

# U.S.-Russia Relations at a Crossroads

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*In September 2020, the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) convened a select group of Russian and American experts to discuss four topics of importance to U.S.-Russia relations: Arms Control, the U.S.-China Rivalry, the Arctic, and the Eastern Mediterranean. What follows is a summary report of those meetings.*

## *Introduction*

U.S.-Russia relations are at their worst since the Cold War and will remain dynamic in the coming years, with a lingering risk of escalation. Washington and Moscow diverge on a growing list of challenges yet there are opportunities for selective engagement. To prevent a drift towards confrontation, they should work to make their relationship more predictable and transparent—regardless of the outcome of the November 3 presidential elections in the United States. Military-military contact and deconfliction efforts must continue but by themselves are insufficient. Both the United States and Russia would benefit from more regular and structured bilateral engagement. There is some, though diminishing, room for a positive agenda, particularly in the Arctic, in the arms control arena, and in the Eastern Mediterranean regional context. But even in areas where the two remain far apart, deconfliction mechanisms should be complemented by diplomatic dialogue that clearly communicates an assessment of regional dynamics and policy priorities and demarcates red lines.

## *Arms Control*

The U.S.-Russia strategic stability framework, which was painstakingly built over decades, is at risk of dissolution. Although treaty violations and unilateral withdraws has fostered an environment of mutual mistrust, the Trump administration views existing arms control agreements as no longer responsive to the evolving security environment, including the inclusion of all nuclear weapons, the emergence of new weapons such as hypersonic vehicles or space-based systems, and most importantly, China's

modernization of its strategic nuclear forces. At the time of this writing, it is unclear whether the United States and Russia will agree to extend the New START Treaty, the last remaining bilateral treaty limiting nuclear stockpiles, when it expires in February 2021 and what political framework will be negotiated to secure a future arms control agreement with both Moscow and Beijing.

An effort by the Trump administration to bring China into a trilateral arms control discussion was deserted earlier in the summer when China refused to participate. At the time of this writing, ongoing bilateral talks appear to be focused on negotiating a one year extension of the treaty (it can be extended for up to five years) as well as a one year freeze on all nuclear warheads (both strategic and non-strategic). It is unclear what verification processes would be agreed to in relation to the nuclear freeze. This one-year period would allow time to launch future arms control negotiations addressing a broader set of issues and which could potentially be renewed every 12-months should negotiations be productive. But there is continued uncertainty around the Trump administration's negotiating priorities and strategy. In early October 2020, U.S. special envoy Marshal Billingslea outlined preconditions for extending New START that Moscow has not agreed to: a framework for a future accord which includes China, covers a wider class of nuclear weapons such as short-range tactical systems, and has tougher verification mechanisms. But following a meeting in Helsinki, Finland, U.S. strategy appeared to shift course, focusing on securing a freeze on nuclear warheads (with a hope that it would be announced before the November 3 U.S. presidential elections) as a precondition for an extension of New START. Moscow initially stated that it would only agree to an extension without preconditions, but on October 20, Moscow indicated that it might be receptive to a one-year freeze on nuclear warheads to secure an extension of New START for the same period. Both sides have yet to conclude an agreement.

One U.S. participant cited a conversation with a senior U.S. military official who said that if forced to choose, they were more concerned about China than about losing data on military stockpiles provided by Russia under the terms of the treaty. Although Vice President Joe Biden has indicated he would extend New START, negotiating an eventual follow-on agreement to New START will be difficult under any administration. There is growing bipartisan consensus in the United States that existing regimes, which were essentially designed to regulate bilateral nuclear competition, must be updated to address the rise of China and the emergence of new technologies. Still, many in the United States believe that although arms control regimes should evolve to remain relevant and contain enhanced verification mechanisms, international security today is better served by imperfect arms control treaties than by no arms control architecture at all.

