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# Russian Challenges from Now into the Next Generation: A Geostrategic Primer

by Peter B. Zwack and Marie-Charlotte Pierre



Center for Strategic Research  
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**Cover:** Vladimir Putin meets in the Kremlin with the leaders of the Federation Council, the State Duma, and dedicated committees of both chambers, December 25, 2018. (President of Russia Web site/Kremlin.ru)

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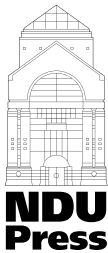


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By Peter B. Zwack and Marie-Charlotte Pierre

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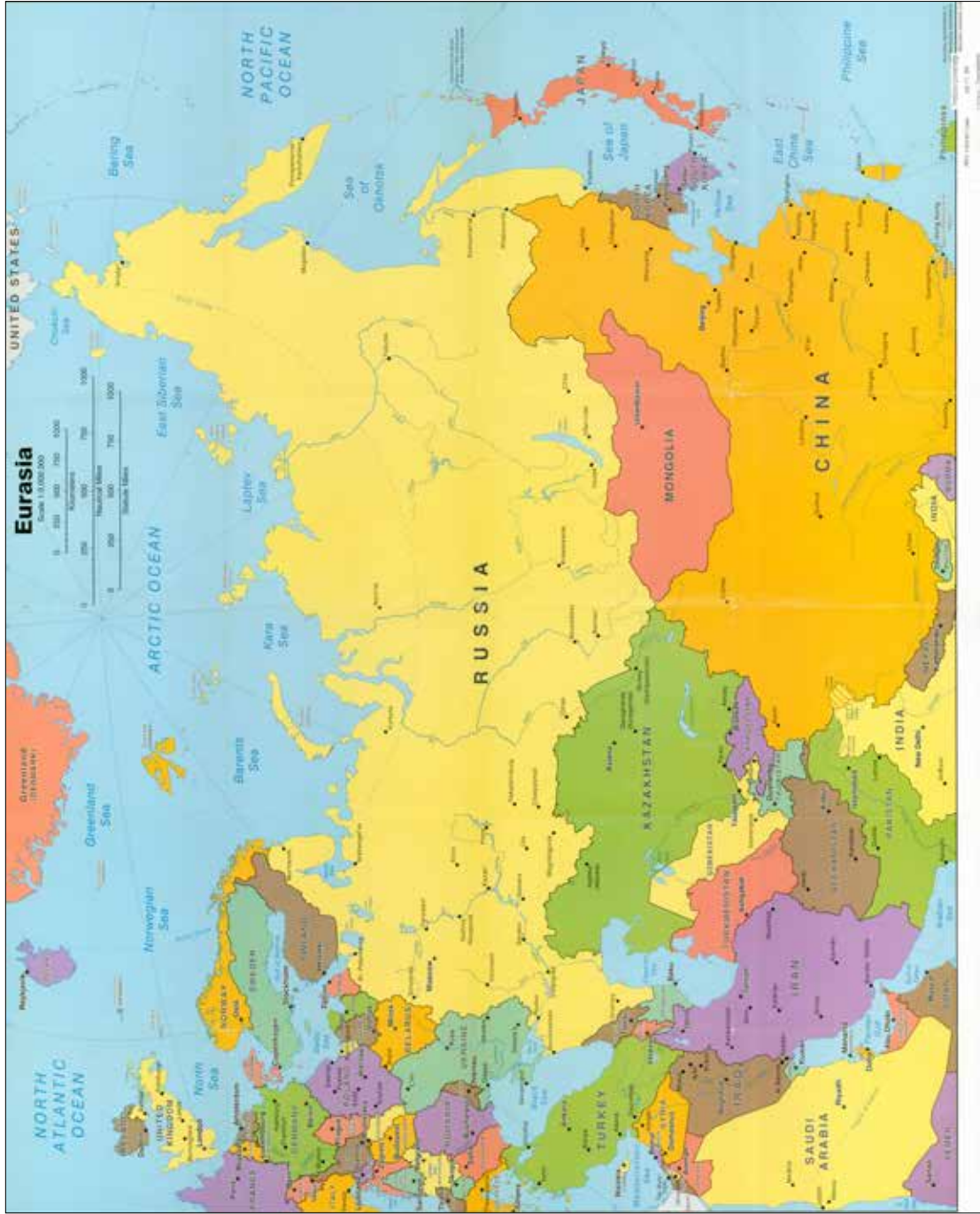
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### Executive Summary

U.S. and Western relations with Russia remain challenged as Russia increasingly reasserts itself on the global stage. Russia remains driven by a worldview based on existential threats—real, perceived, and contrived. As a vast, 11-time zone Eurasian nation with major demographic and economic challenges, Russia faces multiple security dilemmas internally and along its vulnerable and expansive borders. Exhibiting a reactive xenophobia stemming from a long history of destructive war and invasion along most of its borders, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and perceived Western slights, Russia increasingly threatens others and lashes outward. However, time is not on Russia's side, as it has entered into a debilitating status quo that includes unnecessary confrontation with the West, multiple unresolved military commitments, a sanctions-strained and only partially diversified economy, looming domestic tensions, and a rising China directly along its periphery.

Washington still has an opportunity to carefully improve U.S.-Russia relations and regain a more stable relationship in the near term, but only if activities and initiatives are based on a firm and frank appreciation of each other's core interests, including those of their allies and partners. In a dual-track approach, the United States and its allies must continue to work closely to deter any destabilizing Russian behavior ranging from corrosive gray zone disinformation activities—including malign cyber efforts to erode Western democracies—up to full and overt military aggression. Simultaneously, rebuilding atrophied conduits between key American and Russian political and military leadership is imperative in order to calm today's distrustful and increasingly mean-spirited relations, to seek and positively act upon converging interests, and to avert potential incidents or accidents that could potentially lead to dangerous brinksmanship. Notably the July 2018 Trump-Putin summit failed to bring any positive developments to the U.S.-Russia relationship; however, pragmatic efforts to bridge major and increasingly dangerous divides must continue. Perhaps most notable during the summit was the emphasis made by both sides that the weakened arms control regimen and overall strategic stability be addressed to stop a dangerous drift toward renewed nuclear weapons development and competition.<sup>1</sup> Yet in recent months, the relationship has only continued to weaken on multiple fronts too numerous to summarize, including Russian actions against Ukraine in the Sea of Azov and the end of the 31-year Intermediate Nuclear Weapons Treaty signed in 1987 by Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev and President Ronald Reagan.<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

In recent years, Russia has dramatically reasserted itself on the global stage, highlighting unresolved tensions with the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) that have grown increasingly complex and tense. Despite these complexities, U.S. national security priorities in the region remain clear. The United States must deter Russia from further political, economic, and military aggression in Europe, bolster the security of NATO Allies and partners, reestablish and invigorate languishing arms control regimens, and reconstitute direct conduits for frank dialog and crisis deescalation, all while aggressively countering Russian “disruption” campaigns worldwide. 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 paper explores, the resulting security dilemmas that have emerged are grounded in Russia’s historic perception of what it considers to be an existential threat to its survival and dissatisfaction regarding the world order it found itself in at the end of the Cold War.

The illegal annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and unattributed combat operations in Eastern Ukraine left Russia politically and economically marginalized from much of the global community by year’s end. Russia found itself thrown out of the Group of Eight and under a heavy sanctions regime from both the European Union (EU) and the United States. Any euphoria from the 2014 Sochi Olympics and the seemingly successful stealth operations in Crimea rapidly dissipated as Russian proxy separatists became bogged down in an increasingly messy and bloody conflict in Eastern Ukraine, culminating that July with the civilian Air Malaysia MH-17 jetliner being shot down by a Russian-provided Buk missile, killing 298 innocent people onboard, most of whom were EU citizens.<sup>3</sup> Russia also saw NATO move to enhance its collective defense for all 29 of its signatory members, and, despite the continued threat of a Russian disruption of energy, the EU continued to coalesce behind a strong sanctions regime while diversifying its gas and oil access.<sup>4</sup> Throughout all of this, Ukrainians found a renewed sense of national purpose and patriotism, fueling anti-Russian sentiments at a time when Russia was seeking to grow pro-Russian support within the country. Oil prices, from which Russia derives the bulk of its revenue, substantially fell with the value of a barrel of oil dropping by \$40 from June to December 2014,<sup>5</sup> while the ruble lost over 50 percent of its value.<sup>6</sup>

Due to all of these difficulties, the regime of Vladimir Putin, in what could be best characterized as a pseudo-democratic autocratic kleptocracy, was forced to confront the prospect that its domestic legitimacy was beginning to erode from 2014 to late 2015. Even if the regime did not uphold the values of civil society and electoral democracy, it recognized that popular

unrest makes it more difficult to enact policy agendas and maintain order and stability in any country; this is especially true in a country the size of Russia. The regime no doubt remembered and feared an encore of the large and primarily middle-class Bolotnaya Square protests in Moscow and St. Petersburg during the winter of 2011–2012.<sup>7</sup> Despite the strident disinformation that dominated airwaves, Russia simmered internally with disparaging international news and difficult economic conditions that stressed its generally loyal population. Even the devoted and patriotic majority became troubled by stories of egregious corruption and disconcerting information about Russian soldiers and intelligence operatives being captured or killed in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>8</sup>

