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Kremlin's Fear of China Drives Its Foreign Policy

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Russia is very concerned about China, but this is driven more by fears about China's capabilities than any real threats.

Russia perceives China as being highly unpredictable and worries about Beijing's technological dominance, growing military strength and demographic and economic expansion into Siberia, which is sparsely populated but resource-rich.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin's saber-rattling in the Far East, while purportedly aimed at protecting the Kuril Islands from a weak Japan, is Moscow's subtle signal to Beijing.

The real threat for Russia is China's capabilities. Beijing's ability to expand its nuclear arsenal is worrisome because at parity levels, Russia's nuclear deterrent loses credibility in relation to China's greater counterstrike potential. Thus, fear, which is the dominant factor behind the Kremlin's policy of maintaining nuclear superiority over China, hinders global efforts to

decrease Russia's nuclear arsenal — in particular, its tactical weapons.

Moscow's appeals to engage other nuclear states in arms control are implicitly driven by fears of China. But Russia does not fully understand how to engage China and needs the United States to pressure Beijing to talk and for political cover should talks fail. But engaging China on arms control is not practical yet, given the disparities in size and type of each country's arsenals.

Russia's urgency to set its foot down amid China's rise is also driven by unsuccessful attempts to assert itself on many European security issues, namely NATO and U.S. missile defense systems. Moscow has learned its lesson and wants to assure that it has a voice on Asian security matters.

Shared concern over China offers Russia and the United States an opportunity to deepen relations with a strategy to engage and help contain China. Assuaging their concerns will require, among other initiatives, pressuring China to be more transparent about its military, eventually engaging China on arms control, and demonstrating that U.S. and Russian missile defense systems do not undermine China's strategic weapons.

Such a strategy, however, is wishful thinking for the time being. Historic distrust between Moscow and Washington, as well as the Kremlin's fear of provoking China, have shaped their dialogue for the past decade or so. But Russia's and the United States' place in the global arena will depend largely upon their ability to find the right balance between each other and China.

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