



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

The American Foreign Policy Council's Review of
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Related Categories: Arms Control and Proliferation; Democracy and Governance; Europe Military; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Corruption; Resource Security; Baltics; Europe; Russia

NAVALNY POISONING A WESTERN PROVOCATION, CLAIMS DUMA SPEAKER

Only days after prominent Russian political dissident Alexei Navalny was poisoned under suspicious circumstances, a senior Russian lawmaker is looking at ways to assign blame to the West. Vyacheslav Volodin, the Chairman of the State Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament, and member of the ruling United Russia Party, implied that Navalny's poisoning was consistent with a pattern of recent "provocations" carried out by Western government in the region. According to Volodin, the incident needs to be investigated by the Duma's Committee on Security in order to ensure the poisoning was "not an attempt on the part of foreign states to harm the health of a Russian citizen in order to create tension within Russia." Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov also publicly denounced accusations of any official involvement in the poisoning. (*RBC*, August 25, 2020)

WHAT NEXT AFTER NEW START?

The ongoing talks over the New START nuclear disarmament treaty between the U.S. and Russia have major potential major budgetary implications for the Department of Defense. The treaty, which is set to expire in 2021, places caps on the number of strategic nuclear warheads deployed by the two signatory nations. Despite the fact that some negotiations to renew the agreement have taken place to date, major differences between the two sides remain - and President Trump has signaled his willingness to allow the treaty to expire if the agreement isn't expanded on a number of fronts (including by bringing in a third party, China).

If it does, it might kick off a new and costly arms race with Russia. The Congressional Budget Office has estimated that the nuclear rearmament and modernization that might take place in a post-New START world could effectively triple current weapons production costs - adding as much as \$439 billion in modernization expenses, as well as nearly \$30 billion in maintenance, to the Pentagon's budget.

That, however, is only one potential future. "If the New START treaty expired, the United States could choose to make no changes to its current plans for nuclear forces, in which case it would incur no additional costs," the CBO study outlines. "If the United States chose to increase its forces in response to the expiration of the treaty, modest expansions could be relatively inexpensive and could be done quickly. Larger expansions could be quite costly, however, and could take several decades to accomplish." (*Defense News*, August 26, 2020)

THE BALTICS HEAT UP

Military activity and alert levels in the Baltic Sea are increasing dramatically in response to a Russian naval exercise in the region. The drills, carried out in recent days, involve the sailing of several warships from Russia's enclave of Kaliningrad to Saint Petersburg. The maneuvers coincide with ongoing ground force exercises in western Russia that are said to include some 6,000 troops. Those drills - as well as the naval ones - are drawing concern from regional and NATO officials, coming as they do against the backdrop of political unrest in neighboring Belarus, where Russia might potentially intervene to keep the country's dictator, Alexander Lukashenko, in power.

Since Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014, NATO member states have deployed eastward in response to the military threat posed by the Kremlin. There are currently 4,500 Alliance troops stationed in the Baltics and Poland, while thousands of additional personnel have been spread across Eastern Europe. American and Russian reconnaissance planes and jet fighters routinely intercept one another over the Baltic and Black Seas. (*New York Times*, August 26, 2020)

U.S. TROOPS INJURED IN SYRIAN SKIRMISH WITH RUSSIAN FORCES

Four U.S. servicemen were reportedly injured in northeast Syria last week after a Russian military vehicle rammed a coalition vehicle, forcing it off the road. The altercation took place in Al-Marikiyan, not far from the country's border with Turkey. Video posted to social media platform Twitter shows the collision, as well as a Russian military helicopter flying dangerously low near the two vehicles. In order to de-escalate the situation, the coalition vehicle left the scene shortly after the incident. The four U.S. servicemen are reportedly suffering from concussion-like symptoms. In the wake of the crash, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Mark Milley held a telephone conversation with General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian military, but no details of their conversation were released. (*Politico*, August 26, 2020)