During the majority of 2015, Russia remained marginalized internationally. 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. However, Russia remained assertive in the Middle East and within several international organizations, notably the United Nations (UN); the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa Association of Nations; the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO); the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO); and the Eurasian Economic Union. Russia was also instrumental as a member of the P5+1 consortium (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) that negotiated the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the Iran nuclear deal).<sup>9</sup> Perhaps most important was Russia's deepening but utterly transactional "strategic partnership" with China. Despite a flawed natural gas deal, this partnership gave both nations the opportunity to focus their attention and efforts toward different fronts and not against each other.<sup>10</sup>

In a major strategic gambit in late September 2015, Russia aggressively reasserted itself diplomatically and militarily in the Middle East. The Putin regime, under considerable pressure diplomatically and economically since the Ukrainian invasion, hoped to regain its role as a major power player internationally, while also seeking to diminish U.S. global credibility, counter rising Chinese influence, and address terrorism before it became an issue within its borders. With its sharp-elbowed military intervention in Syria, Putin—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 once again as a key player in the Middle East.<sup>11</sup> By restoring the short-term viability of the Bashar al-Asad regime and securing bases at Tartus and near Latakia in Khmeimim, Russia showed the region, the world, and its own citizens that it remained a major power to be reckoned with on the world stage.<sup>12</sup> The widely reported "shock and awe" demonstration of military firepower using heavy bombers and long-



Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft carrier, August 2012 (Russian Ministry of Defense)

range Kalibr cruise missiles from the Caspian Flotilla further accentuated this narrative.<sup>13</sup> This phenomena may in part explain the labored sortie in late 2016 of Russia's sole aircraft carrier, the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, and flotilla from its Northern Fleet to the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>14</sup>

In taking these steps, Russia has mostly broken out of the debilitating status quo of late 2014–2015. The Russian population, suffering the effects of sanctions and collapsed oil prices, responded positively to Putin's decisiveness in the eastern Ukrainian and Syrian interventions. The destruction of Russia's civilian Metrojet over Egypt by likely entities of the so-called Islamic State (IS) and al-Sham and the Turkish downing of a Russian warplane in late autumn 2015 sent tremors into Russia, ending the easy initial phase of intervention and signaling that Russia would likely face a long, hard slog in Syria. Despite this, Putin announced in early December of 2017 that Russia would withdraw the majority of its forces in an attempt to shore up support before the Russian presidential election.<sup>15</sup> Yet a quick exit would prove difficult for Russia. Soon after, in early 2018, a Russian attack aircraft was shot down by a rebel group formerly affiliated with al Qaeda in Syria.<sup>16</sup> Even with the tortured fall of Aleppo and the proxy-supported military resurgence of the Asad regime, Russia remains deeply and violently enmeshed in an open-ended Syrian civil and sectarian war that, with the increasing involvement of regional powers such as Iran, Turkey, Israel, and the stateless Kurds, has a long way to go before any full

cessation of hostilities. The endgame for the remaining U.S. forces in eastern and northeastern Syria, despite Presidential pronouncements in December that they will be withdrawn, is still being determined.

International condemnation of Russia continues for its indiscriminate bombing in Syria that has brutally breached any mainstream adherence to international laws of war. This was magnified in a nearly razed Aleppo and the eastern Ghouta suburb of Damascus while Idlib—inside ostensible “deconfliction zones” established in Astana by the Russians, Turks, and Iranians—is still highly vulnerable.<sup>17</sup> While Russia does not typically concern itself with human rights concerns, such tactics could further detract from its standing in the world. Russia also has the added burden of being enmeshed within a violent, expensive, and increasingly unpopular frozen conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

Meanwhile at home, even with the slow improvement of its banking system and economy, Russian coffers dwindle, food imports are reduced, and the ruble remains weak at approximately 65 to the dollar, inflated from 33 to the dollar in early 2014.<sup>18</sup> Oil prices, though improved, are near \$53.79 per barrel (bbl), well down from their 2014 highs of \$105 bbl.<sup>19</sup> These factors will continue to put increasing long-term pressure on Russia and Putin. While it is difficult to predict Russian actions, it is clear Russia will be looking for every way to keep its narrative—both internationally and domestically—assertive, positive, and forward moving. How Washington both treats and manages Russia while maintaining credible U.S. principles and now challenged allied-partner cohesion will be key toward any collaborative future between the United States and Russia.

The definitive event that slayed 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.<sup>20</sup> This followed several key events that infuriated the Russian regime and Putin in particular. The first was the fall of Muammar Qadhafi in 2011 (facilitated by the United States and NATO) after Russia abstained from vetoing UN Security Resolution 1973, which advocated an international military no-fly zone over Libya.<sup>21</sup> The later-defeated Qadhafi was slain by the opposition.<sup>22</sup> Second and immediately thereafter was the critically undermining precursor event of 2011–2012, the so-called Bolotnaya Square riots, where tens of thousands of mostly Russian middle class demonstrators turned out primarily in Moscow and St. Petersburg against what they perceived was a gerrymandered Putin accession to a third term as Russian president in an ostensibly democratic process.<sup>23</sup> By multiple accounts, these three events viscerally tore at Putin’s personal fears of regime change.<sup>24</sup> Russia’s handling of these protests drew criticism globally. However,

the Putin regime actively promotes the idea that the United States directly supported these major internal Russian protests as part of its own hybrid warfare efforts supporting color revolutions and regime change, such as those that occurred in Libya in 2011. This perception poisons the U.S.-Russian relationship to this day.<sup>25</sup>

For many observers, it is difficult to comprehend why Ukraine's desired inclusion into a peaceful economic union set off a violent reaction and invasion by Russia. Called a Western-backed coup by the Russian disinformation machine, this vociferous and dogged expression of the majority of Ukrainians again hit at the core of the Putin regime's existential fear of a robust opposition pressing for internal regime change.<sup>26</sup> Ultimately, Russia exists in and is in some ways trapped by its historical worldview. It lives in a world full of existential threats, real, perceived—and contrived.

### **Russia and Its Perception of Existential Threats**

Geographically, Russia is Eurasia, but not necessarily in the mystical, destiny-tinged way that Russian thinker-philosopher and Putin favorite, Alexander Dugin, would say.<sup>27</sup> In 1997, he wrote, "The Eurasian Empire will be constructed on the fundamental principle of the common enemy: the rejection of Atlanticism, the strategic control of the USA, and the refusal to allow liberal values to dominate us."<sup>28</sup> This perception could be a psychological blueprint of sorts for some of the rhetoric and related actions that have transpired in recent years across Russia's periphery, both in Soviet and post-Soviet times.<sup>29</sup> Such behavior can be seen in the Russian creation of the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015 with nearly the same membership of its security alliance as the CSTO—Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia, excluding Tajikistan.<sup>30</sup>

Russia's challenges across the Eurasian space are daunting. Its sheer size, relatively small population, long terrestrial borders, and tough climates create major security dilemmas. Even after its territorial decline at the end of the Cold War, Russia still encompasses about one-eighth of the globe's landmass and is 60 percent larger than Canada, the world's second largest country.<sup>31</sup> This is as much a vulnerability for Russia as it is a strength. Russia touches or influences about 70 percent of the world where the United States has serious economic and security interests. These aspects all yield to the fact that any discussion about Russia must first return to "fundamentals" by recognizing the defining role that geography and history have played in determining the Russian perspective. How does one effectively govern a barely cultivatable, permafrost-heavy nation of about 145 million people spread out over 11 time zones, where all trains depart on centralized Moscow time before traveling through lands mostly cut out of the

hide of former nations and civilizations?<sup>32</sup> Since imperial czarist times, this has been a central dilemma for Russian security.

