would mean the rollback of Caesar Act sanctions, China might pursue BRI and reconstruction projects. Should this occur, Russia would have to compete against Chinese investors, potentially

undermining substantial Russian commercial interests in Syria and its intent to receive at least partial compensation for its military intervention and support to the Assad regime.

Second, U.S. cooperation with China and/or Russia on promoting Middle East stability and maintaining peace agreements is motivated by first-order goals—ending the Syrian conflict or resolving the Israel-Palestine issue, which would benefit the security and livelihoods of millions of people long affected by these conflicts. Yet, such cooperation—if successful—also has potential positive externalities for broader regional security and abets additional U.S. strategic interests in the region. Syria’s civil war and security vacuum allowed for the resurgence of Al-Qa’ida in the Levant and the emergence of the Islamic State and attracted the largest wave of Salafi-jihadi foreign fighters in history. Ending the Syrian conflict and undertaking—or at least permitting—reconstruction efforts would put the war-torn country on the long path toward recovery and begin shrinking the space in which violent extremist groups could operate. Peace in Syria may also contribute to containing Iran’s presence and influence in the Levant, which it expanded throughout Syria’s civil war. Combating violent extremist groups and countering Iran are two of the United States’ primary objectives in the Middle East, and both could be facilitated by cooperation with Russia and, to a lesser extent, China on resolving the Syrian conflict. Cooperating with one or both powers to resolve the Israel-Palestine issue and maintaining a relatively peaceful modus vivendi between Israel and its neighbors could similarly promote regional stability and avert a conflict involving Israel, Iran, and its proxies that could potentially broaden into a catastrophic regional conflagration, as will be discussed in the following chapter.

Another second-order effect worth considering is the avoidance of the potential negative ramifications for the United States that may manifest, should it fail to engage with Russia on ending the Syrian conflict. Between the Astana process and the withdrawal of most U.S. forces from Syria in late 2019, Washington has ceded much of its influence on Syrian affairs. Without cooperating with Russia, it will likely have little say in Syria’s future, allowing Russia, Turkey, and Iran to take the reins. Such an eventuality may have further negative ramifications on U.S. influence in the region as whole, with diminished U.S. capability to contain bellicose behavior on the parts of Iran, Turkey, and other actors in the region. Therefore, although cooperating with Russia to resolve the Syrian conflict and retain what influence Washington has in the Levant is not a positive externality, in and of itself, doing so might

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93 Chapter Nine of this report discusses the United States’ strategic objective of countering Iran, the relevant equities, and potential for cooperation with China or Russia therein. For a discussion and analysis of potential cooperation on countering violent extremist groups, see Chapter Five of this report’s companion volume on the global commons (Cohen, Kepe, et al., 2023).

avert additional negative externalities that could impede the United States’ pursuit of other strategic objectives in the Middle East.

Third, the potential for cooperative action on this issue area carries with it the risk of negative externalities—notably, that U.S. influence in the region will diminish to the benefit of Russia and China. Potential cooperation with China on issues of Middle Eastern stability could further open the door for Beijing to grow its influence in the region, at Washington’s expense. Furthermore, China cultivating commercial influence in the region, and especially in Israel, has implications for U.S.-China competition outside the Middle East. China-Israel defense relations ended in 2005, when Israel, under U.S. pressure, declined to help China upgrade its Harpy UAVs, which it acquired from Israel in the 1990s. Nevertheless, Israel may play an important role in China’s bid to sustain economic growth and the BRI through emerging technologies, considering that Chinese investments in Israel’s thriving tech sector totaled approximately $600 million in 2017, nearly a 200 percent increase from 2013. In addition, tech-related investments might not solely benefit China’s commercial interests, and Beijing might look to incorporate transferred or stolen Israeli technology into its military modernization program. Increased Chinese equities in Israel does mean another great power is invested in the country’s security. Yet, China’s mounting commercial presence in the country—as well as that of other regional actors, such as the Gulf States—also provides Beijing opportunities to further its geopolitical interests outside the Middle East, including in areas where Washington and Beijing are more directly at loggerheads.

Russian presence and influence in the Middle East—and especially the Levant and North Africa—is increasingly a fact on the ground, but providing Moscow a role in resolving regional conflicts and easing tensions may legitimize and entrench its claim as a preferable alternative to the United States as arbiter of regional matters. Coming to the negotiating table with Russia sends the signal that its support for a repressive, human-rights-violating regime was a legitimate policy choice. And facilitating Russia’s buildup of influence could undermine U.S. ability to determine outcomes in the region down the line. Moreover, considering the large-scale destruction that Moscow and the regime have wrought over the course of the conflict, there is a sense within Washington that Moscow and Tehran should assume the massive burden of rebuilding the war-torn country—and a by-product of U.S. cooperation will be to provide Moscow the financial resources necessary to rebuild and recoup its losses in Syria. Indeed, in May 2020, James Jeffrey, then serving as U.S. Special Envoy to the Middle East, stated that his “job is to make [Syria] a quagmire for the Russians,” reflecting a prevalent aversion in Washington to such a second-order effect.96


Conclusion

As was the case during the Cold War, the Middle East is a theater of great power competition today. The United States, China, and Russia all vie for influence in the region and, to varying degrees, seek to expand security, economic, and diplomatic partnerships with Middle Eastern actors. The United States’ strength in the region and ability to pursue its strategic objectives rely on its partnerships. China and Russia seek to undermine, or even fully subvert, the United States’ strategic partnerships in the region, growing their own security, economic, and diplomatic ties with Middle Eastern countries that have long orbited within the United States’ sphere of influence.

Yet, the Middle East also presents limited space for cooperation, particularly regarding a resolution to the Israel-Palestine issue, diplomatic resolution to the Syrian civil war, continuing deconfliction, and beginning Syria’s reconstruction. (We reiterate that the possibility for cooperation on countering violent extremism in Syria is discussed in the global context in a companion report.97) Moreover, Russia’s growing influence in the region and its key role in Syria’s future means that the United States would have a very hard time making progress without Russia’s participation. To be sure, cooperation with either power on these issues is contingent and conditional on a number of factors. Notably, progress on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process requires that the would-be cooperating parties come to agree not only on the ends (conflict resolution) but also the means (the contours of the peace plan): This would most likely require a renewed U.S. support of the two-state solution to the conflict.98

To an extent, the United States, China, and Russia all have converging interests on these issues. However, multiple obstacles could impede substantive cooperation: In particular, on ending the Syrian conflict, a lack of trust between Washington and Moscow and issue linkage may impede substantive cooperation.

In considering options to seize any of these opportunities for cooperation, U.S. decision-makers will also have to consider the positive and negative second-order effects that cooperation might have on U.S. strategic interests and on allies and partners. Notably, insofar as coming to the table with rivals boosts their role and influence, the United States must weigh the further dilution of its influence in the region. Nevertheless, issues of stability and resolving regional tensions, ending long-running conflicts, and Syrian reconstruction present some of the few issues on which genuine U.S. cooperation with Russia, China, or both is possible. With the likely obstacles and potential strategic implications in mind, an effort should be made to engage both powers to pursue mutual objectives that may positively affect a region whose stability benefits all three powers.


98 This is not to suggest that U.S. policy should change solely on account of the possibility of cooperation with Russia or China.
CHAPTER NINE

Countering Iran and Its Proxies

Iran’s policies and support for militant actors throughout the Middle East constitute a persistent security threat to U.S. and allied interests. Russia and China, by contrast, have established cooperative relationships with Iran in some respects, although neither power embraces Iran’s role and policies wholesale. This chapter focuses on the possibilities for cooperation on two key dimensions of the Iranian threat: Iran’s nuclear ambitions (and its military power more generally) and its support for proxy actors throughout the region. Past instances of substantive cooperation on Iran’s nuclear program, most notably the 2015 signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and nominal cooperation on containing Iran’s proxy network, particularly in Syria, portend some room for future cooperation. However, especially in the immediate term, multiple obstacles inhibit potential cooperation, which could have positive effects for regional security but possibly dilute U.S. standing in the Middle East.

In this chapter, we first review the U.S., Chinese, and Russian equities or interests with regard to Iran to determine where there exists at least rhetorical alignment among competitors. Next, we identify specific areas of cooperation in the space where interests are aligned, review the evidence that Russia or China are willing to negotiate and cooperate on issues of overlapping interests, and identify obstacles to actualizing cooperation. Finally, we identify salient second-order effects of pursuing cooperation.

Understanding the Equities

U.S. Equities

Following strategic competition with revisionist powers China and Russia, the 2018 NDS clearly establishes destabilizing rogue regimes—North Korea and Iran—as the third most pressing threat to U.S. national security. The Islamic Republic of Iran is “competing with its neighbors, asserting an arc of influence and instability while vying for regional hegemony, using state-sponsored terrorist activities, a growing network of proxies, and its missile program to achieve its objectives.”¹ Countering Iran’s malign activity is therefore important to also achieving other U.S. strategic objectives in the Middle East: Iran attempts to grow its regional influence at the expense of U.S. partnerships, it sponsors violent extremist organiza-

¹ NDS, 2018, p. 2.
tions to expand its proxy network, and it undertakes bellicose activities in the Persian Gulf, threatening freedom of navigation and a stable global energy market.

Historically, Iran has exploited moments of instability to expand its influence and undermine its adversaries in the region. Iran seized on the tumult of Lebanon’s 15-year civil war to establish ties with and build the capacity of Lebanese Hezbollah (LH). Similarly, following the 2003 toppling of the Saddam regime, Iran supported Shi’a armed groups and pro-Iranian politicians to foster substantial influence and compete with the United States within its previously antagonistic neighbor. The Islamic Republic also provided sophisticated arms to its proxies in the Iraqi conflict, contributing to nearly 200 U.S. military personnel deaths. Furthermore, prior to the JCPOA in 2015, the Iranian regime was aggressively developing nuclear weapons, posing a severe security threat to Israel and other key U.S. partners in the region.

Iran undertakes similar malign activity today, continuing its support for designated terrorist groups, such as LH, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad in the Palestinian territories and Kata’ib Hezbollah and Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq in Iraq. Tehran also sponsors other destabilizing armed groups in the region, such as the Houthis in Yemen, the Badr Organization in Iraq, and multiple armed groups in Syria, not to mention the pariah Assad regime itself. Moreover, the Islamic Republic continues to proliferate sophisticated arms and missile systems to its partners and proxies, diminishing Israel’s qualitative military edge over other armed actors in the region, which prompted kinetic responses by Israel and the United States in Syria and Iraq. Through the proliferation of sophisticated arms to its proxies and its own asymmetric kinetic actions, Iran threatens freedom of navigation and the global energy market’s stability.

The United States has undertaken prominent diplomatic, economic, and military efforts to counter malign Iranian activity in the region. Foremost, Washington engaged in years of negotiations with Tehran on its nuclear program, culminating in the signing of the JCPOA in 2015. In exchange for sanctions relief, Tehran agreed to curtail its program and adhere to strict inspection requirements for ten years. However, Washington unilaterally withdrew

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from the JCPOA in May 2018, reimposing sanctions to pressure Tehran into talks to renegotiate a new nuclear deal on terms more favorable to the United States. Nevertheless, the Trump administration reaffirmed its commitment to preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, stating in the NSS that the United States would “deny the Iranian regime all paths to a nuclear weapon.”

To advance its interests vis-à-vis Iran, the U.S. military maintains a robust presence in each Arab Gulf state, as well as Iraq, which enables the United States to project power into the Persian Gulf and seek to deter Iranian belligerence there. Concurrent with additional military deployments, the United States has also undertaken a maximum pressure campaign entailing a sanctions regime intended to cripple the Islamic Republic’s capacity to fund its proxy network and its ballistic missile and nuclear programs and to bring Tehran back to the negotiating table.