In contrast to previous cycles in U.S.-Russia relations, arms control is no longer insulated from the broader disfunction in the bilateral relationship. The U.S. pursuit of strategic stability is in great part dependent upon the state of bilateral relations with Russia, particularly Washington's perception that Moscow violates existing treaty obligations and interferes in U.S. elections. This raises the domestic political costs of negotiating an extension. Moreover, arms control debates in the United States have always operated along two fronts: externally with Russia and domestically. For instance, ratification of the New START Treaty in the United States was contingent on an agreement between Democrats and Republicans to modernize the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Washington may place higher value on arms control with Russia in the future, in particular, if the threat environment stabilizes and U.S. policymakers feel that they better understand the challenge posed by China. However, the takeaway was that U.S. policymakers prioritize the challenge posed by China over Russia.

What would future arms control regimes look like? Do challenges to the existing regime stem from inadequacies in the treaty or from an absence of political willpower and creativity from political leaders?

Elements of the existing arms control framework could be extended to other countries. However, it is unclear if a future multilateral framework would be legally binding or would depend instead on voluntary norms, which could expand the list of participants but complicate verification and compliance. The group agreed that creative, flexible nonbinding forms of arms control and outer space policy, particularly on new elements such as hypersonic weapons and anti-satellite weapons, may be useful additions to legally binding regimes but should not replace existing treaties limiting nuclear stockpiles and platforms. In other words, “soft arms control” cannot substitute for treaty-based “hard” arms control. Some U.S. participants posited that the direction of arms control regimes is towards voluntary norms. Other participants suggested that there could be definitional work done on those areas where there is an agreement that arms control still works.

Beijing’s refusal to participate in a trilateral U.S.-Russia-China dialogue stems from the view that China is far below the strategic levels of the U.S. and Russia. Participants wondered whether China’s interest in arms control would be greater if Beijing was negotiating from a position of relative strength. A trilateral dialogue on intermediate-range missiles in Asia might provide that context, though there are no assurances that the United States would agree to what China would want in return for limits. Still, China has a large number of missiles in the 500-5,500 km range. The United States, only recently withdrawn from the INF, has no midrange missiles currently in Asia but is in talks with its allies about deploying them. The prospect of a midrange arms race in the region could be a starting point for trilateral discussions. A larger discussion of arms control in Asia in an expanded P5 format, including India and Pakistan, might also incentivize Beijing’s participation.

### *Russia and the U.S.- China Rivalry*

U.S. relations with China are at their worst since the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989 and perhaps since the 1950s under Mao Zedong. The rapid deterioration began under the Obama administration with concerns over China’s cyber espionage practices and military buildup in the South China Sea. However, since President Trump took office in January 2017, U.S.-China relations have plummeted into an open rivalry spanning economic, military, technological, and ideological spheres with echoes of the Cold War. Relations have taken an even sharper downward turn in recent months as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, which has upturned the U.S. economy and endangered President Trump’s reelection chances. This is increasingly reflected in the harsh rhetoric of senior U.S. officials such as Secretary of State Pompeo towards the “Communist Party of China” and the “China virus” in the midst of a heated presidential campaign. Even so, the U.S.-China rivalry is of a structural, not personal, character. Even if rhetoric were to become less acrimonious under a Biden presidency, a bipartisan consensus around the need for a more competitive framework for relations with China would persist.

Beijing has likewise come to view long-term competition with Washington as inevitable, though it was surprised by the speed in which it was brought forward. Recent developments have only reinforced this dynamic: pressure from the White House on Chinese technology companies such as Huawei, trade tariffs, financial competition, and the economic implications from Covid-19 have accelerated changes in China’s development strategy (“dual circulation strategy”) that will reduce interdependence with the United States and the West. That CCP leaders believe China will triumph in this competition only hardens the pathways both countries have embarked on.

Moscow and Beijing have demilitarized their relationship and both are averse to a U.S.-dominated international system, even though China continues to benefit from the existing global trade and financial architecture. Moreover, policies in Washington have pushed Russia and China closer together. U.S.

sanctions targeting Russia's policy on Ukraine and more recent sanctions targeting China's suppression of Uighurs in Xinjiang have aligned Moscow and Beijing's interest in developing alternatives to a dollar-dominated global financial architecture, while a revised U.S. National Security Strategy groups Russia and China together as the United States' primary competitors (although Washington views China as the greater strategic challenge). There is also an economic logic to Russia-China relations. China's growing demand for raw materials and new sources of energy and Russia's chronic need for market diversity away from Europe and greater investment are compatible, and as a natural competitor of Australia, New Zealand, and Canada in supplying raw materials to China, Russia stands to benefit in certain ways from an "uncoupling" of China from Western supply chains.