In prior generations, ideological struggle was represented by the great “isms,” namely capitalism, communism, imperialism, socialism, and fascism. Today, Russia and China’s perception of “liberalism” could be added to the fray, aspects of “globalism” are contentious and resurgent “nationalism” dangerously looms. These drove great power dynamics and fueled global conflicts for generations and still do today. Tomorrow’s conflicts, however, will likely be resource driven including access to fresh water. Russia is a warehouse of natural resources—many still untapped—and as competition grows, it will feel an increased vulnerability to its energy- and resource-dependent neighbors, as its economy remains largely dependent on energy exports.<sup>33</sup>

Given all of these challenges, a Russian military general staff planner conducting an objective strategic assessment out to 2050 would have to be highly concerned about the future of the nation. Foremost, Russia has a looming demographic challenge, especially when comparing population sizes with its immediate neighbors and potential adversaries. Any population growth will be marginal at best and will have to factor in the growing number of Russians emigrating annually.<sup>34</sup> In 2015, it is estimated that 350,000 Russians emigrated, and a large portion of these emigres were highly skilled workers.<sup>35</sup>

Currently, 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.<sup>36</sup> This gives the state a predominately Western feel, even in Siberia and the Far East, where Chinese influence is growing. Yet the nature of the population is also changing, especially in the southern regions bordering Central Asia and the Caucasus where birthrates are higher than in the western “European Russian” regions. Much of this future population “supplement” will be Muslim, something of concern to the Russian Orthodox Church, which is enjoying a renaissance of faith and worship with up to 73 percent of the “Great Russian” population.<sup>37</sup> Manageable now, this will present another major demographic challenge for Russian strategists by 2050. For Putin and the Kremlin, the demographic rise of groups and peoples long oppressed by leaders such as Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov will create a political threat that could prompt reforms that have been avoided to date by the current regime.

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 secular Sunni Muslims.<sup>38</sup> 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 and diversify as access to oil and natural gas will become more challenging in the years ahead. Despite record volume today, petroleum extraction will become increasingly difficult and costly in the high latitudes of the frozen but melting tundra. As such, in the years ahead the economy will increasingly struggle with fewer barrels extracted at higher cost.<sup>39</sup> Compared to its 2014 high of \$114 bbl that continued to fuel much of Russia's initial Putin-era growth, including its military modernization, the major 2014–2016 drop in oil prices to \$28 bbl created havoc among Russian budgets and outlays. By August 2018, oil prices had gradually ticked upward back and forth to approximately \$70 bbl before settling back into the mid-\$50s where they are as of this writing. While not satisfactory, this moderate growth is deemed enough by some analysts to balance Russia's budget at \$68 bbl and above.<sup>40</sup> Russia and the Organization of Oil Exporting Countries have begun working together to manage production cuts, likely in an attempt to cut supply and drive up prices.<sup>41</sup>

Diversification of petroleum extraction locations is a major catalyst driving Arctic development—an area of potential cooperation or conflict—and concomitant military basing to expand and secure its claims. These claims include the Lomonosov Ridge extending to the Arctic Pole and access to natural resources along the widening Northern Sea Route.<sup>42</sup>

Additionally, much of the Russian population is struggling when it comes to health care. This is evident with continued high alcohol and tobacco use and the ecological blight that came with Soviet-era rust belt industrial development and poorly regulated nuclear reactor construction and storage.<sup>43</sup> Life expectancy for males in Russia is 13 years lower than the global average. Systematic underfunding of healthcare infrastructure and unaffordable pharmaceutical drugs, as well as a lack of a governmental response to a rise in HIV cases, have all contributed to the poor quality of life in Russia.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, the recently announced reform proposal to substantially raise retirement pension ages to 65 for men and 60 for women makes older Russian society even more anxious, prompting protests in response. Unless convincingly addressed, these concerns will only grow as Russia's population continues to age.<sup>45</sup>

## **A Short Geostrategic Survey Around Russia's Periphery**

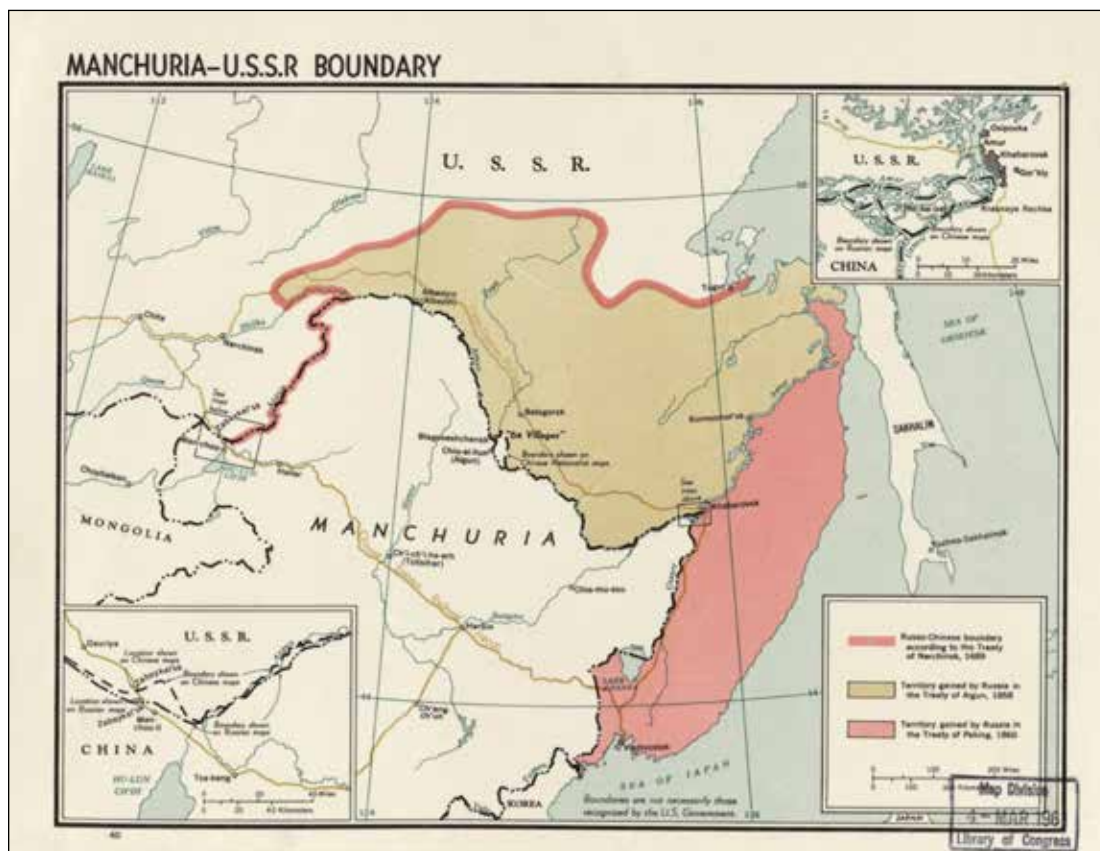
Russia's sheer size imposes strategic challenges that touch most of the world's issues. Russia defines its defense strategy largely based on how it can increase or leverage influence to pursue the economic and political objectives that feed into its broad, defense-oriented security outlook. This adds a level of intensity to most ongoing disputes in the world, as Russia often embeds itself in these conflicts to exert its influence and pursue its agenda.



While most broad overviews of Russia traditionally are Western-centric, this one instead commences from the East, highlighting the complexities, opportunities, and considerable challenges Moscow will likely face east of the Urals over the next generation.

### The Far East and Asia

The territory of the Russian Far East is largely calm, although dormant geostrategic fault lines persist. Armed with plenty of deterrent capability, particularly within its Aerospace and Rocket forces, as well as its Pacific Fleet, Russia has no offensive eastern territorial ambitions and is focused on maintaining its current borders. The heart of its conventional defensive posture is built around a capable multilayered anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) posture that the Chinese are also working to adopt.<sup>46</sup> Russia's principal active Asian territorial issue remains the Kuril Islands dispute with Japan that continues to linger almost 75 years since the southern four islands were occupied in the final weeks of World War II. In recent years, both countries have taken a renewed interest in reaching a peace treaty,<sup>47</sup> yet state visits in Japan in December 2016



and Russia in April 2017 and January have highlighted that many barriers need to be overcome before a resolution can be reached.<sup>48</sup> Further hampering any deepening of relations is Japan's continued support of U.S.-EU sanctions against Russia tied to its 2014 Ukraine incursions.<sup>49</sup> The Russia-Japan relationship could become important to both nations in the years ahead, especially if China's influence in the overall region continues to grow.

