



Zurab Tsereteli's monument to Peter the Great. Памятник Петру Первому / Monument to Peter the Great (AlphaTangoBravo / Adam Baker is licensed with CC BY 2.0)

The Origins of Russian Conduct

By Clint Reach

In 1947 George Kennan argued for a policy of U.S. containment of the Soviet Union based on his assessment of the origins of Soviet conduct. Because the Kremlin was ideologically bent on global domination through a zero-sum competition with the West, political accommodation was not an appropriate strategy. Fifty years after the “X” article appeared, Kennan saw in the Russian Federation a wholly different animal than its Soviet predecessor. Russia was in the early stages of democracy, and its development should be shepherded by a magnanimous West. Based on this updated view of Russia, Kennan asserted that the enlargement of NATO would be “the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-cold-war era.”¹ Implicit in Kennan’s argument was that the nature of the new Russian regime was not inherently antagonistic toward the United States and the West. There was not an underlying ideology or feature of the new political and economic system that led him to conclude that confrontation with Russia was unavoidable or that cooperation was impossible. This assumption turned out to be one of the critical dividing lines in the debate on how to deal with the Russians after the Cold War, and it is implicitly found in discourse on Russia policy that continues to this day.²

What are the origins of Russian conduct? Has Russian domestic and foreign policy predominantly been the result of misguided U.S. and European actions? Would the Kremlin have behaved differently if these policies had been more accommodating to Russia as a separate but equal partner in European integration? As in 1947, the answers to these questions are directly tied to current and future U.S. policy toward Russia. Those who believe Russian conduct is largely a reaction to Western actions that threaten Russia’s core strategic interests are likely to promote policies guided by a sense of compromise.³ Those who believe Russia would have acted similarly even if NATO had been disbanded or if the West had been more sensitive to Russian interests likely support a tougher military and diplomatic line with Russia and will be less interested in engagement. Yet there is rarely a full examination of the underlying reasons for promoting a particular approach.⁴ It is often taken as a given that we can do business with Russia or we cannot. To develop an optimal strategy toward Russia, it is important to clearly articulate a reasoning for coming to one conclusion or the other.

Kennan’s reasoning was that Russia in the 1990s was on a path toward becoming a member of the European project. Russian embrace of Western political norms would mitigate the potential for the

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reemergence of dividing lines and the need for American security guarantees in areas of historical Russian influence. The United States, however, was considering actions that would derail this process by fomenting nationalist and militaristic sentiments within Russia that might otherwise be marginalized due to the lack of a legitimate Western threat. The extent to which this turned out to be the case is difficult to determine. Since the late 1990s, there have been a number of U.S. and Russian actions outside the NATO enlargement dispute that have muddied the analytical waters. But, as Kennan said, “The attempt must be made if [Russian] conduct is to be understood and effectively countered.”⁵

Historical Background

The Soviet Union was neither militarily defeated nor forced to succumb to the political preferences of its opponent. Leaders in the Kremlin instead allowed the entire system to fall without much resistance. The Cold War ended with more of a truce than a peace. The Russian Federation under Yeltsin nevertheless behaved as a relatively willing participant in the political and economic integration processes of the West. There was genuine interest among Yeltsin’s reformist team in charting a new domestic and foreign policy course for Russia.⁶ Yeltsin himself stated that “Russia had to rid itself of its imperial mission.”⁷ Russian strategy documents from the early 1990s envisioned that at some point in the future Russia would pursue an alliance with the United States, perhaps even within NATO.⁸

As Russia was in the throes of young democracy and the transition to market capitalism, discussions began in the West on the enlargement of NATO into former Warsaw Pact countries. Then NATO intervened in the former Yugoslavia. Russia to some extent vacillated on the NATO enlargement threat, with the military most fervently against, and it was almost unanimously opposed to the military action in the Balkans.⁹ But in the early 2000s, Russian

President Vladimir Putin—who succeeded Yeltsin in 2000—was not prepared to write off a strategic orientation toward the West, a policy even his Chief of the General Staff endorsed in 2004.¹⁰ Putin’s speech to the German Bundestag in 2001 and his immediate offer to assist the United States in the aftermath of 9/11 affirmed this position. In May 2004, after the accession of six countries to NATO, including Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, Putin’s speech to the Federal Assembly welcomed the expansion of the European Union and “new possibilities for the future of Greater Europe.”¹¹

There were no immediate overt signals in the early 2000s that Russian political leadership saw NATO enlargement as a grave threat to its security or Western-leaning foreign policy objectives, although there were clearly misgivings in some circles. Russia did strongly object to the U.S. withdrawal from the Antibalistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002 and the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and Russian frustration with U.S. foreign policy writ large famously boiled over in Putin’s 2007 speech to the Munich Security Conference.¹² But Russian military reforms begun a year later in 2008 led to a large reduction in the armed forces based on the premise that local military conflicts along the periphery were most likely and that the probability of large-scale war was low (an assessment that remained true even after the 2014 crises in Ukraine).¹³ The Russian war with Georgia in 2008 was followed by a “reset” in U.S.-Russia relations, and the last U.S. tanks departed Europe in 2013.¹⁴ There were, though, sufficient indications during the time period up to 2014 that Russia’s problem with the United States and its allies was more fundamental than a military threat from NATO.

