

Integrated Intelligence, Defence and Security Solutions

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RUSSIA MONITOR

May 2021



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Political and Security Overall Assessment

Level of Risk Probability: H - High; M – Medium; L – Low.

- **RUSSIA**

The Kremlin can now follow undisturbed its political agenda having crushed “Navalny upheaval”. Repression of opposition, actually of anything called “independent”, will be continued systematically, but in silence. As Russia is already in an undeclared election campaign and the Kremlin’s party, United Russia, does not fare well in polls, some social incentives are to be expected. Economy will be managed cautiously as there is no place for surprises in this period. Kremlin will focus on winning big this election in order to demonstrate that it is in full control of the situation, winning the hearts and minds of Russian people. Rhetoric will intensify. Kremlin will promote the image of normal as usually and of a political life that is better without the disturbances generated by the opposition.

- **RUSSIA / EUROPE.** Moscow and Bruxelles stepped back for the brink of permanently damaged relations, EU avoiding new sanctions and delaying any decision regarding Russia’s illegal actions. It is not about mending the relations, but only of avoiding further escalations. Russian accusations against the EU will diminish and the Europeans will follow a smooth path of planning a coherent policy. Finalizing the building of North Stream 2 represent a strong signal that Germany policy of improving economic relations with Russia, regardless of political standoff, works and US approval will be highly valued by Moscow. However, if new illegal actions of Kremlin are discovered, all will be back to square one. Foreign policy of Russia will be focused on its backyard, Central Asia and Caucasus, as US is leaving Afghanistan and tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan are high. Moscow will support Lukashenka in the case of Ryan Air plane hijacking but will softly avoid a new confrontation with Europeans.

- **RUSSIA / US** Till June, “all is quiet on the Western Front”, as the two presidents’ summit has to be thoroughly prepared and any tension has to be avoided. Moscow will avoid acting aggressively and will focus on main topics of the agenda, implementing demonstrative operation in Ukraine, Belarus and in arms control in order to shape the frame of the negotiations with US. Moscow will look for improving its communication with the new US administration. As both parts have no illusion about the results of the summit, the old “we agree that we disagree” is a starting point. The NATO summit, reaffirming the solidity of transatlantic relations and having Russia issue on the agenda, will be coldly received by Moscow, especially because US is back on track as the leader of the West and the Europeans are glad with this. No US sanctions or Russian retaliations are in sight.

Key Political and Security Events

I RUSSIA

● **Democratic opposition is banned by the law.** Russia's, State Duma has approved (May 26) the final reading of a bill that would ban supporters and members of "extremist organizations" from being elected to any post. Leaders and founders of organizations declared "extremist" or "terrorist" by Russian courts will be banned from running for elective posts for a period of five years. Other members or employees of such organizations will face a three-year ban. The move makes virtually impossible for any citizen connected to Aleksei Navalny from gaining public office.

Assessment ~ *Having total control of the state and its institution, Kremlin concludes the process of outlawing the political opposition by the law. Navalny organization is the main target. However, any Russian organization who tries to merely contest decisions of Putin will be tagged as "extremist" or, worse, "terrorist" and its members will be banned from being elected a long time after the organization will have been outlawed. Even if the Putin regime does not have a viable ideology, its political actions are already similar to those of the totalitarian regimes of the past. → The law is the tip of the iceberg of an all-out crush of democratic society targeting political and other independent movements, independent mass-media and free social communication that will continue unabated. After it captured the state, the power is planning to capture the society. On short term, this move brings some stability as it silence the civil society and diminishes power's paranoia, but in the long term it will bring instability as the social tensions will accumulate (H to M).*

● **Kremlin's rhetoric becomes threatening as it accused its adversaries of "Russophobia".** On WWII Victory Day, Vladimir Putin declared that "Russia consistently defends international law. At the same time, we will firmly defend our national interests to ensure the safety of our people". He denounced what he called a creeping return of ideologies of the past, when "slogans of racial and national superiority, of anti-Semitism and Russophobia became ever more cynical". Vladimir Putin said (May 20) that Russia was seeing periodic attempts to bite off some part of Russia, "everyone wants to bite us somewhere and bite chunks off of us. But those who intend to do it should bear in mind that we will knock their teeth out so that they can't bite anymore", adding that the development of the national armed forces was the guarantee.