In addition to its military presence, the United States pursues strategic partnerships and security cooperation programs aimed at building partners’ capacity to deter, detect, and prevent Iranian aggression. For instance, the 2017 NSS states that the United States “will work with partners to neutralize Iran’s malign activities in the region,” and the 2019 CENTCOM Posture Statement affirms the United States’ commitment to “support [its] regional partners [in] developing processes and procedures to counter ballistic missiles (CBM) and counter unmanned armed aerial systems to help mitigate threats to civilian populations and critical infrastructure” that Iran might pose—as demonstrated in the Abqaiq attack. Consequently, the United States has a considerable foreign military sales relationship with Gulf states—including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar—which host significant U.S. military installations or formations. Lebanon provides a good example of security cooperation with partners: the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) has been a steadfast U.S. security partner since 2005, serving as a counterweight to Iran’s primary proxy in the region, LH, which poses a

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10 NSS, 2017, p. 50.
11 Votel, 2019, p. 6.
12 Over the past ten years, the United States has approved multiple CBM-related foreign military sales deals to the three aforementioned Gulf states, comprising dozens of Thermal High Altitude Area Defense and Patriot PAC-3 systems, along with hundreds of missiles, radars, and fire control and communication systems, designed to intercept incoming ballistic missiles (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, data files on U.S. arms sales to Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, undated-a).
considerable threat to Israel’s security. In addition to the LAF, the United States has also invested significantly in the Iraqi military and U.S. security partners in Syria—namely the Syrian Democratic Forces—investments that are intended to aid in the counter-ISIS fight but also serve as a “counterweight to Iranian influence.”

Chinese Equities

Overall, we assess China’s stakes in the Iran issue area to be of a medium level of importance, because of Iran’s potential as an energy resource for Chinese economic growth and as a counterweight to U.S. influence in the region. China’s common desire for stability in the Middle East makes it generally opposed to Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons and support to proxy armed groups, many of which are designated terrorist groups. However, China’s “strategic partnership” with Iran and a sympathetic view of Iran’s security situation—i.e., the threat posed by the United States and China’s needs for its energy resources—mean that its objectives are only in mixed rhetorical alignment with those of the United States. Ultimately, Beijing’s close ties with Tehran represent a strategic counterweight to the United States in the context of competition in the Middle East. And Iran represents a reliable source of key energy products that China can rely on in a conflict with the United States if China fears that the United States may interdict its energy imports and broader maritime shipping through key sea lanes of communication.

Like the rest of the Middle East, Chinese equities in Iran are predominantly energy-related and commercial. Iran is China’s seventh-largest source of imported oil, at 586,000 barrels per day (bpd) in 2018, representing Iran’s largest destination. After the Trump administration reinstituted sanctions, Iranian exports to China dropped in official statistics, but it is unclear how much Iranian oil China is still purchasing through other, unofficial means. Economically, Beijing has invested heavily in the energy sector and broader Iranian market. Tehran is a key node on the BRI, and in 2016 Xi pledged to increase bilateral trade to $600 billion by

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2026—although that goal is unlikely, with 2019 bilateral trade at only $23 billion and a drop of more than 30 percent from 2018, mostly reflecting the impact of U.S. sanctions.\textsuperscript{16} China has invested at least $27 billion in Iran, with significant commitments to the energy sector, including a $16 billion investment in the Northern Pars natural gas field.\textsuperscript{17} The relationship has not always been smooth, as Iran terminated a $2.5 billion deal in 2014 and a Chinese state-owned enterprise backed out of a $4.5 billion project in 2019.\textsuperscript{18} Nevertheless, the overall economic relationship is expected to deepen in the coming years, due to both economic and political considerations.\textsuperscript{19}

The political relationship between China and Iran is driven by a shared animosity toward the United States and a common interest in building Iran’s power as a counterweight to the United States in the region. In 2016, the two capitals upgraded their relationship to a “comprehensive strategic partnership,” an indication of their closeness.\textsuperscript{20} As Xi has stated, “no matter how the international and regional situations change, China’s resolve to develop [a] comprehensive strategic partnership with Iran will remain unchanged.”\textsuperscript{21} From China’s perspective, according to a 2016 RAND report, “Iran can help counter U.S. power in the Middle East as China chips at U.S. influence in East Asia.”\textsuperscript{22} In the security domain, China has deepened military ties but has not undertaken much high-profile support.\textsuperscript{23} China’s recent joint military exercise (with Iran and Russia) in the Gulf of Oman has also served as a signal to the West that broader security cooperation among Tehran, Moscow, and Beijing have reached a “meaningful” level.\textsuperscript{24}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} Golnar Motevalli, “China, Iran Agree to Expand Trade to $600 Billion in a Decade,” Bloomberg, January 23, 2016; Emma Scott, “Defying Expectations: China’s Iran Trade and Investments,” Middle East Institute, April 6, 2016; “Iran-China Trade Dropped by One-Third in 2019,” Radio Farda, January 24, 2020. For perspective on rumored numbers of bilateral trade, see Jacopo Scita, “No, China Isn’t Giving Iran $400 Billion,” Bourse and Bazaar, September 20, 2019.
\item \textsuperscript{17} American Enterprise Institute, undated.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Michael Lipin and Ziwen Jiang, “Pandemic Not Likely to Stop China from Building Influence in Iran,” Voice of America, March 31, 2020.
\item \textsuperscript{20} “China, Iran Upgrade Ties to Carry Forward Millennia-Old Friendship,” Xinhua, January 25, 2016. For perspective, see Peter Wood, “China’s Foreign Relations,” Twitter, September 24, 2016.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Chen Aizhu and Florence Tan, “Exclusive: China Shifts to Iranian Tankers to Keep Oil Flowing amid U.S. Sanctions,” Reuters, August 20, 2018.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Scobell and Nader, 2016, p. 52.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Joel Wuthnow, “Posing Problems Without an Alliance: China-Iran Relations After the Nuclear Deal,” National Defense University, Strategic Forum, February 2016.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Ben Westcott and Hamdi Alkhshali, “China, Russia and Iran Hold Joint Naval Drills in Gulf of Oman,” CNN, December 2019.
\end{itemize}
China is no fan of a nuclear Iran: Beijing was a participant in and supported the JCPOA process and voted in favor of the UN resolution.\textsuperscript{25} It has been more critical of U.S. unilateral pressure on Tehran since the U.S. withdrawal from the agreement, claiming that Iran’s reduction of its commitment under the JCPOA does not pose a “substantial nuclear proliferation risk.” Accordingly, Beijing has stood by the JCPOA: In March 2020, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson affirmed that “the JCPOA, as an important outcome of multilateralism endorsed by the UNSC Resolution 2231, should be implemented effectively and in full. . . . China will work with all relevant parties to continuously uphold the authority of the UNSC Resolution and the JCPOA and advance the political and diplomatic process of the Iranian nuclear issue.”\textsuperscript{26} Moreover, Beijing has strongly opposed U.S. sanctions that brought Iran to the negotiating table, frequently watering down UN resolutions against Iran’s nuclear program.\textsuperscript{27} In sum, Beijing’s continuing support for the agreement puts it at odds with Washington’s current policy, if not with the ultimate goal of keeping Iran from going nuclear.\textsuperscript{28}

On the issue of Iran’s destabilizing support for proxies in the region, Beijing has said little. In 2006, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson stated plainly that “we have never labeled Hamas as a terrorist organization,” though it did “urge” Hamas to “abandon violence.”\textsuperscript{29} During the Syrian civil war, China dismissed U.S. concerns about Iranian influence there.\textsuperscript{30} Beijing has also not spoken publicly about the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen. Perhaps the closest Beijing has come to acknowledging Iran’s role in Yemen’s civil war was a May 2015 call between the Chinese and Iranian foreign ministers, during which Wang Yi told Iran’s foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, that the “Chinese side is deeply concerned about the persistent turmoil and the increasingly severe humanitarian crisis in Yemen. . . . The Chinese side stands ready to maintain communication with the Iranian side.”\textsuperscript{31} This stands in


\textsuperscript{27} “UN Votes for New Sanctions on Iran over Nuclear Issue,” BBC, June 9, 2010.


\textsuperscript{31} Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Foreign Minister Wang Yi Holds Telephone Talks with Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif of Iran,” May 16, 2015. Because Minister Wang Yi made his comments to Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif, one could read the statement as Beijing cautioning
contrast to Beijing’s deep concerns about the cultivation of Chinese terrorists in foreign war-zones that could return to conduct attacks domestically—such as the thousands of Uyghurs that Beijing claims have fought in the Syrian civil war.32

China has taken, at most, only a muted stance on Iran’s proxy network. Beijing has a vested interest in ensuring the security of its shipping equities in the Gulf, such as Dubai’s Jebel Ali port—the busiest in the Middle East. Additionally, China’s $100 billion megacity project on Kuwait’s Boubyan Island could strategically entrench substantial Chinese influence at the north end of the Persian Gulf. Boubyan Island also lies at the confluence of Iranian, Iraqi, and Kuwaiti domains and could be threatened by conflagration in the Gulf. Insofar as Iranian proxies might affect Beijing’s broader interests in the region, including the security of its citizens living abroad, their activities would be a cause for quiet concern. However, these concerns are unlikely to prompt Beijing to reconsider its relationship with Tehran, weighed against all other sources of instability in the region. Indeed, China has tolerated North Korea’s destabilizing behavior for decades much closer to home. Furthermore, China has provided limited security support, by way of arms exports, to Iran’s rivals; notably, China has sold tactical UAVs to regional actors—such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia—to whom the United States has heretofore refused to sell tactical UAVs.33 Nevertheless, continued instability caused by Iranian proxies that incurs tangible costs for China (e.g., evacuating its citizens) may provide at least some impetus for cooperation with the United States that has not been forthcoming for other similar issues, such as the counter-ISIS counterterrorism campaign.

Overall, China rhetorically supports stability in the Middle East and stopping Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, but its tangible commitment has been tepid. Experts note that China’s policy toward Iran continues to be a “cautious balance” between respecting U.S.-led sanctions and restrictions and capitalizing on the opportunities presented by Iran’s isolation.34 Beijing has also sought to avoid blaming Iran for tensions arising as a result of an Iranian attack on a Saudi oil facility in September 2019. The incident put Beijing’s balancing act between the two rivals to the test, and ultimately Beijing condemned the attack but refused to specifically blame Iran by name, merely referencing “relevant parties.”35 During the brief

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34 Scobell and Nader, 2016, p. 51.

U.S.-Iran crisis in early 2020, Beijing criticized Washington’s “military adventurism” but did not denounce Iran’s attack on the U.S. base in Iraq, merely calling for “restraint on both sides” and averting a destabilizing escalation that would jeopardize China’s myriad commercial interests in the region.36

Russian Equities

We assess the Iran issue area to be of medium level of importance to Russia, because the Iranian issue area concerns an important partner but does not directly implicate state or regime survival or core security concerns. Iran has been Russia’s closest partner in the region since the end of the Cold War. Russia’s relationship with Iran is nonetheless complex and rife with tensions. Russia does not support Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons and has concerns about Iran’s influence through its proxies that affect Russia’s, and its partners’, interests—all of which brings Russia in mixed rhetorical alignment with U.S. goals.

Russia’s official position is that of “commit[ment] to the comprehensive development of cooperation with the Islamic Republic of Iran,” per its 2016 Foreign Policy Concept. Declarations of cooperative relations are echoed across official and public statements.37 Iran has been key to Russia’s regional ambitions. Importantly, Russia and Iran share an interest in countering and limiting U.S. influence over the Middle East. Russia’s relationship with Iran afforded Russia an important seat at the table at the negotiations over Iran’s pursuit of nuclear power. Iran’s opposition to Salafi-jihadi groups like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the Islamic State, as well as its support for Assad’s regime, made it an indispensable partner in Russia’s Syria campaign. Russia’s intervention in Syria appears to have been coordinated with Iran,38 and its successes in Syria have been built on Iranian-backed ground forces. While Russian air power provided invaluable support to the Assad regime, Iranian-backed Syrian units and

According to a ministry document, Xi told the Saudi king that

The Chinese side condemned the attacks on Saudi oil facilities, and the incident has had an impact on the situation in the Gulf region and on the international energy market. Xi Jinping hoped for a comprehensive, objective and just investigation into the incident and called on relevant parties to refrain from taking any actions that may escalate tensions in the region so as to jointly safeguard regional peace and stability. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Xi Jinping Holds Telephone Talks at Request with King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia,” September 20, 2019c)


37 For example, Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation Nikolai Patrushev referred to Iran as “ally and partner” in talks with Israel and United States (Marianna Belenkaya, “Rossiya Davala Uroki Iranskogo [Russia Was Giving Iranian Lessons],” Kommersant, June 26, 2019).