Americans and Russians characterize Sino-Russian relations in different and at times contradictory ways. Some Washington insiders take note of an overlap in Russian and Chinese tools of statecraft, as Beijing increasingly resorts to disinformation, cyber isolation, and coercive energy trade to achieve its political aims, and on this basis perceive a growing Russia-China entente that goes beyond mere economic cooperation. Others believe that greater economic engagement between Russia and China belies Moscow's anxiety about becoming a "junior partner" to China. Proponents of this view argue that U.S. policy should focus on exploiting natural fissures and frictions in Russia's relations with China in order to gain political leverage on Beijing. Of this, Russian participants were skeptical. To secure Moscow's cooperation vis-à-vis China, would the United States ever be willing to make the necessary tradeoffs (for example, concessions on Ukraine)? Moreover, Russian participants posited that Moscow may be less anxious about growing economic asymmetry than many in the United States would like to believe. Despite the vast difference in economic size, Russia holds little Chinese debt, and China accounts for just 16 percent of total Russian trade volume, versus 42 percent in the European Union. Economic prowess does not always translate into political leverage.

For Moscow, balance and diversification are a strategic imperative. It views the U.S.-China rivalry as the organizing principle that will realign contemporary international relations, requiring all other players to choose their strategies and approaches relative to this struggle. Yet Russian policy aims to create room for maneuver and to avoid the need to choose between Western or China-dominated technological or financial platforms. Although Russia sees opportunities for further cooperation with China in technology and trade, it has sought to counterbalance its relations with China with players such as the European Union, India, Iran, and Japan (even as its growing alignment with China complicates relations with India and as recent policies vis-a-vis Belarus and the poisoning of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny have alienated the European Union). In Central Asia, Russia is a competitor of China, though the region is a relatively low priority for both and does not currently threaten a tendency towards greater cooperation.

Indeed, Russia seeks a potential role for itself within the U.S.-China paradigm as leader of a new global nonaligned movement—a "third way." This may explain elements of Russia's more assertive international stance in recent years, including ventures into regions where its strategic interests are unclear to Washington, earning Russia the moniker of a "spoiler" to U.S. policy preferences. Because the United States' strategic priority has shifted towards China, U.S. participants wondered whether Washington might prefer a "third way" for Russia over a complete bifurcation of the global order in which Russia sides with China.

### *Russia's Chairmanship of the Arctic Council*

The Arctic remains a positive outlier in a receding list of areas where U.S.-Russia engagement is cooperative. Russia's forthcoming chairmanship of the Arctic Council (2021-2023) provides an occasion to build on decades of cooperative engagement between the United States and Russia, particularly

within the Bering Strait and Sea region, as well as a proven multilateral, consensus-based format. Yet U.S.-Russia cooperation in the Arctic faces headwinds. These include a shift in U.S. policy priorities away from Arctic governance and climate change under the Trump administration and an increased securitization of the Arctic set in motion by Russia's enhanced military presence (and responsive measures by NATO) as well as China's growing economic presence in the region. As U.S. and Russian priorities in the region continue to evolve, Washington and Moscow should strengthen existing lines of communication and form a new dialogue for addressing contentious security and geopolitical issues in order to lower the risk of inadvertent escalation and build greater regional confidence. At the same time, they should work within the Arctic Council to define a positive agenda (in particular on, but not limited to, the Arctic marine environment) that is responsive to the demands of a fast-evolving region.

The future of U.S. policy towards the Arctic hinges in great part on the outcome of the U.S. election in November. The Trump administration's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement and reversal of domestic Obama-era climate regulations have pitted the United States against other Arctic states on issues related to environmental protection, a core issue for the Arctic Council. Under a second Trump term, U.S. engagement on climate change and environmental stewardship within the Arctic Council may continue to fade, depriving the Council of a key point of unity and narrowing the room for joint initiatives with Russia. However, if Vice President Joe Biden is elected, the United States would likely return to and expand upon Obama-era environmental protection and climate mitigation policies which, along with arms control, could become an area of growing U.S.-Russia engagement—even as the overall tenor of the relationship remains tense.

