

BY DMITRI TRENIN

U.S.-Russian relations continue to deteriorate. Expectations on both sides are extremely low. Arms control is unraveling fast, with the Trump administration seemingly more likely to let the New START treaty expire within a year than to extend it. Open Skies may be another agreement that US President Donald Trump would like to discard. The coming US presidential election might well result in new accusations of Russian meddling, which would lead to new sanctions against Russia.

But whatever the outcome, more sanctions are a near certainty. As has been the case for the past six years, the most one can realistically achieve in the foreseeable future is to prevent an inadvertent direct military collision between Russia and the United States. In the absence of meaningful US-Russian dialogue, communication channels between the two countries' top defense and security officers remain the only instruments of keeping the peace between the two adversaries.

Russia's relations with Europe continue to disappoint. Expectations of a breakthrough or at least significant progress on Donbass, which were raised as a result of the Ukrainian presidential and parliamentary elections of 2019, have had to be significantly rolled back. It is possible that the line of contact in Ukraine's east may see a prolonged lull in shelling and shooting, with more civilians freely crossing the line to go about their daily business and prisoners still kept by both sides returning to their families. What also seems probable, however, is a long-term freeze of the political status quo in Donbass.

The Minsk agreement, whose implementation is a sine qua non for the lifting of EU sanctions against Russia, will remain unfulfilled. Moscow's insistence on a special constitutional status for Donetsk and Luhansk remains anathema to Kyiv. The late-December Russian-Ukrainian gas transit agreement, under which Moscow agreed to honor a court decision in favor of Kyiv, has failed to avert the US impos-



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Vodka on the rocks

Russia's relations with the West are not about to get any better

sition of sanctions on companies involved in laying the Nord Stream 2 pipeline across the Baltic Sea. The German government called the US action unacceptable, but the construction has stopped and the completion of the project will be delayed.

Even with the sanctions in place, it appeared at one point that the leading EU member states were poised to initiate a rapprochement with Moscow. French President Emmanuel Macron invited Russian President Vladimir Putin to his summer residence for a wide-ranging private discussion of the relationship. Coming on the eve of the G7 meeting, this sparked a brief debate on the merits of invit-

ing Russia to re-join the group from which it was expelled in 2014. In a subsequent interview with *The Economist*, which caused quite a stir, Macron, while pronouncing NATO "brain-dead," talked of the need to open a dialogue on European security with Moscow. Some in France and Germany voiced concern that isolating Russia would only serve to push it even closer to China, with negative implications for Europe.

These arguments have been less than compelling. The formal cancellation in 2019 of the INF Treaty

raises the possibility of a new US-Russian missile stand-off in Europe. Yet, to Moscow's surprise, this worrisome prospect has failed

to stir European governments into action to prevent an additional confrontation. Indeed, European calm has only confirmed the fact that Europe's security on the Western side is fully managed by NATO. French leaders can make statements, but little more, particularly when their views are not even supported by France's closest partner, Germany, which remains steadfast in its Atlanticism. Chancellor Angela Merkel recently made a rare visit to Moscow, but only to discuss Libya's security, not Europe's, with Putin.

The coming 75th anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany in World War II has opened a new front in European-Russian rela-

tions. Moscow angrily rejects the notion, contained in the European Parliament's resolution, of the joint responsibility of the two totalitarian regimes, Hitler's Nazism and Stalin's Soviet Bolshevism, for the outbreak of World War II. Victory in the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945 is key to both the official and popular Russian historical narrative as well as the country's very self-image; any attempt to undermine it is widely regarded as a vicious case of Russophobia.

Against this background, Moscow's relations with – and public attitudes toward – a number of Eastern European countries, from Poland to the Baltic States to Ukraine, have reached new lows.

Looking ahead, Russian-Western relations are unlikely to improve in the next few years. If history is any guide, US sanctions, enshrined in law, will outlive most of today's politicians. There are limits to the daylight that can be allowed to emerge between US and EU policies on Russia. As for Moscow, while the cost of adversity is considerable, Russia's resources are not exhausted. Putin's position remains more or less solid, so strategic concessions are out of the question. The past six years have proven that the Kremlin's foreign policy will not change under Western pressure.

Even as the Russian president has now launched a long process of political transition, it has become clear that while Russians will vote for a different head of state in 2024, the new governance structure and the personalities filling it will be Putin's choices. It is widely accepted that Putin himself will likely act as the country's top authority for years after 2024.