Shi’a foreign fighters provided considerable ground forces that facilitated the regime’s recapture of much of the country. Indeed, Iran and its Shi’a proxies have fought and died in defense of the Assad regime since at least January 2012.\(^{39}\) Cooperation in launching the campaign in Syria was followed by steps that further advanced military cooperation, starting with a new intergovernmental agreement on military cooperation in 2015.\(^{40}\) In 2019, Russia, China, and Iran conducted an unprecedented naval exercise in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Oman, serving as a symbol for the deepening of those relationships, as well as Russian and Chinese support for Iran against U.S. pressures.

Russia’s economic interests in Iran’s future are not very significant, with the exception of arms sales and civilian nuclear power. China has $33 billion in annual trade with Iran, whereas Russia’s trade with Iran totals only $2 billion.\(^{41}\) Russia is building two nuclear facilities in Iran, after previously completing the Bushehr plant. In the past, Iran has been one of the top recipients of Russian arms, but Russia has limited and canceled sales to comply with sanctions, a persistent source of Iranian irritation. However, there are signs that the arms sales relationship between the two may yet revive: Russia has voted against extending the UNSC sanctions past 2020, and “Iran has expressed its intention to buy at least 8 billion USD [U.S. dollars] of Russian arms and military hardware to modernize its air and naval forces.”\(^{42}\) Ending the ban is important to Russia to tap the “world’s last big untapped weapons markets,” according to Ruslan Pukhov, a defense expert and head of the Center of Analysis of Strategies and Technologies.\(^{43}\) However, our expert interviews indicate that there is likely a limit to what Russia would be willing to sell to Iran, as it seeks to preserve a “capability gap.”\(^{44}\)

Although the shared interests are considerable, the relationship is fraught, and Russia does not consider its interests to be well served by unequivocal support for Iranian actions and policies.\(^{45}\) The two have experienced conflicts over numerous issues even outside the Middle East, such as the division of the Caspian Sea. Within the Middle East, Russia’s equities are also tied to maintaining good relations with Iran’s adversaries, such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain. The possibility of a conflict between Iran and its adversaries imposes a certain limit to the Russia-Iran partnership: Moscow is cultivating an image of a


\(^{41}\) Reese Erlich, “Trump Is Driving Iran into Russia’s Arms,” Foreign Policy, May 29, 2019.


\(^{44}\) Interview with Israeli academic, Tel Aviv, February 17, 2020.

\(^{45}\) Views of Iran, and of the extent of desirable cooperation with it, are not uniform across the Russian governing and military elites. See, e.g., Grajewski, 2020, p. 15.
“responsible” power in the region and would likely favor preventing such conflicts or seek to mediate them were they to break out, rather than unequivocally supporting Iran.

Tensions between the two states have also become apparent over the course of the Syrian conflict. Although Russia continues to need Iranian support in Syria, Russia’s and Iran’s goals for the near future of the Syrian conflict diverge. Russia is more focused on conflict settlement to boost its regional and global power status and is uninterested in getting involved in the broader Sunni-Shia competition in the region. The latter guides Iran’s interests, with Tehran seeking entrenchment in the Levant in part to be closer to LH and Israel’s border. Iran has entrenched itself deeply into Syria, securing influence within its security apparatus and cultivating a parallel security structure through its militias, which hinders Russian attempts at reforming security services and the military. Iran can be a spoiler to anything that Russia tries to propose to Assad in the way of settlement, and Iran’s presence prevents the kind of flexibility that Russia would prefer to command. To the extent that Russia would like to augment its power status through settling a conflict (and one that the United States and the West could not settle), it has an interest in limiting Iranian influence in Syria. The same goes for reconstructing Syria, with Russian and Iranian businesses competing against each other.

Another source of tensions pertains to Russia’s approach to Iranian proxies. Iran’s proxies are an important part of Russia’s longer-term problem with Iranian influence in Syria. Moscow has signaled that the withdrawal of all uninvited foreign forces from Syria is its “ultimate priority after a full political settlement is achieved.” Foremost and in the near term, the Kremlin is referring to U.S. forces stationed in northeastern and southern Syria.

46 For example, in 2016, Russian bombers used a base in Iran to carry out strikes in Syria prompting speculation in Russia that this could lead to long-term Russian access to Iranian military facilities. However, Tehran promptly cut off Russian access to the air base, complaining that Moscow had violated the terms of the deal by making it public. The Iranian government’s move was a signal that not all was proceeding smoothly in that relationship. (Rumer, 2019, citing both “Syrian Conflict: Russian Bombers Use Iran Base for Air Strikes,” BBC News, August 16, 2016; and Anne Barnard and Andrew E. Kramer, “Iran Revokes Russia’s Use of Air Base, Saying Moscow ‘Betrayed Trust,’” New York Times, August 22, 2016)

47 Interview with Israeli academic, Tel Aviv, February 17, 2020; Rumer, 2019.

48 Alexey Khlebnikov, 2019.

49 Putin had stated that “We proceed from the assumption that in view of the significant victories and success achieved by the Syrian Army in its fight against terrorism, and the start of a more active phrase of the political process, foreign armed forces will be withdrawing from the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic” (Vladimir Putin, “Statements Following Russian-Syrian Talks,” Kremlin, May 17, 2018). Alexander Lavrentiev, Russia’s Special Envoy to Syria, then clarified that this includes Iran (Igor Subbotin, “Иран отказался уступать Сирию российским войскам [Iran Refused to Cede Syria to Russian Troops],” Независимая [Independent], May 23, 2018).

50 See, e.g., Ramani, 2019b; “Exclusive: Russia, Iran Race for Syria Reconstruction Deals,” Asharq Al-Awsat, September 20, 2018.

as well as Turkish forces in northern Syria. Yet, in the longer term, Russia also likely wants Iranian forces and Iran’s foreign proxies out of Syria. Iranian proxy networks in Syria and Lebanon also threaten Israel, a partner for Russia. Russia may also have other interests that militate in favor of working to limit the destabilizing activities of Iranian proxies. As Russia seeks to expand its influence throughout the region, relations with countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt could be bolstered by Russia’s efforts, however tacit, to limit Iranian proxies. And as Rumer observes, allowing Israel to attack Iranian targets within Syria serves not only to accommodate Israel’s security interests but also to minimize Iran’s influence postconflict—and boost Russia’s.52

Russia’s position vis-à-vis the American objective of countering Iran’s nuclear ambitions, like China’s, is somewhat ambiguous. Russia is also no fan of a nuclear Iran. Russia voted in favor of the 2006 UNSCR 1737, which restricted the provision of nuclear-related weapon technology to Iran, and it was one of the parties to suggest P5+1 negotiations, which yielded the JCPOA.53 Russia formally supports nonproliferation—in the Middle East in particular.54 Furthermore, Russia’s formal commitment to cooperation with Iran is accompanied by the quest to “ensure the consistent implementation of the joint comprehensive agreement to settle the situation around the Iranian nuclear programme based on UN Security Council resolution 2231 of July 20, 2015 and relevant IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] Board of Governors decisions.”55 Russia also declares that it will “continue its balanced policy in favor of a comprehensive political and diplomatic settlement of the situation with Iranian nuclear program through dialogue based on a step-by-step and mutual interest approach and in strict compliance with nuclear non-proliferation requirements.”56

After the United States withdrew from the JCPOA, a move that Russia called a “destructive policy,” Russia continued its support for the agreement.57 Russia also likely perceives the risk of a nuclear Iran as less imminent than does the United States, according to a well-known expert on Russia’s defense issues.58 And, notwithstanding its concerns about nonproliferation, Russia is a key supporter of Iran’s civilian use of nuclear power and has lobbied for

52 Rumer, 2019, p. 15.
54 Russia’s 2016 Foreign Policy Concept states that Russia “maintains an unwavering commitment to strengthening the political and legal foundations of the nuclear non-proliferation regime, as well as the non-proliferation of other weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery”; Russia “supports the creation of zones free from nuclear weapons and other types of weapons of mass destruction, primarily in the Middle East” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016).
58 Interview with Israeli academic, Tel Aviv, February 17, 2020.
exemptions from UN sanctions in this regard. In spite of U.S. pressure, Russia built Iran’s Bushehr reactor—completed in 2011—and has concluded contracts for additional construction on Bushehr.

Space for Cooperation

In our assessment, there is potential trade space for cooperation with Russia, and to a lesser extent China, on averting a nuclear-armed Iran, containing Iran’s proxies, and limiting arms and technology exports to Iran. As is the case with the issue area pertaining to Middle East stability addressed in the prior chapter, we assess willingness to cooperate to be at the medium level for both countries, although we note that it is still relatively higher for Russia than China. And as with the issues addressed in the prior chapter, whether the opportunities to cooperate may be actualized is in part contingent on future policy choices and future developments, including U.S. policy choices about how to pursue objectives on which there is some alignment with its competitors. Iran is an important partner to China and Russia, but it is not indispensable to either power, and both have engaged with the United States in pursuit of common interests in the past, including on limiting Iran’s nuclear program and restricting arms sales to Iran. Additionally, Russia and the United States have, on a limited basis and often indirectly, cooperated to curtail Iran’s proxy network throughout the Middle East and particularly in Syria.

Limiting Arms and Military Technology Exports to Iran

China and Russia are two of the largest arms exporters to Iran but have historically demonstrated some willingness to cooperate with the United States on curtailing arms sales to Iran. China has been integral to Iran’s military modernization efforts and helping Iran establish its domestic defense industry. Nevertheless, the administration of George W. Bush engaged Beijing on several Iran-related issues and reportedly succeeded in curtailing Chinese arms exports there. China has also reduced its arms sales to Iran since 2010, in compliance with UN sanctions and prohibition of major arms transfers to Iran.

China has cooperated with the United States to curtail Iran’s nuclear program; however, it has been less willing to cooperate with the United States on curtailing Iran’s ballistic missile program and military modernization. While Iran is now able to domestically produce its sophisticated ballistic missiles, China’s past provision of missile technology served as a

61 Scobell and Nader, 2016, p. 57.
foundation for Iran’s contemporary indigenous capacities. Additionally, although Beijing has officially curbed its security assistance with Iran, Chinese businesses may be providing a workaround whereby Beijing is in compliance with UN sanctions but front companies continue supporting Iranian arms development and military modernization efforts. Moreover, China signaled that it would not support the United States’ efforts in mid-2020 to extend the 2015 UN arms embargo on Iran associated with the JCPOA. China might seek to rejuvenate its arms exports to Iran and help fulfill the Islamic Republic’s desire to modernize its military, especially its aged air fleet. Much of this decision will depend on how much Beijing values positive relations with Washington, how many concessions it can get out of Washington, and its long-term need for Iranian energy and geopolitical position.

Russia has also shown some, though mixed, willingness to cooperate in the past. Notably, after the imposition of UN sanctions and amid a brief period of warming U.S.-Russia relations, Moscow suspended the transfer of S-300 air defense systems to Iran in 2010. However, with a return of frosty relations between Washington and Moscow following the latter’s intervention in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia lifted the freeze on the S-300 transfer in 2015, and the systems were delivered to Iran in 2016.