Of greater consequence was what was happening within Russia, where the Kremlin by 2003 had taken a number of steps to establish greater control over the domestic political situation.¹⁵ Putin, often described as a statist deeply affected by the calamitous political

and economic times of the 1990s, believed that for the state apparatus to function effectively it must not be challenged by independent actors with the means to potentially supplant his authority.¹⁶ The information environment—e.g., large television broadcast companies—was quickly shored up under direct or indirect state control. The “commanding heights” of the economy suffered a similar fate, as Putin delivered an unequivocal message to the Russian captains of industry to maintain their loyalty to the Kremlin above all else.¹⁷ The remainder of Putin’s second term focused on the consolidation of “sovereign democracy,” which outside observers have described as a euphemism for authoritarianism.¹⁸

NATO intervention in Libya and the 2011-2012 street protests throughout Russia essentially spelled the end of the “reset” and any potential constructive U.S.-Russia relationship in the near term. Dmitri Trenin described the events that followed Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012 as Russia’s “break-out from the post-Cold War system.”¹⁹ According to Trenin, Putin during his tenure as Prime Minister

had explored the possible religious underpinnings of a new national idea for the Russian Federation, one that was distinct from the greater West. Although political usage became more common in the early 2000s, Russian leadership increasingly began to embrace the idea of Russia as a Eurasian power that would project and protect so-called traditional values and conservative culture.²⁰ In 2011, Putin promoted not the path of Austria, Sweden, or Finland, who have chosen to remain outside of NATO but acceptant of the overall political and economic vision of the continent, but the creation of a Eurasian Union.²¹ It was in fact this new union, which Putin later described as a distinct political and economic counterpart to the EU, that collided with the West and sparked the Maidan protests that have been disastrous for Ukraine and to some extent for Russia as well.²² The centrality of this initiative to Russia’s vision for the region cannot be overstated, and it is arguable that a Eurasian Union that includes Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova remains a long-term objective for the Kremlin.²³



U.S. – Russian security cooperation of the 1990s seems a remote possibility today. (BalkanPhotos is licensed with CC BY-NC 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/>) November 7, 2016

Need It Have Been So?

Post-Cold War history has shown that there is a deeper problem in U.S.-Russia relations that transcends NATO enlargement or Western policies that threaten Russian security. The Western interventions in Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Libya were perceived by the Kremlin as a pattern that could be repeated in Russia, although this is highly improbable. These actions were the United States and allies simply conducting foreign policy as they saw fit in pursuit, however clumsily, of a generally agreed upon vision and set of guiding principles. The actions did not paint Russia into a corner from which its only escape was to engage in full-blown confrontation to sow discord within European and American societies. Had Russia remained on a path toward political reform along the Western model and sought to integrate more closely with the European Union, would it have seen U.S. action in Libya as a national security challenge? States that generally are pursuing the same regional and global vision are theoretically much less likely to resort to the means Russia has as a way to express displeasure with a counterpart's behavior. China did not harangue Russia at a security conference after Moscow violated Georgian and Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity, nor did German or French displeasure with the U.S. decision to invade Iraq result in an irreparable fallout in relations.

In fact, most consequential is the incompatibility of the U.S. and Russian political systems (and great power mentalities), which are an outgrowth of geographic, historical, and cultural influences on the formation of a governance model, national interests, and foreign policy. Russia likely could not have “fit” in Europe regardless of what the West plausibly might have done.²⁴ Russia finds itself once again at odds with the United States less because of individual foreign policy actions on either side, but because Russia's chosen domestic course, and the resultant regional vision, is difficult to reconcile

with the Western development project that majorities in nearly every other country in Europe accepts as the best available option.²⁵ Friction is created by alternative development models seeking to expand their respective influence, which turns what might otherwise be resolvable disputes among like-minded states into more intractable challenges.

The Russian decision to adopt “sovereign democracy” in 2002-2003 was the most pivotal moment in the relationship, and it was not connected to NATO or EU enlargement or the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty. Russia in fact was not on the sustainable path to liberal democracy that Kennan foresaw in 1997. Russia's choice of a governance model was rather the latest incidence of a history of conservative triumph over liberal reformist forces in Russia, a lopsided battle that has been under way for at least two centuries.²⁶ It was not a result of marginal Russian political figures empowered by U.S. recklessness. And because of Russia's geographic location on the eastern edge of Europe, the clash of governance models is more consequential than if Russia's neighborhood were on another continent. In Europe as it is today, virtually united on questions of governance, economics, and security, an alternative development model requires an alternative alliance or strategic partnership for Russia, the isolation of which would be “unenviable,” as General Yurii Baluevskii and military futurist Musa Khamzatov euphemistically described it in mid-2014.²⁷