Other headwinds come from changes in Russia's approach to the region. For Moscow, the Arctic is both an economic imperative and a potential source of insecurity along its more than 7,000 miles of Arctic coastline. Russia's enhanced military presence in the region, which includes increased submarine activity in the North Atlantic, coastal missile batteries, and air defense systems, has prompted responsive measures in the form of increased patrols in the Barents Sea by the U.S. Navy's 2nd and 6th Fleet. The danger of slow militarization of the region is higher amidst overall low levels of trust between Russia and the West and reduced contact between U.S. and Russian military chiefs. Contributing to this tension are differences of view over the legal definition of the Northern Sea Route (Russia views it as internal waters; the United States view it as an international passage), Russian legislation requiring advanced 45-day warning from foreign naval vessels passing through the Northern Sea Route, the legal definition of the Northern Sea Route, and the charging of fees for Russian icebreakers and co-pilots. The United States has long prioritized Freedom of Navigation (FON) globally and regards these restrictions as incompatible with the United Nations Law of the Sea treaty. Russian legislation restricting access to the international passage or attempt to restrict access to the high seas of the Central Arctic Ocean and the increase in the number of military exercises in the region could create a dangerous flashpoint in the future.

Risks notwithstanding, the rhetoric of great power competition in the Arctic has overstretched actual capabilities. Russia's military development in the region has fallen behind its ambitious schedule. Its Arctic strategy until 2035 mentions, but does not concentrate on, Russia's sovereign claims in the region, focusing instead on the region's economic and social development. And though U.S. perception of a strengthened Russian military presence in the Arctic has provoked an increase in NATO patrols in the Bering and Barents Sea, it has not provoked an Arctic arms race. Even as policymakers in the United States turn their attention to U.S. insecurity in the Arctic, the U.S. Air Force and Navy have made only limited adjustments to their capabilities, and U.S. participants doubted that the Navy would conduct FON exercises in the Arctic in the near future. Melting sea ice has created new commercial opportunities

accompanied by an increase in military activity, but the Arctic remains challenging and inhospitable to military forces.

The introduction of hard security dynamics to the region, however, requires new mechanisms for deconflicting and resolving disputes. The Arctic Council is a proven format for harmonizing approaches to the environment and conservation but is unable to address security issues or the threat of actual conflict. A new forum is needed to deconflict military activity and to promote transparency and restraint. Iceland, the outgoing Arctic Council chair, could initiate a discussion of this forum on the sidelines of the May 2021 ministerial meeting, but to ensure the forum's success, a resumption of high-level contact between U.S., Russian, and Arctic state defense ministries is crucial.

There is also room for bilateral cooperation outside of the security realm regardless of U.S. election results. The United States and Russia should establish a joint maritime domain awareness center to facilitate vessel traffic separation in the Bering Strait; coordinate search and rescue responses; prevent illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing; and respond to environmental accidents in the Bering Strait and Sea. Both the United States (in Alaska) and Russia are challenged by permafrost thaw and concomitant threats to commercial and critical infrastructure. A new scientific working group within the Arctic Council dedicated to permafrost research would meet a real-time need and would also expand the area of cooperative U.S.-Russia engagement, helping to rebuild the trust which could hopefully have some spillover effect on more difficult security issues. But the work of the Council should also be more action-oriented and responsive in real time to the region's mounting environmental challenges. The toppling of an oil tanker in Norilsk in May and revelations of devastating seawater pollution off the Kamchatka peninsula are just two examples of ecological disasters in Russia that would benefit from the collective technical expertise of the Arctic Council nations.

Although there are growing challenges to U.S.-Russia cooperation in the Arctic amid a shift in U.S. and Russian approaches, there is a long history of and strong precedent for cooperative engagement in the region—including through periods where bilateral relations were at their lowest points. Led by Russia and the United States, the creation of marine management mechanisms, a marine science organization for the Central Arctic Ocean, and a new Arctic security dialogue would go far in addressing the emerging challenges of a rapidly warming Arctic region.