As Rumer points out, however, although Russia did eventually sell the S-300s to Iran, Russia also provided Israel with sensitive technical data on the systems to help Israeli aircraft evade the defenses. Moscow’s behavior in this instance suggests that its arms sales to Iran do not have immutable priority—they, too, are a bargaining chip in the balancing act that Russia tries to pull off among adversaries in the Middle East. Indeed, Rumer also cites more recent reports that Russia declined Iran’s request to procure the S-400 air defense system while again providing Israel with technical knowledge to help its aircraft avert potential threats that the S-400 might pose in the future. Additionally, in late 2019, Israel reportedly agreed with Russia to cancel the sale of Israeli arms equipment to Ukraine and Georgia, in exchange for which Russia acquiesced to Israeli requests to not sell undisclosed weapon systems to Iran. Regional experts interviewed for this study suggested that Russia is hesitant to sell high-profile platforms—such as the S-400—to Iran and the Syrian regime, fearing

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63 Scobell and Nader, 2016, p. 57.
64 Nichols, 2020.
65 Grajewski, 2020, p. 6.
66 Rumer, 2019, p. 16.
67 One of our interviewees made a similar point, observing that Russians use “everything for a card at the negotiating table” (interview with Israeli think tank researcher, Tel Aviv, February 16, 2020).
68 Rumer, 2019, p. 16.
69 “Russia Nixed Arms Sales to Israel’s Enemies at Its Request, PM’s Adviser Says,” Times of Israel, November 2, 2019.
that the United States or Israel might target and destroy the platform, which would have detri-
mential strategic implications on international perceptions of Russian military technology
and its deterrence value.70 Thus, Moscow may be willing to bargain or cooperate with the
United States vis-à-vis arms transfers to Iran and particularly prospective transfers of politi-
cally sensitive platforms.

To be sure, evidence for Russia’s inclination to act in a way that coincides with U.S. inter-
ests in this regard is mixed. Russia has historically been and will likely continue to be a key
provider of military arms to Iran. Additionally, Iran may be benefiting from the covert trans-
fer of Russian military technology to modernize its domestically produced platforms. For
instance, Tehran announced in mid-2016 that it would begin producing the “Karar” main
battle tank, modeling it after the Russian T-90, suggesting that Russia may be assisting Iran
in the Karar’s development.71 As such, Russia’s genuine cooperation on limiting arms sales to
Iran and adherence to arms embargoes is arguably inconsistent and unreliable.

Nevertheless, given the historical willingness from Russia and, to a lesser extent, China
in this space, limiting arms exports to Iran provides another opportunity for cooperation.
Beijing’s track record of circumventing restrictions on transferring military technology to
Tehran suggests that genuine cooperation may be unlikely. However, Russia may be willing
to deny Iran the S-400 and other high-end air defense systems for reasons described above.

Averting a Nuclear-Armed Iran

First and foremost, neither China nor Russia has an interest in a nuclear-armed Iran. Beyond
mere rhetorical alignment, Beijing and Moscow have demonstrated a willingness to engage
and, to a modest extent, to cooperate with Washington on restricting Iranian nuclear activi-
ties. For instance, during the Obama administration, Washington and Beijing engaged in
Track 1, Track 1.5, and Track 2 dialogues that touched on Iran’s nuclear program.72 Under
the Trump administration, discussions continued, but without much by way of specific areas
of agreement or tangible results.73

70 Interview with an Israeli think tank researcher, Tel Aviv, February 16, 2020; interview with an Israeli
academic, Tel Aviv, February 17, 2020.

71 "گزارش: تحول جدی در توان زرهی نیروهای مسلح/تزریق صدها تانک جدید به سازمان رزم ارتش و سپاه" [Report: A Serious
Change in the Armament Capacity of the Armed Forces/Injection of Hundreds of New Tanks into the
Army and IRGC Combat Organization], "خبرگزاری تسنیم" [Tasnim News], July 17, 2016; Anton Mardasov,

Outcomes of the Strategic Track,” July 14, 2014; U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, “U.S.-

73 During the 2018 U.S.-China Diplomatic and Security Dialogue in November 2018, according to the
U.S. Department of State readout, “The United States raised the threat posed to regional stability by Iran’s
nuclear and missile programs, support for terrorist organizations, and other malign behavior. Both sides
intend to continue consultations on topics related to Iran” (U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokes-

184
China's past cooperation with the United States in this regard, however, had distinct limits. Iran's relative economic dependence on China gives Beijing a considerable amount of leverage when dealing with the United States and its Western allies.\(^{74}\) Even after the United States unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA and reimposed sanctions on Iran in 2018, China was able to secure a waiver from the United States, allowing it to purchase oil from Iran for 180 days.\(^{75}\) Though the waiver permitted China to import up to 360,000 bpd from Iran, five months after receiving the waiver, China was reportedly importing upward of 800,000 bpd from Iran and has continued to import approximately 200,000 bpd since the waiver's expiration.\(^{76}\) China's willingness, to a certain extent, to ignore U.S.-imposed restrictions has enabled China to maintain some influence over Iran.

China's willingness to expend meaningful effort or resources to keep Iran away from nuclear weapons has been limited and driven entirely by the threat—and often, actual imposition—of U.S. sanctions.\(^{77}\) U.S. sanctions against Iran are a serious concern for China because of their ability to cut off Chinese companies or financial institutions from the U.S. dollar, and thus the global economy. China did curtail its energy imports from Iran in the run-up to the JCPOA, but with stiff resistance, and the United States sanctioned several Chinese entities to coerce other Chinese firms into severing business ties with Iran.\(^{78}\) Since the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA and the renewal of U.S. sanctions, China has officially cut its oil imports. This, however, is not a case of unambiguous Chinese cooperation with U.S. policies: Following the expiration of the 180-day waivers, Chinese entities were sanctioned—including the same companies that were sanctioned earlier.\(^{79}\) Moreover, China has actively evaded sanctions through a variety of means and has also sought to circumvent the U.S. dollar by increasing the use of its currency, the renminbi, in trade with Iran.\(^{80}\)

\(^{74}\) As China experts Scobell and Nader argue, China has been the biggest winner from the United States’ contentious relationship with Iran, “extracting concessions from Washington in exchange for agreeing to United Nations sanctions” on Iran (Scobell and Nader, 2016, p. 62).


\(^{76}\) Katz, 2019.

\(^{77}\) For an early discussion of this, see Erica Downs and Suzanne Maloney, “Getting China to Sanction Iran,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 20, 2011.

\(^{78}\) Andrew Quinn, “U.S. Slaps Sanctions on China State Energy Trader over Iran,” Reuters, January 12, 2012.


For Russia’s part, during the U.S.-Russia rapprochement in the early years of the Obama administration, Washington and Moscow cooperated on nonproliferation issues. For instance, Moscow used its relationship with Tehran to both pressure and incentivize Iran to curtail its nuclear program, and Moscow initiated the multilateral negotiating platform comprising the United States, Russia, China, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom—known as the P5+1. Furthermore, the United States, China, and Russia are all signatories of the JCPOA. In addition, since the United States unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA in May 2018, both China and Russia—along with the other members of the P5+1, aside from the United States—have worked to keep the deal afloat and maintain Iranian compliance, despite renewed U.S. sanctions.

Although the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA complicates prospects, future cooperation in this realm is at the very least possible. As demonstrated by their efforts to sustain the JCPOA and forestall Iran restarting its nuclear program, both China and Russia may at least entertain the prospect of renewing negotiations, should the United States seek to reenter or restructure the JCPOA. In such an event, Andrey Kortunov and Jeffrey Mankoff have posited that Moscow might serve as an intermediary between Washington and Tehran, determining what the latter is at least willing to negotiate on. And as one prominent Israeli expert suggested in an interview, should Iran progress toward the bomb, Russia might passively allow the United States or Israel to conduct preventative strikes or cyber attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities while simultaneously presenting itself as a shield from such measures to Iran, as a means of extracting concessions from the latter.

**Containing Iran’s Proxy Network**

As the discussion of equities shows, the United States, Russia, and, to a lesser degree, China have a mutual interest in curtailing Iran’s proxy network and its destabilizing actions throughout the region. Russia’s record is mixed, suggesting some, but not high, levels of willingness to cooperate, and signs that China is willing to devote attention or resources to the issue are quite few.

Although China and the United States have engaged at length on Iran-related issues, there has been less productive discussion of Iranian proxies, to which China appears to have paid no substantive attention. By contrast, Russia certainly pays attention to Iran’s proxies. As

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83 Interview with Israeli academic, Tel Aviv, February 17, 2020.

noted above, Iran’s proxies in Syria benefit Russia in the short term but present obstacles to Russia’s consolidation of influence in a postconflict Syria. As the country’s civil war appears to abate, Russia-Iran competition for influence over Syria’s military and security apparatuses will also likely intensify.\(^8\) Russia has sought to rejuvenate Syria’s depleted security forces and to professionalize and integrate regime-aligned militias directly into the regime’s conventional command and control (C2) structure. Conversely, Iran has supported and propagated a militia network, which fights for the regime but is, as Russian journalist Anton Mardasov contextualized it, a “de facto parallel army” more readily influenced by Iran.\(^8\) However, Russia is also cultivating its own network of preferred militias that do not directly answer to the Assad regime, and Russia and Iran are even competing for influence of units within the regime’s C2 structure.\(^8\)

Syria thus provides evidence, albeit limited, of Russia’s willingness to cooperate with the United States and its allies and partners to limit Iranian proxy activity in the Levant. In particular, when the Assad regime launched an offensive in summer 2018 to retake opposition-held enclaves in southern Syria, both Israel and Jordan voiced their concerns about pro-regime Iranian proxy militias entrenching in the area. To assuage their concerns, Russia agreed with the United States and Israel—with Jordan participating in discussions—to establish a 70–80-km buffer zone along the Syrian side of the Israeli and Jordanian borders. In exchange for U.S., Israeli, and Jordanian consent for the regime reclaiming southern Syria, Russia agreed to patrol the buffer zone and prohibit Iranian forces from operating in the area.\(^8\) U.S. and Jordanian officials have also conducted regular meetings with their Russian counterparts to discuss the situation in southwestern Syria, addressing topics such as LH’s expanding presence in the area and maintaining border region buffer zones.\(^8\)

Moreover, Moscow has passively permitted Israel to strike Iranian-affiliated personnel operating in Syria and reportedly transferring advanced weapon technology to LH. Driven by a concern over Iran using Syria as a land bridge to transfer advanced weapon technology to LH, Israel began striking Iranian targets in Syria in January 2013. Since then, Israel has conducted a steady drumbeat of airstrikes on Iranian-affiliated targets, maintaining a deconfliction hotline with Russia’s Hmeimim Air Base to provide advanced warning of Israeli sorties.\(^8\) Reflecting and balancing its ties to both Iran and Israel, Russia has passively acquiesced in Israel’s frequent targeting of Hezbollah and Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Syria. As an Iran specialist at the Russian Academy of Sciences, Vladimir Sazhin, explained, “We close our eyes when the Israeli air force attacks Syria as long as there’s no attack on

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\(^8\) Grajewski, 2020, p. 16.
\(^8\) Mardasov, 2020.
\(^8\) Aksenov, 2019.
\(^8\) Interview with U.S. Department of State official, Amman, February 12, 2020.
\(^8\) Interview with Israeli think tank researcher, Tel Aviv, February 16, 2020.
Russian installations. It’s a gentleman’s agreement.” Our interviews confirmed the same explanation for Russian conduct with regard to Israeli strikes. Russia’s actions in this regard may be viewed as tacit cooperation with a U.S. ally, if not the United States itself, to combat Iranian influence in Syria. Additionally, Russia has reportedly deployed military police to the Golan Heights to assuage Israeli concerns over expanding Iranian presence in the area.

Russian willingness to cooperate in this regard is likely mixed. For example, U.S., Israeli, and Jordanian officials interviewed for this study all confirmed that Iranian proxy groups are increasingly active along the two countries’ borders, a testament to Russia’s lack of will, capacity, or both to enforce the buffer zones. Furthermore, interviewees also indicated that, in their experience, Moscow would only honor an agreement as long as it promoted Russian interests and would not hesitate to circumvent it otherwise. Nevertheless, Syria presents one of the few areas where Russia may be willing to cooperate with the United States or one of its allies, be it actively or passively, to contain Iranian influence and the expanding presence of its proxies.