Thinking long term, the Russians will surely oppose any major rearming of Japan, a topic discussed in President Donald Trump's recent visit to Tokyo and reinforced to one of this monograph's writers during a visit to the Russian Far East in November, 2018.<sup>50</sup> Russia will regard a heavily armed Japan as a reinforced platform for American influence in the Far East. If Russia finds itself in a weaker condition, it could also feel vulnerable to possible Japanese revanchism toward territories and islands occupied at the end of World War II.<sup>51</sup>

North Korea, with which Russia shares a narrow 11-mile land border along the Tumen River, presents growing challenges. However, it also provides a wedge for Russia and China to disrupt U.S. interests and policy in Northeast Asia.<sup>52</sup> Remaining verbally supportive, Moscow is both wary and skeptical of how any potential rapprochement between Washington and Pyongyang develops. At a high water mark, Russia reportedly had between 30,000 and 50,000 low-paid North Korean laborers in its Far East. These numbers have slipped in recent years mainly due to increased sanctions placed on the North Korean regime. Russia is, as is especially China, concerned about a refugee influx if war breaks out or the Kim Jong-un regime implodes. Its principal concern is the possibility of a unification on the peninsula that would bring an American-backed Korea to the Yalu and Tumen rivers.<sup>53</sup> While not desiring a conflict, official Russian policy—carefully coordinated with China, as highlighted by officials from both nations at the Moscow Security Conference in April 2017—is focused on a noncombat resolution to current tensions.<sup>54</sup> With that said, Moscow—a long-time interlocutor with North Korea since 1945 when, in the wake of World War II and collapsed Japanese occupation, it supported the 33-year-old Kim Il-sung to attain unquestioned power—still maintains a direct relationship with Pyongyang that occasionally runs counter to Chinese interests.<sup>55</sup> Contrary Russian actions in 2017 during a period of Chinese sanctions toughness toward Pyongyang—due to its threatening missile launches and rhetoric—included sending oil supplies via rail and sea as well as providing an alternative Internet backbone to the Kim regime.<sup>56</sup> Both countries will continue to closely watch the aftermath of President Trump's May 2018 and February 2019 meetings with Kim, as well as continued talks between Kim and South Korean President Moon Jae-in.<sup>57</sup> Likely to maintain influence in Pyongyang and the region as a major diplomatic player, and in anticipation of the second round

of Trump-Kim talks, Moscow reportedly offered the construction of a nuclear power plant to North Korea in exchange for dismantling its nuclear weapons program.<sup>58</sup>

Neither Russia nor China desire North Korea to obtain more and longer range nuclear weapons. However, paradoxically, even on the Korean Peninsula, where the missile threat is unambiguous, both are loudly opposed to the seemingly logical deployment of the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) system to South Korea and declared such in the recent security conference. The Russian and Chinese perception of the U.S. missile defense system is that it is a growing global system that is aimed primarily at Russian and Chinese strategic delivery capabilities, rather than rogue-like threats, such as those from Iran and North Korea.<sup>59</sup> One Russian senior think tank analyst frankly stated when pressed that it was the “principle” of THAAD and overall missile defense to which Russia was opposed, not the actual system.<sup>60</sup> The entire missile defense issue will only intensify the “Strategic Stability” dialog as American SM-3 Aegis Ashore interceptors will soon be deployed to Poland, following their recent installation in Romania.

Looking to Russia-China relations, maintaining the status quo seems to be the preferred outcome for both countries. Despite resettlement efforts in the Far East by the Russian regime, regional demographics are overwhelmingly in China’s favor. While a scant 8 to 9 million Great Russians live between Siberian Irkutsk on Lake Baikal to Vladivostok on the Pacific Ocean, over 130 million Chinese live in neighboring Manchuria (The “Northeast”), including a significant number living and trading on Russia’s side of the border.<sup>61</sup> Notably of strategic interest, Moscow in November 2018 legislated the transfer of the Trans-Baikal (Chita) and Buryatia (Ulan Ude) Oblasts (regions) with their population and resources to the Far East Federal District to buttress its weak demographic and social position in Asia. This major regional realignment came after several elections in late 2018 where Putin’s United Russia party suffered reverses in local voting. This regional shift included military units commanded by the Central Military District in Ekaterinberg being transferred to the Eastern Military District in Khabarovsk. Furthermore, the capital of the Russian Far East was shifted to Vladivostok from Khabarovsk, though the Eastern Military District headquarters remains in Khabarovsk. All these moves increased the Far East’s population to about 9 million citizens, bolstered its budget, and revealed the regime’s concern about managing its regions and population. It also supported Russia’s efforts to build stronger, more viable economic links to Asia and Pacific region, offsetting in part, its difficult relations with the West.<sup>62</sup>

The border dispute along the Ussuri River near Khabarovsk that culminated in bloody clashes between the Soviet Union and China in 1969 was pragmatically resolved in 2004.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, trade and military contacts have increased, including the signing of a massive \$400

billion natural gas deal. Due to continued low oil prices, this deal has not proved to be profitable for Russia.<sup>64</sup> Yet with Russia embroiled in Eastern Ukraine and Syria, and China increasingly committed to exerting influence and control within the Spratly and Senkaku islands, these arrangements make temporal and geostrategic sense and have significantly relaxed tensions over the 2,600-mile shared land border.<sup>65</sup>

Looking long term, however, one could see tensions rising again within this vast resource-rich zone north of Manchuria. 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, as much of Manchuria's timber has been cut down.<sup>66</sup> Notably, a huge chunk of the Russian Far East north of the Amur River, and the lands that encompass Vladivostok east of the Ussuri River, was wrested from a weak Qing Dynasty by Imperial Russia in the mid-1800s. While formalized by the Treaties of Aigun (1858) and Peking (1860), this is a fact that has not been forgotten by Chinese historians or nationalists.<sup>67</sup>

While the Russians and Chinese are both practicing prudent foreign policy regarding one another, they are not natural friends or allies, with histories, cultures, religions, ethnicities, and fundamental philosophies that are different and at times opposing. The sheer mismatch between Russian and Chinese demographics (Russia's population is approximately one-ninth that of China's) and economies (Russia's economy is the 13<sup>th</sup> in gross domestic product [GDP] to China's second) will relegate Russia to a subordinate role in any major long-term partnership with China.<sup>68</sup> As such, geostrategically, Russia seems to be working to buy time in the Far East, while China, thinking dynastically, appears to be biding its time.

### **Central Asia and Afghanistan**

In Central Asia, Russia sees the five independent FSU nations of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan as within its so-called privileged sphere of influence. History shows that Russia will take firm action to ensure that no excessive foreign military presence takes root in the region.<sup>69</sup> Whatever may be its post-Soviet imperial desires, the demographically and economically challenged Russia does not have the military means to annex and permanently occupy these diverse states. Therefore, it has taken measures to maintain a strong and influential regional suzerainty among them.

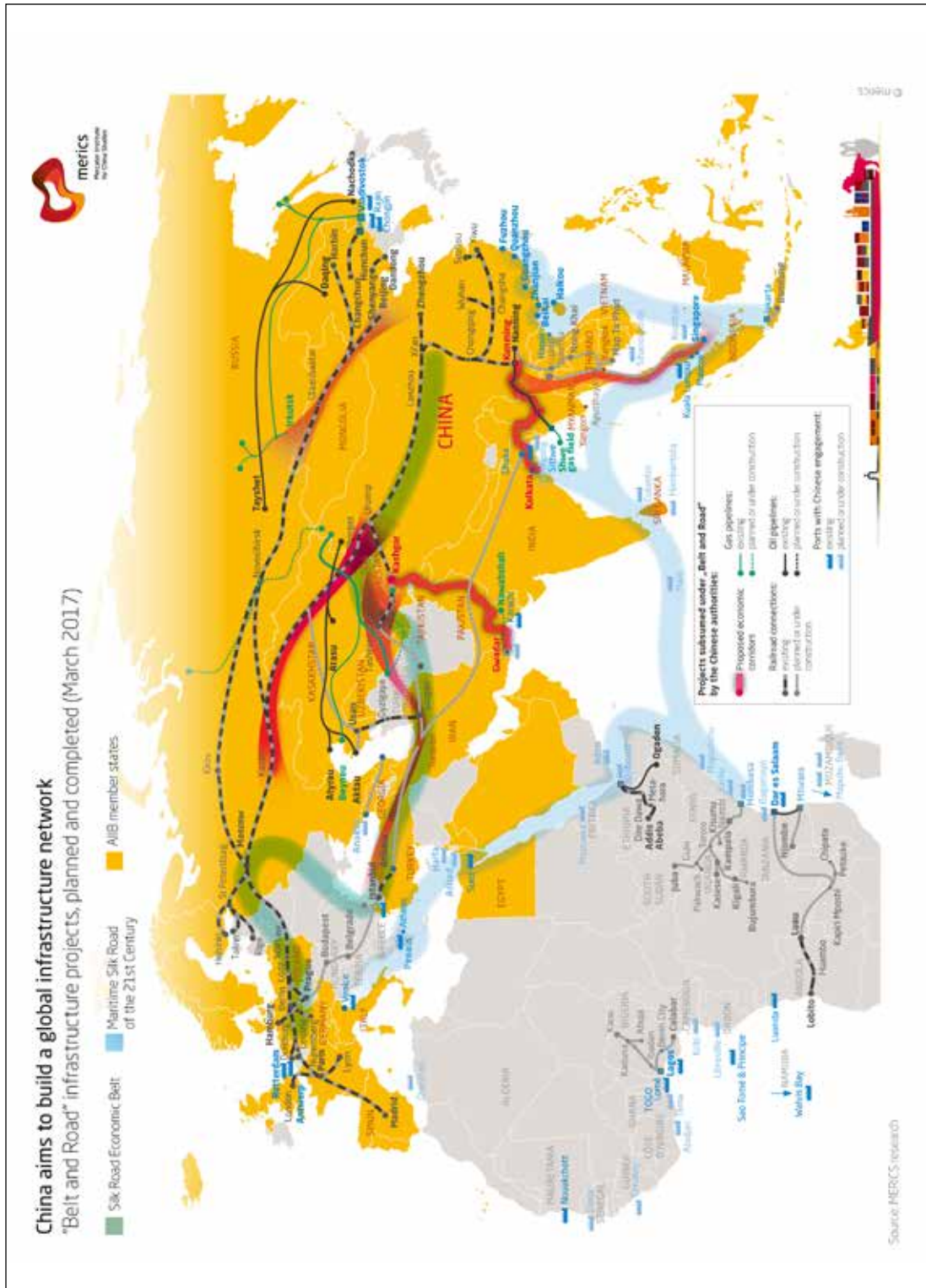
Within the past 3 years, two longstanding regional leaders who firmly defined the direction of their post-Soviet countries, while maintaining a careful balance with Russia, have moved from power. Islam Karimov, president of Uzbekistan since 1989, died suddenly, and Tashkent's

