

Contextual Scene Setter

Russian Federation<sup>1</sup>

ISR Operational Perspectives for the Warfighter

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## **Introduction**

This paper is a primer on the current international security considerations and important background information on the Russian Federation germane to relations with the US and the US's partners, allies, and interests. It begins by highlighting the unique geography, climate, and resources of the region, and offers a high-level comparison between Russia and the US on the topic of military culture, size, and spending. The paper summarizes several current challenges Russia faces and related strategic issues regarding economic dependencies, military partnerships, and matters of importance with respect to the changing great power world landscape. The objective of the paper is to provide US military leaders a starting point for becoming familiar with these key security challenges, transnational issues and relationships, economic drivers, and military context relevant to a myriad topics in Eastern Europe, Central and East Asia, as well as developing circumstances related to the Arctic region.

## **Geography and Population**

Russia is unique from other countries in many ways and its vast geography is one of the most obvious. Although many commonly used map projections tend to exaggerate areas nearer the poles, Russia is in fact the largest country by land mass in the world. According to the Central Intelligence Agency's World Factbook, Russia's territorial claims make it approximately 1.8 times larger than the contiguous US although much of the land is sparsely populated. Though not broadly supportive of an agrarian society, the Russia landmass is rich in oil, gas, coal, and important mineral resources which are currently in high demand throughout the developed world. Access to these resources, however, is challenged by difficult terrain and a lack of convenient access to the sea. At this time, the Kaliningrad oblast's access to the Baltic Sea

provides Russia with its only year-round ice-free port. Even with these logistical challenges, Russia is routinely in the top three annual exporters of fossil fuels. It currently sits in second place for crude oil exports and is the top natural gas exporter in the world.<sup>2</sup> These few major exports, discussed in further detail below, are vital to the economic stability of the country.

Its vast size notwithstanding, Russia's population is less than half that of the US and only one tenth the size of China's making it the ninth most populated country. This overall low population density is driven by two major factors, poor climate conditions throughout much of the North and Central regions, and a lack of suitable terrain and soils necessary for adequate food supply. Overall, the population size has been decreasing in recent years. This is primarily due to low birthrates and is a contributing factor to internal societal issues described herein. Even though population size is on the decline, Russia enjoys a net positive migration rate. This favorable indicator demonstrates a desire for non citizens to move to the country, many of whom come from the 14 countries with which Russia shares a common border. Although the population age distribution differs significantly from the US, population dependency ratios—showing the ratio of mostly younger and older persons dependent on the product of working adults—are similar to those in the US suggesting social system stability even with reduced birthrates.<sup>3</sup>

## **Military**

Russia's approach to its standing military forces is different than the US's in many ways. First, Russia requires either a one year conscripted service or a two year military contract for all males.<sup>4</sup> Though the US has a much larger population, both Russia and the US have a similar number of armed forces personnel.<sup>5</sup> As a percentage of the available labor force, therefore, Russia's military comprises approximately 2% while the US military hovers closer to 1% in recent years.<sup>6</sup> In terms of government spending, Russians invest a similar percentage of their

Gross Domestic Product in their military, but when compared in absolute US dollars, this results in less than 10% of what the US spends on its military each year.<sup>7</sup> In addition to these variations, control of the military is vastly different between these two powers.

In the Russian Federation, the military is tightly controlled through a top down approach by President Putin and influence from the Russian population or parliament is deliberately limited. Specifically, the president directs the employment of the armed forces while the General Staff executes the organization, planning, acquisition, and operational command and control functions over the military.<sup>8</sup> Activists have attempted to improve the conditions of military conscripts in an uphill battle against the limited access to information and tight presidential controls over the military.<sup>9</sup> Though parliament has the power over defense spending in Russia, only a few military officers have broad access to budget and spending information. This leaves little ability for the parliament or citizens to verify or influence military programs and aligns Russian forces more with the president's personal priorities rather than institutionalized bureaucratic controls.<sup>10</sup> That said, ethical reforms have slowly taken place over the last decade following many years of civil activism targeted at improving the conditions for conscripts. This has improved public opinion of the military and now a majority of Russians are in favor of keeping the conscription system.<sup>11</sup> However, this type of civilian influence over the military differs from the US in that Russian activism has focused not on how the military is employed, but instead on the ethical treatment of military members and the quality of their time in service.<sup>12</sup> Utilization of the military remains tightly controlled by senior leaders in line with their objectives abroad.