Assessment ~ *Lacking an ideology and the legitimacy, as Russian elections are not free and fair any more, Kremlin has invented the narrative of Russia assaulted by historical and irrational enemies. This narrative not only justifies Kremlin's aggressive foreign policy that caused its isolation, but equates the Putin regime, confronted with the Western adversity, with the entire Russian people. Thus, the Western reaction is not a defensive answer to Kremlin illegal actions, but an unjustified behavior caused by an irrational "Russophobia". This is completely untrue, the policy of the West showing respect for the Russian people and its right to live in dignity under a regime respecting a democratic Russian Constitution. → The "fortress Russia under siege of Russophobes" narrative will become one of the main slogans of Kremlin as long as the West does not (and cannot) accept Putin political behavior. It dangerously brings in the foreign policy field racial concepts like Russophobia, worsening the relations of Russia with those who opposed Kremlin aggressive acts (its neighbors and the West) (M).*

II RUSSIA – EUROPE

● **EUROPEAN UNION.** European leaders avoided decisive measures and sent to Russia a cautious warning. European Council conclusions on Russia (May 24) are: “The European Council held a strategic debate on Russia. It condemns the illegal, provocative and disruptive Russian activities against the EU, its Member States and beyond. It reaffirms the EU’s unity and solidarity in the face of such acts as well as its support to Eastern partners. The European Council expresses its solidarity with the Czech Republic and supports its response. The European Council reaffirms its commitment to the five principles governing EU policy vis-à-vis Russia. It invites the High Representative and the Commission to present a report with policy options on EU-Russia relations, in line with these principles, with a view to its meeting in June 2021. The EU will continue coordination with like-minded partners”.

Assessment ~ *With this stand, EU is trying to stop a further escalation of tensions with Russia, avoiding new sanctions and delaying an answer to the last Russian illegal actions. Firmly invoking its principles, but without backing them with concrete actions, EU stop short of taking any measure against Russia. UE warns Moscow that it will act in “coordination with partners”, meaning mainly US, if Kremlin does not stop this kind of unlawful behavior. → The old strategy is the new strategy. EU is proposing a modus vivendi, an end to the vortex of Russian hostile actions and European reactions to them. But this time, with US back on track, EU strategy is reinforced by the weight of a united Western position, compensating for the lack of European actions against Russia. Under the fog of an intense anti-Western rhetoric, Russia will reluctantly accept the European approach, on condition that what it has already achieved will not be contested (no EU support for Russian democratic movements, Belarus integrated in “Russian sphere of influence” and Ukraine, Republic of Moldova and Georgia as buffer zones, without a clear perspective to integrate into Euro Atlantic structures). “Details”, like Russian support for Lukashenka hijacking of a Ryan Air plane, could delay or even derail this approach (M).*

● **UKRAINE remains “the hot spot”.** Russia has withdrawn just a few thousand troops from the border with Ukraine, far fewer than it had initially signaled, Biden administration officials said. 80,000 Russian troops remain at the border with Ukraine and many of the withdrawn units left their armored vehicles behind. Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Kiev (May 06), affirming US support for Ukraine amid ongoing tensions with Russia. Blinken said the US is considering Ukraine’s request for additional military assistance to help deter Kremlin aggression. Kyiv has requested U.S. air defense systems and anti-sniper technology, along with a possible deployment of Patriot missiles in Ukraine.

Assessment ~ *Even if the Russian military presence could be seen as a message from Moscow that it could match the number of troops taking part in a NATO military exercise in Europe, its main purpose is to maintain military pressure on Ukraine. Political tensions between Kiev and Moscow are high, as the oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk, the leader of pro-Russian opposition (and friend of Putin) was accused of high treason. US military aid is the decisive factor in building the capacity of Ukraine to defend itself against “ongoing Russian aggression”. → Ukraine will remain one of the most difficult topics in Russian relations with the West because the entire Russian strategy of building a “sphere of influence” is being questioned here. Moscow is discontented especially with US military support for Ukraine. The fight for survival of sovereign Ukraine will continue dotted with escalations (H to M).*

