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US Experts Consider China a Shifting and India a Stable Friend to Russia

They Predict Less Tense Russian Relations with the United States and the European Union

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With both Russia and China facing increasingly confrontational relations with the United States, the two countries have increased ties with each other and have pursued similar approaches in opposition to the US government concerning Iran, Syria, and Venezuela. Steve Biegun, US Deputy Secretary of State, recently characterized the developing relationship between Russia and China as one built on [“mutual determination to challenge the United States.”](#)

To better understand how experts think about Russia’s relations with the other great powers, The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs recently conducted a survey of 201 American experts on Russia. The survey finds that a majority describe the relationship between Russia and China today as one of mostly partnership. They also describe India as primarily a partner to Russia, both today and in the future. By contrast, they say that Russian relations with the United States and the European Union are mostly competitive. But they anticipate that in 20 years, rivalry between Russia and China will grow, perhaps creating space for reducing tensions with the United States.

Key Findings:

- A majority (68%) of experts believe Russia and China are currently mostly partners. Opinions on whether this trend will continue in 20 years are mixed, with 49 percent of experts saying they will remain mostly partners and 46 percent saying they will be mostly rivals.

- India is seen by experts as even more likely (78%) than China to be mostly partners with Russia. Experts see this trend continuing two decades from now, with 76% predicting they will stay mostly partners.
- While experts currently see Russia and the EU as more rivals (84%) than partners (14%), they predict that ties between Russia and the EU will thaw and that they will be more partners (54%) than rivals (39%) in 20 years. One reason for this prediction is the belief held by most experts (57%) that EU sanctions will be removed within the next decade.
- Nearly all experts (96%) believe the United States and Russia to be mostly rivals. A slightly lower majority predict that they will remain mostly rivals 20 years from now.

US Experts Say Russia and China are Mostly Partners Now, Divided about the Future

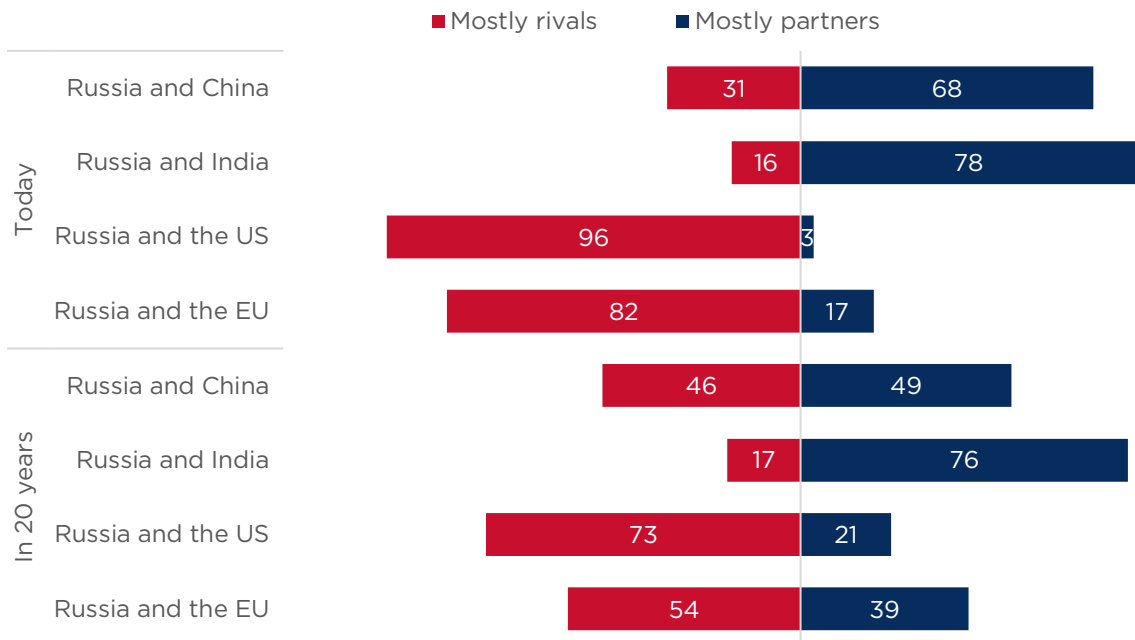
When the United States and the EU imposed sanctions against Russia following the annexation of Crimea and the onset of the war in eastern Ukraine in 2014, Moscow began looking eastward to China for energy exports and trade. Ideologically, Moscow and Beijing have shared interests in rejecting US hegemony and democracy promotion efforts. Beyond these convergences, Russia and China have begun more active cooperation in [joint military exercises](#) and [cooperation on technological and scientific research](#).

The recent Chicago Council-Fletcher School survey of American experts on Russia found that a majority view Russia and China as mostly partners (68%; 31% mostly rivals). [A 2019 Chicago Council-Levada Center survey of the Russian public](#) found that an even larger majority of Russians believe their country and China are mostly partners (84%; 11% mostly rivals).