### *Transparency and Deconfliction in the Eastern Mediterranean*

The Eastern Mediterranean remains the most likely flashpoint for a military incident between the United States and Russia. To avoid a drift towards confrontation, the United States and Russia need to clearly define and communicate interests in the region and shift towards regional diplomacy. The recent Berlin Conference regarding Libya is a good precedent.

Russia's interests across the region are varied. As a land power, Moscow has historically viewed the region to its south as a "soft underbelly" and potential source of insecurity emanating from state and non-state threats. It relies on transit to and from the Black Sea into the Eastern Mediterranean to access the Indian Ocean through the Suez Canal. This defensive threat perception extends across the Eastern Mediterranean, which Russia views as an extension of its Black Sea frontier. Although Russia had been absent from the region for many years, Russia's 2015 intervention on behalf of Bashar al Assad, Russia's last remaining ally in the region, was a return to historical precedent rather than an aberration. In Syria, Moscow's interest has now shifted from ensuring Assad's political survival to facilitating a stable political environment ahead of next year's presidential election. A lasting peace in Syria would carry economic benefits for Russia but,

more importantly, enhance Moscow's security posture and demonstrate its viability as an alternative to the United States. In Libya, the Russian military has provided logistical and military support via Yevgeny Prigozhin's Wagner Group mercenaries to forces fighting on behalf of Khalifa Haftar and the Libyan National Army (LNA). As in Syria, this intervention ensured Moscow has a critical seat at the diplomatic table and a say in the political, economic, and security future of Libya. In renewing its economic and military relationships across the region such as with Egypt and Cyprus, Russia also influences EU policy choices and challenges which emanate from the Eastern Mediterranean, such as migration flows. Notably, a recent visit to Moscow by a senior German official focused on the topic of migration, not Ukraine.

For the United States, the Eastern Mediterranean is NATO's southern flank, an increasingly important regional energy hub, and a vital transit point for commerce. To uphold its NATO commitments, Washington seeks to maintain the readiness and effectiveness of NATO's deterrence and defense posture in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Although the United States has sought to reduce its military commitments in the Middle East, it has focused on placing significant economic and political pressure against Tehran and accelerating diplomatic recognition of Israel. The United States wants to maintain access and influence in the region but is uncertain about how it should address a growing Russian presence there and an increasingly difficult bilateral relationship with Turkey. U.S. policy in Syria has focused on retaining an ever-shrinking physical footprint in order to reduce Iran's regional strength, help defend Israel, and counter the threat of resurgent terrorism. In Libya, the U.S. wants a ceasefire and path to political reconciliation, although it is unclear whether the Trump administration supports the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) or Haftar's LNA.

Both the United States and Russia share an interest in preventing any one actor from becoming dominant in the region, in creating the conditions for economic activity, and in supporting counterterrorism efforts in order to protect the U.S. and Russian homelands. But the U.S. believes stability is best guaranteed through liberalization and democratization efforts which address the underlying grievances of civil society, whereas Russia believes stability is served by steady regimes. As a result of these different approaches and strategies and the close proximity of their militaries in theater, both the United States and Russia view each other as destabilizing and often misinterpret each other's actions and intent.

This divergence is most clearly illustrated in Syria, where the United States and Russia hold irreconcilable views of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the grave human rights violations that have taken place under his watch. Moscow, lacking an abundance of financial resources, has demonstrated a willingness to sell arms to a wide customer base and intervene on behalf of its partners. This makes Russia an attractive option for many of the region's leaders seeking to resist U.S. pressure on democracy and human rights and diversify their dependence on external players.

Syria and a growing number of flashpoints in the Eastern Mediterranean raise the stakes for renewed bilateral dialogue and continued military deconfliction. An altercation in August between U.S. and Russian forces in Syria demonstrates that even stalemates present risks. Further west, NATO naval exercises in the Black Sea are, for the United States and NATO, an important part of its deterrence and defense posture as Russia strengthens its military position in the region, yet for Russia, increased NATO activity near its borders is perceived as threatening. Russia has itself also sought to project power into the region with its military build-up in Crimea and increased military exercises and activities which have come dangerously close to U.S. and NATO forces. The probability of accident or miscalculation by either side, again, is high.