Critics of U.S. foreign policy in Europe have argued that as a great power Russia should be entitled to a sphere of influence that presumably would consist of the former Soviet republics with the exception of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.²⁸ But the creation of a sphere of influence can only occur in two ways. It can either evolve out of shared interests of countries that have a similar regional political vision or it can be created by force. Historically, the Kremlin has found allies and partners in Europe that were willing to collectively ensure regional

stability and security, or it occupied areas by force and established political regimes that superficially gave the appearance of shared interests and regional vision. The connective tissue of the post-Cold War order in Europe has been the agreement across the continent on a single governance and development model. Russia's rejection of that critical binding element makes it difficult for Moscow to establish a sphere of influence in Europe based on shared interest as it has done in the past.

This problem for Russia is at the foundation of the current competition with the United States. When Putin early in his third term was soliciting input for a Russian idea, what he was after was an ideology that not only could drive Russian domestic and foreign policy, but one that could attract partners in rejection of the U.S.-led order in Europe and beyond.²⁹ Hence the notion of Russia as a

protector of so-called traditional values, which was a conscious policy choice by the Kremlin to appeal to those in Europe and perhaps the United States dissatisfied with socio-cultural trends supported in many Western capitals.³⁰ Post-Soviet Russia is searching for ways to avoid isolation and rebuild lost influence. This is the result of the choice, early in Putin's first term, to go a different direction from a solid majority of those in the West.

In sum, it is unlikely that the United States would be facing a different Russia today if it had not participated in NATO enlargement, withdrawn from the ABM Treaty, or intervened in Iraq or Libya. Such policies became agitants to a deeper problem. The underlying political contradictions compounded by geographic realities and great power mentalities virtually assured confrontation at some point.



President of China Xi Jinping awarded the Order of Friendship of the People's Republic of China to Vladimir Putin. The President of Russia is the first foreign leader to be awarded this high national order of China. (Presidential Press and Information Office is licensed with CC BY 4.0.)

Russia's Vision for the Future

Having chosen to go its own way, Russia is now faced with the challenge of carving out its unique place in the world among the great powers. Lacking the soft power of the West or the economic clout of China, Russia has fewer options to pursue its national interests, although it is far from impotent. One of the most consequential moves the Kremlin has made since the total fallout with the West has been to seek a closer relationship with China in the hope of forging a “non-Western” coalition of the unwilling to push back against U.S. policies seen as destabilizing to global stability. Yevgenii Primakov, who apparently never believed that Russia’s Western orientation would bear much fruit, in the mid-1990s spoke of the development of a multipolar (polycentric) world in which U.S. hegemony would be replaced by disparate power centers and a greater role for non-Western countries such as Russia, China, and India who would form the center of a non-Western international order.³¹

While the eventual rise of the polycentric world has remained an article of faith in Russia’s official rhetoric, it has largely not come to pass.³² Russia’s strategic forecast to 2036 leaves open the possibility of a wider dispersion of power over the next fifteen years, but “bipolarity 2.0” is more likely to materialize according to other Russian long-term forecasts.³³ In this scenario, China replaces the USSR in a new era of superpower competition that relegates all other participants to a secondary role in shaping international relations. Nevertheless, a sphere of privileged influence in the former Soviet space with the exception of the Baltic countries would remain a guiding light for Russian foreign policy even in this case.

Because of the dynamics discussed above, Russian strategy has not and will not be limited to influencing the political situation in its immediate neighborhood. In fact, the primary targets for Russia to realize its regional vision are Western European

countries and the United States. Both Western populations and the political elite will come under pressure through all means available below direct conflict to either change their view on policy toward Russia or to simply be driven toward a state in which conducting a sustained foreign policy of any kind will be increasingly difficult given domestic turmoil. The extent to which Russia is able to play much of a role in this outcome is a subject of much debate, but there is little question that inflicting “damage” on target societies is part of Moscow’s strategy. Until the matter of the regional order in eastern Europe is resolved, there should be little expectation of letup in Russian activity that Kennan described as “a fluid stream which moves constantly, wherever it is permitted to move, toward a given goal.”³⁴

If the establishment of unchallenged authority in its near abroad is a minimum foreign policy objective for Russia, the maximum objective is to reduce the role of the United States in Europe. A more isolationist United States and a more independent Europe would from the Russian perspective certainly constitute a polycentric world. The United States would lead the western hemisphere, while Russia would at the very least face a much less powerful opposition in Europe in the near and medium term. The overall power of the United States together with the leading economies of Europe is overwhelming compared with that of Russia.³⁵ It will be very difficult for the foreseeable future for Russia to coerce a cohesive alliance of that magnitude. A Russian Ministry of Defense (MOD) assessment in 2015 clearly explained the relationship between power dynamics and Russia’s ability to advantageously affect international relations:

Assurance of the realization of such a combination of scenarios (such as the polycentric world) could . . . strengthen and develop the socio-political potential of the state on the basis of effective socially oriented domestic policy and the preservation

*and development of fundamental moral values of the nation. This will ensure the important and growing role of Russia in the formation and strengthening of trade, economic, and military coalitions and alliances with the leading states of the world that conduct independent policies (i.e. non-Western countries) and pursue their national interests within the bounds of international law. If Russia does not manage to create the above conditions, it will not be able to play any substantive role in the formation of new power centers and influence the international situation.*³⁶

Put another way, Russia needs to create the domestic and international conditions such that it does not get left behind and become internationally irrelevant. Maximally speaking, even a partial collapse of the Western alliance would go some way in creating such conditions from Russia's perspective.

Russian foreign policy outside of the Western world is driven today not by the expansion of ideology, but by the expansion of influence, which perhaps is an easier problem to manage given the absence of quasi-messianism. As Dmitry Medvedev explained Russian interest in moving back into Africa: "Let's be frank, there is a lot of interest in Africa today. The primary players are actively established here. The (People's Republic of China) is doing a lot of things, the United States and European Union are actively engaged. Are we worse? We should also be engaged."³⁷ If Soviet behavior was a "fluid stream which moves constantly, wherever it is permitted to move, [to fill] every nook and cranny available to it in the basin of world power," Russian behavior is directed toward what basins are left available in a much more crowded map of powerful river systems. These river systems include not only the United States, leading EU countries, and China, but also India, Japan, Brazil, and Turkey, who each have economic

interests and a considerable amount of military potential, particularly if allied with other powers that are willing to challenge Russia.³⁸

The Indirect Approach to Strategy

As it pursues its vision of a lesser but still meaningful role around the world, in cases where Russian military power can be matched by an opposing side, the "indirect approach" is the preferred means to the desired end for the Kremlin and the MOD.³⁹ The indirect approach is one of battle avoidance that seeks to frustrate or exhaust the stronger opponent without actually engaging in open conflict unless faced with an existential threat.⁴⁰ Russia almost surely would like to turn the tables on the Western political and security system and see it collapse under the weight of its own contradictions without firing a shot. If it can opportunistically put its finger on the scale it will certainly do so, at least until a regime comes to power



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in Moscow that is no longer diametrically opposed to the Western vision and believes it has more to gain than lose from cooperation. As before, the means to execute such a strategy will almost always take the form of what Kennan called “political warfare,” which is a nonviolent approach to affect political division within a target country with the ultimate aim of a sharp change in policy toward Russia.

U.S. Strategy Toward Russia

The origins of Russian conduct have evolved from 1947 but not significantly so. Russia still remains fully and willingly outside the Western orbit. It seeks its own unique place in international affairs and to find or create spheres of influence based on an alternative development model. The Kremlin may not directly say so, but its behavior sends a strong signal that it would not be disappointed if the U.S. and Western-led military, political, and economic alliances were replaced with something smaller and more manageable and manipulable. At a minimum, it desires that Western capitals quite substantially alter what heretofore have been guiding principles of their foreign policies. If existing Western political parties or elites can be replaced by those who have different principles and different views toward Russia, Moscow will support those groups through existing nonmilitary means. What is different is that Russia is no longer the most vexing long-term challenge to the United States. This is due to the confluence of Russia’s geopolitical and military decline (relative to the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact) and China’s precipitous rise.⁴¹ These factors mean that Russia for much of this century will play a role of a “swing state,” and as a result U.S. strategy toward Russia cannot be a reprise of containment of the USSR.

Over the long-term, U.S. strategy should not be oriented toward countering Russia at all points around the globe. As attention and resources increasingly shift to China, this would be difficult to execute in any case, but it also leads to policies

guided by a less rigorous assessment of U.S. strategic interests and more by a desire to oppose an adversary wherever they happen to be gaining influence at a given time. For example, assertions that Russia gaining a “foothold” in the Middle East would *ipso facto* be detrimental to U.S. interests should be met with a healthy dose of skepticism based on the American experience of the past three decades. In fact, it could turn out to be quite the opposite. Managing disparate interests and populations that are suspicious of foreign presence can be quite costly in myriad ways for the fleeting prize of international leadership. Broadly speaking, Kennan’s view that Europe and Asia should be the anchor of American foreign policy is as true today as it was then. U.S. alliances in both regions should be managed with the greatest care, not subject to “microaggressions” toward allies at the expense of the much greater strategic benefit of these relationships. Russian forays elsewhere into areas with unstable regimes and security environments should cause the opposite of alarm so long as they do not lead to expanded opportunity to threaten the U.S. homeland.