Russia's Relationship with Other Countries

At present, do you think the following countries are mostly rivals or mostly partners?

In 20 years, do you think the following countries will be mostly rivals or mostly partners? (%)



January 27-February 20, 2020 | n = 201
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEY

THE FLETCHER SCHOOL OF LAW AND
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However, experts' expectations of the future presage a changing relationship. Asked to look forward 20 years, 46 percent of experts predict that Russia and China will be mostly rivals, while just 48 percent expect them to be mostly partners. One expert portrays the developing Sino-Russian ties as superficial: "The seeming partnership that is growing between Russia and China is fake, in my opinion, and merely shows Russian weakness. It would fall apart if Russia had a better alternative." Another respondent adds, "The relationship between Russia and China is very volatile and unpredictable, and I could see China (or India for that matter) trying to woo Central Asian nations away from Russia." Given experts' descriptions and responses, the Sino-Russian relationship seems to be a tenuous one, and the shifting balance of power over the next two decades will likely lead to a deterioration of their current partnership.

US Experts Perceive Solid Indo-Russian Relations

While experts view Russia's current relationship with China as quite positive, an even larger majority view Russia's relationship with India as one of mostly partners (78%). India's close relationship with Moscow predates the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

As reporter [Emily Tamkin recently wrote in Foreign Policy magazine](#), “Moscow was a reliable partner for New Delhi when no one else was.”

Several experts point to India’s expected economic growth as an important reason for contemporary Indo-Russian ties. One notes that “India, given its large population and capacity as a labor resource, is rising in influence.” But India has also become an important export market for the Russian defense industry; [India’s sole nuclear attack submarine is leased from Russia and Moscow has worked with India on several nuclear reactors](#).

Some of the historic bonds between Russia and India have become less vigorous in the post-Cold War world, with Moscow building its ties to China and India cooperating more with the United States. Nevertheless, most experts believe that Russia and India will remain mostly partners 20 years from now (76%). In fact, of all the relationships asked about, India was seen to have more partnerships with countries than any of the other great powers presented (see Appendix Figure A for the full data).

By contrast, experts characterize the Sino-Indian relationship today as relatively tense (69% mostly rivals), most recently evidenced by the eruption of violent border disputes over the last several months between Indian and Chinese troops in contested border areas. Experts see little relaxation of the rivalry between China and India in the next 20 years (with 64% expecting mostly rivalry).

Russia and the European Union: Frenemies

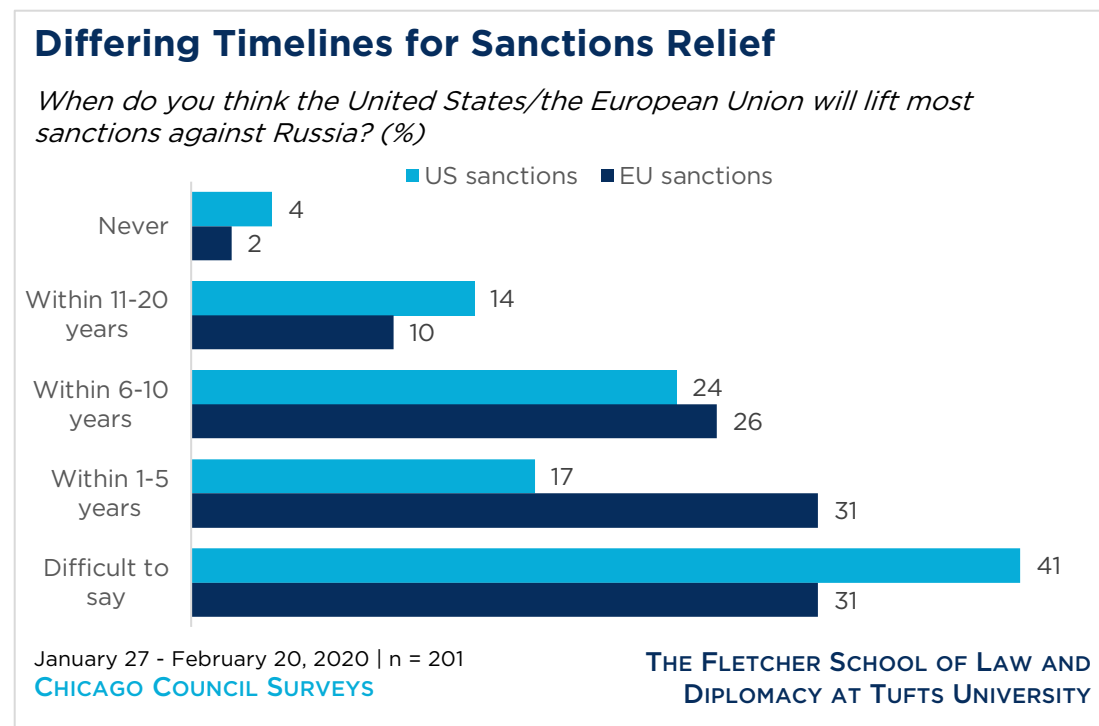
Russia’s relations with the West remain cold, and majorities of experts deem Russia’s relationships with both the EU and the United States to be mostly rivalries. While members of the EU continue to impose sanctions on Moscow, Russia and the EU are still critical trading partners to each other. Even as Europe pushes to adopt renewable energy sources instead of fossil fuels, Russia is the [largest energy exporter](#) to Europe. “As long as the world depends on hydrocarbons, Russia will have significant influence,” comments one respondent.