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transition to new leadership under a more moderate President Shavkat Mirziyoyev proved unexpectedly smooth with few signs of overt Russian influence.<sup>70</sup> In neighboring Kazakhstan, on March 19, 2019, the other dominant post-Soviet ruler in Central Asia, President Nursultan Nazarbayev, announced his retirement after 30 years in power. This action surprised the region and Russia, which has significant equities in Kazakhstan including energy and the leased Baikonur space complex.<sup>71</sup> Additionally, there is a significant ethnic Russian minority of about 24 percent in Kazakhstan, though relations and their status have been calm.<sup>72</sup> Only time will tell how these nations evolve. There is little doubt that Russia has military contingencies prepared to counter a wide range of scenarios—including precluding so-called color revolutions—in Central Asia that might lead toward some form of local liberal democracy, as Moscow attempted to preempt in Ukraine. This is a major reason that the Russian-controlled CSTO exists.<sup>73</sup>

A long-term wild card concerning Russia's influence in Central Asia is the increasing move toward the implementation of the Chinese-inspired and mostly financed Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—formerly known as the One Belt One Road Initiative—that would build roads, rail,



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and linkages from western China through former Soviet Central Asia into the Caspian and beyond into Europe.<sup>74</sup> The Russians officially support this project, though quietly some academics and policymakers evince concern, as noted by Vladimir Portyakov, deputy director of the Institute of Far Eastern Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences, who stated, “The most unpleasant issue for us is that China is becoming a serious center for integrational processes in Eurasia, which it never was in the past. Instead of linking up the Eurasian Economic Union and the Belt and Road, we may end up with the Eurasian Economic Union being subordinated to this Chinese scheme.”<sup>75</sup> Adding to potential regional challenges coupled with economic opportunity for Russia involving China is Beijing’s recent announcement of a future Polar Silk Road, which would transit the Northern Sea Route opening up due to major summer ice melt in Russia’s Arctic area of interest.

Growth and influence projected from such economic corridors will likely further integrate the countries in its reach. Beijing, which in a generation from now will be even more dependent on regional natural resources, will stand to benefit greatly by leveraging its growing presence and access to the region’s oil and natural gas wealth that could make it less reliant on Russia’s energy assets. Over time, a solid Chinese economic presence in Central Asia, with commensurate influence, could evolve into a major security challenge for Russia.

The dynamics of Central Asia have significantly evolved since the Soviet Union’s breakup in 1991. In the 1990s, with Russian power and influence diminished, major Western aid initiatives were undertaken in the region, most notably in 1994 when all five former Soviet Central Asian republics joined NATO’s Partnership for Peace. These relationships, with Russia’s acquiescence, were later leveraged to support the swift U.S.-allied invasion of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan after 9/11.<sup>76</sup> While Russia was generally uncomfortable with U.S. activity and airbases in Central Asia (Karshi-Khanabad in Uzbekistan and Manas in Kyrgyzstan), its initial support of the war on terror and concern about militant Sunni Islam triumphing in Afghanistan superseded those worries. This enabled (at considerable financial benefit) the establishment of the Northern Distribution Network in 2009 as part of the brief U.S.-Russia “reset” in relations. The network brought substantial nonlethal materials and personnel through Russia and Central Asia into Afghanistan, bypassing more dangerous routes via Pakistan.<sup>77</sup> This logistics arrangement, which included the brief establishment of a Russian-operated NATO logistics hub at Ulyanovsk in 2012, gradually eroded as relations degraded between the United States and NATO and Russia.<sup>78</sup> For example, under major Russian pressure, Kyrgyzstan pressured the United States to close its logistics base at Manas in 2013, which had been important for NATO-U.S. nonlethal supply to Afghanistan.<sup>79</sup> Russia maintains considerable leverage over the FSU, as

seen in Kyrgyzstan. Two years before the base's ultimate closure, Russia and Kyrgyzstan signed a 15-year base deal, and Russia agreed to forgive \$500 million in Kyrgyz debt.<sup>80</sup> This indicates that while Russia is willing to allow the West to have a short-term significant presence in the FSU, Russia seeks to be the longstanding, dominant partner and will make moves to ensure its continued strength and presence. How Russia carefully shapes the major China-led BRI effort through these sensitive natural gas-rich former southern lands of the Soviet Union will have ramifications for the Russian economy and its ability to gain leverage over the FSU for generations to come.

Russia's difficult-to-define relationship with the Taliban is disruptive to the Afghan government of Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, as well as to the U.S.-led international coalition supporting the effort to keep the government soluble.<sup>81</sup> While Russia states that it supports the efforts of this coalition, it appears irresistible to Russia—from global, competitive, and adversarial perspectives—not to simultaneously undermine this U.S.-driven stabilizing mission. Accentuating this is the disputed claim that Russia is providing weapons via neighboring Tajikistan to the Taliban, which is fighting both the coalition and IS splinter groups in Afghanistan. Iran ostensibly has a role in this as well.<sup>82</sup> Ironically, the failure of this mission would likely further negative regional disorder, all of which would be against Russia's long-term interests. Such fallout could include any combination of terror, crime, drugs, and migration flowing north into Russia's influenced band of Central Asian and FSU neighbors, destabilizing the mostly autocratic secular regimes and further flowing into the Russian Sunni Muslim-heavy south, the Caucasus, and China's Uighur-dominated Xinjiang Province.<sup>83</sup>

Russian contact with the Taliban, while clearly disruptive to the government of Afghanistan and coalition stabilization efforts, appears also to be a strategically defensive move intended to cobble together a regional "firebreak" to shore up future Afghan power players and factions, responding to what they believe will be a failure of the current stabilization mission and collapse of the current Afghan government. Chinese senior think tank analysts essentially stated the same to one author in Beijing during conversations in December of 2017.<sup>84</sup> The Russians appear to be hedging their bets, readying themselves for the next geostrategic crisis to Russia's south. To this end, they are looking for ways to shore up their influence and firebreak in Central Asia, including acceding to the massive Chinese-driven BRI project that, if successful, would likely significantly reduce Russian influence in the region while increasing and expanding China's influence in its vulnerable south.<sup>85</sup> However, it would create more ties between China and Russia, giving Russia a strong partner to counter the United States and NATO, particularly in the face of increased Western isolation.<sup>86</sup>



Still, the 2014 shutdown of Manas Airbase in Kyrgyzstan is indicative of just how viscerally sensitive Russia is to U.S. or NATO bases or the perception of excessive influence on FSU territories. The bloody crises that ensued in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 are recent examples of this perspective. Moving forward, Russia will have to find a balance between impeding security and development in the region and assisting in the efforts. Finding a realistic balance will be the only way for Russia to maintain a permanent foothold in the region while avoiding a confrontation with looming economic powerhouse but resource-weak China in the years ahead.

### **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 straddles 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 aggressively engaged in FSU lands. It was an unseen precursor of future reactions in Ukraine during 2014, and a harbinger for other potential flashpoints such as Moldova, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and while less likely, also NATO's Article 5-protected Baltic States. Today's Russia will resist what it perceives as excessive foreign influence within the FSU or discrimination against ethnic Russians living within its lands. How it reacts—either by aggressive gray zone influencing and political pressure or more overtly by armed intervention—will warrant review situationally on a case-by-case basis. Russia feels that it ought to be the dominant partner for FSU countries, making any “Western pivot” within them a threat to Russian dominance.

