

Russia

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U.S. and Western relations with Russia continue to deteriorate as Russia increasingly reasserts itself on the global stage. Driven by a worldview based on existential threats—real, perceived, and contrived—Russia, as a vast 11-time zone Eurasian nation with major demographic and economic challenges, has multiple security dilemmas both internally and along its vulnerable periphery that include uncertain borders to its south and far east. Exhibiting a reactive xenophobia carried from a long history of destructive war and invasion along most of its borders, the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's peaceful enlargement, and perceived Western slights, Russia increasingly threatens or lashes outward with its much improved but still flawed military. Time is not on Russia's side, however, as it has entered into a debilitating status quo that includes unnecessary confrontation with the West, multiple unresolved military commitments, and a sanctions-strained economy. In a dual-track approach, the U.S. and its allies must deter Russian aggression while simultaneously rebuilding atrophied conduits between key U.S. and Russian political and operational military leaders to avert incidents or accidents that could lead to potential brinkmanship.

In recent years Russia has dramatically reasserted itself on the global stage, drawing attention to a complex and increasingly tense relationship with the United States that has never been fully resolved. Despite the complexities, U.S. national security interests in the region are clear. The United States must deter Russia from further aggression in Eastern Europe, bolster the security of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Allies and partners, reconstitute direct conduits for frank dialogue and deconfliction while aggressively countering Russian disinformation campaigns, and reestablish and reinvigorate languishing arms control regimes. These interests are directly linked to the turbulent course Russia has charted as it struggles to break out of a status quo that

it views as debilitating and threatening. As this chapter explores, the resulting security dilemmas that have emerged are grounded in Russia's historic perception of what it considers to be an existential threat, and in the growing number of both real and perceived vulnerabilities facing the Russian state.

In 2014 Russia set into motion a turbulent course with its illegal annexation of Ukraine's Crimea that by year's end left it isolated, hemorrhaging resources, and under a heavy international sanctions regime. The euphoria from the Sochi Olympics and the invasion of Crimea rapidly dissipated as Russian proxy separatists became bogged down in an increasingly bloody conflict within eastern Ukraine, culminating with Air Malaysia MH-17 being shot down by a Russian-provided Buk missile.¹ In the interim Russia had been thrown out of the prestigious Group of Eight and was suffering from increased sanctions by the European Union (EU) and the United States. Additionally, NATO moved to reassert its Article 5 mission. The EU coalesced behind a strong sanctions regime, despite the threat of Russian disruption of energy supplies. Ukrainians found a sense of national purpose and patriotism. Oil prices, from which Russia derives the bulk of its revenue, collapsed while the ruble lost over 50 percent of its value.²

For these reasons, the Putin regime, a pseudo-democratic autocratic kleptocracy, was forced to confront the prospect that its domestic legitimacy was beginning to erode from 2014 to mid 2015. Despite a purported 85 percent approval rating for President Vladimir Putin, polls did not necessarily translate to full public approval of the Russian regime and its actions abroad, or even internally. The regime no doubt remembered the large and primarily middle-class "Bolotnaya" protests in Moscow and St. Petersburg during the winter of 2011–2012.³ Despite the strident disinformation that dominated Russian airwaves, Russia simmered internally with disparaging international news and difficult economic conditions that stressed its generally loyal population. Even this patriotic majority became troubled by stories of egregious corruption and by disconcerting information about Russian soldiers and intelligence operatives being captured or killed in eastern Ukraine.⁴

During much of 2015 Russia remained isolated internationally. The sanctions continued to bite and NATO continued to regain its confidence and strategic balance, taking measures to increase shared spending while reasserting its presence in and around those areas that felt threatened by an increasingly confrontational Russia. Paradoxically, Russia did manage to remain active within international organizations, notably the United Nations (UN), the Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa association of nations, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Collec-

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tive Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Eurasian Economic Union. Russia also was instrumental as a member of the P5+1 consortium (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) that negotiated the Iran nuclear deal.⁵ Perhaps most important was Russia's deepening but utterly transactional "strategic partnership" with China. Despite a flawed natural gas deal, this gave both nations the opportunity to focus their attention and efforts toward different fronts and not against each other.⁶

In late October 2015 Russia undertook a gamble to break out of its perceived containment by aggressively asserting itself in the Middle East as both a diplomatic and military actor. With its sharp-elbowed military intervention in Syria, Putin and his regime, for the first time since 1979 in Afghanistan, successfully reasserted Russia's military presence beyond the confines of the Former Soviet Union (FSU), establishing Russia as once again a key actor in the Middle East.⁷ By restoring the near-term viability of the Bashar al-Asad regime and securing bases at Tartus and Latakia, Russia is showing the region, the world, and its own citizens that it remains a powerful nation on the world stage.⁸ The widely reported "shock and awe" demonstration of military firepower using heavy bombers and long-range cruise missiles from the Caspian Flotilla accentuated this narrative.⁹ This phenomena may in part explain the sortie of Russia's sole aircraft carrier, the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, and flotilla from its Northern Fleet to the eastern Mediterranean.¹⁰

