



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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DEEPER SINO-RUSSIAN TIES ON THE HORIZON

During their respective New Year's addresses, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese General Secretary Xi Jinping underscored the need to continue and expand the bilateral cooperation that took place between Beijing and Moscow over the past year. According to Xi, cooperation in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and expanding trade were proud achievements, while closer alignment of China's expanding Belt and Road Initiative with the countries of the Eurasian Economic Union offers an opportunity for sustained growth. In his address, Putin praised Russia and China's coordinated responses to international challenges in 2020 and said he expects new achievements in bilateral ties in the coming year. (*China Daily*, January 1, 2021)

ONGOING BORDER TENSIONS WITH ESTONIA

Attempts to ratify a treaty resolving a longstanding border dispute between Russia and Estonia have stalled. Leonid Slutsky, the head of the Russian State Duma's Committee for International Relations, pins the blame for the impasse on the insistence of Estonian politicians of using language from a hundred-old post-WWI agreement signed by the then-fledgling USSR. The original 1920 document, known as the Treaty of Tartu, cemented Estonia as an independent country after the fall of the Russian Empire and established its national borders. When the Soviet Union annexed Estonia during World War II, it claimed territory around Ivangorod that according to the Treaty belonged to Estonia. Years of negotiating the post-Soviet Russo-Estonian border led to a new treaty cementing the border; however, that arrangement never took effect because, Slutsky charges, the Estonians added a last second reference to the Treaty of Tartu and the disputed territories. (TASS, January 3, 2021)

COVETING KAZAKHSTAN

Members of the Russian State Duma stirred up controversy this past December when they made public statements regarding the territorial legitimacy of neighboring Kazakhstan. Vyacheslav Nikonov, the grandson of Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov and current Chairman of the Duma's Education and Science Committee, was quoted as saying, "The territory of Kazakhstan is a great gift from Russia and the Soviet Union" - a comment that caused tempers to flare in Nur-sultan. Nikonov's fellow parliamentarian, Evgeni Fyodorov, went even further, claiming Kazakhstan "rented its territory from the Soviet Union," and calling upon his colleagues to reclaim territory lost during the dissolution of the USSR. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 5, 2021)

RUSSIA'S NEIGHBORS REARM

Sweden's military buildup is continuing in the face of a mounting Russian threat to the Baltics. Although Sweden is not a NATO member, the country's urgency matches that of the Alliance in other parts of Europe. During the Cold War, the Scandinavian country maintained a standing army of nearly 700,000 troops, but the collapse of the USSR led to a drawdown of forces and the transition of Sweden's military into a greater peacekeeping role around the world. However, after witnessing Russia's recent aggression in Georgia and Ukraine, officials in Stockholm decided to change course and reinvest in the country's armed forces. In particular, amphibious exercises held by the Russian military in Kaliningrad has convinced Sweden's military brass that an armed conflict with Russia could lead to an invasion, so extra efforts are now being made to train Home Guard reservists with the help of American Green Berets stationed in the country. (*Wall Street Journal*, January 5, 2021)

DOJ A VICTIM OF SOLARWINDS HACK, TOO

The Department of Justice disclosed last week that it, too, was a victim of the recent SolarWinds data breach that is believed by intelligence agencies to have been perpetrated by Russia. The DOJ reports that 3 percent of its email accounts, all powered by the Microsoft 365 service, were compromised over the past year. Additionally, the Administrative Office of U.S. Courts reported a breach of the electronic case file system used by federal courts across the country. The sealed court files housed within contain details on the identities of informants, ongoing wiretapping activities, and other sensitive information which, if stolen, would have serious national security implications. Experts believe it will take months for the full extent of the SolarWinds hack to be known, as additional agencies continue to identify and disclose breaches within their systems. (Associated Press, January 6, 2021)

BERLIN MULLS SPUTNIK-V

During a recent call with Russian President Vladimir Putin, German Chancellor Angela Merkel expressed her willingness to use European resources to produce the Russian "Sputnik-V" vaccine, pending approval for the measure from the European Medicines Agency. Thus far, Germany has distributed the highest number of vaccines among EU member states, but the bloc as a whole has received criticism for not responding as quickly as other parts of the world to vaccinate its population. The new willingness to consider "Sputnik-V" appears to be part of official efforts to ramp up inoculations on the continent; if European authorities decide to approve the measure to supplement existing efforts, Germany would join a growing list of countries worldwide that have elected to use the Russian vaccine. (*CNBC*, January 7, 2021)