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Russia in Review: October 6 – October 19, 2021

Russia Promotes Kremlin-friendly Organizations at International Conference for Asian States

By George Barros

The Kremlin advanced two key lines of effort to increase Russian influence globally at the 2021 Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) ministerial summit—leveraging international organizations and expanding Russian cyber capabilities and influence. The CICA is an inter-governmental forum of 27 Asian and Eurasian member states founded in 1992 to enhance cooperation and promote security and stability in Asia.¹ CICA held the 2021 iteration of its biannual conference in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan, on October 12.

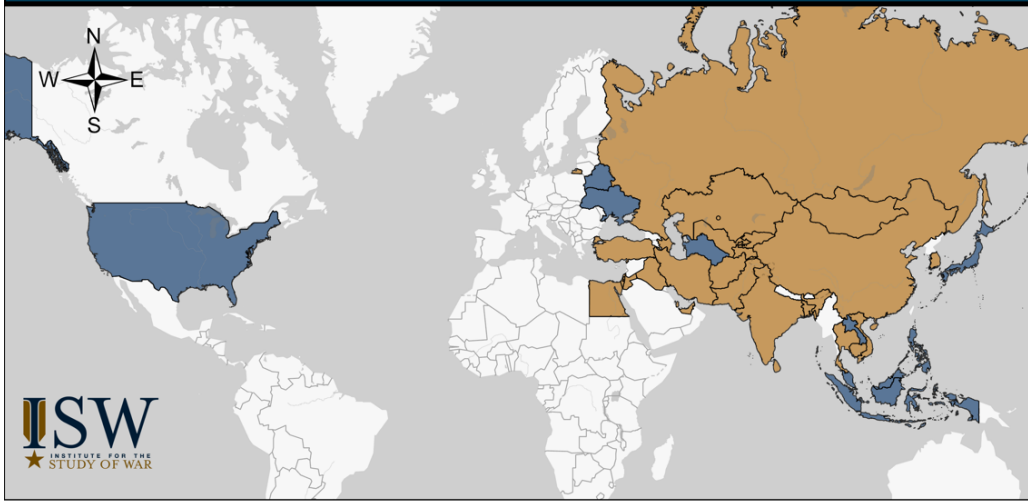
Russian negotiators at CICA advanced the Kremlin’s campaign to develop a network of Russia-amenable international organizations. The Kremlin seeks to cultivate a network of coalitions and international organizations to amplify Russia’s limited power, diversify Russia’s influence and subversion tools, and expand Russian influence in strategic regions.² Russian Foreign Minister

Russia Around the Globe



Sergey Lavrov proposed that the CICA join existing efforts by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to support Russian President Vladimir Putin’s Greater Eurasian Partnership during the conference.³ The Kremlin has used the Greater Eurasian Partnership as an umbrella concept to cohere international organizations in the region since 2016.⁴ Lavrov also stressed the need to integrate the efforts of Eurasian regional and sub-regional structures—such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), SCO, EAEU, ASEAN, and Eurasian elements of BRICS—with CICA members to increase cooperation across multiple policy areas.⁵

Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) Membership as of October 2021



■ CICA Member States as of October 2021
 ■ CICA Observer States as of October 2021

The Kremlin additionally advanced its campaign to expand Russian cyber capabilities and influence by leveraging international information and communications technologies (ICT) agreements. Lavrov proposed launching a new area of cooperation within the CICA platform on information security.⁶ Russian success in expanding information technology influence among CICA members would advance longstanding Kremlin campaigns to expand Russian access to global technical networks and infrastructure, develop human networks and institutional links around the world, and reinforce Kremlin narratives to posture as an alternative to Western ideas in cyberspace. The Kremlin has pushed for information technology cooperation among its partners—both bilaterally and within coalitions such as the CSTO—since 2015.⁷

A successful Kremlin effort to promulgate Russian ICT agreements among the CICA would significantly increase the level of international support for Russian efforts to exploit and shape norms on cyberspace.⁸ CICA’s membership is broad and many of its members

do not directly intersect with Kremlin-dominated and Kremlin-amenable international organizations. The Kremlin seeks to contest the West in cyberspace by leveraging ICTs within international organizations, giving Russia opportunities to shape international norms on cyberspace to its advantage.⁹ The Kremlin’s information security policy, which was updated in 2016, calls for an independent Russian information policy and the elimination of Russian dependency on foreign ICTs.¹⁰ The Kremlin aims

to pull as many countries into its orbit as possible to expand its soft power capabilities in cyberspace.

Western leaders and policymakers should remain aware of the Kremlin’s efforts to expand its international coalitions and act to counter Russian expansion in cyberspace. Western leaders and policymakers should highlight how the Kremlin leverages international coalitions and partnerships to advance subversive Kremlin interests by framing them as multilateral initiatives.¹¹ Western leaders should contest the Kremlin’s assertion that Russia is a trusted actor in cyberspace by drawing attention to the Kremlin’s malign cyber activities. Western leaders and diplomats should additionally call out Russian efforts to undermine other states’ sovereignty by subordinating their IT industries to Russian-dominated structures and norms.