In so doing, Russia has partially broken out of the debilitating status quo of late 2014–2015. The Russian population, suffering the effects of sanctions and collapsing oil prices, responded positively to Putin's decisiveness and verve through the eastern Ukrainian and Syrian interventions. The destruction of Russia's civilian Metrojet by Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) entities and the Turkish downing of a Russian warplane sent tremors into Russia, however, ending the easy phase of intervention and signaling that Russia may face a long, hard slog. Despite the apparent success in Syria, this may be the new status quo for Putin's Russia. Russia is now deeply and violently enmeshed in an open-ended Syrian civil and sectarian war that has a long way to go before any cessation of hostilities. It is also internationally tarred by its indiscriminate bombing of Aleppo that brutally breached any mainstream adherence to international laws of war. Furthermore, Russia has the added burden of being stuck with a violent, expensive, and increasingly frozen conflict in eastern Ukraine. Meanwhile, Russian coffers dwindle, food imports are reduced, and despite slight increases oil prices remain low with the ruble inflated. These external and domestic factors will continue to put increasing pressure on Russia and Putin. What will Russia do next to break out

of the status quo? While it is difficult to predict Russian actions, it is clear Russia will be looking for every way to keep “the narrative”—both internationally and domestically—assertive, positive, and forward moving.

The single main event that undermined the 2009 political “reset” between the United States and Russia and set off Russia’s strategically defensive, tactically preemptive military actions of early 2014 was the February ouster of pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich of Ukraine.¹¹ For many observers, it is difficult to comprehend how inclusion into a peaceful economic union could set off a violent reaction and invasion by a dominant neighbor. Called a Western-backed coup by the Russian disinformation machine, this vociferous and dogged expression of majority Ukrainians hit at the core of the Putin regime’s existential fear of internal regime change.¹² In fact Russia exists in and in some ways is trapped by its historical worldview. It lives in a world full of existential threats, real and perceived—and contrived.

Russia and Its Perception of Existential Threats

Russia is Eurasia. It touches or influences about 70 percent of the world where the United States has serious economic and security interests. Any discussion about Russia must first begin by recognizing the role geography and history have played in determining the Russian perspective. How does one rule a barely cultivatable, permafrost-heavy nation of 144 million people spread out over 11 time zones, where all trains depart on centralized Moscow time through lands mostly cut out of the hide of former nations and civilizations?¹³

In prior generations, ideological struggle was represented by the great “isms,” namely capitalism, communism, socialism, and fascism. These drove great power dynamics and conflict. Tomorrow’s conflicts will be resource-driven. Russia is a warehouse of yet untapped natural resources and, as competition grows, will perceive its increasing vulnerability to energy and resource-dependent neighbors.¹⁴

Given these challenges, a Russian general staff planner conducting an objective strategic assessment out to 2050 would necessarily be highly concerned about the future of his nation. Foremost Russia has a looming demographic challenge. Whether the population increases, any growth will be marginal at best.¹⁵ A significant portion of Russia’s population, about 74 percent, lives in urban areas primarily west of the Ural Mountains where greater Asia becomes greater Europe.¹⁶ This gives the state a predominately Western feel even in Siberia and the Far East. The nature of the population is also changing, becoming increasingly ethnically Central Asian or from the Caucasus. Much of this population “supple-

ment” will be Muslim, which has to be concerning to the Russian Orthodox Church that is enjoying a “renaissance” of faith and worship with up to 73 percent of the “Great Russian” population.¹⁷ The conflicts along Russia’s periphery and within the Middle East involving Sunni Islam threaten to intensify anti-Russian sentiment both externally and among Russia’s approximately 15 million predominantly Sunni Muslims.¹⁸ The dynamics of Chechnya, and the incipient Sunni insurgency in Dagestan, can only become more complicated and dangerous for Russia as surviving jihadists fighting in Syria and Iraq eventually return home.

Russia’s petroleum-based economy must adapt as access to oil and natural gas becomes more challenging in the years ahead. With extraction increasingly difficult and costly in the high latitudes of the frozen but melting tundra, the economy will increasingly struggle with fewer barrels extracted at higher cost.¹⁹ This is a major catalyst driving Arctic development—an area of potential cooperation—and concomitant military basing to expand and secure its claims. These claims include the Lomonosov Ridge and access to natural resources along the widening Northern Sea Route.²⁰ Additionally, much of the Russian population is unhealthy. This is exacerbated by high alcohol and tobacco use, plus the ecological blight that came with Soviet-era rust belt industrial development and poorly regulated nuclear reactor development and storage.²¹