III RUSSIA – UNITED STATES

● **The summit will take place.** The Kremlin and the White House said (May 25) that the Putin-Biden summit would take place in Geneva on June 16. According to the Kremlin, the presidents will discuss the current state of and prospects for further development of Russian-US relations, problems of “strategic stability”, as well as current issues of the international agenda, including cooperation in combating the pandemic and “settlement of regional conflicts”. The US administration expects Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin to discuss strategic stability and the situation in Belarus and Ukraine: “We expect they will spend a fair amount of time on strategic stability, where the arms control agenda goes following the extension of New START. Biden will also raise Ukraine, underscoring America’s support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and also Belarus, conveying US grave concerns”. The two leaders may address the issue of Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran’s nuclear program. Washington expects “difficult conversations but views them as an opportunity to move toward a more stable and predictable relationship with Russia”.

Assessment ~ *US believe that the June 16 meeting between the two presidents is vital for defending American interests “an opportunity to raise concerns and to move toward a more stable and predictable relationship with the Russian government”. Russia is seeing also the meeting as crucial for its security and foreign policy. → Both parts do not have great hopes for solving the disputes, but the meeting will be crucial for the future of US-Russia relations. US will look for “a more stable and predictable relationship” and Russia will try to extract a price for this, mainly in Ukraine and Belarus. Everything is negotiable with the exception of (lack of) democracy in Russia and Russian “sphere of influence” (Ukraine, Belarus). Arms control will be an important topic, with Russian trying to raise the old idea of connecting strategic nuclear weapons with ballistic missile defense and avoiding, for the moment, a comprehensive treaty extended to all nuclear weapons (SSC-8 gives it a upper hand in Europe), but not closing the perspective, especially because it is in its interest to bring in China. Even if Russian government has already branded the United States an “unfriendly” nation, a lull in the Russia-US tensions is to be expected till June, dotted with calculated demonstration of force and calibrated rhetoric. (H)*

● **Russia’s “some responsibility” in a new cyber-attack on US infrastructure.** President Joe Biden said (May 10) that Russia had “some responsibility” to address a ransomware attack that had paralyzed Colonial Pipeline, the largest U.S. fuel pipeline, although he refrained from directly blaming the Kremlin. Biden said there was no evidence the Russian government was involved in the cyberattack on Colonial Pipeline, but that there is evidence the hackers or the ransomware software they used are in Russia. Biden said that “they have some responsibility to deal with this”.

Assessment ~ *Again, a cyber attack on US strategic infrastructure from Russia, but, this time, Russian government was not involved. Could be only lack of Russian capacity to fight cyber criminality or Kremlin may tolerate or even employs these cybercriminals. → This could be a new trend “let them do it” as dangerous as the other Russian cyberattacks against US government networks. However, US will closely watch the involvement of Russian government in this kind of cyberattacks and there will be consequences. (M)*

● **Arctic Council summit in Reykjavik.** As Russia assumed the rotating chairmanship of the Arctic Council (May 20), the US rallied other members to oppose Moscow’s plans to set

maritime rules in the Northern Sea Route. US are leading a campaign against Russian attempts to assert authority over Arctic shipping and reintroduce a military dimension to discussions over international activity in the area. There are growing concerns in Washington and among NATO allies about a surge in Russian military and commercial activity in the region. Russia has expressed similar suspicion about NATO's activities. Sergey Lavrov dismissed the U.S. criticism because the Arctic "is our territory, our land" and questioned NATO's motives in deployments of bombers and submarines to the area. He said resumption of an Arctic Council military dialogue would contribute to stability.

Assessment ~ *For Moscow, Arctic it is the last geopolitical battleground where it holds the advantage over Washington. Russian seeks to militarily outmatch US in Arctic. → Having steal the start, Russia will try to impose its view on Arctic issues. Arctic resources and strategic position of Arctic are vital for Russia. EEZ disputes and military activity in the area will increase. Arctic could be the next confrontation field, even if the post-soviet space remains main field of confrontation, focused on Ukraine and Black Sea region (M)*



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Nr. Reg. Special **48/21.05.2019**, CIF: **41374789**
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