One of the ways to resolve the current standoff in eastern Europe is to find a compromise solution to the regional order.⁴² Such ideas are based in part on the aforementioned conclusion that had the U.S. pursued different policies in the preceding decades, an improved *modus vivendi* between Russia, Europe, and the United States could have been achieved. It deserves consideration, but, given the origins of Russian conduct, this approach is highly unlikely to produce anything more than a tactical reduction of U.S.-Russia tensions at some cost to U.S. credibility. Moreover, because Russia alone has chosen an alternative course that rejects what nearly all other European countries have accepted, should the whole project be overturned?

It is more appropriate at this juncture to pursue a strategy based on resilience and military deterrence with the long-term aim that Russia will see

cooperation with the West as most beneficial to its interests. Accommodation of the Kremlin on questions of European security and the political order will not produce the desired result because of the contradictions discussed above. Better to let Russia's relationship with China fizzle over time as the two great powers find it difficult to manage each other, and allow Russian policy to shift the other direction when it has a clear interest in doing so. Actively seeking various agreements with Russia under the current regime would send the opposite signal than should be sent in the very early stages of a renewed competition that in hindsight appears not so much to have ended as to have hibernated.⁴³

One of the key tactics of Russia's indirect approach is to identify weak links in a stronger adversary and exploit them using inexpensive tools. Building resilience implies understanding what these weak links are and working to shore them up. By now it has become abundantly clear that societal cleavages resulting from a host of natural—in particular, economic—and manufactured forces are a key point of emphasis in Russian strategy. Political leaders and elites in the United States and Europe must recognize that domestic sentiment in the current information environment must be managed responsibly or it will continue to be a low-hanging fruit for the indirect approach.⁴⁴ They must also ensure that a considerable majority of the participants in the liberal democratic experiment believe they have something to gain by the continuation of an approach to governance and economic policy that on the whole has served their societies well since 1945, particularly in comparison to the alternative. In short, an emphasis on domestic political compromise as opposed to fundamentalism and zero-sum thinking must become a central tenet of the overarching national security strategy.

Extreme societal divisions can clearly become a national security problem over time. As the Soviet strategist Aleksandr Svechin wrote in 1927, “a

significant superiority in forces and a hostile state whose political structure resembles a giant with feet of clay are conditions which favor a destructive strike and make it possible to end a war very quickly.”⁴⁵ Updating this remark to modern times, a superiority in information dominance and an opponent whose socio-political structure resembles a clay giant are apt for a “destructive” strike that could end a confrontation without having to wage war. Resilience requires bipartisan political leadership and elites to accept responsibility to shape an information environment that is less susceptible to foreign or domestic disruption. Kennan's advice in this respect has stood the test of time:

*In the light of these circumstances, the thoughtful observer of Russian-American relations will find no cause for complaint in the Kremlin's challenge to American society. [She] will rather experience a certain gratitude to a Providence which, by providing the American people with this implacable challenge, has made their entire security as a nation dependent on their pulling themselves together and accepting the responsibilities of moral and political leadership that history plainly intended them to bear.*⁴⁶

If the Russia challenge can serve as a catalyst for more responsible political and elite leadership to adjust the “profit model” toward unity as opposed to division, fear, and anger, we would all be safer and more prosperous in the end.

The U.S. military can and should assist in this effort to build resilience to political warfare in Europe and it should develop ways to threaten Russia in kind. Indeed, senior Russian military officers and the Minister of Defense have stated explicitly that they believe the West is waging a war in the information domain to weaken or even unseat the current regime.⁴⁷ If the Russian military thinks it



Saber Strike 17 was a U.S. Army Europe-led multinational combined forces exercise conducted annually to enhance the NATO Alliance throughout the Baltic Region and Poland. (Staff Sgt. Brian Kohl (U.S. Army Europe is marked under CC PDM 1.0.) June 16, 2017

is at “war,” this could expand the boundaries of their activities up to—but not including—military force to a considerable degree.⁴⁸ But on the whole building resilience to political warfare is not primarily a military problem; it is a political and societal problem that entails a whole-of-government approach that should emanate from the top, down. The primary role of the U.S. military is to maintain credible deterrence for as long as the confrontation lasts, in the confidence that our system of governance is better than any other on offer.

Deterrence of Russian military aggression provides the time and space needed for the more sustainable Western political and economic system to prevail again over an adversary whose alternative regional vision thus far has generated little appeal in Europe. The devil is in the details, but at a broad level Russia understands military deterrence as the

ability to inflict damage on critical political, military-economic, and military infrastructure with both nuclear and long-range conventional weapons (and perhaps cyber weapons). If the United States and NATO allies are able to sustain the ability to credibly threaten Russia with those capabilities, they will have achieved deterrence as Russia defines it. Some Russian deterrence theorists have argued that the damage thresholds have lowered over time as a result of greater recognition on both sides of the unacceptability of the consequences of nuclear and conventional strikes.⁴⁹ If one accepts this proposition, this actually reduces the resource requirements due to fewer munitions needed to inflict the required damage.