Elsewhere in the region, China’s and Russia’s willingness to bargain or cooperate in containing Iranian proxies or malign behavior is largely absent. Both Beijing and Moscow should have a vested interest in suppressing belligerence in the Gulf, as their commercial and security interests grow. However, following Iranian-linked attacks on oil tankers in the Gulf in 2019—which have at times been associated with the Iran-backed Houthi movement in Yemen—neither China nor Russia participated in the U.S.-led Warsaw Summit in February 2019, which originally sought to convene international pressure against Iranian actions in the Gulf. Moreover, rather than publicly pressuring Iran to cease aggressive actions in the Gulf, both China and Russia signaled their alignment with Iran, conducting an unprecedented joint naval exercise in the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Oman in December 2019. The joint operation likely has only token operational significance. However, the messaging was clear—China and Russia stood by Iran amid U.S.-driven anti-Iranian sentiment. Although

91 Erlich, 2019.
92 Interview with Israeli think tank researchers, Tel Aviv, February 16, 2020.
95 Interview with U.S. Department of State official, Amman, February 12, 2020; interview with Israeli think tank researcher, Tel Aviv, February 16, 2020. This, we observe, is not too surprising, as states cannot be reasonably expected to cooperate with competitors or rivals when it does not promote their interests.
96 For an argument for U.S. cooperation with Russia in this regard by two Middle East experts, see Elizabeth Dent and Ariane Tabatabai, “Iran Is in Syria to Stay,” *Foreign Affairs*, December 14, 2020.
both powers may have privately pressured Iran to dial down its provocative activities, neither have indicated willingness to publicly cooperate with the United States to curtail Iran’s actions and avert escalation.

Table 9.1 summarizes our assessment of the theoretically available cooperation space in terms of the stakes for the two U.S. competitors, the rhetorical alignment between each and the United States, and their willingness to cooperate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 9.1</th>
<th>Interest in Cooperation on Countering Iran and its Proxies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How important is the issue area</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space for cooperation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical alignment</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrated willingness to cooperate</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Obstacles

Here again, multiple obstacles impede the paths to cooperation between the United States and China or Russia. First, a lack of trust will certainly complicate cooperation on any of the issues within the trade space. As we observed above, both Russia and China likely engaged in covertly undermining the sanctions and arms embargoes on Iran. Washington may thus justifiably harbor doubts about either of its competitors’ compliance with any cooperative agreement reached in this regard. Washington also harbors doubts about Moscow’s willingness to counter Iranian proxies, in view of Russia’s mixed record on patrolling the buffer zones along Syria. Lack of mutual trust flows the other way, as well. Given the United States’ unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA, both China and Russia may be wary of reentering into a deal or cooperating with the United States via other means.

Second, Iran strategy has been a contentious, high-profile issue in the United States. As evidenced by the Obama administration’s leading role in enacting the JCPOA, along with the Trump administration’s withdrawal and adoption of a maximum pressure strategy, any move may cause backlash—on both a domestic and international stage.99 Moreover, audience costs would attend U.S.-Russia cooperation on curbing Iranian influence in Syria: Even if likely necessary for stabilizing the country and addressing Syria’s humanitarian crisis, such cooperation might also endow Assad with an air of legitimacy.

Third, third-party actions will have a significant influence. Clearly, on issues of its nuclear program, military modernization efforts, and expanding proxy network in the Gulf

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and Levant, Iran has a decisive role. As discussed above, Beijing and Moscow both hold a fair amount of political and economic leverage over Tehran; nevertheless, Iran still has means at its disposal to raise the costs of an isolating and punitive containment policy. For instance, in a hypothetical scenario in which U.S. cooperation with China and/or Russia left Iran truly isolated and desperate, Iran could close the Strait of Hormuz and cripple the global energy market in an attempt to scuttle or dissuade U.S.-China-Russia cooperation.

Multiple regional actors might influence the prospects for U.S.-China-Russia cooperation, as demonstrated by Netanyahu’s lobbying in 2015 for congressional opposition to the JCPOA. U.S. allies in the Gulf—particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE—could act similarly with regard to any U.S. approach to Iran. The GCC states cautiously supported the JCPOA in 2015 but only after receiving U.S. assurances that the United States would prevent Iran from developing nuclear capabilities if the deal failed, in addition to guarantees of increased U.S. military support and continued pushback against Iranian proxies. Therefore, U.S. allies might seek to spoil cooperation with China or Russia on Iran-related issues if they believe said cooperation advantaged Iran’s position in the region to an unacceptable degree. Additionally, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom were also key players in enacting the JCPOA; it is not difficult to imagine a scenario in which their objections or policy priorities inhibit—or at least complicate—possible U.S. cooperation with China and Russia on countering Iran.

Fourth, despite mutual U.S.-Russia interests in containing Iran or limiting its role in Syria, cooperating in the near term will likely be complicated by issue linkages between tactical and strategic considerations on the part of both powers. At present, U.S. foreign policy links the issues of Iran’s nuclear program with its ballistic missile capabilities and support for proxies. U.S. opponents of the JCPOA have thus criticized the deal for being too narrow, and the United States’ 2018 withdrawal from the agreement declared the intention to renegotiate a more comprehensive deal that would “eliminate the threat of Iran’s ballistic missile program” and “stop its terrorist activities.” Insistence on this issues linkage by the United States—or any party involved in negotiations—may inhibit future cooperation on restricting Iran’s nuclear program. Moscow is unlikely to assertively curtail Iranian presence and influence in Syria, if even possible, until the United States has withdrawn and the conflict has resolved.

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However, Washington has intermittently signaled its desire to maintain its presence in Syria until Iran withdraws from the country.  

For Beijing, beyond serving as a strategic counterweight to U.S. influence in the region, Iran—like much of the rest of the Middle East—is first and foremost a priority for its energy resources that are needed to fuel China’s growing economy over the coming years. This link is made clear in the fact that the “secret” China-Iran cooperation agreement, reported in July 2020, is basically an oil-for-investment (and possibly military assistance) deal. As noted above, China’s reliance on foreign oil is projected to rise to 80 percent by 2035, up from 77 percent in 2019. Although decreasing U.S. demand, due to expanded domestic supply, may open up some of the existing market (Saudi Arabia, etc.) to greater Chinese purchases, it is quite likely that Beijing is betting on Iran as a long-term growth source for its energy imports.

Second-Order Effects of Cooperation

As on other issues, multiple second-order effects, both negative and positive, would need to be considered, weighed, and accommodated by U.S. decisionmakers. First, there are no clear openings to inject tensions into the Russia-China partnership through cooperation with one or both of the powers.

Second, cooperation on curtailing Iranian influence in Syria, and possibly in Lebanon, could certainly have positive reverberations for regional security. Such cooperation would greatly enhance Israel’s security, in particular. If the proliferation of Iranian missile technology to LH and Iranian proxies entrapping along Israel’s northern border were effectively constrained, Israel might no longer be driven to target Iranian and Iranian-affiliated actors in Syria through airstrikes. Israeli and Iranian-affiliated forces have intermittently exchanged tit-for-tat strikes. Israeli airstrikes or Iranian-affiliated missile strikes have not led to a more robust escalation by either side, yet such exchanges risk escalation that could spiral into a region-wide conflagration. Nevertheless, should a miscalculation occur—as was the case when the Syrian regime accidentally shot down a Russian reconnaissance plane, mistaking it for an Israeli fighter jet leaving Syrian airspace—conflict could quickly expand to involve the broader region, representing an extreme consequence of continued escalation.

Cooperating with China and Russia to avert a nuclear-armed Iran could also avert nuclear proliferation throughout the Middle East. In the event that Iran develops nuclear capabilities, it is not impossible that Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and possibly even Egypt or the UAE might also seek to acquire nuclear weapons. Such an eventuality could have dire consequences for regional stability and increase the potential for preemptive strikes or interstate nuclear conflict, which could also draw in Israel—currently the region’s only nuclear-armed power.


104 Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2019, p. 12; Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. 133.
increased presence of nuclear weapons in the region also raises the risk of nuclear technology falling into the hands of terrorist groups, who might seek to use such a weapon against civilians in the region, targets in Europe, or even the U.S. homeland. Therefore, cooperation with China and Russia on curtailing Iran's nuclear program offers significant positive externalities vis-à-vis averting a nuclear-armed Iran, nuclear proliferation in the region, and an escalatory spiral that could culminate in nuclear exchange.

Third, on the negative externalities side, U.S. cooperation with either or both powers might augment Russian and/or Chinese influence, possibly to the detriment of the United States. Any progress in cooperatively rolling back Iran's influence in Syria would likely be a strategic gain for Russia and strengthens its position in the Levant. An entrenched Russian presence will almost certainly have further effects on the overall balance of power in the Middle East, some of which may be destabilizing. For instance, a multipolar Middle East in which the United States holds less sway may galvanize more unilateral, assertive, and reckless action by actors in the region. Less speculatively, increased Russian influence might also expand Russia’s share of the regional arms market, which could have detrimental effects on arms proliferation in an already fragile and turbulent Middle East. A strengthened China or Russia would use any leverage gained to seek concessions from the United States or its allies—for example, to secure sanctions relief or favorable trade deals, as in the past.

Moreover, to the extent that cooperation with Russia or China would entail U.S. policy leadership, any new agreement or approach may be met with the same kind of dismay from U.S. allies that attended the JCPOA. Although signed by the P5+1, that deal was largely viewed as a U.S. initiative, bringing U.S.-Israel relations to a low point and harming Washington's relations with U.S. allies in the Gulf. A negative second-order effect in its own right, the fallout in U.S.-Israel relations also provided Russia the opportunity to expand its ties with Israel, already on the rise after Russia's 2015 intervention in Syria.

Conclusion

Cooperation between the United States and Russia or China may be possible on some subset of the issue area pertaining to countering Iran. The United States views Iran as one of the key drivers of instability in the Middle East and has sought to counter Iran both through its regional partnerships and multilateral platforms, such as the P5+1. China and Russia, both P5+1 members, are also wary of Iran’s malign behavior; however, both powers also see Iran as an important partner in countering U.S. influence in the region, which clearly limits the extent to which the interests of the three powers overlap.

Moscow and, to a lesser extent, Beijing have selectively cooperated with Washington on countering malign Iranian activities. Notably, all three powers negotiated the JCPOA, along with the remaining P5+1, and Chinese and Russian efforts to keep the agreement alive after the United States’ unilateral withdrawal suggest that both revisionist powers are still averse to Iran gaining nuclear capabilities. Therefore, they may also be open to renewed coopera-
tion on this front—conditional on the policy approach taken by Washington in the future. Even with the obstacles we identify, at least on Iran’s nuclear program, cooperation remains a distinct possibility, and any substantive diplomatic progress on preventing Iran’s acquisition of nuclear capabilities must involve Beijing and Moscow, Tehran’s primary international backers. Both China and Russia have, at times, cooperated with the United States to limit arms sales to Iran and to comply with UN sanctions, though we assess the potential for cooperation with Russia to be more likely than with China. Moscow and Washington have also attempted cooperative endeavors to limiting Iranian proxies in certain areas of Syria. Although the results are not wholly encouraging, the potential for future cooperation with Russia in this regard—if not with China—is within the trade space. Even if a more robust cooperation on a substantive, strategic level to rein in Iran’s proxies is not very likely, at least tacit or indirect cooperation with Russia to counter Iranian presence in Syria at the tactical level remains plausible.