Russia Around the Globe

1. Germany, France, and Ukraine likely seek to hold Normandy Format talks with Russia within the next six months. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French

President Emmanuel Macron, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky held a phone call on October 11 to discuss preparations for a potential future Normandy Format summit.¹² Merkel, Macron, and Russian President Vladimir Putin held a separate October 11 phone call and agreed to determine prerequisites for holding a Normandy Format summit.¹³ The Normandy Format is a peace talk format on the war in Ukraine consisting of Germany, France, Russia, and Ukraine. Merkel, Macron, and Putin last held a similar three-way phone call in May 2019 in the lead-up to the last Normandy Format summit in December 2019.¹⁴

The Kremlin may use the carrot of agreeing to hold a Normandy Format meeting as a bargaining chip to pressure Germany to certify Russia's Nord Stream 2 pipeline (NS2) before a new German government could threaten NS2's certification. A Normandy Format meeting cannot occur without Russian participation, and the Kremlin historically uses its consent to hold a meeting to extract concessions from the other summit participants. NS2 is fully constructed but not yet operational due to ongoing European certification processes that will likely take until May 2022.¹⁵ Merkel remains the German chancellor in a caretaker capacity until a coalition government forms, which could take several months.¹⁶ The Kremlin may seek additional concessions from Ukraine or France in exchange for agreeing to a Normandy Format meeting.

2. The Kremlin-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) began annual joint operational and strategic exercises on the Tajik-Afghan border on October 18. Over 5,000 CSTO personnel are participating in the annual "Combat-Brotherhood-2021" exercises at the Momirak and Harb-Maidon training grounds in Tajikistan from October 18-23.¹⁷ The 2021 iteration emphasizes improving command and control and interoperability among CSTO joint collective forces to increase CSTO capabilities to respond to terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan.¹⁸ Combat Brotherhood's 2021 iteration has three

centerpiece component exercises in Tajikistan: logistics support exercise "Echelon-2021," reconnaissance exercise "Search-2021," and combined arms combat exercise "Interaction-2021." All six CSTO members—Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—will additionally participate in the annual "Unbreakable Brotherhood-2021" exercise under the umbrella of Combat Brotherhood-2021 in Kazan, Russia, in November 2021.¹⁹ The Kremlin seeks to leverage these exercises to expand Russian military influence in Central Asia and deepen cooperation with partner militaries.²⁰ The Kremlin additionally experienced a setback in its campaign to expand military cooperation with Uzbekistan. Uzbekistani Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov stated on October 8 that Uzbekistan will not renew its CSTO membership, Uzbekistan's first statement on its CSTO membership since Moscow intensified outreach to Uzbekistan following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.²¹

3. Moldovan authorities arrested Moldova's prosecutor general, advancing pro-Western Moldovan President Maia Sandu's pro-Western reform agenda and pushing back on pro-Russian influence. Moldovan authorities detained Moldovan Prosecutor General Alexander Stoianoglo on corruption charges on October 5.²² Former pro-Russian Moldovan president and current opposition politician Igor Dodon appointed Stoianoglo in 2019. Dodon organized an approximately 2,000-person protest against the government in Chisinau, Moldova, on October 10 in response.²³ Dodon accused Sandu's government of attempting a coup, echoing Kremlin characterizations of pro-Western reformers as being agents of Western-backed hybrid wars.²⁴ Sandu's government will likely continue to pursue its reform agenda and anti-corruption program. The Kremlin will likely increasingly leverage energy pressure to retain Russian influence in Moldova as Sandu's reforms remove the Kremlin's previous favored actors from Moldova's government. Russian state-owned monopoly Gazprom reduced gas flow to Moldova in mid-October and will likely

raise gas prices for Moldova when Gazprom's current gas contract with Moldova expires at the end of October 2021.²⁵ Gazprom may have also reduced flows to Moldova in mid-October to retaliate against Stoianoglo's arrest.²⁶

4. The Russian Armed Forces conducted three joint military exercises in October with Egyptian, Pakistani, and Mongolian forces. A company-sized airborne element (over 100 personnel) of the Russian 108th Airborne Regiment likely formed a combined battalion with an Egyptian airborne battalion (400 personnel) at the 2021 iteration of the annual "Defender of Friendship" exercise in Egypt from October 17 to 29.²⁷ The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) stated the Russian and Egyptian airborne troops would operate as a "consolidated" and "combined" unit under a unified command and control system—the same terminology the MoD has used to describe its combined airborne battalions with Belarus.²⁸ The Kremlin's effort to integrate foreign troops into likely Russian-controlled battalions since 2020 is a dangerous development that will expand Russian control over the militaries of sovereign states and help the Kremlin obfuscate its military activity by framing Russian activities as multilateral.²⁹