At an operational level, in light of the worsening confrontation with China that is expected to last decades, the United States should be guided

by the principle of sufficiency in Europe. Given the overall military potential imbalance between the two sides in favor of NATO, perhaps the most important capability to develop will be a robust logistics system that allows for the flow of superior forces right up to Russia's border to assure defense of NATO allies in the event of an unexpected military conflict. Forward deployed forces are not irrelevant, but necessary in perhaps far fewer numbers than in the previous era of confrontation based on Russian concerns of air and sea-based aerospace potential and limited Russian inventories of long-range conventional munitions.⁵⁰ A minimum threshold might be holding Kaliningrad at risk in the initial period of war with a combination of U.S., Polish, and other allied ground forces while simultaneously threatening critical military and military-economic infrastructure across Russia's western border through both kinetic and nonkinetic means.

An important outstanding question is U.S. strategy toward the non-aligned countries in eastern Europe. Regardless of the intent, Russian actions in Ukraine and Georgia improved the attraction of the argument for further NATO enlargement. At the same time, Russian interests in the former Soviet space are clearly strategic. Andrei Kokoshin, the former Secretary of the Russian Security Council, wrote in the late 1990s, "Russia attaches particular importance to the quality of its relations with the territories of the former Soviet Union, particularly with Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. Admittedly, the prominence of the Russian-Ukrainian relationship transcends the boundaries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and even Europe as a whole. World politics to a large extent depends on the status of that relationship."⁵¹ This dynamic suggests a strategy of patient constraint on the part of the United States that is oriented toward resilience through democratic and economic development assistance as opposed to a leading role for military deterrence. To be sure, this

line of effort toward building resilience has been ongoing for some time. The idea that the professed neutrality of these countries could produce a lasting peace is dubious both because of the populations' desire for political and economic integration with the West and because Russia's rejection of the underlying political norms lays the groundwork for creating an alternative sphere of influence by force. The ultimate end state would be one in which a future Russian regime does not feel the need to resist a Western orientation of its neighbors because it has concluded the most beneficial course of action is to embrace the political norms that could legitimately create a Europe whole and free. *Nadezhda umiraet poslednei* (Hope springs eternal).

Despite Kennan's assertions to the contrary, his analysis and conclusions on the Soviet regime remain relevant today with the leadership of the Russian Federation. The rejection of a governance model that would have assured security on its western flank was Russia's sovereign choice. And that choice was the perhaps inevitable result of the pull of conservative political forces throughout Russian history. Russia simply could not be "another Poland," and it is not clear what plausible arrangement could have satisfied Russian desires given political realities throughout Europe and the United States.⁵² As it is, an alternative Russian model requires a separate sphere of influence. A separate sphere of influence automatically brings Russia into conflict with the United States and much of Europe who are pursuing a different vision for the continent. Russia could change its vision, or the West could change, but neither is likely to do so in the near term despite concerted efforts on each side to facilitate that outcome. Thus, "it is clear that the United States cannot expect in the foreseeable future to enjoy political intimacy with the (Russian) regime."⁵³

Given this reality, the United States must settle in for another round of confrontation and competition with the Kremlin. In this iteration, however, the Kremlin will not be the primary object of U.S. focus.

That critical difference has a number of implications for U.S. strategy. It simply may not be possible over the course of decades to put up strong resistance to Russian attempts to expand its global influence while also confronting and containing China. But it also will not be necessary. Russia has limited means at its disposal, and there is not yet any indication that Putin is willing to commit anywhere near the resources on the military that likely would be required to do so.⁵⁴ In light of renewed competition with two great powers, the U.S. will need to prioritize. It will need to pursue less costly approaches to dealing with Russia than in the past. It will need to rely more on resilience and deterrence than on forward deployed forces. But this is appropriately suited to counter a Russian strategy centered on the indirect approach and battle avoidance with a stronger power. The origins of Russian conduct are inherently confrontational with the West, but they are not suicidal. **PRISM**

Notes

¹George Kennan, “A Fateful Error,” *The New York Times*, February 5, 1997. <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/02/05/opinion/a-fateful-error.html>.

²Rose Gottemoeller, Thomas Graham, Fiona Hill, Jon Huntsman Jr., Robert Legvold and Thomas R. Pickering, “It’s Time to Rethink our Russia Policy,” *Politico*, August 5, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/08/05/open-letter-russia-policy-391434>; David J. Kramer, “No, Now is Not the Time for Another Russia Reset,” *Politico*, August 5, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/08/11/russia-reset-response-open-letter-393176>; Sławomir Dębski, James Sherr, and Jakub Janda, “Take It From Eastern Europe: Now Is Not the Time to Go Soft on Russia,” *Politico*, August 31, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/08/31/open-letter-not-time-to-go-soft-on-russia-405266>; Ariana Gic, Hanna Hopko, and Roman Sohn, “Appeasing Vladimir Putin’s Russia Will Only Embolden It,” *Politico*, September 25, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/09/25/open-letter-russia-ukraine-421519>.