A Short Geostrategic Survey Around Russia’s Periphery

The Far East and Asia

The Russian Far East is currently calm though geostrategic fault lines persist. One should not forget that Russia is also an Asian power, albeit on a scale smaller than in the West. Though armed with plenty of deterrent capability, particularly within its Rocket Forces and Pacific Fleet, Russia is playing pure defense and has no territorial ambitions in the east. The heart of its defensive posture is built around a capable antiaccess/area-denial (A2/AD) posture that the Chinese are working to adopt.²² Russia’s principal active Asian territorial issue beyond the dormant Chinese border remains the Kurile Island dispute with Japan. Far from being resolved, the dispute has lingered for over 70 years after the southern four islands were occupied by the Soviet Union.²³ Despite resettlement efforts by the Russian regime, regional demographics are overwhelmingly in China’s favor. While a scant seven million Great Russians live between Siberian Irkutsk on Lake Baikal to Vladivostok on the Pacific Ocean, longitudinally there live several hundred million Chinese, including a large minority living and trading on Russia’s side

of the border.²⁴ The border dispute along the Ussuri River that culminated in bloody clashes between the Soviet Union and China in 1969 was pragmatically resolved in 2004.²⁵ Additionally, trade and military contact have increased, including the signing of a natural gas deal.²⁶ With Russia embroiled in eastern Ukraine and Syria and China increasingly committed to exerting influence and control within the Spratley and Senkaku islands, these arrangements relaxed tensions over their 2,700-mile land border.²⁷

Looking long term, however, one could see a natural tension reoccurring along this resource-rich zone, especially on the Russian side. Russia's Far East and Eastern Siberia are rich in natural resources beyond oil and gas that resource-starved China could covet. For years Russian locals along the border have complained about illegal Chinese logging activity along their remote border regions.²⁸ Notably a huge chunk of the Russian Far East, including those lands that encompass Vladivostok east of the Amur River, was annexed by Imperial Russia from the weak Qing Dynasty in the mid-1800s and formalized by the Treaties of Aigun (1858) and Peking (1860)—a fact that has not been forgotten by Chinese historians.²⁹ While the Russians and Chinese are both practicing prudent foreign policy regarding one another, they are not natural friends or allies, with a history, culture, religion, and ethnicity that are different from one another.

Central Asia

In Central Asia Russia sees the five independent FSU nations of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan within its “privileged sphere of influence” and will take firm action to ensure that no excessive foreign military presence takes root in the region.³⁰ Whatever its post-Soviet imperial desires, Russia does not have the military means to retake and occupy these diverse states. Therefore, it has taken measures to maintain a strong and influential regional suzerainty among them. There is little doubt that Russia has military contingency plans to prop up Central Asia's existing regimes and is prepared to counter a wide range of scenarios, including extremist Islamists or so-called color revolutions, that might lead toward some form of local liberal democracy. This is a major reason that the Russian-controlled CSTO exists, whose members include Kazakhstan, Kryrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (Uzbekistan withdrew in 2012) as well as Belarus and Armenia.³¹ While likely impossible today due to an extreme trust deficit, it could be far-sighted to offer exchanging modest observer missions among Russia-controlled CSTO, Chinese-led SCO, and U.S.-NATO.

The dynamics of Central Asia have evolved since the Soviet Union's breakup in 1991. In the 1990s, with Russian power and influence di-

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minated, major Western initiatives were undertaken economically, most notably in 1994 through accession into NATO's Partnership for Peace. These relationships, with Russian acquiescence, were leveraged to support the swift U.S.-allied invasion of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan after 9/11.³² The Russians were generally uncomfortable with U.S. activity and airbases in Central Asia (Karshi-Khanabad in Uzbekistan and Manas in Kyrgyzstan); however, their initial support of the war on terror and concern about militant Sunni Islam triumphing in Afghanistan superseded those worries, allowing (at considerable financial benefit) the establishment of the Northern Distribution Network in 2008. The network brought substantial nonlethal materiel and personnel through Russia and Central Asia into Afghanistan.³³ This logistics arrangement, which included the brief establishment of a Russian-operated NATO logistics hub at Ulyanovsk in 2012, gradually eroded as relations degenerated between NATO and Russia.³⁴ For example, under major Russian pressure, Kyrgyzstan forced the United States to close its logistics base at Manas in 2013.³⁵ The paradox is that Russia does not want the United States and its allies to depart Afghanistan, fearing the possibility that the fragile Afghan government would ultimately implode and releasing a flood of radical Sunni Islam, drugs, crime, and illegal migration into its buffer zone of regional partners. Russia dreads the destabilizing effect this might have, potentially spreading into an already demographically and ethnically vulnerable southern Russia.³⁶

The Caucasus

This complex, fractious region of both Russia and the FSU looms as dynamic and contentious in the years ahead. An ethnic, religious, and migratory crossroads for centuries, the Caucasus bifurcates both the Black and Caspian seas and presents significant current and future security challenges for Russia. The issues are not only geostrategic and economic, but also ethnic, linguistic, and religious.

