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US Experts Anticipate Future Decline for Russia Among the Great Powers

They Forecast Diminishing Russian Influence and Stagnating Economic and Military Strength

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Although President Trump initially hoped for improved relations between the United States and Russia, during his tenure the US government has overtly declared Russia a top threat to US national security. Congress and the administration widened Obama-era sanctions against Russia after alleged Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. Data from a recent survey of American experts on Russia, conducted by The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs paints Russia as a declining power.

The results show that while experts anticipate changes in the global balance of power in the next 20 years, with China overtaking the United States, they do not expect Russia to come out stronger over that time frame. Experts draw attention to Russia's cracked economic and political foundation in the present and its likely decline over the next two decades due to economic mismanagement and faltering soft power. Now there are the lingering economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic to add to this list.

Key Findings:

- Experts expect China to surpass the United States within 20 years in terms of influence and economic strength but not with respect to military power.
- In 20 years, experts expect Russia's level of influence to fall barely past that of India, which experts currently view as much less influential than Russia.
- Despite dim prospects for Russia's economy, experts predict that its economic strength will modestly increase over the next two decades, though it will remain less economically powerful than other great powers.

- While Russia remains a militarily powerful country today with a sizeable nuclear arsenal, experts see a somewhat diminishing might over the next two decades.

US Experts See Changing Global Balance of Power, with Russia in Decline

Influence

The Chicago Council and The Fletcher School surveyed 201 American experts at various universities and research institutes about US-Russian relations and future geopolitical trends. Asked about influence in the world today and in twenty years, the experts surveyed described Russia as significantly less influential than the United States, China, or the European Union. Many experts argued that influence can take different forms, including military and economic pressure (hard power), attraction (soft power), and manipulation (sharp power).

India is the only great power they perceive as being more influential than Russia, but only for now. They predict a noticeable increase in India's influence in two decades' time, putting it roughly on par with that of Russia. Experts anticipate that the United States and the EU will also face reductions in influence and that China will become the most influential power over the next 20 years.

Via open-ended comments, experts provided their reasoning for their expectations of the future. Responses about the United States note that its internal political struggles and divided leadership threaten to prevent effective management of domestic and international issues. Experts pointed to the fraying cohesion among members of the EU. When it comes to Russia, many are uncertain how the end of Putin's reign will transpire; how the nation handles that transition will say much about Russia's future. However, the projected plunge in Russia's influence is based on Russia being quite weak internally. As one expert explained, "there are far too many international and domestic problems in Russia to imagine it as anything but a fading...space."

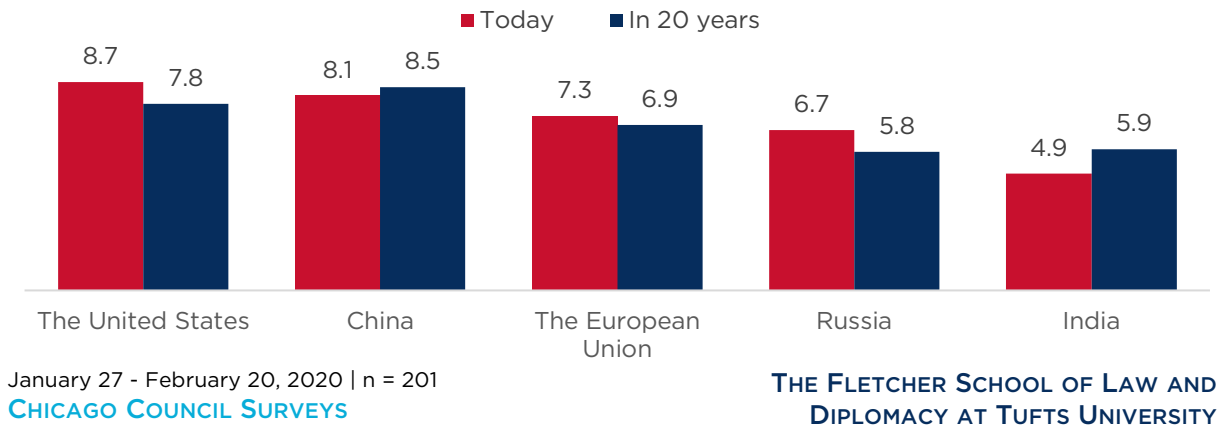
Another respondent tied Russia's outsized influence to US actions, writing that "Russia should indeed hardly be more than a regional power if it were not for the power vacuum that US policies have brought with them in the Middle East as well as in East-Central and South-Eastern Europe." However, another expert stated that in the future, "Russia will remain influential in Eastern Europe, in its borderlands, but not on a global scale." This trend might be explained in part by Russia's limited economic capacity, which experts predict will remain largely unchanged over the next two decades.

Comparison of Influence: Today and in 20 Years

How much influence do you think each of the following countries has in the world today?

How much influence do you think each of the following countries will have in the world 20 years from now?