³As Graham Allison and Dimitri Simes wrote for *National Interest*, “As seen during Obama’s second term, when treated primarily as a ‘foe,’ Russia can undermine important American objectives. If it can be persuaded to act more as a partner, within the framework of a sustainable, if difficult, working relationship, Moscow can help advance U.S. foreign-policy objectives in a number of ways.” See, Graham Allison and Dimitri K. Simes, “A Blueprint for Donald Trump to Fix Relations with Russia,” *National Interest*, December 18, 2016. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/blueprint-donald-trump-fix-relations-russia-18776>.

⁴Celeste Wallander and Anne Wildermuth, *The Sources of Russian Foreign Policy After the Cold War*, (Routledge, 1996).

⁵Kennan, 1997.

⁶Yegor Gaidar, *Collapse of an Empire: Lessons for Modern Russia*. 1st Edition. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2007).

⁷Timothy Colton, *Yeltsin* (Basic Books, 2008), 266.

⁸President of Russia, Kontseptsia vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii, April 23, 1993; Colton, p. 269.

⁹The Russian Foreign Minister at the time, Yevgenii Primakov, was traveling to Washington. Upon receiving the news of the NATO intervention, ordered the plane back to Moscow in protest. For a brief chronology of Russian reactions to NATO enlargement, see, Radin, Andrew and Clint Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1826.html.

¹⁰Yurii Baluevskii (ed.), et al., *Voennaia bezopasnost’ Rossiiskoi Federatsii v XXI veke*, Center for Military-Strategic Studies of the General Staff, Moscow, 2004, pp. 10-25.

¹¹Vladimir Putin, speech, “Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation.” 26 May 2004. http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2004/05/26/1309_type70029type82912_71650.shtml.

¹²Thomas Ambrosio, “The Russo-American Dispute over the Invasion of Iraq: International Status and the Role of Positional Goods,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 57, No. 8, December 2005, pp. 1189-1210, DOI: 10.1080/09668130500351357.

¹³Clint Reach, Vikram Kilambi, Mark Cozad, *Russian Assessments and Applications of the Correlation of Forces and Means*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, RR-4235, 2020, pp. 115-122. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4235.html.

¹⁴U.S. armor returned to Europe only after Russian annexation of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine.

¹⁵ Andrew Radin and Clinton Bruce Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, RR-1826, 2017, p. 71. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1826.html.

¹⁶ Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015).

¹⁷ Putin assembled the leaders of the leading Russian industries in 2000 and “passed the puck” to them, which essentially meant that it was their choice to keep their distance from politics and enjoy the fruits of privatization, or not. Khodorkovsky chose the latter. See, “Kak Putin vstrechalsia s krupnym biznesom,” *Kommersant*, December 24, 2015.

¹⁸ Vladislav Surkov, “Natsionalizatsiia budushchego (polnaia versii), surkov.info, December 6, 2006. As of October 26, 2020: <http://surkov.info/nacionalizatsiia-budushchego-polnaya-versiya/>; Steven Rosefielde & Romana Hlouskova, “Why Russia is Not Democracy,” *Comparative Strategy*, 26:3, 2007, p. 216, DOI: 10.1080/01495930701454454; Michael McFaul and Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, “The Myth of the Authoritarian Model,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2008, pp. 68-84. https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Myth_of_the_Authoritarian_Model.pdf.

¹⁹ Dmitri Trenin, “Russia’s Breakout from the Post-Cold War System: Drivers of Putin’s Course,” Carnegie Moscow Center, December 22, 2014. <https://carnegie.ru/2014/12/22/russia-s-breakout-from-post-cold-war-system-drivers-of-putin-s-course-pub-57589>.

²⁰ Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire*, (Woodrow Wilson Center Press with Johns Hopkins University, 2008); Brian Taylor, *The Code of Putinism*, (Maryland: Oxford University Press, 2018).

²¹ Vladimir Putin, “Novyi integratsionnyi proekt dlia Evrazii – budushchee nachinaetsia segodnia,” *Izvestiia*, October 4, 2011.

²² Vladimir Putin, Interview, “Miroporyadok,” *Rossiya HD*. December 20, 2015.

²³ The 2015 National Security Strategy and 2016 Foreign Policy Concept each emphasized the prioritization of Eurasian integration processes. There is little public indication that senior Russian leadership exclude Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova from this long-term integration project.

²⁴ Aleksei Miller and Fedor Lukyanov, “Otstranennost’ vmesto konfrontatsii: postevpopeiskaia Rossiia v poiskakh samodostatochnosti,” *Sovet po vneshnei i oboronnoi politike*, 2016, pp. 1-2.

²⁵ Stephen Watts, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Benjamin Harris, and Clint Reach, *Alternative Worldviews: Understanding Potential Trajectories of Great-Power Ideological Competition*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, RR-2982, 2020, Appendixes, pp. 21-32. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2982.html.