Company-sized Russian sapper and Pakistani Special Forces elements (approximately 200 personnel in total) participated in the fifth iteration of the annual joint Russo-Pakistani "Friendship-2021" counterterrorism exercise at the Molkino Training Ground, Russia, from September 28 to October 8. Russian sappers and Pakistani Special Forces conducted a joint raid against simulated terrorists in an urban environment. Russian sappers disarmed a house-borne improvised explosive device encountered in Russian operational experience in Syria.³⁰ Russian motorized rifle elements—likely of the 37th Motor Rifle Brigade—and Mongolian artillery elements held annual Russo-Mongolian "Selenga-2021" exercises at the Doytyn Am Training Ground, northeastern Mongolia, from September 22 to October 8. Selenga-2021 is the largest iteration of Selenga

to date and exercised combined arms operations against a simulated superior enemy force. The Russian military is successfully leveraging joint exercises to increase Russian military influence globally. The Kremlin will likely continue to expand its military exercises to cultivate military influence with key partners in Central Asia and Africa.

5. The Kremlin advanced efforts to coordinate the responses of Central Asian states to the situation in Afghanistan at meetings of senior leaders in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in Minsk, Belarus, from October 13 to 15. Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov encouraged close information, military, and cultural cooperation in meetings with CIS member states' intelligence service heads, foreign ministers, and heads of state. Putin stressed the importance of constantly monitoring the Afghan border for terrorist flows and called for CIS security agencies to coordinate work.³¹ Putin said the CIS should conduct joint counter-terror operations via the CIS Anti-Terrorist Center "if necessary."³² This rhetoric was consistent with previous Kremlin efforts to create a unified and Kremlin-dominated response to Afghanistan in the former Soviet Union. Putin also invited CIS members to discuss the Afghan situation in the Moscow format talks with the Taliban on October 20, likely to facilitate Russian control over Central Asian states' interactions with Kabul. The Kremlin will likely continue to expand its military presence in Central Asia and seek to control a unified response to the Taliban to maintain itself as an essential actor in Central Asia. The Kremlin also used the CIS meetings to advance Russian-led mediation efforts between Armenia and Azerbaijan for the Nagorno Karabakh ceasefire.³³

6. An active-duty Russian air-defense unit deployed the new S-500 air defense system for the first time in mid-October. Russian media outlet TASS reported on October 13 that an air-defense element of the 15th Aerospace Forces Army in Moscow received

Russia's first brigade of S-500 air defense systems for active service.³⁴ The S-500 is a modernized version of the S-400 air-defense system with a claimed extended range of 600 kilometers and the ability to strike more complex targets, such as low-orbit satellites and hypersonic missiles.³⁵ The Kremlin is unlikely to replace all of its currently deployed S-400 systems with S-500 systems for several years. Russia's manufacturing constraints prohibit the mass production of the S-500. Russian defense planners initially planned for the S-500 to enter production in 2014—a deadline repeatedly delayed until now.³⁶ The manufacturer of the S-400 and S-500 systems is still working on fulfilling existing contracts to deliver three S-400 regiments to Russian units by 2023.³⁷ TASS reported that the Russian military will only receive its second S-500 brigade in the first half of 2022—a deadline that will likely be delayed. The deployment of the S-500 system nonetheless increases Russian air-defense capabilities, closing a gap with NATO.

7. Protesters in the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) temporarily disrupted a portion of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Special Monitoring Mission (OSCE SMM) in Ukraine in Donetsk. Ukraine's military detained a Russian military officer who was caught conducting reconnaissance on Ukrainian positions near the front line in Luhansk on October 13.³⁸ Citizens of the Russian proxy Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) began holding protests at the SMM headquarters in Donetsk on October 15 to demand the officer's release.³⁹ Protesters escalated their tactics on

October 17, preventing SMM personnel from leaving the SMM headquarters and impounding SMM patrol vehicles at an SMM forward observation post.⁴⁰ The SMM in Donetsk temporarily suspended its work at the blocked headquarters on October 17 due to the heightened security threat to its personnel.⁴¹ Kremlin media falsely claimed that the OSCE suspended its entire monitoring mission in Donbas due to the protests.⁴² The OSCE SMM only suspended operations inside the blocked headquarters and never stopped operating in Luhansk.⁴³ The DNR released the vehicles at the forward observation post and allowed SMM personnel to leave the headquarters in Donetsk on October 18.⁴⁴ DNR personnel continued to restrict the SMM's freedom of movement in multiple different locations in Donetsk as of October 20, despite the protests at the headquarters ending on October 18.⁴⁵ Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) residents have not launched any similar protests against the OSCE. ISW has not observed any evidence that the DNR coordinated the protests with the LNR or the Kremlin, but the Kremlin may have sought to free the detained officer or test its ability to restrict SMM activities. The Kremlin may leverage the demonstrated capability of its proxies to restrict SMM activities in the future.

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¹⁵ German regulator BNetzA must submit a draft decision on approving Nord Stream 2’s operation to the European Commission by January 8, 2022 to make a draft decision and submit it to the European Commission. The commission will then have two months

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¹⁸ Stated goals of the exercise include responding to terrorist fighters that penetrate territory of CSTO

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