But, beyond energy concerns, the recent surge of right-wing populist parties in Europe threatens to give Russia further leverage. News reports detail Kremlin efforts to bolster these political movements across Europe, including the League in Italy, the Alternative for Deutschland (AfD) in Germany, and the Freedom Party in Austria, among others. According to a November 2019 Pew survey, supporters of these right-wing groups are more likely to express confidence in Putin regarding world affairs. Moreover, statements from the League and the Freedom Party have criticized European sanctions on Russia and have even gone so far as to call Russia’s annexation of Crimea to be legitimate. If these groups continue to achieve greater power in the European Union, it could pave the way for closer EU-Russia relations.

A majority of experts characterize Russia and the EU as mostly rivals (84%), not mostly partners (17%). One expert noted that “[Russians] are mostly rivals [to Europe], but partnership is necessary on certain issues given their proximity.”

Another respondent suggests that Russia is more of a hybrid of partner and rival to the EU, more like “frenemies.”

They expect EU-Russian relations to be much less strained in 20 years (54% mostly rivals; 37% mostly partners). Experts may expect more positive ties to develop, because most of them (57%) foresee the EU removing its sanctions against Russia within the next 10 years. In comments, experts expect the economic and energy cooperation between Russia and Europe to drive some sort of sanctions relaxation in the next decade. One expert contrasts America’s trade relationship with Russia with that of Europe: “Most relationships should get better over time as economic interdependence grows in an ever-globalizing world. I do not, however, picture trade between Russia and the United States growing enough to ease the ever-present tensions in the relationship. Russian-European relations, however, should be more or less restored.”



Big Chill: Russia and the United States

The bilateral atmosphere between Washington and Moscow remain quite tense, with continued sanctions, accusations of interference in domestic affairs, disputes over Ukraine and Syria, debates over [the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline](#), and reports of [Russian bounties on US soldiers in Afghanistan](#). Barring a significant change in the status quo, experts predict that the US-Russian rivalry will continue in the next two decades. Nearly all respondents believe that the two countries are mostly rivals today (96%), and about three quarters expect the same in 20 years (73%). One expert suggests that “the United States and Russia under similar conditions in 20 years will continue their rivalry, although it could be that pragmatic issues are back on the table.”

A 2018 survey conducted by the Chicago Council and the Levada Analytical Center highlighted that the publics in both the United States and Russia believe that the current impasse between the two nations is preventing progress on important joint efforts like [arms control and nuclear proliferation agreements](#). Experts agree, and one respondent argues that “Russia and the United States should cooperate more but the toxic mentality that pervades the United States now makes that difficult. Putin is a lot of bad things, but we share a lot of security concerns with Russia and could find common ground on a number of issues.”

Experts also believe that it will take longer for the United States to lift sanctions against Russia than it will for the EU, with a plurality indicating that it is “difficult to say.” Many experts connect the time horizon for sanctions relief to the outcome of 2020 US presidential election. Several respondents commented that if President Trump wins the election, he might eventually make moves to lift sanctions on Russia. However, other experts note that the [popular perception](#) of ties between Russian business interests and the American president makes it unlikely that Trump will lift sanctions. The truth is probably less black and white, but with [Republican party becoming more amenable](#) to cooperation with Russia, it is possible that the timeline for US sanctions relief may be shortening.

Conclusion

“A great power has no friend or partner: only everchanging interests,” one of the experts surveyed concludes. While Russia’s relations with China and India are seen to be strong for the moment, the specter of change lingers as China extends its influence toward Central Asia and tensions between China and India increase. As [Dmitri Trenin of the Carnegie Moscow Center points out](#), Russia’s biggest challenge will be balancing China’s ascent to the status of superpower, or even hegemon, while maintaining a degree of independence from Beijing.

In the meantime, the United States and the EU still consider Russia a potential threat and pressure Moscow accordingly. US and EU sanctions on Russia may ultimately be lifted within the next 20 years, creating opportunities for rapprochement despite continued disagreements. Observers will be watching to see whether Russia will eventually attempt to rebalance its relationship with the West if it hopes to retain autonomy in the international arena as it juggles its relationships with India and China.

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, 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).

This research is made possible by the generous support of Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Appendix

Figure A