South Ossetia and Abkhazia, wrested into autonomous “statelets” by force of arms, remain a frozen conflict between Russia and Georgia.<sup>87</sup> The Russian 102<sup>nd</sup> Military Base garrison in Gyumri, consisting of about 3,000 troops, continues to be a guarantor of Armenia, which borders hostile Azerbaijan.<sup>88</sup> True to form, Russia ensures that it maintains its central role by involving itself in all aspects of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, from mediation to arms deals. As of 2015, Russia was the primary supplier of weapons to both Armenia and Azerbaijan.<sup>89</sup> Smarting and revanchist over its 1990s losses in still-simmering Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan launched major incursions in April 2016 using late-model Russian-provided weapons that shook Armenian trust in Moscow. Skirmishes continued into 2017, resulting in further

Armenian-Azerbaijani de-confliction negotiations in Geneva. This ultimately led to the release of a joint statement by both Presidents Serzh Sarkisian (Armenia) and Ilham Aliyev (Azerbaijan) who “agreed to take measures to intensify the negotiation process and to take additional steps to reduce tensions.”<sup>90</sup>

Notably, Russia-aligned Sargsyan’s 10-year tenure in power ended ignominiously in April 2018 when he stepped down from power after weeks of major nonviolent demonstrations protested his efforts to contrive another term. He was unseated by the efforts of opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan, who in May 2018 became Armenia’s Prime Minister.

Furthering his push to change Armenia’s political landscape, Pashinyan then called a snap election the following December in which his My Step Alliance won an overwhelming majority at the expense of the formerly entrenched Republican majority in Parliament. While Pashinyan promised to maintain Armenia’s political alliance with Russia, it appears that Armenia will be more flexible in its foreign policy.<sup>91</sup>

While Russia uncharacteristically maintained a low profile during this drama, clearly this popular expression of national will leading to regime change within a neighboring FSU ally is worrisome for the Russian regime that regularly stokes domestic fears and passions with its narrative emphasizing threats of Western-backed color revolutions.<sup>92</sup> Armenia, regardless, is dependent on continued Russian support for its own protection. Another controversial issue for Armenia remains the continued Turkish denial of the World War I-era Armenian genocide.<sup>93</sup> Russia’s 2015 official recognition pleased an antsy Armenia, straining relations with Turkey in the process.<sup>94</sup> While this region remains frozen in conflict, Moscow’s influence will be necessary for any possible resolution in the future.

The most organic “kinetic” danger to Russia comes from within Russia’s border—its Caucasus region. Mountainous Chechnya, the site of two horrific military campaigns commencing in 1995 and 1999, remains under Russia’s thumb in the guise of the Russian-enabled Ramzan Kadyrov, head of the Chechen Republic, who staunchly supports most of Putin’s actions, including sending Chechen fighters into eastern Ukraine’s Donbas in early 2014.<sup>95</sup> This support could be severely challenged, however, if, as anticipated, several thousand surviving Sunni Russian jihadists in Syria and Iraq eventually return to Russia in Chechnya and elsewhere.<sup>96</sup> In adjacent Dagestan, the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) has been fighting a low-boil insurgency for years. It is likely this insurgency, as part of the diminished “Caucasus Emirates” or growing IS, will increase in intensity as angry, revenge-minded fighters return home spreading extremist Wahhabist Islam in the overall region.<sup>97</sup>

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 gradually growing via higher birthrates and illegal immigration.<sup>98</sup> Additionally, these concerns have been stoked by several pointed IS statements specifically branding Russia as an enemy.<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, Putin well remembers the Wahhabist Chechen threat in particular, after the grisly attack and bungled rescue operation in 2004 on a school in the North Ossetian town of Beslan in which 331 people, mostly children, perished.<sup>100</sup> 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.<sup>101</sup>

Reasons for concern likely also stem from the incredible unpopularity that Russia faces within Chechnya and globally for its past brutal treatment of Chechens. Exacerbating this was the international outcry during 2017 over the persecution, abuse, and detention of dozens of gay men in Chechnya led by Putin ally Kadyrov.<sup>102</sup> In late December 2018, reports began to surface that there was a new wave of persecution of the Chechen lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer community, with two individuals dead and dozens incarcerated.<sup>103</sup> The longer that Russia waits to address this abuse, the higher the potential for additional backlash becomes, staining the already fragile international reputation of the regime. Reforming these behaviors in the region could result in positive coverage and a modicum of goodwill, something that the government needs moving forward as it pursues its revisionist agenda.

### **The Middle East**

The Russian intervention in late September 2015 on behalf of Assad's Ba'athist regime in Syria signaled the most significant geostrategic shift in Russia's military activity since the end of the Cold War. This intervention has been a bold endeavor that, despite major battlefield and political successes, risks leaving Russia enmeshed in a hornet's nest of competing regional factions and interests that have taken on a Sunni-Shi'ite sectarian flavor involving multiple regional states including Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.<sup>104</sup> Up until then, direct Russian military action had been confined within territorial Russia, notably in Chechnya and Dagestan, and FSU states.

Not since the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan during Christmas 1979 has Russia seemingly moved so aggressively "out of area."<sup>105</sup> For Russia watchers, this intervention should not have been a surprise. As one of his unstated "Red Lines,"<sup>106</sup>—akin to unattributed Russia's main force intervention into Eastern Ukraine in late summer 2014 to restore its failing proxies—Putin repeatedly signaled Russia's full support for the Syrian Ba'athist regime,

an unbroken Soviet-Russian-Syrian relationship that dates back to 1956.<sup>107</sup> Even in the face of tensions during this 60-odd-year relationship, they rely on their continued partnership to support each other regionally, as seen in the Syrian civil war. In the rubble of the Arab Spring, this relationship strengthened as Putin sought to stabilize the Russian presence in the changing Middle Eastern landscape. In Moscow's view, shared by some of its neighbors,<sup>108</sup> violent regime change in Syria would further destabilize a region in near free-fall and further weaken Russian influence within the region.<sup>109</sup> As a result, 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 bases.<sup>110</sup> One author helped facilitate some of these negotiations in Moscow in 2013 where Russian guarantees were made—and tangible measures taken—that all Syria's chemical weapons would be removed. Since then, despite this agreement, there have been numerous chemical attacks reported within Syria. A major Syrian atrocity in April 2017 resulted in a subsequent U.S. Tomahawk missile strike on Shayrat Air Base. A year later on April 7, 2018, another attack ensued in Dhouma, followed this time by U.S., French, and British airstrikes on Syrian chemical research facilities.<sup>111</sup> As a key guarantor of the Asad regime's compliance, major questions concerning Russia's intent or ability to ensure Syria's cooperation are currently in stark focus. The repeated head-scratching denials and obfuscation on behalf of its ally, Syria has even further increased the high-level global distrust of any consistent Russian geostrategic narrative. This fundamental distrust of the Russian regime by many of the world's nations is a strategic factor.

With Asad's forces significantly weakened in late summer 2015, the Russians likely went through a "go and no-go" intervention criteria and risk assessment before launching their operation in late September 2015, with the intent to save the Syrian regime and batter the Islamic rebels most threatening to its immediate viability.<sup>112</sup>

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 also saw IS as a growing threat, 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.<sup>113</sup> Their main goal is the perpetuation of a stable and allied Syrian regime and regional platform and not necessarily the specific long-term preservation of the ruling Asad family.

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, whom he views as empathetic to the cause of

IS and other terrorist groups.<sup>114</sup> 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.<sup>115</sup>

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 "Triumph" air defense system with its formidable A2/AD capability in the stunned aftermath of the Turkish downing of a Russian SU-24 bomber in November 2015. This deployment, along with recently inserted S-300s, has changed the regional airpower equation and greatly complicated the consideration of regional no-fly or safe zones.<sup>116</sup> In June 2017, Russia, Iran, and Turkey began a series of dialogs in Astana, agreeing to set up safe zones in Syria, a move that was met with concern by the U.S. State Department and was initially rejected by rebel groups.<sup>117</sup> It is still unclear as to the level of success in providing safety for refugees in these zones, several of which have unraveled.

The rapid deployment of air and ground assets into Syria in late September 2015, coupled with long-range, sea-based Kalibr precision cruise missile strikes and bombings by strategic bomber assets, showed that the Russian deployment into Syria was also a demonstration and testing of firepower reminiscent of the 1936 Spanish Civil War. It unambiguously signaled to the world and its own populace that the Russian military was back.<sup>118</sup> Essentially a laboratory for its evolving tactics, techniques, and procedures across a wide spectrum of conventional warfare—as well as a training ground for a new generation of military leaders—Syria, and more subtly Eastern Ukraine, has reaped numerous short-term benefits for the Russian military. Russian chief of the General Staff, Army General Valery Gerasimov, as much as stated this by declaring that real officers are "born in battle" and that the overall Syrian experience was "priceless" for the development of the Russian military.<sup>119</sup> Russian arms exporters are also benefiting from the successful demonstration of their leading-edge systems.<sup>120</sup>

However, a potentially dangerous situation is evolving in Syria as resurgent Russian-backed Syrian forces—interlaced with Russian and Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps "advisors" enabling a mix of foreign Shia militias—come increasingly into proximity with U.S.-supported counter-IS, anti-Asad regime forces, the Kurdish People's Protection Units, and the Israeli border.<sup>121</sup> The defeat of "main force" IS entities and the seizure of their cities and infrastructure have driven them mostly underground or increasingly out of the country, creating zones where Russian and American personnel are in near proximity. Inflaming the situation greatly, on February 7, 2018, ethnic Russian Wagner paramilitary "contractors" pressed too aggressively into U.S. positions backing resident Kurdish Syrian Democratic Front forces near Deir Ezzor in western

Syria and were roundly repulsed with likely close to 200 killed.<sup>122</sup> Not even in the depths of Cold War was there ever such a loss of life between U.S.-NATO and Soviet forces in direct contact, signaling just how dangerous this encounter could have been. In a positive vein the standing communications link between Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford and Russian Chief of General Staff General Valeriy Gerasimov—one of the few still standing at a high level between the U.S. and Russian militaries—may have helped deescalate any further action by either side. While Russia was quick to dissociate itself from these unattributed “mercenaries,” it is likely that it saw this as a tough lesson learned and may look for a way to “pay back” this bloody riposte against Russian nationals.<sup>123</sup>

Despite this stunning action, and whatever is resolved (or not) in Geneva and Astana, the U.S. and Russian militaries are maintaining their daily deescalation contacts between U.S. Central Command in Qatar and the Russian expeditionary headquarters near Latakia, Syria.