The clumsy Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 served notice to the region and the world that Russia would remain engaged in the FSU and not tolerate what it perceived to be discrimination against ethnic Russians living outside Russia after the breakup of the Soviet Union. South Ossetia and Abkhazia, wrested into autonomous "statelets" by force of arms, remain a frozen conflict between Russia and Georgia.³⁷ The Russian 102nd Military Base garrison in Armenia, consisting of about 3,000 troops, remains the guarantor of Christian Armenia that borders hostile Azerbaijan.³⁸ Smarting and revanchist over their 1990s losses in still simmering Nagorno-Karabagh, Azerbaijan in April 2016 launched major incursions using late model Russian-provided weapons that shook

Armenian trust in Moscow. Meanwhile, neighboring Turkey still refuses to acknowledge the Armenian genocide.³⁹

The gravest danger to Russia is within the Russian Caucasus. Mountainous Chechnya, site of two horrific campaigns commencing in 1995 and 1999, remains under Russia's thumb under the guise of the Russian-enabled President Ramzan Kadyrov, who staunchly supports most of Putin's actions, including sending Chechen fighters into the Donbass in 2014.⁴⁰ This support could be severely challenged, however, when the several thousand Chechen jihadists in Syria return to fight Russia in Chechnya and elsewhere.⁴¹ In adjacent Dagestan, the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs has been fighting a low-boil insurgency for years. It is likely this insurgency will increase in intensity as fighters return home and radical Wahhabist Islam spreads in the overall region.⁴² There is significant concern that this radical cancer could "metastasize" from the Caucasus and Central Asia into Southern Russia, where in contrast to Russia's overall demographic stagnation, the Muslim population is rapidly growing via high birthrates and illegal migration.⁴³ Additionally these concerns have been stoked by several pointed ISIL statements branding Russia as an enemy.⁴⁴ This is a dangerous long-term threat to Russia and another reason Russian forces have been ordered into Syria to fight Islamic extremists while supporting an old ally.⁴⁵

The Middle East

The Russian intervention in late September 2015 on behalf of Bashar al-Asad's Baathist regime in Syria signaled a major geostrategic shift in Russia's military activity since the end of the Cold War. This was a bold, high-risk endeavor that could leave Russia enmeshed in a hornet's nest of competing regional factions and interests that has taken on a Sunni-Shiite sectarian flavor involving Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.⁴⁶ Up until then, direct Russian military action had been confined to within territorial Russia, notably in Chechnya and Dagestan, and then within states of the FSU.

Not since the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan during Christmas 1979 has Russia moved so aggressively "out of area."⁴⁷ For Russia watchers, this intervention should not have been a surprise. As one of his unstated "Red Lines," similar to Donetsk and Lugansk in eastern Ukraine from summer 2014, President Putin repeatedly signaled Russia's full support for the Syrian Baathist regime, an unbroken Soviet-Russian-Syrian relationship that dates back continuously since 1956.⁴⁸ Preservation of the Syrian regime was a major reason in 2013 that Russia acceded to assisting the removal of the bulk of Syria's chemical munitions that precluded a U.S.-led coalition bombing of Syrian regime installations and

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bases.⁴⁹ With Asad's forces significantly weakening in late summer 2015, the Russians went through a "go and no/go" intervention criteria and risk assessment before launching their operation in late September with the intent to save the Syrian regime and batter the Islamic rebels most threatening to its immediate viability.⁵⁰ It should be no surprise, therefore, that the Russians first went after anti-regime rebels, the so-called moderates, most lethal to the Asad regime. While the Russians loathed ISIL, their first priority in Syria was to stabilize the Asad regime and consolidate longstanding interests in Syria such as the Tartus Naval Base, their only functioning port facility outside of the FSU.⁵¹ Their key equity is the perpetuation of a stable and allied Syrian regime and regional platform, and not necessarily over time the persona of Asad.

Putin also wanted to take the fight against militant Sunni Islam beyond Russian borders. Only time will tell if this preemptive strategy will prevent attacks both against and within the Russian homeland by its large Sunni minority.⁵² Woven into this entire situation is a supporting narrative that asserts Russia's role as a serious global player beyond the confines of the FSU, while simultaneously promoting a narrative of U.S. and Western weakness.⁵³

The Russian intervention in Syria also created the conditions to test and showcase the resurgence of Russian military prowess, capability, and systems. These include the swift, opportunistic deployment into Syria of the lethal long-range S-400 air defense system with its formidable A2/AD capability in the stunned aftermath of the Turkish downing of a SU-24 bomber in November 2014. This deployment, along with recently inserted S-300s, has changed the regional airpower equation.⁵⁴ On top of the rapid deployment of air and ground assets into Syria in late September 2015, coupled with air- and naval-launched Kalibr precision missile strikes and bombing by strategic bomber assets, this was definitely a regional, domestic, and international demonstration and testing of firepower reminiscent of the 1936 Spanish Civil War. It signaled to the world that the Russian military was back.⁵⁵ Essentially a laboratory for its evolving tactics, techniques, and procedures across a wide spectrum of conventional warfare and a training ground for a new generation of military leaders, Syria, and more subtly Eastern Ukraine, has reaped numerous near-term benefits for the Russian military. Russian arms exporters are also benefiting from the successful demonstration of their leading-edge systems.⁵⁶