Finally, we observe that while multilateral efforts to curtail Iran’s nuclear program and support for proxies would likely improve regional stability, this would come at a potential cost of strengthening the competing power(s) in the region. As we emphasize throughout this report, a thorough weighing of the second-order positives and negatives is beyond the scope of this analysis and would depend on the particular shape that cooperation takes. However, we observe that bolstering Russia’s influence as an unintended effect of cooperation on rolling back Iran’s influence in Syria, for example, is likely to be a net positive for regional security, as Russia’s presence in the region does not pose the same threats that Iran’s expanding proxy network poses to Israeli security, Iraqi sovereignty, or the physical safety of American and allied service members stationed in the Levant and the Gulf.
Conclusions and Recommendations

As expected, given the context of great power competition, there is no low-hanging cooperation fruit to be picked in the European and Middle Eastern domains. That is, on no issue area is there complete alignment of objectives and an unambiguous willingness to cooperate by either Russia or China. In Europe, the scarcity of such opportunities is due largely to the opposition of the United States and its rivals on core objectives, which relegates the trade space for cooperation to the mutual interest in reducing the risks of unintended escalation. This trade space, moreover, is exclusive to the United States and Russia—chiefly because China’s stakes in European security issues are too low to merit any expenditure of effort or resources. In the Middle East, the trade space is somewhat more open, because none of the three powers view the region as central to their national security and may thus be more open to compromise. In both the Middle East and Europe, multiple obstacles complicate the prospects of cooperation.

In this chapter, we summarize the findings with respect to each issue area and outline recommendations for the U.S. government, the Joint Force, and the Department of the Air Force on how to realize some of the theoretical opportunities to cooperate and advance U.S. interests. We emphasize that we did not conduct a systematic assessment of the direct and second-order costs and benefits of cooperation on any of the issues within the trade space for cooperation; however, for any of the issues that we identify as potential opportunities for cooperation, there is at least, appropriately, a potential that the benefits outweigh the costs.

Cooperation in Europe and the Middle East

Table 10.1 summarizes the trade space for cooperation presented in Chapters Three through Nine. The columns present, in order, our assessments of: the level of rhetorical alignment, or the extent to which official articulations of national objectives are in harmony or opposition to those of the United States; the stakes, or the equities of each power in each issue area; the willingness to bargain, or evidence that indicates the state is willing to engage in dialogue or negotiations about the issues; and the willingness to cooperate, or evidence that indicates the state is willing to expend resources or effort toward shared goals.

We highlight several aspects of our cumulative findings. As noted above, on no issue area are the United States and its strategic competitors fully aligned. The trade space for
cooperation, therefore, consists entirely of partial coincidence in national objectives, which should not be unexpected in view of the competition context. Nonetheless, trade space is not absent. In Europe, even though the United States and Russia are diametrically opposed in many of their core objectives, the shared interest in avoiding an unintended escalation of conflict between U.S./NATO and Russia produces at least some opportunity to cooperate on each issue area. There is likewise opportunity, even if it not highly likely to be pursued, that the United States and Russia can cooperate to advance the resolution of the Serbia-Kosovo conflict and resolve the conflict in Ukraine, or at least limit its most acute consequences. In the Middle East, the potential cooperation is closer to the core security issues implicated in each issue area, and at least theoretically includes China as well as Russia. Nonetheless, the possibilities of cooperation with China on core U.S. security objectives are more modest than with Russia—in part because China’s stakes in the region are largely driven by economic, not security, considerations.

Whether cooperation might be realized with respect to any of the opportunities for cooperation identified to be within this issue space is uncertain. Obstacles are numerous for each issue area, with lack of mutual trust and third-party problems being the most common. Both of these findings should not be too surprising. As the realist school of thought in international relations scholarship instructs, cooperation among states is rare because of the problem of credible commitments: Without a central authority to enforce agreements, the absence of trust is bound to minimize successful cooperation. And the present context of strategic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue Area</th>
<th>China</th>
<th>Russia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Broader Euro-Atlantic security</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baltic security</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balkan security and strategic orientation</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey’s regional role and strategic orientation</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The future of Ukraine</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East stability and peace processes</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Countering Iran and its proxies</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
competition is not conducive to trust. Third-party problems are rooted in the fact that just about every issue in Europe and the Middle East involves a crowded field of stakeholders and veto players.

All of the issue areas in Europe also suffer from a perceived lack of urgency or immediacy: In particular, insofar as the issues within the cooperation trade space involve managing the risk of unintended escalation, the absence of a serious crisis to date seems to create perceptions that the continent can muddle along even with the intensifying West-Russia tensions. Prospects for cooperation are also often complicated by issue linkages: For example, Russia has officially linked arms control and confidence-building measures to the broader state of U.S. and NATO relations with Russia, demanding that the former retreat from a policy aimed at containing Russia in order to make progress. Unless Russia can be more flexible on particular measures and in particular settings, this position makes it difficult to achieve even piece-meal progress, which is otherwise the most promising path to cooperative islands in a sea of strategic competition. Cooperation is also often obstructed by laws, chiefly on the U.S. side: Notably, the restriction on bilateral military-to-military engagement with Russia, and the accretion of sanctions related to Russia’s actions in Ukraine, Europe, and the United States, as well as sanctions related to Syria’s Assad regime, circumscribe possibilities for cooperation.

Finally, some issue areas present the problem of domestic audience costs that are likely to attend cooperative initiatives. On the U.S. side, political opposition is particularly likely with high-profile issues that have become embroiled with U.S. domestic politics: This pertains to anything related to Ukraine, for example, or issues that touch one of the international treaties or agreements that the United States has recently repudiated (JCPOA, the INF Treaty, the Open Skies Treaty) or concluded (the Peace to Prosperity plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict). Thus, with respect to some issues, whether the opportunity to cooperate may be seized is in large part contingent on future U.S. policy choices about how to pursue objectives on which there is some alignment with Russia and/or China.

On the side of relative optimism, few of the obstacles are fatal. For example, a lack of mutual trust in competitors’ compliance with any hypothetical agreements struck may be mediated by political will on both sides—and, for some issues, by robust monitoring of compliance. The concerns of allies and partners can be managed through diplomacy and reassurance. The political climates that shape the extent of audience costs and the preferred policy approaches to advance national security objectives vary, and it is conceivable that these will shift to better accommodate cooperative approaches in the future. But the obstacles do mean that cooperation in the near term is likely difficult to undertake. Table 10.2 summarizes these obstacles.

Assessing which of the theoretical opportunities for cooperation should be pursued should obviously take into account the extent to which they will advance U.S. interests; beyond that, however, second-order effects on other parties and other objectives and interests also should be weighed. Although we did not engage in a systematic weighing of such

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1 For this argument with regard to arms control, see Gottemoeller et al., 2020.
effects on both sides, we did seek to identify at least some of the key considerations. Here, the important pattern to highlight is the relative absence of “wedge” issues in the China-Russia partnership—that is, opportunities for the United States to introduce points of tension into that relationship. We note a few potential areas where cooperating with Russia might irritate or displease China, but not much more. In general, cooperation on any issue has the potential to create positive externalities in the slow accretion of trust that facilitates further cooperation and may boost security beyond the individual issue and for our allies and partners. Likewise in general, any cooperative venture also likely creates trade-offs between valuable aims. Table 10.3 summarizes our assessment of the second-order effects of great-power cooperation in Europe and the Middle East.

## Recommendations for the U.S. Government

Below, we synthesize the discussion in Chapters Two through Nine to identify ways in which the United States might take advantage of the theoretical opportunities for cooperation. We emphasize that not every recommendation suggested by our analysis is one to “cooperate” with Russia or China outright. Rather, most recommendations identify areas where various degrees of assessment or dialogue needs to happen to make a net judgement of whether cooperation is possible and beneficial to the United States.

Moreover, some opportunities for cooperation could advance U.S. interests with regard to an issue area in theory—but are unlikely to do so, or are not plausible, under present cir-
# Conclusions and Recommendations

## TABLE 10.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue Area</th>
<th>Impact of Cooperating with One Power on the Relations with the Other</th>
<th>Positive Externalities</th>
<th>Negative Externalities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Broader Euro-Atlantic security</td>
<td>Europe-focused post-INF agreement could prompt China's displeasure</td>
<td>Modest progress on managing risk of conflict is most plausible first step to ease tensions and build trust.</td>
<td>Trade-offs between lowering risk of conflict through CAC/CSBMs and deterrence and reassuring allies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>U.S. participation in some CSBM measures creates benefits for allies.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baltic security</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Modest progress on managing risk of conflict is most plausible first step to ease tensions and build trust.</td>
<td>Trade-offs between lowering risk of conflict through CAC/CSBMs/deconfliction and deterrence and reassuring allies</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balkan security and strategic orientation</td>
<td>Kosovo recognition might irritate China</td>
<td>Successful cooperation can contribute to easing U.S.-Russia tensions</td>
<td>Kosovo recognition likely to be exploited by Russia to maintain influence in Balkans, legitimize Crimea annexation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey’s regional role and strategic orientation</td>
<td>Increased U.S.-Turkey-Russia cooperation might irritate China</td>
<td>NATO-Russia deconfliction measures may also reduce risk of escalation between NATO members in Eastern Mediterranean Sea</td>
<td>Trade-offs between lowering risk of conflict through CAC/CSBMs/deconfliction and deterrence and reassuring allies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The future of Ukraine</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Progress on Ukraine likely to have dispersed positive effects, as this crisis is at root of the downturn in U.S./West-Russia relations</td>
<td>Any compromise with Russia may seem to legitimate its claims to Crimea and sphere of influence in post-Soviet space.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle East stability and peace processes</td>
<td>Cooperation with Russia on Syrian reconstruction may benefit Chinese economic interests, may increase China-Russia economic competition</td>
<td>Broader regional security gains from conflict resolution in Syria, progress on Israeli-Palestinian peace process.</td>
<td>Cooperation with Russia on Syria may legitimize its support for bloody al-Assad regime. Cooperation with Russia or China on any issue may further entrench their regional influence, to the detriment of U.S. interests down the line.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Countering Iran and its proxies</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Broader regional security gains from limiting Iran, including for key U.S. allies such as Israel</td>
<td>Cooperation with Russia or China on any issue may further entrench their regional influence, to the detriment of U.S. interests down the line.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

199
cumstances or in the short term because of salient obstacles. Because most obstacles are not immutable, we still identify these areas—but flag these less promising opportunities as warranting “consideration” or “monitoring of developments.”

Recommendation 1: If the United States chooses to cooperate, approach cooperation with Russia in Europe and the Middle East through gradual, modest steps

Overall, as some of the most prominent experts on U.S.-Russia relations suggest, the United States should approach cooperation with Russia through gradual, modest steps. Narrowly tailoring discussions or negotiations to specific security issues (e.g., ceasefire versus comprehensive conflict resolution in Ukraine) or theaters (e.g., the Black Sea versus all of Europe) may prove to be less divisive than broad agendas. As this report conveys, such modest steps are intended to limit the risks of armed conflict with Russia and to rebuild a minimal degree of mutual trust, rather than to advance major substantive U.S. objectives.\(^2\) Taking this approach would contribute to improving baseline U.S.-Russia relations, which some U.S. military and policy experts have argued is a necessary precondition for progress on any major issues to occur.\(^3\) This means that the United States should consider steps that might not in themselves constitute meaningful cooperation but might lay the groundwork for cooperation down the line, enabling the United States to seize the moment “when the window of opportunity opens.”\(^4\)

Recommendation 2: In Europe, focus on measures that reduce the risk of unintended conflict: conventional arms control, confidence- and security-building measures, crisis management, and deconfliction

There is scarce space for cooperation with either strategic competitor on the substantive visions of regional security architecture. However, numerous avenues of cooperation to make competition safer are at least theoretically available. As Chapter Three details, the traditional pillars of the CAC and associated CSBM regime, which have historically contributed to stability in Europe, have been eroded to various degrees. While cooperation remains challenging and beset by obstacles, potential for reducing the risks of unintentional escalation to armed conflict between Russia and NATO is not absent. To capitalize on that potential, the United States could pursue opportunities and engage Russia in dialogue along the following directions.