Russia has few formal military partnerships and no collective defense alliances with other major military powers. However, its military doctrine and systems are closely connected and

deliberately interoperable with key partners like border state Belarus.<sup>13</sup> Russia's pseudo-partnership with China is of particular interest to the US and has garnered attention from several countries in recent years. China is a major gas, oil, and manufacturing trading partner accounting for the largest share of Russia's imports and exports (20% and 14% respectively).<sup>14</sup> The two country's leaders have been seen together publicly on several occasions and portrayed a friendly attitude while highlighting their trade partnership. From Moscow in June 2019, while in the company of Xi Jinping, Putin remarked, "[...] our cooperation has reached a very high level. It would be no exaggeration to say that this level is unprecedentedly high. We discussed in detail major international issues and confirmed that the positions of Russia and China on key global issues are close or identical, as the diplomats put it."<sup>15</sup> However, these two countries' security approaches towards the US differ greatly and have strained their relationship.<sup>16</sup> China prefers to view itself as a rising power independent of Russia and sought to distance itself from Russia after the illegal annexation of Crimea and multiple US accusations of Russian backed cyber attacks. Ultimately, both powers wish to counter the US's hegemony, but China has shown distrust towards Russia's somewhat brash military threats in the course of international politics.<sup>17</sup> Further, Russia's external security focus has been more closely aimed at border states which are members of the Former Soviet Union (FSU).<sup>18</sup>

### **Internal Challenges**

Russia's population struggles to succeed compared to many developed countries due in part to healthcare challenges and broad economic conditions. The healthcare system is insufficient to support the needs of the people which manifests a 13 year lower life expectancy for males than the world average.<sup>19</sup> Many workers report feeling shackled or indebted to the government's social programs where the mandated retirement age is nearly the median life

expectancy contributing to a poor outlook on life.<sup>20</sup> Many people felt their situation had improved when President Putin came to power in the early 2000's, but especially amid numerous sanctions resulting from actions in Crimea and cyber attacks, the economic situation has worsened in recent years. These sanctions have caused a rise in inflation and food shortages in certain parts of the country directly impacting the population.<sup>21</sup>

Many Russian sub-populations also struggle against various human rights issues which have existed since the USSR. These internal difficulties often gain international attention through the judicial processes of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR). Russia became a participant in the ECHR when it joined the Council of Europe (CoE) in the mid 1990's. This provides an avenue for Russian citizens or organizations to seek judgments against Russia for human rights abuses. Why Russian leaders would commit to such human rights conventions when their internal system clearly fell short on many of its mandates, or why the CoE approved their membership, may never be entirely understood. However, it seems even limited participation in the system may have brought much needed legitimacy to the fledgling government and helped hold off perceived threats to Russia's sovereignty.<sup>22</sup> When Putin came to power the preponderance of cases in the ECHR's court system were against Russia. Settlements have typically been paid on time by the government, but the often promised structural reforms to Russia's internal systems have not come to fruition.<sup>23</sup>

In the 2010's, the situation began to worsen when Russia passed a combination of laws designed to provide coercive tools against individual activists and, similarly, non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These legislative acts gave the government a straight avenue for convicting citizens of treason and restricting or shutting down NGOs with any foreign financial support simply for contesting Russian ideology.<sup>24</sup> This marked a turning point where Russia

could now restrict the power of activism on human rights issues and accordingly began to distance itself from European and Western ideologies especially as they relate to the ECHR.<sup>25</sup> The trend toward more authoritarianism and institutional separation from Western influence continued after the annexation of Crimea and Putin's more recent rhetoric to delegitimize the CoE.<sup>26</sup> This demonstrates an overall regressive pattern on human rights matters. This behavior coupled with a renewed focus on bilateral deals with FSU states may be indicative of Putin's growing confidence in his government's regional power or that the ECHR has become a perceived threat to Russia's sovereignty its CoE membership once sought to prevent.<sup>27</sup>