Please answer on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means they are not at all influential and 10 means they are extremely influential. (%)



Economic Strength

In terms of economic strength, experts predict that Russia will grow slightly over the next two decades but remain the weakest economy among the great powers. Experts anticipate China growing more economically powerful than the United States over the next 20 years. Respondents foresee India experiencing a large increase in economic strength as well, with the EU more or less retaining its current economic strength. Notably, only the United States is expected to see its economic power diminishing in that time period.

Experts have mixed opinions about the future of Russia's economic growth. To explain the outcome for Russia, one respondent commented that "Russia only has natural resources, and the income inequality there is only setting them up for further economic issues down the road." Given the [recent instability of oil prices](#)—not to mention the growing [economic feasibility of renewable energy](#)—comments focused on the unsustainability of Russia's reliance on petroleum wealth. Should renewable energy become cheaper in the next two decades—and in some cases, it is already [around the same cost](#) as oil, natural gas, and coal—Russia will have to diversify its economy and shift its production priorities to rely less on fossil fuels. Moreover, asked about the distribution of income and wealth, 82 percent of experts said that wealth distribution in Russia became less fair over the last 20 years, and 56 percent of them say it will get less fair over the next 20 years. (See the Appendix Figure A for full data.)

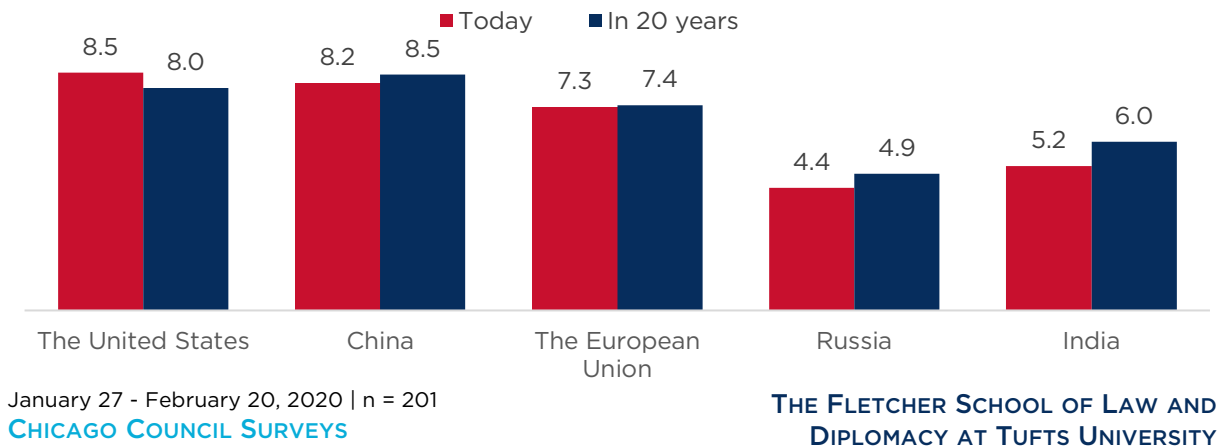
It is important to note that the survey was fielded before the COVID-19 outbreak escalated to a global crisis. In the months since the pandemic began, the world's

economy has taken a massive hit, so it is unclear what long-term effects the coronavirus will have on the economic strength of the great powers.

Comparison of Economic Strength: Today and in 20 Years

Please rate each of the following countries according to their economic strength today on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means they have no strength at all and 10 means they are extremely strong.

How much economic strength do you think each of the following countries will have 20 years from now? (mean)



Military Strength

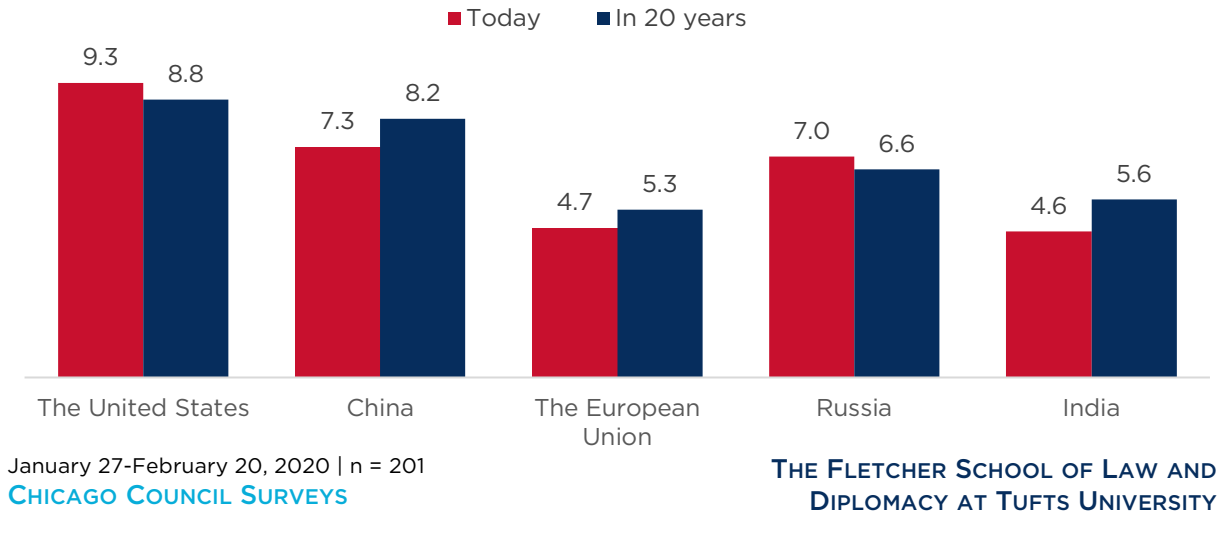
Experts foresee a slight downturn in Russia's military strength, though they expect that it will retain third position after the United States and China. This prediction comes in spite of Moscow's continued [heavy investment in military procurement as well as research and development](#), its focus on hybrid warfare, and its immense nuclear arsenal. One respondent explains that "while the Russian military is robust, a lot of its strength is performative. Russia has more of an advantage in intelligence services and technology than it does military might." Moreover, another expert notes that "Russia's military strength comes from its nuclear arsenal and its ability to bully certain neighboring countries."