The West

Any discussion about the West must begin with the Russian psychosis toward what it perceives as a liberal democratic and economic system of governance and finance that is totally at odds with, and perceived to be

an existential threat to, the Russian state. NATO and the EU are seen as the hard-power and soft-power agents that threaten Putin's regime. With a false narrative designed to present and pump up external threats and reinforce Russian self-reliance and internal controls, the regime sees Russia in a permanent state of competition and confrontation with the West. As events have shown since Georgia in 2008, Russia will use force, overt or nonattributed, if it feels its direct interests are threatened, especially within the FSU. Russia does not want to go to war with NATO or the United States, but certainly feels threatened by them, and has singled out the Alliance as its principal adversary.⁵⁷ As such it prepares its military and is mobilizing its societal base for what some would say is inevitable war.⁵⁸

Russia's obsession with so-called color revolutions and regime change reveals Putin's deep insecurity concerning the legitimacy of his regime within the eyes of Russia's own domestic population.⁵⁹ Secure nations, comfortable with their governance and secession processes, do not obsess and talk about regime change. Since Muammar Qadhafi's fall in 2011 in Libya, and the large-scale and apparently frightening Bolotnaya protests in Moscow in 2011–2012, the Russian media and official pronouncements have sounded increasingly strident.⁶⁰ In spring 2014 a main theme at the Moscow Security Conference, and again in 2015 and 2016, was the perceived threat to Russia of Western-backed color revolutions. Some Russian variation of President Yanukovich's ignominious February 2014 fall from power in Ukraine is likely what "keeps Putin up at night."

Anyone in Russia over 45 years old remembers the fall of Communism, when a restive Soviet population induced by deteriorating economic conditions, a discredited ideology, and the unpopular conflict in Afghanistan pressed Soviet leaders such as Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin to take bold reform measures. Those measures unintentionally led to the breakup of the Soviet Union in December 1991 and to a new Russia—shorn of 14 of its republics comprising one-third of its landmass and half its population including 25 million ethnic Russians. This remarkable event was, and still is, a bitter pill for many Russians. The difficult and mismanaged economic reforms in the 1990s saw the rise of the first wave of oligarchs. Western political chortling following victory in the Cold War, and poorly handled insurgencies and conflicts in Chechnya and the Russian "near abroad," helped pave the way for a strong no-nonsense leader when Putin became President of Russia in 2000.

From the Western perspective, NATO enlargement focused on the incorporation of newly sovereign states into a democratic, market-based system with only defensive intentions. The Alliance worked hard to bring Russia into its fold as a partner in the 1990s, resulting in the NATO-Russia Founding Act and NATO-Russia Council.⁶¹ Both Russia and

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the United States signed the Budapest Memorandum in 1994, guaranteeing Ukrainian sovereignty in exchange for Ukraine giving up its nuclear weapons.⁶² Russian paratroopers were even integrated into NATO operations in Bosnia.⁶³ This was a challenging, difficult process that ended with the NATO bombing of Belgrade and intervention to stop genocide in Kosovo in 1999.⁶⁴ Even moderate Russians were deeply upset by the U.S.-NATO intervention despite the righteousness of Western actions to prevent a Kosovar Albanian genocide. This was the real break, and the beginning of the downward spiral of post-Cold War NATO-Russia relations.

From a Russian perspective, the problems concerning NATO's enlargement began after Germany's reunification. While no official document exists, the Russian narrative contends that verbal promises were made at high levels that NATO would not expand to the east.⁶⁵ Most Russians, stoked by their state-controlled press, genuinely believe this. By 1990, reunited Germany was in NATO, and in 1999, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic entered the Alliance.⁶⁶ Throughout the process, the Russians were consulted, and to any informed observer, the militaries joining the Alliance were not a conventional threat to Russia. In 2004 a second major tranche joined the Alliance. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were invited into the Alliance along with Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.⁶⁷ It has long been the policy of NATO to dictate that no external state should interfere with the accession process. Russia's direct interference in this process by issuing incendiary statements over Montenegro's recent invitation to join NATO further damaged the NATO-Russia relationship.⁶⁸

While a natural progression from the Western perspective, this advance was seen by the Russians ominously through a prism steeped in the historiography of contemporary Western threats. In 1989 the Warsaw Pact extended deep into central Europe. While providing a menacing offensive platform for huge Soviet and satellite country armies, xenophobic Soviets also saw the borders as a major buffer separating the Soviet Union from the West, which in the lifetime of senior Russian and FSU citizens perpetuated a war of annihilation by Nazi Germany that led to the deaths of a staggering 20–26 million Soviets, many of whom were civilians. The 1989 East-West German border was 880 miles from Leningrad and surrounded West Berlin 800 miles away. Today the distance from NATO's Estonian-Russian border at Narva to St. Petersburg is only 85 miles.