\(^4\) OSCE, Forum for Security Co-operation, 2019c.
Recommendation 2A: Pursue dialogue on intermediate-range weapons to determine whether an agreement that advances U.S. interests is possible

Although the United States points to Russia’s noncompliance with the INF Treaty as a key reason for the U.S. withdrawal, the United States retains an interest in limiting a potentially dangerous and costly arms race and the risks of unintentional escalation that these weapons present. As Chapter Three details, expert opinion suggests that addressing these risks—if not the resurrection of the INF Treaty—could be in the interests of the United States and its allies. Intermediate-range missiles historically contributed to a dangerous crisis that risked nuclear war in 1983.5 Such weapons, if stationed in Europe, would be able to reach vital targets deep within Russia, with potentially destabilizing consequences. In view of U.S. and NATO superiority in non-land-based launch platforms and the reluctance of the U.S. Congress to appropriate funds for such weapons, the United States should at least consider entering into a dialogue with Russia in this regard. Dialogue should serve to clarify Russia’s position with regard to the offer of a moratorium on first deployments of land-based intermediate-range missiles in Europe—in particular, whether Russia’s most recently announced position on the 9M729 cruise missile, which the United States has long-maintained violated the treaty, can be acceptable to the United States. As discussed in Chapter Three, Russia has displayed at least a mixed willingness to bargain and cooperate on this issue, and some U.S. experts have outlined the contours of a potential compromise.6 Limits on deployments in Europe, if negotiated, would still leave the United States and Russia free to deploy such weapons to the Indo-Pacific theater, which provides one of the few avenues for cooperation with Russia in Europe that might serve as an irritant to China.

Recommendation 2B: Consider opportunities to renew efforts for conventional arms control and improve cooperation on CSBMs

The United States should continuously assess and consider opportunities to reinvigorate negotiations on CAC and associated CSBM measures in Europe. As our analysis in Chapter Four suggests, obstacles to cooperation based on the Vienna Document, while certainly present, are likely less severe than those obstructing the other two pillars of the CAC and CSBM regime in Europe. Although Russia appears to reject proposals for modernizing the Vienna Document, the document has remained in effect since the downturn in relations, and other signals suggest that Moscow could be brought to the negotiating table. Updating and closing some of the loopholes in the Vienna Document to promote greater transparency would mitigate operational risk continent-wide but would have particularly significant effects in the Baltics, Black Sea, and Eastern Mediterranean, given the density and frequency of military assets and activities in those regions. Building on such stipulations in a modernized Vienna Document, other proposals (such as the previously discussed Baltic Contact

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5 See Dell, 2018.
6 Countryman and Reif, 2019.
Zone proposal) to instate increased transparency and verification measures in sensitive U.S./NATO-Russia contact areas may also decrease the risk of unintentional escalation in specific theaters. The Russia-NATO Founding Act and the Russia-NATO Council could also serve as potential vehicles for pursuing some degree of arms control and confidence building, notwithstanding the obstacles we describe.

In combination with recommendation 1, this avenue toward potential cooperation may mean that discussions on some aspects of CAC should focus on a subregional, rather than continent-wide, as well as “other narrower ground and maritime environments.” The United States could explore options for limitations on troops and equipment in specific theaters: Although introducing limits in the Baltics theater might favor Russia, any such advantage would be offset by U.S. and NATO superiority on the European continent. Therefore, a subregional option might help lower the risk of miscalculation and unintentional conflict while preserving deterrent balances in the given region. To merit more serious pursuit of such options of course, the United States needs to take into account the position of the most centrally affected allies and weigh the negative against positive externalities.

Recommendation 2C: Pursue opportunities to improve deconfliction and escalation management mechanisms to lower the risk of dangerous incidents in the air and on the sea

The United States should pursue opportunities to improve the “patchwork of bilateral agreements between NATO member states and Russia that aim to manage military-military encounters in international airspace and on the high seas.” The focus should be on (1) including state parties that are currently uncovered by such arrangements but are important by virtue of their location or military activities and (2) accounting for changing technology and operational methods. It may be most beneficial to focus in particular on bolstering subregional arrangements, including managing risks around the Baltic, Black, and Mediterranean Seas, where NATO-Russia contacts are especially likely to lead to unintentional escalation. The risks in the Baltic and Black Seas have attracted a fair amount of policy discussion, but we emphasize that the same dangers may be growing in the Eastern Mediterranean, where the risks of a Turkey-Russia incident in particular merit U.S. attention. U.S. efforts should include discussions on updating existing agreements, such as the U.S.-Russia INCSEA, DMA, and equivalent agreements with other European states, as well as considering new or expanded instruments of coordination, such as a NATO-Russia vehicle for managing dangerous incidents.

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8 Frear, 2018, p. 6.
Recommendation 3: Expand U.S. engagement with Russia on ending the conflict in Eastern Ukraine based on the Minsk II agreement and pursue more modest opportunities to limit the most acute consequences of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine for the affected populations and to reduce tensions between the parties

If the United States seeks to affect the outcome of the simmering conflict in the Donbas, it should take certain steps that would allow negotiating with Russia from a stronger position. First, the United States needs to identify a viable forum through which to engage Russia on conflict resolution. This might mean reviving the withered Ukraine track, or explicitly involving another forum, such as the Russia-NATO Council. Second, the United States should aim to identify sources of leverage to use in negotiations with Russia, in view of the probable insufficiency of the promise of lifting sanctions as currently constituted. Third, the United States could consider more clearly defining its position on the contentious provisions of Minsk II and seeking to influence parties to the negotiation toward the preferred resolutions of these questions. The United States should frame its positions and set terms for its participation in conflict resolution in a way that avoids sending the signal that the United States acquiesces in Russian aggression or that Russia’s violations of international law are acceptable.

Because reaching an agreement based on Minsk II is not very likely in the near term, the United States should pursue and support more modest steps to alleviate the consequences of the conflict. Such steps include maintaining a stable ceasefire, improving unrestricted access and freedom of movement for civilians in eastern Ukraine; advocating the restoration of the Joint Centre for Control and Coordination, supporting establishment of a military-to-military crisis management dialogue (e.g., among Russia, Ukraine, Germany, and France), supporting humanitarian initiatives such as those focusing on missing persons and demining, and negotiating economic measures such as proposals for reconstruction of the Donbas. Apart from mitigating the impact of the conflict on Ukraine, such measures may create a modicum of trust among the parties and foster a more fertile ground for more comprehensive solutions in the longer term.

Recommendation 4: Seek opportunities to cooperate with Russia to counter Iranian proxy networks

The United States should seek opportunities to engage Russia in efforts to counter Iran’s proxy networks, an objective that all three powers share to some degree. To be sure, cooperation on this issue is likely to be partial, tacit, and confined to Russia. As we explain in Chapter Nine, Iran’s proxies in Syria benefit Russia in the short term but present a serious obstacle to Russia’s consolidation of influence in a postconflict Syria in the longer term. Russia has a mixed record of cooperating with the United States, Israel, and Jordan on this front. On the one hand, Russia has agreed to establish a buffer zone along the Syrian side of the Israeli and Jordanian borders, where Iranian forces would be prohibited. Moreover, Russia has tacitly
stood aside to allow Israeli strikes against Iranian targets in Syria and is reportedly deploying military police to the Golan Heights to meet Israeli concerns over expanding Iranian presence there. On the other hand, as Chapter Nine details, none of these cooperative ventures are wholly successful, with Russia often not delivering on its representations. And future opportunities to cooperate with Russia—at least in the near term—will likely remain piecemeal, rarely producing unqualified successes. Nonetheless, even such piecemeal efforts might contribute to confining, if not rolling back, Iranian influence in the Middle East; thus, we recommend an ongoing assessment of opportunities to continue and deepen cooperation on this front.

In addition to recommendations 1–5 for the U.S. government above, which may be pursued at will, our study identified more contingent opportunities for cooperation, which could advance U.S. interests in theory but are either less likely to do so under present circumstances or are not practically plausible at present because of salient obstacles. These opportunities are summarized in recommendations 6–10, also addressed to the U.S. government.

**Recommendation 6: Monitor developments (notably, Serbia’s conduct) to identify opportunities to help resolve the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo**

As discussed in Chapter Five, numerous ongoing political conflicts in the Balkans carry the potential to escalate into armed conflict. Although there are no immediate opportunities for direct engagement with Russia, the United States should keep an eye toward openings to jointly deescalate or help resolve the long-standing dispute over Kosovo’s status. While maintaining close ties with Russia, Serbia has also recently indicated an interest in U.S. involvement in brokering a resolution to the Kosovo conflict, participating in U.S.-led talks that most recently resulted in the normalization of economic relations between Serbia and Kosovo. If both Serbia and Kosovo continue to call for U.S. involvement, the United States could play a major role in facilitating a resolution to this conflict. Although Russia has an interest in maintaining Kosovo as a frozen conflict, it would likely take a different position if Serbia continues to push for a U.S.-brokered resolution to avoid the risk of losing its influence over its most important ally in the region. As we discuss in Chapter Five, Russia has already indicated, at least rhetorically, that it would support Serbia’s decision on this matter—although we warn that Russia could also choose to covertly foment further instability in the region to undermine the deal while publicly claiming to support it. Although contingent and uncertain, such a development could present a chance to bring both the United States and Russia into contact with each other around the negotiating table, potentially prompting further dialogue on other issues in the Balkans and beyond.
Recommendation 7: Consider seeking cooperation opportunities with regard to Syria through Geneva process with Russia and China

The United States could exploit the shared interest among all three powers in a diplomatic resolution of the Syrian Civil War—primarily through the Geneva process, building on past cooperation with Russia. As we explain in Chapter Eight, Russia is a major international arbiter of Syrian affairs and plays an influential role in multilateral efforts to resolve the conflict through the UN’s Geneva peace process and the parallel Astana process. Moscow and Washington disagree on the key issue of the fate of the Assad regime, and Russia’s motives for supporting reforms to Syria’s constitution differ from those of the United States and its allies. However, Moscow has been consistently engaged with this effort, and the Astana participants apparently ceded the issue to the Geneva process. This is one of the few acceptable avenues for Washington to not only engage with Moscow but also maintain some influence over the future of Syria—if it chooses to do so. The dominant influence of the Astana process and the withdrawal of most U.S. forces from Syria in late 2019 diminished U.S. influence on Syrian affairs. Unless it cooperates with Russia, the United States will likely have little to no say in Syria’s future, allowing Russia, Turkey, and Iran to fully take the reins. China, for its part, has traditionally aligned with Russia on Syrian matters and has also supported the UN-sponsored Geneva track. The pragmatic case for engaging China on this front may be weaker, as its limited influence in Syria would not significantly affect the fate of the constitutional reform process. However, getting China on board with the peace process might make it more inclined to cooperate in the shared interests with regard to reconstruction (see next recommendation).

Recommendation 8: Monitor developments for potential to participate in Syria’s reconstruction in cooperation with Russia (and to a lesser extent, China), should conditions change (e.g., Assad departs, Russia ceases support) and a window of opportunity arise

At present, U.S. options to cooperate with either Russia or China on Syria’s reconstruction are limited, as we discuss in Chapter Eight. Russia’s role in Syria makes it necessary to deal with Russia at some level, but Russia’s current support for the Assad regime makes engagement on this issue a nonstarter for the United States—and U.S. cooperation with Russia on this issue is indeed precluded by U.S. law (the Caesar Act). However, in view of the U.S. interest in restoring stability to Syria, redressing some of the worst humanitarian consequences of the conflict, and retaining some influence in the country’s future, the United States should be prepared to change course should the operative conditions change. That is, Assad’s departure for any reason or genuine reforms within the regime, or the cessation of Russian support for Assad’s reign would change the calculus for the United States. As we suggest in Chapter Eight, these conditions are not wholly unlikely, which counsels in favor of close U.S. attention to the evolving potential for cooperation with Russia. In planning for potential cooperation, the United States should consider both the benefits that economic revival would bring
and the costs, including the likelihood that reconstruction resources will benefit Russia’s commercial interests in the country. Although China shares the rhetorical commitment to reconstruction, many experts believe it is not likely to contribute significantly, thus limiting the potential gains to be had from engaging China on the issue.