While Syria remains volatile, there may an opportunity for both the United States and Russia to be constructive interlocutors between the numerous states and factions in carving out some semblance of a regional peace, as unlikely as it may seem. This remains true even with the announcement that the United States will be withdrawing from Syria. If Russia is shortsighted and strives to drive the United States and its partners entirely out of Syria, it will be left alone with the Asad regime and Iran to manage a dangerous and likely never-ending chain of regional violence, especially if Shi’ite Iranian influence grows into a palpable threat to Israel via an emboldened Hizballah, and more Sunnis are killed—or ethnically cleansed—from regime reconquered zones. Not to work pragmatically toward a broader regional peace involving the United States and its partners risks the permanent ensnarement of major Russian military resources in Syria that, in the long term, can only weaken its political and economic resources and agenda worldwide.

In December of 2017, Putin announced that Russia had succeeded in Syria and would begin to immediately reduce its involvement. This drawdown in the wake of what looked to be a real battlefield victory for the Asad regime and its partners appears different than the one loudly announced in March 2016, where the reduction in the teeth of a still dangerous opposition proved more of a reorganization and reapportionment of forces—as well as a probable Asad regime obstruction—than an actual withdrawal.<sup>124</sup> Russia’s ideal plan was to maintain a smaller, permanent military presence in Syria.<sup>125</sup>

Since Putin’s December 2017 announcement, the situation on the ground has become more complex and tangled with major regional powers such as Iran, Turkey, and Israel becoming even more involved and entangled. While this declaration may have helped Putin win

a short-term victory in the run-up to Russia's presidential election in March 2018, how the scale-down in Syria actually occurs, as well as Russia's ability to extract itself favorably from the ongoing conflict, remains to be seen. In particular, Russia has to balance reducing its influence in Syria with maintaining its interests, such as keeping the Asad regime in power. As of late July 2018, Asad stated his desire that Russian forces remain long term in Syria.<sup>126</sup>

Russia's complex relationship with Iran also bears watching; it appears to be a cynically pragmatic partnership of convenience. Russia provided a decisive role as part of the P5+1 negotiations with Iran that led to the 2015 nuclear agreement, where Russia wanted to avoid any prospect of the United States bombing Iranian nuclear facilities. Furthermore, Russia does not want increased nuclear proliferation beyond the current nuclear powers. However, this strategic nonproliferation stance has not curbed Iran's increasingly aggressive actions in other spheres, highlighting the awkward relationship between Russia and Iran, both of whom enable Syria's brutal counter-rebel fight while increasingly alarming Israel and irritating Sunni-dominated Turkey. This is most evident with the expansion of Iranian influence in Syria via its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Quds Force, as well as via its Shi'ite and Hizballah proxies. This focused effort in tandem with Russia's force of arms helped Asad's military survive in late 2015 and continues to weaponize Shi'ite Iranian influence throughout southern Iraq and Syria and within the Levant.

In discussing the Middle East and Russia, one must not forget Israel. Israel is keeping a somewhat low profile regarding the Syrian civil and sectarian war, but its highly trained and superbly equipped military would snap into immediate action if it thought it were directly threatened. It is apparent that Israel overall prefers a predictable stability in the greater region. This is especially true along its borders, which would be severely disrupted if the Syrian regime were to precipitously collapse. This is probably a reason that little Israeli opposition to Russia's intervention ever came forth, even after the insertion of long-range Russian S-400 air defense missiles into Syria in late 2015.<sup>127</sup> To emphasize, what Israel is acutely concerned about is the aforementioned rise of Iranian influence in southern Syria and into Lebanon; in the future, this is something that Russia will have to directly address with Israel.

Keeping in mind Israel will aggressively respond to threats, Israeli air strikes occurred near Damascus on April 10, 2018, 2 months after a prior strike in which an Israeli F-16 was shot down by Syrian air defenses. This Iranian spread of influence south in Syria and Lebanon toward the Israeli border guaranteed a military confrontation between Tel Aviv and Tehran.<sup>128</sup> Perhaps boosted by the Trump administration's May 8 withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal,<sup>129</sup> the extensive Israeli airstrikes on May 10 across the breadth of the Iranian military presence in Syria

was a sharp and unambiguous throwing down of the gauntlet by Tel Aviv and virtually ensures that the Russian intervention presence in Syria will only become more problematic and vulnerable.<sup>130</sup> As one Russian senior think tank analyst stated afterward, “We told the Iranians that if they strike Israel they would get a bloody nose. And then they did, and got a bloody nose!”<sup>131</sup> Moscow will need to balance its currently practical relations with Israel carefully so as to avoid a major Israeli preemptive cross-border reaction into either southern Lebanon or even from the Golan into southern Syria.<sup>132</sup> After a recent meeting between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Putin, it was reported that Netanyahu told Putin that Israel would not challenge Assad staying in power in Syria but that the Iranian presence remains unacceptable for Israel.<sup>133</sup> Based on Israel’s recent actions and statements, Moscow’s recent provision of S-300s missiles to the Syrian arsenal will almost certainly trigger an eventual Israeli reaction.<sup>134</sup> This could further feed concerns that the fraught situation in and around Syria could spread into a larger regional conflict with multiple state and nonstate actors. With its forces caught in between, such an escalation would clearly not be in Russia’s best interest, shredding the mostly pragmatic and cooperative relations currently between Tel Aviv and Moscow.

This Russian-Iranian partnership is not without its friction points, as noted by the Iranian expulsion of Russian aircraft based at Hamedan in August 2016 that occurred just a week after strategic bombers arrived from Russia. This occurred because of public Russian declarations about its bombers’ use of this Iranian airbase that the proud and nationalistic Iranians, apparently preferring some discretion, saw as excessive.<sup>135</sup> However, this partnership—which has included sharing facilities—will likely continue as both seek to establish a stronger, more dominant presence in the Middle East.

Russia is also working to fill a perceived regional void of receding American power and presence in both the Middle East and the aforementioned Afghanistan. Its growing regional relationships include reopening civilian flights and signing a nuclear energy deal with Egypt after Putin’s visit to Cairo in December 2017 to meet Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi<sup>136</sup> and the recent opening with the dominant powerbroker in Libya, Libyan National Army Commander Khalifa Haftar.<sup>137</sup> Furthermore, the landmark visit in October 2017 of Saudi Arabia’s King Salman bin Abd al-Aziz to Moscow also punctuated Russia’s increasing assertiveness and credibility in the Middle East as both a power and energy powerbroker. The fact that Putin met Salman during a period of major tensions and increasing brinksmanship between Iran and Saudi Arabia over war-torn Yemen and tentatively agreed to supply S-400s to Riyadh could not fail to put its so-called partner Iran on notice that Russia will work flexibly with multiple partners in the region to secure its interests.<sup>138</sup> Regional balancing was also evident with Putin’s lack



of criticism of Saudi Arabia for the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi embassy in Istanbul. Showing utter disdain for international norms, at the Buenos Aires G20 Summit, he even publically “high-fived” Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who is seen as complicit in the grisly murder. Putin opted to compare it to the attempted murder of Sergei Skripal, a former GRU intelligence officer who became a defector and critic who was attacked by Russia using poison, stating that it wanted to wait for all the evidence to be produced.<sup>139</sup> Such posturing is an extension of Putin’s attempts to maintain powerful allies in the Middle East, while also indicative of the Russian government’s general disdain for journalists and dissidents.

One other indicator of Russia’s political breakout from its 2014–2015 political marginalization was how it set the agenda and participants for the ongoing Syria mediation process as part of the Astana talks that include Russia, Syria, Iran, and Turkey. Only belatedly was the United States invited to join this group. This has been seen by some observers as a way to circumvent the UN Geneva process.<sup>140</sup> Due to the complexity of the conflict in Syria, the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, has maintained that the UN Geneva process is the only way to reach a peace deal.<sup>141</sup> Reaching peace in Syria remains a true obstacle, and how it is ultimately negotiated may also depend on the political ambitions and survival of Trump and Putin in the coming years—and whatever transpires in the tangled aftermath of the Trump-Putin summit in Helsinki.