A deep suspicion toward EU soft power exists as well. It was, after all, Russia's response to the EU's offer of Association to Ukraine in late 2013 that began the slide into today's difficult confrontation.⁶⁹ Russia's reaction following Yanukovich's ouster—committing special forces to seize Crimea and backing proxy forces in eastern Ukraine—shed light

on evolving Russian geostrategic thinking, especially around its periphery. The idea that color revolutions spurred by NATO/EU enlargement are the greatest existential threat to Russia has likely played a major role in all Russian interventions since.⁷⁰ In each, Russia took both overt and covert military action to achieve its objectives, which should give policymakers and planners insight into how Russia might preemptively react over future events involving FSU nations Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Transnistria, Ukraine, and, most dangerously, NATO's Baltic allies. Watching what transpires in Uzbekistan, after the elderly President Islam Karimov's recent death, will be instructive.

Much has been written about the dramatic events that transpired between Russia and Ukraine after the fall of its pro-Russian regime in 2014. While the Russians appeared successful with their masked invasion and annexation of Crimea, follow-on efforts to secure large tracts of eastern Ukraine on behalf of its large ethnic Russian population bogged down after initial successes.⁷¹ Efforts to use variations of hybrid, nonlinear warfare, seemingly so effective in Crimea, failed to create the conditions to seize Kharkiv, Mariupol, and Odessa. The downing of Air Malaysia MH-17 in July 2014 signaled a nadir for Russian efforts in eastern Ukraine.⁷²

From 2014 through 2016, four new strategic factors emerged and continue to influence the conflict today:

- Catalyzed by aggressive Russian actions, a sense of mainstream Ukrainian patriotism beyond former right-wing splinter nationalism coalesced among the bulk of the Ukrainian population and especially with Ukrainian elites.⁷³ Over 32 million Ukrainians, while not necessarily anti-Russian, were now proudly pro-Ukrainian. They would fight. This was a significant strategic miscalculation by Russia.
- The EU managed to implement effective, sustained sanctions that have remained in place despite Russian countermeasures and even beyond Brexit, adding pressure on both the Russian economy and public well-being.⁷⁴
- NATO sharpened its strategic Article 5 focus after withdrawal from Afghanistan. This was another strategic development Russia had not counted on.
- Russia had not anticipated the simultaneous fall in oil prices and the inflation of the ruble. These, combined with EU sanctions, placed great stress on the Russian economy.⁷⁵

Despite the apparent success in Syria and elsewhere, these four strategic developments will continue to extract a high cost in exchange for limited gains.

The Russian Military

The Russian military, though much improved as an overall fighting force, is not the juggernaut it is sometimes made out to be. With a defense budget only one-ninth of the U.S. budget, and few true allies, Russian leaders and planners must think carefully before employing the military.⁷⁶ Therefore, the aggressive intervention into Syria was of major significance.

Russia's current demographic challenges make it difficult to sustain large standing field forces.⁷⁷ Short of a mobilization, it is hard-pressed to put a million active-duty personnel under arms. Russia's robust security services, even before factoring in the omnipresent Federal Security Service, include roughly a quarter-million Ministry of Internal Affairs troops, which compete in the same Russian personnel pool as the regular armed forces. The role of the ministry will likely further change with the announcement of a new "national guard" that could be employed internally or beyond Russia's borders.⁷⁸ While major strides have been made under its "New Look" initiative in reducing its bloated structure and streamlining the military into a more lethal and deployable force as displayed in Syria, major inconsistencies remain.⁷⁹ Despite its major and partially successful effort to create a contract (volunteer) force, the expense as well as social challenges have slowed progress.⁸⁰ The Russian military, especially the Land Forces, still consist of over 30 percent conscripts who are called up in annual drafts for a service term of 1 year. This was reduced from 18 months in 2008.⁸¹ Conscriptio is generally unpopular, though the popularity of the Russian military has grown in recent years. However, for career leaders and trainers, the challenges of annually bringing in and assimilating several hundred thousand new 1-year recruits into formed units is daunting.⁸² *Dedovshina* (hazing) of recruits still occurs, and Russian decisionmakers have to think long and hard before deploying conscript-heavy ground units that are connected to social media into complicated, sensitive, and potentially divisive areas such as eastern Ukraine, the Baltics, or even Syria.⁸³

Russia's standing nuclear forces (Strategic Rocket Forces, Strategic Aviation, and Navy) still command the *crème* of the Russian military personnel system. Additionally, elite forces such as the Main Intelligence Agency and FSB Spetsnaz, airborne forces, and Naval Landing Infantry, which do most of the hard "out of area" work, continue to improve their capabilities and are increasingly battle hardened across a broad spectrum

and direct and indirect (hybrid) conflict in Crimea, Donets-Lugansk, and Syria. These forces have been heavily used in the past 2½ years and likely are in major need of rest and refit. Cracks have appeared in the facade of even elite elements, as revealed by their occasional capture and unpopular nonattribution in Russia.⁸⁴