²⁶ Richard Pipes, *Russian Conservatism and its Critics: A Study in Political Culture*, (UK: Yale University Press, 2007).

²⁷ Yurii Balaluevskii and Musa Khamzatov, “Globalizatsiia i voennoe delo,” *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, August 8, 2014.

²⁸ John J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October, 2014. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault>.

²⁹ Stephen Watts, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Benjamin Harris, and Clint Reach, *Alternative Worldviews: Understanding Potential Trajectories of Great-Power Ideological Competition*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, RR-2982, 2020, Appendixes, pp. 21-32. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2982.html.

³⁰ Mark Galeotti, “Putin’s Hydra: Inside Russia’s Intelligence Services,” European Council on Foreign Relations, ECFR/169, May 2016, p. 13.

³¹ “Lavrov rasskazal ob idee Primakova sozdat’ ‘treugol’nik’ Rossiia-Indiia-Kitai,” *RIA Novosti*, October 29, 2019.

³² Andrei Kortunov, “Pochemu mir ne stanovitsia mnogopoliarnym?” *Rossiia v global’noi politike*, June 26, 2018.

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³⁴ Kennan, 1997.

³⁵ Burenok (ed.), 2018, pp. 300-310.

³⁶ S. R. Tsyrendorzhiev, “Prognoz voennykh opasnostei i ugroz Rossii,” *Zashchita i bezopasnost’*, Vol. 4, 2015, pp. 10-14.

³⁷ Aleksandr Kolesnichenko, “Kak president Medvedev chut ne ‘zazheg’ v Namibii,” *Argumenty i fakty*, June 26, 2009.

³⁸ V. M. Burenok (ed.), *Kontseptsiia obosnovaniia perspektivnogo oblika silovykh komponentov voennoi organizatsii Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, Granitsa Publishing House, 2018, pp. 300-310.

³⁹ B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, BN Publishing, 2008.

⁴⁰ Andrei Kartapolov, “Uroki voennykh konfliktov, perspektivy razvitiia sredstv i sposobov ikh vedeniia. Priamye i nepriamye deistviya v sovremennykh mezh-dunarodnykh konfliktakh,” *Vestnik Akademii voennykh nauk*, Vol. 2, Issue 51, 2015; Rod Thornton, “The Russian Military’s New ‘Main Emphasis’,” *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 162, Issue 4, August/September 2017, p. 20.

⁴¹ Ben Connable, Abby Doll, Alyssa Demus, Dara Massicot, Clint Reach, Anthony Adler, William Mackenzie, Matthew Povlock, Lauren Skrabala, *Russia’s Limit of Advance: Analysis of Russian Ground Force Deployment Capabilities and Limitations*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020, RR2563. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2563/html.

⁴² Kissinger, for example, has proposed that Ukraine should be a “bridge” between Russia and NATO, a view that he concedes is in the minority in American foreign policy thought. See, Jeffrey Goldberg, World Chaos and World Order: Conversations with Henry Kissinger, *The Atlantic*, November 10, 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/11/kissinger-order-and-chaos/506876/>.

⁴³ New Start Treaty excepted.

⁴⁴ It would also be the right thing to do for the country, regardless of Russia’s actual ability to manipulate public opinion in the United States.

⁴⁵ Kent Lee (ed.), translation of Aleksandr A. Svechin, *Strategy*, 2nd Edition, (Minneapolis: East View Publications, 1991), 98.

⁴⁶ Kennan, 1997.

⁴⁷ M.A. Gareev, et al., “Metodologiya i praktika sovershenstvovaniia strategicheskogo rukovodstva oboronoi strany s uchedom kharaktera buduschikh voyn i voorzhenykh konfliktov,” *Vestnik Akademii voennykh nauk*, No. 1(66), 2019; “Shoigu nazval tsel’ informatsionnoi voyny Zapada protiv Rossii,” TASS, June 26, 2019; Oleg Falichev, “Pravo pervym podnyat’sya v ataku,” *Voenno-promyshlennyyi kur’er*, September 11, 2018.

⁴⁸ Modestov in 2009 discussed the idea of strategic deterrence in the information sphere, which included operations to inflict “damage” both psychologically and to critical information infrastructure on which modern societies and economies rely. See, S. A. Modestov, “Strategicheskoe sderzhivanie na teatre informatsionnogo protivoborstva,” *Vestnik Akademii voennykh nauk*, Vol. 1, Issue 26, 2009, pp. 33-36.

⁴⁹ A. A. Kokoshin (ed.), *Vliianie tekhnologicheskikh faktorov na parametry urgroz natsionaloi i mezh-dunarodnoi bezopasnosti, voennykh konfliktov i strategicheskoi stabil’nosti*, Izdatel’stvo Moskovskogo Universiteta, 2017, pp. 205-225.

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⁵⁴ Henry Foy, “Russia to cut defence spending in bid to prop up ailing economy,” *Financial Times*, September 21, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/763b1345-b703-40db-8065-167cbfe7f>.