Assessing the other great powers' military strength over the next 20 years, experts think that US military superiority will wane slightly, perhaps because of a risk of overstretch or weakening alliances. While they expect that China will narrow the gap with the United States due to advances in military technology, they still predict it will be a close second to the United States. Experts envision that India and the EU will remain militarily weaker powers, although they do expect increases in their respective military capabilities to some extent.

Military Strength Today and in 20 Years

Please rate each of the following countries according to their military strength today on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means they have no strength at all and 10 means they are extremely strong.

How much military strength do you think each of the following countries will have 20 years from now? (mean)



Conclusion

While Russia remains a major player in global politics today, its future is not so certain. The experts surveyed present an image of Russia in decline, with its influence and military strength falling while its economy muddles through.

Russia's current level of influence can be attributed to its increased presence in the Middle East, Central and Eastern Europe, and the Balkans, which has emerged as US foreign policy has alienated countries in those regions, allowing Moscow to gain a foothold. Moreover, Europe's reliance on Russia for energy products gives it both a strong economic bolster to lean on while also allowing it to exert a degree of influence on European countries.

Experts' predictions about Russia's future diminished influence and economic strength likely have more to do with internal problems than external problems. Moscow's lack of export diversity means that they are lagging behind on high-tech industries in which the United States and China are excelling. The lack of economic equality in Russia also contributes to slower growth and the future predictions of the distribution of wealth and income do not foretell an improvement. Moreover, none of the expert predictions had factored in the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has already dealt an immensely deleterious blow to the global economy. Although it is unclear what the net effects of this crisis will mean for Russia, its already tenuous economic position makes it unlikely that Moscow will emerge more stable and powerful than when the pandemic began.

Methodology

The report is based on a survey among selected American experts from the government, top universities, and research institutes. The Chicago Council team identified researchers, academics, and policymakers who attended the 2019 Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) conference and selected those who self-identified as American citizens. The participants in the ASEEES conference represent a broad swath of experts from across the United States who specialize in topics which concern Russia, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, as well as US-Russian relations. Of those who responded to the survey, 55 percent were male, and 45 percent were female. In terms of partisan affiliation, there was a much greater proportion of Democrats (66%) than Republicans (4%) or Independents (24%). Just 3 percent reported having served in the US military, while 17 percent reported having served in the US government. Nearly all the respondents currently reside in the United States (94%), and despite the 2019 ASEEES conference being held in San Francisco, California, there is fairly even representation of experts from across the country. The survey was fielded using Qualtrics, an online survey platform. The Chicago Council initially targeted 2,198 experts by email on January 27, 2020. The final reminder email was sent on February 9, 2020, and the fielding of the survey was closed on February 20, 2020.

About the Chicago Council

The Chicago Council on Global Affairs is an independent, nonpartisan membership organization that provides insight—and influences the public discourse—on critical global issues. We convene leading global voices, conduct independent research, and engage the public to explore ideas that will shape our global future. The Council is committed to bringing clarity and offering solutions to issues that transcend borders and transform how people, business, and governments engage the world. Learn more at thechicagocouncil.org and follow [@ChicagoCouncil](https://twitter.com/ChicagoCouncil).

About The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy

The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University is the oldest exclusively graduate school of international relations in the United States. The Fletcher Russia and Eurasia Program is dedicated to teaching and research of a broad range of historical and contemporary issues related to Russia, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. Its mission is to educate future scholars and practitioners, generate cutting-edge scholarly analysis of the region, and foster US-Russia cooperation. Learn more at sites.tufts.edu/fletcherrussia and follow [@FletcherRussia](https://twitter.com/FletcherRussia) or on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/fletcherrussia).

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Appendix

Figure A