The Russians have stated that they do not want to go to war with the United States and NATO, as demonstrated in the recent rewrite of their Strategic Doctrine⁸⁵ and recently announced National Security Strategy.⁸⁶ However, they are preparing for conflict against the West. The Russians are well aware of their overall deficiencies and lack of allies.⁸⁷ Therefore, any prospective action must invoke surprise and be fast, deep, precise and multispectral. While there are those who wish for the geographic reknitting of the Soviet Union, most practical Russian military thinkers realize this is impossible. Instead the military is being rebuilt to maintain credible strategic nuclear retaliation, conventional area and maritime denial using precision munitions, and swift deployable forces that could, for example, overturn a looming color revolution within a failing former FSU capital or even conduct limited out-of-area operations in strategically important regions such as Syria. Without a significant mobilization, the Russian military, especially conscript-heavy ground forces, cannot hold large expanses of contested ground as would have been the case if it made an attempt at seizing Crimea's Perekop Isthmus via Mariopol.⁸⁸ An added factor to consider—an enormous tactical-to-strategic leap—is the emergent Soviet doctrine of using tactical nuclear weapons to “deescalate” a conflict.⁸⁹ Finally, Russia still must contend with the challenges posed by extremely long and chronically difficult-to-defend borders with the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Far East. Unfortunately, due to its reactive behaviors based on obsolete threat perceptions, Russia views the Ukraine and Baltic border regions as tense—as reinforced by the recent deployment of SS-26 Iskander short-range ballistic missiles to Kaliningrad—even though these areas should be the quietest and most peaceful.⁹⁰

Possible Worst-Case Scenarios

If Russia saw war as inevitable, much as Japan did before World War II, it would attempt to strike first and fast using *maskirovka* (deception) and *disinformatsiya* (disinformation) to mask its intent. War could be sparked by the fear of regime change, a bordering color revolution, some incendiary incident that rapidly moves to brinkmanship, or, worst case, a failed attempt to subvert the Baltic states protected by NATO Article 5. While preparing its population and the world with an intense media and disinformation campaign, Russian moves would also involve an

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initial cyber and electronic warfare onslaught to blind and deafen U.S. command and control, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, as well as space and navigational capabilities. Kinetic strikes would follow to attack U.S. and allied capital ships and forward-based aviation with an opening barrage of precision munitions. The loss of these symbols of Western power and prestige would be followed by a declaration of Russian readiness to use nuclear weapons if the United States were to respond in kind.⁹¹ These approaches suggest a defensive mindset by a nation that understands it is globally outmanned and outgunned, except in the nuclear realm. In any initial phase of a conflict, Russia will use surprise and shock as a decisive force multiplier. For any major preplanned scenario, Russia will have to stage a discreet mobilization and call-up of reserves to buttress its standing forces.

Russia's military buildup and modernization are hampered by the effects of ongoing sanctions and the overall weakened state of the Russian economy.⁹² This resulted in the announcement of a 5 percent reduction in the 2016 modernization budget.⁹³ Relatedly, since the Cold War, the diplomatic ties holding together much of global arms development and proliferation have been unraveling. At an impasse over missile defense and increased Russian obsession about strategic U.S. global conventional strike capabilities, the possibility for a tactical-to-strategic nuclear exchange triggered by an accident or incident is now greater than during the Cold War.⁹⁴ The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty and Open Skies Agreement are increasingly questioned, the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction initiative is history, the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe treaty is suspended, and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty is scrapped.⁹⁵ Furthermore, a longstanding agreement signed in 2000 between the United States and Russia for the mutual disposal of dangerous military plutonium stockpiles was recently canceled by Russia.⁹⁶ Besides actively working to reduce nuclear arsenals and to moderate the building and testing of new destabilizing weapons, these treaty regimens (with their associated communities of diplomats, scientists, and bureaucrats that met nearly every working day) were confidence-building measures that reduced tensions and enhanced understanding between the United States and the Soviet Union/Russia. The same could be said for U.S. and Russian (diminished but still active) cooperative space programs.

Where is all this headed? The United States and Russia remain at odds both officially and in much of written and spoken media. Russia continues to work to divide Western allies and partners politically, domestically, and economically (principally through energy deliveries). Its disinformation machine, modulated directly by the Putin regime, is a good way

to track the nature of the currently troubled relationship. Tangible lines of stress, confrontation, and even potential cooperation are well demarcated. While eastern Ukraine simmers in Donetsk and Lugansk, further seizing and holding larger tracts of Ukrainian territory would require a large-scale use of conscripts against an improved Ukrainian military that would extract high financial and domestic costs. Russia could emerge victorious against Ukraine but would then be forced to confront a large, seething fellow-Slavic population, broken economy, and a hostile global community. Greater Russian pressure on Ukraine will drive Western upgrades to the Ukrainian military, adding modern defensive weapons to Ukraine's arsenal. Furthermore, Russia could expect added sanctions by an increasingly resolute West reinforced by the return of U.S. units and capabilities to Europe.

The Russians also know that if they try to destabilize the Baltic states with a variation of their hybrid Crimea operation, they will at some point face the invocation of NATO's Article 5. The Baltic states could be overrun in 48 to 72 hours, but the results would be too unpredictable for even Putin's regime to calculate. This would also open a NATO-enabled and expensive partisan ulcer on the Baltic periphery that Russia could ill afford to maintain for long. It would also shake the neutrality of Sweden and Finland.