Turkey is an additional complicating factor and pressure point in U.S.-Russian relations. Turkish president Erdogan's actions at home are increasingly perceived by the United States as anti-democratic and anti-

Western. Coupled with Turkey's more assertive military posture in the region, this has put Turkey at odds with NATO and the European Union (particularly Greece, France, and the United States). One recent trend in U.S. policy toward the Eastern Mediterranean is to develop new security and energy alliances with Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, and Jordan in order to circumvent reliance on Turkey. Russia's relationship and increasingly frequent interaction with Turkey fuels this search for policy alternatives. For Russia, closer ties with a core NATO ally create friction inside the Alliance, is confirmation of its status in the region, and is an antidote to Western efforts to isolate Russia politically.

Yet Turkey derives its own utility from the partnership, which at times goes underappreciated in Washington. For Erdogan, cooperation with Moscow on discreet projects also provides opportunities for self-promotion, increases leverage with Turkey's Western partners, and diversifies Ankara's great power dependency. In Erdogan's eyes, Turkey's pursuit of indigenous defense capabilities and its purchase of S-400s from Russia, for example, allow it to pursue a more independent foreign and security policy track—even as Turkey continues to benefit from its membership in NATO. Historical mistrust and Turkey's NATO membership put natural boundaries around Turkey's partnership with Russia. Of note, the recent uptick in Greece-Turkey tensions could hurt Russian interests with regard to Cyprus and the Balkans. But although Moscow and Ankara are on opposing sides in many of the region's conflicts, even a limited partnership of convenience enables the regional ambitions of both Turkey and Russia to prosper, filling the void left by the United States in the region.

Russia's courting of closer ties with Turkey reflects a broader shift in regional strategy away from a more purely threats-based to an opportunities-based approach. Moscow prioritizes its regional diplomatic successes (which frequently stymie the West) while cooperating with all major players on both sides of any conflict. Russia has sought to organize separate diplomatic tracks from Western-led initiatives because Moscow feels existing structures are Western and normative dominated and thus do not provide the means or legitimacy Moscow needs to negotiate flexibly with all parties. This policy dynamism, while frustrating to the United States, suggests there is room for bilateral engagement.

Bilateral cooperation in the region might start with a consolidation and alignment of diplomatic initiatives. The continuation of a limited U.S. presence in southwest Syria means that Russia cannot achieve all of its aims. In this context, the United States and Russia along with other stakeholders such as the European Union and Turkey should return to exploratory talks. Turkey's deployment of Syrian mercenaries to Libya and most recently to Nagorno-Karabakh now begins to threaten Russian core interests in its "soft underbelly." Diplomatic cooperation between the United States, Russia, and France under the auspices of the Minsk Group is encouraging despite the escalation of the conflict which Moscow is finding increasingly difficult to manage.

Both the United States and Russia are major actors in the Eastern Mediterranean and should create a regular dialogue on regional dynamics—not necessarily to solve them, but to continue to understand the evolving nature of these dynamics and to clarify their respective policies and positions. This dialogue should take place outside of public view and at a sufficient governmental level to ensure a robust and detailed conversation takes place but not so senior as to raise expectations that a bilateral "deal" is being struck. At the same time, ongoing military coordination and communication are essential to mitigate the rise of military accidents or incidents. Restoring a regular and depoliticized dialogue will take time—particularly if there is a change of administration in the United States—and diplomatic engagement will remain vulnerable to one-off incidents. In order to protect and grow the political space for a productive U.S.-Russia dialogue, both parties must prioritize deconfliction and accident prevention and exercise rhetorical restraint while beginning a candid conversation about how much presence and influence in the region is enough.

## Conclusion

This Track 2 dialogue was particularly surprising in that, in the midst of a deep crisis in U.S.-Russian bilateral relations, Russian and U.S. experts frequently agreed on regional assessments and found the perspectives and insights of each side illuminating. Experts on both sides were concerned about the policy directions of Moscow and Washington and were focused on identifying new dialogue mechanisms, whether that was related to arms control, the Arctic, great power competition, or the Eastern Mediterranean. All too frequently, these types of conversations become a litany of differences and frustrations, where experts on both sides parrot government talking points. This dialogue was different. We hope that in the future, Russian and U.S. government officials will begin to parrot the constructive and empathetic perspectives of their experts.

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*This report is made possible by the generous support of Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the authors.*

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