Having once marked his presidency with the removal of corrupt and wealthy elites from government, Putin's administration has now come under fire for corruption. When he came to power in 2000, Putin pushed a popular anti-establishment agenda trying to improve people's trust in the Russian government.<sup>28</sup> However, many powerful people close to Putin are once again seen as wealthy elites who made their money from an oil-backed government system.<sup>29</sup> These tensions of the past were renewed as Alexei Navalny brought to light examples of internal corruption which spread quickly over the internet. In a 2018 interview with Voice of America, Navalny lambasted the election system stating, "We are faced with a construct in which they, the authorities, look into the eyes of the public and say: 'You know, we will not allow you to choose your own people's representatives. We offered you some people, you can vote for them.' [...] So it's fake, it's a falsification, and it's pointless to participate in the construct that from the get-go foresees Putin's targeted '70/70' percent result."<sup>30</sup> The Russian government has attempted to thwart the spread of this information by placing restrictions on the internet and social media, however, younger generations continue to find ways around them. This, along with the multiple

suspicious arrests of Navalny have only served to amplify the corruption allegations and bring them to international media headlines.<sup>31</sup>

On a larger scale, the country's revenues fluctuate greatly based on oil prices and demand. As previously mentioned, Russia is one of the top crude oil and natural gas producers whose export volume is similar to the US.<sup>32</sup> Unlike the US, however, more than half of Russia's revenue stream—at times close to two thirds—is driven by oil sales. Oil price reductions, which are connected to the US dollar, cause the Russian ruble to be less valuable and directly reduces the real incomes and wealth of the population.<sup>33</sup> With such widespread economic impacts from oil, when oil prices go up the economy expands quickly and squeezes other market sectors such as manufacturing and domestic food processing. These sectors, among others, are needed to create a more diverse and robust economy but are hurt by oil price hikes creating a cycle which is difficult to break and hurts the economy in the long term.<sup>34</sup> Overall, the Russian government's over dependence on a fossil fuel-based economy will likely have negative strategic consequences in the coming decades.

### **Transnational Issues**

Of particular interest to the Russia government is the completion and operation of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. For several years, this pipeline project has been at the forefront of numerous political debates between European states, Russia, and the US. As one author described, international geopolitical factors have come to dominate the Gazprom gas company's distribution project rather than more typical economic and market factors.<sup>35</sup> Despite a slow decline of natural gas production in Europe and climate change policies threatening gas consumption overall, European demand for Russian supplied gas has been steadily increasing since the late 2010's.<sup>36</sup> The Nord Stream 2 will greatly expand transport capacity to meet the



growing demand. At this time, approximately half of Gazprom's gas exports pass through and pay transit taxes to Ukraine. The Nord Stream 2 will provide alternative routing options though overall transfer costs and fees may not be reduced by comparison.<sup>37</sup> European state politics are deeply divided over the merits and risks of the new undersea pipeline. Supporters typically focus on the improved capacity, additional routing options, and economic benefits of the pipeline's construction and eventual supply. Opponents, especially the US, highlight the potential security concerns for Europe and claim Russia's true motives are to circumvent Ukraine revenues while the US simultaneously offers alternatives in the form of Liquefied Natural Gas shipments.<sup>38</sup> In recent years, these debates over fossil fuels and trade have dominated the contentious international relations issues between Russia and Europe.

Regarding other relationships with European states, Russia has long focused on what it calls the "near abroad." Specifically, this focus includes the Baltic states and Southeastern European states, several of which are now NATO members. Within this near abroad area, Russia caters directly to Russian language speaking people through their news media and deliberate information operations, and imposes economic pressure on the states themselves. The overall intent is to weaken Western Europe influence by sewing discord within Western messages while creating a positive view of Russia. The Russian government sees these border region operations as creating a geographic security barrier and seeks to increase its influence and power in this region. Parallels to the illegal annexation of Crimea abound though do not necessarily suggest Russia intends to annex additional areas within the near abroad.<sup>39</sup>

Russia sees itself as the primary partner with FSU states and will resist any potential for Western influence in these areas. The Caucasus region is a particular focus for this type of Russian control given the closely shared ethnic and cultural history as well as geographic

importance. Unlike the Baltics, these FSU states are not members of NATO and therefore do not enjoy the collective defense protections it offers.<sup>40</sup> On and off conflicts in this region over the last two decades combined with growing inter-regional tensions over borders, resources, and sovereignty make the Caucasus ripe for low intensity skirmishes or outright conflict though involvement in other World regions may be more alarming for US policy makers.