An adventure in Transnistria would also bring more trouble than progress for Russia. Russia could easily subvert Moldova, but again, to what end? To support any such adventure, Russia would be forced to support with main force Russian units in an area bounded by NATO forces. And then there is an angry Turkey, a strategic nation and NATO Ally with a strong military. Even after its internal failed coup and warming relations with Russia, Turkey will always—due to difficult history, geography, and increasingly conservative Sunni religious orientation—present future challenges for Moscow.

The Russians are in a strategic bind. If they continue to use military force to change the status quo in the name of protecting ethnic Russian populations and maintaining unwilling buffer states, they will likely fail as a nation. Eastern Ukraine will limp along in an increasingly expensive, frozen status. Syria, which is becoming a public relations and legal disaster internationally, will continue to be challenging for Russia due to its unpredictability and volatility. Syria does, however, despite Russia's brutal bombing campaign and failed diplomatic efforts, present a potential opportunity to build a real international effort to address the conflict. Without international cooperation leading to a sustained ceasefire, even the Russian people will eventually demand to bring troops home. As history has repeatedly proved, bad things happen to foreign militaries

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that remain fighting and indefinitely exposed within Middle Eastern civil and sectarian wars.

To navigate this complex relationship, the following recommendations might warrant consideration by U.S. policymakers:

- Develop a dual-track policy regarding the Russian Federation. First, push back hard on transgressions against NATO Allies and partners, and breaches of international law. Second, rebuild direct, cogent conduits between key civilian and operational military leadership to increase understanding on issues, activities, and incidents that could reduce the enormous and increasingly dangerous trust deficit between our nuclear-tipped nations.
- Support and reassure Allies and partners. Reinforce Europe militarily. Place credible defensive forces in eastern European countries that feel threatened by Russia. Work closely with framework nations such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Add a U.S.-flagged combat engineer company to each of the three NATO battalions in the Baltic states. Ensure forward-based ground units have a short-range air defense capability. Deter, remove, or mitigate any viable early stage offensive military option from the Russian strategic calculus.
- Emphasize nuclear deterrence. Rebuild eroded U.S.-Russia arms control and confidence-building regimens. Patiently and transparently chisel away at missile defense concerns.
- Improve strategic messaging. Aggressively counter Russian narratives seeking to justify actions or divide Western opinion in a more responsive and coordinated manner. Agree to exchange observers for major exercises.
- Work with European allies toward agreement on ways to provide defensive armaments to threatened partner states. In tandem with such, establish direct conduits for messaging to Russia to clearly explain why.
- Continue to communicate to Russian officials why a strong NATO is important for Russia as well. Make clear in every venue that Russian attempts to erode and undermine peaceful Western stability-focused institutions, such as the EU or NATO, will only end badly for a fundamentally vulnerable Russia. Russia should *not* want an unstable, anxious, and possibly reactionary West as a result.

- Enhance full-spectrum cyber capabilities for deterrence. Emphasize to other cyber nations that the United States will aggressively respond with the full range of possible options to proven state-sponsored cyber attacks. Collectively avoid at all costs opening a state-sponsored cyber “Pandora’s Box” while being ready for a worst-case scenario.
- Maintain sanctions and political isolation in coordination with the EU until Russian actions deescalate in both Ukraine and Syria.
- Build political offramps to ensure that countries do not fall into strategic brinksmanship.
- Coordinate U.S. national and theater policy and activities to ensure that they do not inadvertently drive China and Russia—not traditional allies—into a transactional temporal military pact.
- Buttress the U.S. role in a flawed and frustrating United Nations. As primary donors, press for internal UN reform. Press Russia and China to promulgate and support positive UN international actions including joint peacekeeping.
- Reiterating the first point: Rebuild atrophied personal links and conduits between key Western and Russian political and military leaders, despite inevitable disagreements and disinformation. Establish a network of crisis “first responders” on both sides that could rapidly intervene at the regional level in event of a fast-breaking accident or incident.

The status quo remains ominous for Russia as current demographic, economic, political, and security trends play out. In medical terms, all Russia’s vital signs are trending negatively into the next generation. What comes next? If the United States and Russia, despite their huge trust deficit, focus on core interests, with a reasonable appreciation for the concerns and interests of each other, a stable relationship could be regained. There is a clear danger, however, that Putin’s conflation of Russia’s interests with those of his regime may drive him to more and greater military-backed adventurism. Continued Russian military use of force as an increasingly preferred policy tool of choice in the face of economic decline will raise the chances of open conflict with the West—an outcome that represents a policy and strategy failure of the first order. Managing this risk must rest at the very top of the administration’s foreign policy and national security agenda. This task will require equal doses

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of firmness and pragmatism; U.S. alliances and partnerships must be stoutly upheld, while Russia's core concerns on its periphery and insistence on recognition of its great power status should be acknowledged. Over time, rapprochement and economic reintegration with the West represent Russia's best option. Without such pragmatism, the future of the Russian state, and therefore the stability of the international order writ large, will be at peril.

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