The bad news is that the Moscow-Washington confrontation will continue; the good news is that there will be some guardrails built around it. Russia's relations with European countries will vary from the pragmatic, such as with France, Germany and Italy, to the highly toxic, such as with several Eastern European neighbors. The conflict in Donbass is unlikely to rekindle or escalate, but nor will it be solved anytime soon. Crimea will stay Russian, but will not be internationally recognized as such. There will be no hostilities in the Baltic Sea area, but hostility on both sides of the NATO-Russian divide will become more deeply entrenched. The Arctic will become busier commercially, but more militarized as well. The Balkans, while no longer an East-West battleground, will be a sandbox for small-time geopolitical games. The Eastern Mediterranean, however, is emerging as an area where Russia, again, is competing with the West.

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France, were involved in the fight against Islamic State (IS) in the area and were exposed to the fallout of Trump's decision.

This episode was typical of Macron: take advantage of a major disruption to add another layer of disruption in order to "shift the parameters," as one of his advisers puts it. In this case, most NATO allies admitted that, despite its strength and activity as a military organization, the Alliance itself, as a political umbrella, was in trouble. "Macron has opened a strategic conversation at a political level, and this is important," a NATO official acknowledged. But there was collateral damage. Questioning NATO's relevance increased suspicions surrounding his push for European defense among France's partners. Yet the French are now convinced that they are making inroads. As long as they avoid the words "strategic autonomy," they feel that the concept itself is gaining traction as their European partners finally take stock of Trump's contempt for global rules and of his chances for re-election.

What does Macron want – apart from disruption? His long speeches, press conferences and interviews all point to a clear vision of a world where great-power competition

has returned, presenting Europe with a drastic choice: prey or power. The changing trans-Atlantic relationship was identified early on as a long-term, fundamental challenge: "For the first time," Macron says, "we have an American president who does not share the idea of the European project." And

All the tools of soft, smart and hard power should be used. As the US multiplies its threats of tariffs, trade becomes a major instrument of foreign policy. Trying to save the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear deal with Iran was seen as a European effort. Building up European defense is an obvious

the creation of a new Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space, which, under the control of European Commissioner for Internal Market and Services Thierry Breton, will manage the European Defence Fund.

Early on, though, the French president's crusade for a stronger Europe was met with inevitable suspicion. Call it "Gallic prejudice" or the "Gaullist edge" – what he wants, it is feared, is a French Europe serving France's interests.

Macron's style and method feed this suspicion. His unabashed tendency to act unilaterally in order to strengthen a multilateral organization irritates his European partners – not least the closest of them, Germany. "This is what leadership means," says one source at the Elysée. "Either you are a leader or you are not. He is." But others argue, notably in Brussels, that leadership also means building up support behind you. His Russian initiative is a case in point. By deliberately omitting Berlin – where it would have encountered little opposition – he fed accusations of selling out to Russia from angry Northern and Central European member states. Ambassador Pierre Vimont, a smooth operator well liked in European circles, was belat-

edly dispatched to mend fences and brief wary partners on the Elysée's Putin strategy. Sending him before the announcement of Macron's plan might have helped. The same goes for the controversy over the EU's enlargement process. France produced merely a non-paper in Brussels, with proposals to reform the EU enlargement process, after refusing to open accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania.

The paradox is that with Russia, Macron is probably genuinely convinced that he was acting in Europe's interests. Facing the end of the nuclear arms control agreements, he sees a security vacuum on the horizon and wants European interests to be taken into account, including those of the countries closest to Russia that are not covered by the INF treaty and its range of 500 to 5,500 kilometers. His proposal of a new "architecture of trust and security" remains elusive. Forget about "architecture"; the key words are "trust" and "security." Macron's hope – that there is room for discussion between reluctant European partners and Moscow's divisive efforts – seems to be hitting a wall, as Putin shows no signs of movement despite a few positive steps in the Minsk process

The only way for Europe to survive is to think of itself as a global power

now the European project itself is at a crossroads. Having lost its main external enemy with the collapse of communism, the EU has lost its sense of history; it needs a new political purpose. The rise of China is another factor of fragility for Europe, with a risk of bipolarization – a US-China "G2" that, in Macron's view, would deprive the EU of the ability to pursue its own course. The only way for Europe to survive, therefore, is to think of itself as a global power.

on Ukraine. The Russian president's attention will now likely be focused on the transition process in the Kremlin.

One parameter has been constant in Macron's foreign and security policy: the priority given to the fight against terrorism. Hit by mass terrorism in 2015 and still under active threat, the French generally support maintaining 5,100 French troops in the Sahel, as they have for seven years now, to combat jihad, even at the expense of casualties and even with an increasing feeling that, like Afghanistan, it is a war that may never be won. This is also a crucial element in the complex relationship Paris has with Washington. European support for this combat force will not compensate for the assistance provided by US intelligence and logistics. The French and US militaries have learned to work well together, but every threat of withdrawal tweeted by Trump resonates deeply in Paris – probably more than do his threats of tariffs on French wine.

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