Though Russia has no clear foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific and Southeast Asian nations, Putin has publicized his support for providing economic and military aid to the region.<sup>41</sup> With the current US military emphasis on great power competition and the potential for conflict, these ties between Russia and the Pacific are of heightened importance. Russia has recently made numerous investments in its own military capabilities and presence along its eastern border with the Pacific, and has sought out additional arms deals in Asia. Russia currently supplies arms to 52 countries, 60% of such exports go to the Asian theater with 43% destined to Southeast Asian countries specifically. Russia maintains a military relationship with China, India, and Pakistan and, in recent years, has highlighted this cooperation and demonstrated their combined capabilities in large-scale wargames.<sup>42</sup> In recent years, Russia has exported nearly a billion dollars a year in military equipment each to Vietnam and China.<sup>43</sup> India is another regular buyer of Russian arms and, in licensing and manufacturing deals struck in 2017 and 2019, India began producing some of the Russian-designed military helicopters on its own soil.<sup>44</sup> Along with other recent Russian military efforts in the Middle East, these arms deals provide insight into Russia's foreign policy objectives and interests.

With China specifically, Russia does not have a formal alliance but rather enjoys a cordial relationship among their leaders. In recent years, they have conducted combined military exercises in the Mediterranean Sea and the South China Sea.<sup>45</sup> In the early 2000s, Russia showed

favoritism towards the US, but by the early 2010s, this relationship began to wane. China did not want to be viewed as a close military partner with Russia during the actions in Crimea. However, now that the US is taking a stronger stance against China's trade practices, economic expansion, human rights issues, and military presence in the South China Sea, China has begun cooperating militarily with Russia in public forum. This burgeoning military relationship extends beyond common arms sales agreements and exercises to direct Russian assistance with China's early warning and defense systems against potential US attack. As COVID-19 impacts are on the decline in these countries, the two leaders have made statements indicating their collective willingness to cooperate towards a multi-polar world against the current hegemon.<sup>46</sup>

Russia has also supported China's Belt and Road Initiative to better link overland trade between Europe and Asia. Some Russians, however, fear that the Chinese system may eventually gain a powerful upper hand and, rather than simply linking to the European economy, may exert pressure to control it. President Putin metaphorically intertwined the Chinese shipping infrastructure projects of the Belt and Road with the Northern Sea Route at a public ceremony in 2017 attended by Chinese diplomats.<sup>47</sup> China has since announced its intentions to develop the so called Polar Silk Road.<sup>48</sup> This maritime access path is beginning to open due to melting sea ice which previously made the passage between China and Europe via the Arctic impossible. Though China has announced its interest in this shipping route, Chinese investments into the required infrastructure improvements have been limited. Russia could benefit greatly from such investments by expanding their maritime support infrastructure, service industry, and providing greater access to the northern areas, but some Russians have expressed concern that China may want tight control over the route's operations and services, which would likely lead to tense disagreements between the two states.<sup>49</sup>

The Arctic is well known to contain enormous oil and gas reservoirs which are slowly becoming accessible to oceanic drilling as the ice sheets recede. Russia's government is focused on expanding its access and security in this region in order to capitalize on these vast fuel resources. China is also interested in gaining access to these petroleum products and currently purchases large quantities of crude oil and liquefied natural gas from Russia.<sup>50</sup> Given Russia's over-dependence on the sale of such resources and China's growing demand for energy to support its massive population, if China attempts to gain direct access to these resources in the Arctic it could present a major blow to Russia's economic future and present additional security challenges along the polar sea route.<sup>51</sup> These arctic relationships and potential disputes will be fundamental to the ever changing balance of power.

## **Conclusion**

The Russian Federation is unique from other states in many ways including its immense Northern geography, rich natural resources, conscripted and centralized military establishment, and government revenue dependencies. Like many countries, however, Russia experiences challenges within its internal social constructs and also with other states that hold differing beliefs, trade priorities, and international prerogatives. Appreciating these similarities and differences for what they are, and comprehending how these issues may be viewed differently by various international actors is important for US military leaders. Especially given the US military's renewed focus on Great Power Competition and the slow shift towards a more multipolar world order, leaders must be cognizant of these powers' situations and priorities. This paper provides only a glimpse at these important Russian topics with the aspiration that this serve as a starting post for further exploration of the interconnected yet divergent perspectives on reshaping the post Cold War international order.

## Notes

1. I wish to thank Dr. Andrew Akin, Kaitlin Kiser, and Kasey Miller for their thoughtful comments and suggestions. All errors found herein are my own.
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