Recommendation 9: Monitor developments for potential to advance peace and stability between Israel and Palestine in cooperation with Russia, should conditions change (e.g., U.S. policy approach) and a window of opportunity arise

The United States should seek to identify opportunities to build on the shared interest with Russia in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and promoting Israeli security. As Chapter Eight recounts, Russia and China share these general goals with the United States, but their preferred approaches to advancing these goals—generally based on the two-state solution—diverge from the current U.S. approach. In view of the historical record of some degree of cooperation with China and Russia on efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian issue and Arab-Israeli conflict, the United States should continue to assess openings for future cooperation. The growth of Russian influence in Israel and the region more broadly makes engagement with Russia a pragmatic option; although explicit cooperation with Russia might further entrench its influence, this would at most reinforce existing trends and could potentially be offset by gains to regional security and Israeli security from any progress that results.

China shares a rhetorical interest in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but the case for cooperation is much weaker; at the very least, the United States should weigh engagement with China carefully. China’s economic outreach could be leveraged if it is led by Chinese aid—not Chinese loans—and the United States may want to engage China in some way to prevent Chinese obstruction (such as through a UN Security Council veto vote). However, such a consideration must be balanced against the potential boost to Chinese influence—particularly within Israel’s tech sector—that active cooperation might deliver.

Recommendation 10: Monitor developments for potential to prevent a nuclear Iran in cooperation with Russia and China, should conditions change (e.g., U.S. policy approach) and a window of opportunity arise

The United States should seek to identify opportunities to build on the shared interest with Russia and China in preventing a nuclear-armed Iran. As Chapter Nine details, neither China nor Russia has an interest in Iran developing nuclear weapons, and both have demonstrated at least a mixed willingness to bargain and cooperate on this issue. The U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA complicates prospects for cooperation, as both states continue to support the nuclear deal and disagree with the current U.S. policy approach. Should circumstances change or the United States’ policy approach shift, both China and Russia would possibly
entertain the prospect of renewing negotiations with Iran (whether it is to restructure the JCPOA or revitalize and extend the deal in its original 2015 form). If a cooperative approach is pursued, the United States should tread carefully: Although Russia’s and China’s influence over Iran might help reach an agreement with the latter, Moscow and Beijing will also likely seek to exploit the process to strengthen their position vis-à-vis Washington. In view of the severity of the destabilizing effects that a nuclear Iran would have, progress on preventing such an outcome should probably take priority over concerns about Russian and Chinese influence—but such concerns should nonetheless inform U.S. policy choices.

Recommendations for the Joint Force, U.S. Department of Defense, and the Department of the Air Force

Recommendation 1: Identify strategies for competition with potential to create incentives for cooperation

As we discuss in Chapters Three, Four, and Six, cooperation on reducing the risks of unintentional conflict is obstructed in part by a perceived lack of immediacy or urgency for any given measure. The Joint Force has levers to increase Russia’s perceptions of urgency through carefully calibrated competitive tactics. To the extent that the U.S. side perceives Russia’s noncompliance and exploitation of loopholes in agreements such as the Vienna Document as being one-sided, the Joint Force can ratchet up the pressure by adopting strategies that mirror Russia’s own.9 If Russia structures exercises to spread troops across multiple countries so as to circumvent the Vienna Document requirement to report, for instance, the Joint Force might seek to work with allies to do the same—while staying within the letter of applicable rules. Such steps should be considered together with strategic communication, such as through notifications called for by the Vienna Document, to make clear the U.S. message behind these actions. Because the U.S. Air Force is the leading service, or at the very least a prominent player, in most European theaters or missions (e.g., Baltic Air Policing), it can play a key role in strategic signaling and messaging. Most exercises in the Baltics, for instance, involve a heavy air component; future air exercises could be carefully constructed to mimic Russian tactics of circumventing Vienna Document provisions in order to send a signal to Moscow that it would be in Russia’s best interest to comply with the spirit, not just the letter, of the document. If the Joint Force and the DAF can structure such competitive steps to guard against escalatory pressures, they might strengthen Russia’s incentives to engage on CAC and CSBM measures.10

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Recommendation 2: Maintain and look for opportunities to expand military-to-military engagement for purposes of deconfliction in Syria and establish such channels in Europe

As our analysis suggests, the deconfliction channels between the United States and Russia in Syria are widely regarded as reasonably, if not completely, successful in preventing dangerous incidents, and represent one of the few remaining viable channels for communication and cooperation. Pending a decisive resolution of the Syrian conflict, the Joint Force and the U.S. Department of Defense should maintain these channels at every level, from the hotline connecting mid-level officers to the line connecting three-star level commanding officers. Moreover, due consideration should be given to expanding the purpose of these channels to address evolving operational realities.

To improve deconfliction and escalation management mechanisms in regions with heightened risks of dangerous incidents between U.S./NATO and Russia in the air and on the seas—i.e., the Baltic, Black, and Eastern Mediterranean Seas—the Joint Force and the DAF should pursue the establishment of deconfliction channels at the operational level. The Joint Force can build on and adapt the arrangements in Syria between CENTCOM and Russian forces to the different environment in Europe. In the European context, a channel that connects NATO air commanders and their Russian counterparts may be the most pragmatic approach. The U.S. Department of Defense can also consider a direct U.S.-Russia line for deconfliction efforts in Europe where feasible. Such channels would help to deescalate tensions and resolve incidents in a timely manner, as well as contribute toward routinizing coordination between NATO and Russia, while staying within current legal limits on U.S. or NATO military engagement with Russia.

Recommendation 3: Pursue Dialogue with Russia to limit sales of S-400 and other advanced weapon systems to Iran

As a relatively discrete, but effective, step, the Joint Force, the U.S. Department of Defense, and the DAF should advocate dialogue aimed at Russia’s limiting sales of advanced weaponry—the S-400 systems in particular—to Iran. Although the key actors to implement this approach are outside the military, the DAF in particular has weighty equities at stake, in view of the battlefield effects of these weapons, and could work with the key U.S. actors to pursue this avenue. Russia has shown some willingness to curtail arms sales to Iran generally, even as Moscow likely seeks to expand its arms trade volume with that state. Russia has reportedly sought to accommodate Israel’s legitimate security concerns about this and other advanced weapon systems. Moscow might be hesitant to sell high-profile platforms—such as the S-400—to Iran and the Syrian regime, fearing the United States or Israel might target and destroy the platform, which could have detrimental strategic implications for perceptions of Russian military technology. As such, Moscow may be willing to bargain or cooperate with the United States, vis-à-vis arms transfers to Iran and particularly prospective transfers of politically sensitive platforms. A more remote possibility is to advocate engaging in similar
dialogue with China on potential arms sales to Iran in the future, particularly with regard to UAVs or air defense technology, in view of the likely expansion of military cooperation between the two. As we noted, however, China's willingness to limit weapon sales has been decidedly mixed, and it is not clear that the United States would be able to offer appropriate incentives.

Final Thoughts

The set of cooperative ventures available on the U.S. policy menu in Europe and the Middle East is certainly limited at present and consists of relatively modest steps. However, we emphasize that even seemingly minor or peripheral cooperative steps can be important. First, they are important in their own right. As of late 2020, tensions and incidents between the U.S. and Russian militaries in Europe, the Middle East, and even close to the United States (e.g., Alaska) are increasing. Such skirmishes and dangerous incidents underline the real risk of loss of life and unintended escalation between the great powers with the biggest nuclear arsenals in the world. Although deconfliction or escalation management measures lack the cache of resolving the Syrian or Ukrainian conflicts, cooperation on the former goals is nonetheless quite important.

Second, the importance of these measures may also bear out in second-order effects. Here, the value is not in driving a wedge between Russia and China (a second-order effect in which the United States should not place much stock for most issue areas addressed here). Instead, the second-order value of cooperation on such issues is gradually remedying the trust deficit by building up a record of cooperation, thereby making engagement on the most important issues more plausible with time. The explanation offered by Trenin for Russia’s offers of cooperation in common crises is worth highlighting: “The main reason for Moscow to reach out to Washington with an offer of cooperation in a non-existential crisis is that a coalition would allow it . . . to break through the logjams blocking the relationship.” Even small steps can help cut through the gridlock that stems from issue linkages and precludes the United States from striking a better balance in its quest to succeed in a simultaneous competition with two powers.

In this, we echo the recommendations of numerous other experts, who affirm the necessity and value of small steps—especially to reduce the level of tensions in the U.S.-Russia relationship and put it on a less dangerous path. In this regard, it is worth emphasizing the


13 For example, Kubiak, 2019.
message recently crafted by six of the most prominent Russia officials and experts, who have collectively served every recent U.S. presidential administration. Rose Gottemoeller, Thomas Graham, Fiona Hill, Jon Huntsman Jr., Robert Legvold, and Thomas R. Pickering argue that the United States should “maintain[] our defense” but balance it with “engag[ing] Russia in a serious and sustained strategic dialogue that addresses the deeper sources of mistrust and hostility and at the same time focuses on the large and urgent security challenges facing both countries.” These challenges include

the imperative to make safer and more stable the military standoff that cuts across Europe’s most unstable regions, from the Baltic to the Black Sea, working vigorously to preserve existing constraints, such as the Open Skies Treaty—now under challenge—and the Vienna Document 2011, and creating new confidence-building measures.14

14 Gottemoeller et al., 2020.
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bpd</td>
<td>barrels per day</td>
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<td>BRI</td>
<td>Belt and Road Initiative</td>
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<td>CAATSA</td>
<td>Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act</td>
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<td>CAC</td>
<td>conventional arms control</td>
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<td>CCP</td>
<td>Chinese Communist Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>CENTCOM</td>
<td>U.S. Central Command</td>
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<td>CFE</td>
<td>Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIS</td>
<td>Commonwealth of Independent States</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSBM</td>
<td>confidence- and security-building measure</td>
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<td>DMA</td>
<td>Agreement on the Prevention of Dangerous Military Activities</td>
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<td>EASLG</td>
<td>Euro-Atlantic Security Leadership Group</td>
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<td>eFP</td>
<td>enhanced forward presence</td>
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<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<td>EUCOM</td>
<td>U.S. European Command</td>
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<td>FY</td>
<td>fiscal year</td>
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<tr>
<td>GCC</td>
<td>Gulf Cooperation Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>INF Treaty</td>
<td>Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INCSEA</td>
<td>Agreement on the Prevention of Incidents On and Over the High Seas</td>
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<tr>
<td>JCPOA</td>
<td>Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action</td>
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<td>KFOR</td>
<td>NATO Mission in Kosovo (Kosovo Force)</td>
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<tr>
<td>LH</td>
<td>Lebanese Hezbollah</td>
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<tr>
<td>NATO</td>
<td>North Atlantic Treaty Organization</td>
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<td>NDAA</td>
<td>National Defense Authorization Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDS</td>
<td>National Defense Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSS</td>
<td>National Security Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OSCE</td>
<td>Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLA</td>
<td>People's Liberation Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLAN</td>
<td>People's Liberation Army Navy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRC</td>
<td>People's Republic of China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAM</td>
<td>surface-to-air missile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCO</td>
<td>Shanghai Cooperation Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAE</td>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAV</td>
<td>unmanned aerial vehicle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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UNIFIL  United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon
UNSCR  United Nations Security Council Resolution
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245


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Assessing the Prospects for Great Power Cooperation in Europe and the Middle East


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Can the United States find ways to cooperate with China or Russia in Europe and the Middle East? Using official U.S., Chinese, and Russian policy documents, leadership statements, and other sources, the authors of this report assess the prospects for great power cooperation on seven issues: broader Euro-Atlantic security, Baltic security, Balkan security and strategic orientation, Turkey’s regional role and strategic orientation, the future of Ukraine, Middle East stability and peace processes, and countering Iran and its proxies.

The authors find that, in Europe, opportunities for cooperation on the core security challenges with either competitor are virtually absent, but there are opportunities to limit escalation or manage tensions. In the Middle East, more substantive opportunities for cooperation exist in principle—more with Russia than China, but some cooperative options exist even with the latter. However, in both regions, there are multiple obstacles that will likely preclude the United States from seizing the more ambitious of these opportunities in the near term.