While discussing the Middle East, it must be stated how complex, yet integral, oil and natural gas are for Russia and other powers. Even though Russia greatly desires a return to the pre-2014 prices of well over \$100 per barrel that fueled its economic rise, it would not be in the interest of increasingly huge oil consumers, such as China and India, to see major price increases. While China is awash in income that could absorb high prices in the near term, India’s growth would be significantly stunted by such. In the status quo, both maintain cordial relations with Russia. India also currently buys the bulk of its weapons from Russia, a relationship Russia is keen to continue developing.

Russia has collaborated with both Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi’ite Iran to increase oil prices, running counter to EU and Association of Southeast Asian Nations economic interests. Many countries have taken proactive measures in response to this. Despite Russian threats to cut off energy supplies to EU countries in response to heavy sanctions, EU countries have not changed their position regarding Russia, though the recent spate of contentious EU and U.S. relations could affect Europe’s solidarity regarding Russian-related policy. The United States, on the other hand, with its shale revolution is now more protected from these oil and gas price fluctuations.

China is aggressively seeking alternative supplies it can ultimately control, as seen in the South China Sea and with the BRI.

### **The West**

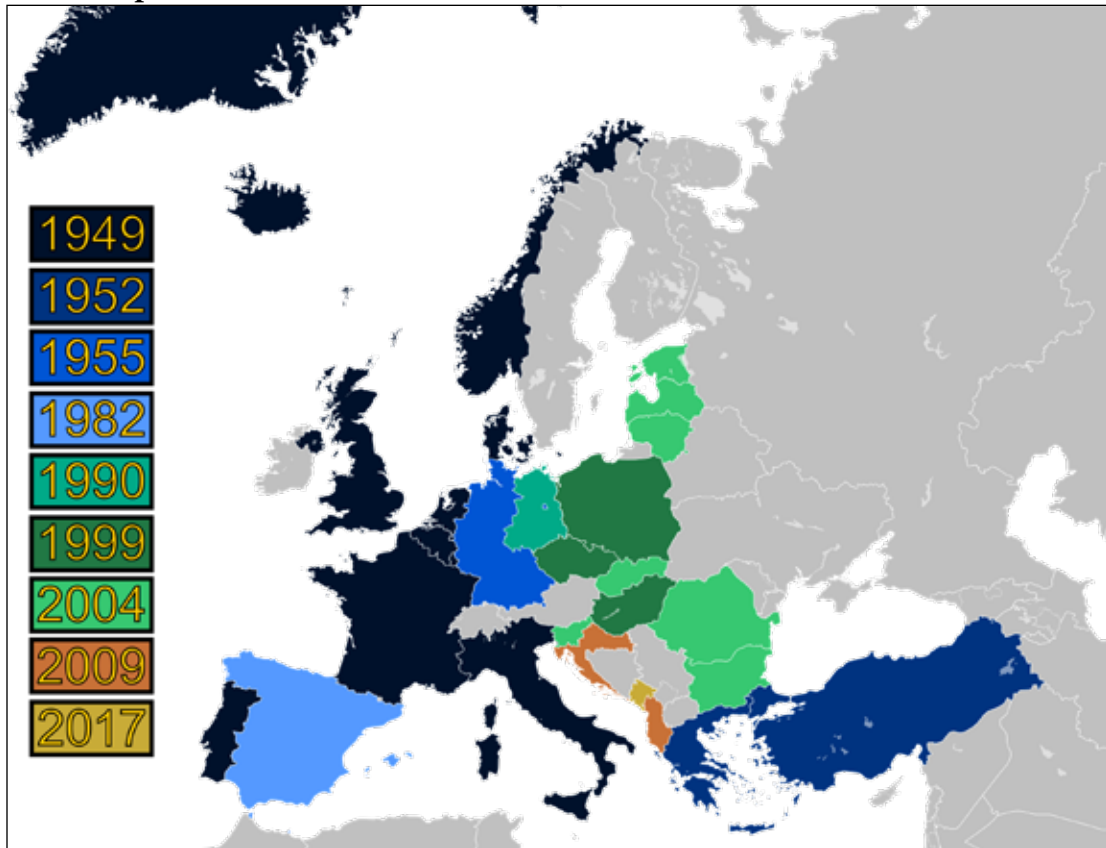
Any discussion about the West must begin with the Russian perception of a liberal democratic and economic system that is an existential threat to the Russian state. With a narrative designed to present and exaggerate external threats and reinforce Russian self-reliance and internal controls, the regime sees Russia as facing a permanent state of competition and confrontation with the West. As events have shown since Georgia in 2008, Russia will use overt or nondeclared force 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 them out as its principal adversaries.<sup>142</sup> As such, in a way nearly impossible for liberal democracies to fathom in peacetime, Moscow prepares its military and is mobilizing its societal base for what some would say is inevitable war.<sup>143</sup>

Russia's obsession with the 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.<sup>144</sup> Secure nations, comfortable with their governance and succession processes, do not obsess about regime change. After Qadhafi's fall in 2011 in Libya, and the large-scale Bolotnaya protests in Moscow in 2011–2012, the Russian state-controlled media and government pronouncements became quite strident.<sup>145</sup> During 2014–2016, a main theme at the Moscow Security Conference 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 the age of 45 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 the birth of a new Russia shorn of 14 of its republics comprising one-third of its landmass and half its population, including over 25 million ethnic Russians, spread into an often-contentious peripheral diaspora. This remarkable event was, and still is, a bitter pill for many Russians, best captured by Putin's now well quoted statement in 2005:

*Above all, we should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century. As for the Russian nation, it became*

## NATO Expansion, 1949–2017



Source: Patrick Neil/Wiki Commons

*a genuine drama. Tens of millions of our co-citizens and co-patriots found themselves outside Russian territory. Moreover, the epidemic of disintegration infected Russia itself.<sup>146</sup>*

The difficult and mismanaged economic reforms in the 1990s saw the rise of the first wave of oligarchs—corrupt, powerful businessmen with heavy influence on Moscow’s inner political circles. Western political chortling of victory in the Cold War, difficult to coordinate and execute Western aid efforts, a lack of Russian understanding as to why NATO enlarged, 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 has focused on the incorporation of newly sovereign states into a democratic, market-based system with defensive intentions. The traumatized nations of Central and Eastern Europe were desperate to be part of a peaceful and

credible defensive alliance, after the Soviet breakup and centuries of being bloodily squashed “in-between,” marched over, and occupied by adversarial great powers.<sup>147</sup> The key point Russia never fully comprehended in the wake of its dissolution and breakup of the Warsaw Pact is that, unlike NATO, membership was never democratic or voluntary for its members.

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.<sup>148</sup> One author saw these efforts up close while working on NATO Policy and the Partnership for Peace program on the Joint Staff from 1996–1999 and even wrote a thought piece about bringing Russia into the military structure as part of a NATO-Russia Contingency Command.<sup>149</sup> Pulling Russia completely into the Alliance, however, was simply not feasible with ongoing internecine clashes—Moldova, Armenia-Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Tajikistan come to mind—in the FSU. It was also too difficult to get NATO member governments to buy into Article 5 assurances for a nation that shared an approximately 2,600-mile land border with China, with whom Russia had border problems until only recently.<sup>150</sup>

Both Russia and the United States did manage to sign the Budapest Memorandum in 1994, guaranteeing Ukrainian sovereignty in exchange for Ukraine giving up its nuclear weapons.<sup>151</sup> Russian paratroopers were even integrated into NATO operations in Bosnia.<sup>152</sup> This NATO-Russia interaction in the Balkans that lingered into 2003 was a challenging and difficult process that expired primarily due to unchecked Serbian excesses that ended with the NATO bombing of Belgrade and intervention to stop genocide in Kosovo in 1999.<sup>153</sup> Even moderate Russians were deeply upset by the U.S.-NATO intervention despite the righteousness of Western actions to prevent a Kosovar-Albanian genocide.<sup>154</sup> This was the real break and the beginning of the downward spiral of post-Cold War NATO-Russia relations.<sup>155</sup>

From a Russian perspective, the problems concerning NATO’s enlargement began in the discussions about Germany’s reunification. For decades, the Russian narrative contended that verbal promises were made to Gorbachev at high levels that NATO would not expand to the east when Germany reunified.<sup>156</sup> Most Russians, stoked by their state-controlled press, genuinely believed this. In recently released documents from The George Washington University National Security Archive, evidence appears to support the Russian contention that private assurances were made that NATO would not expand east if Germany was allowed to unify. The reporting of such was widely reported within Russian media, but lightly covered in the West.<sup>157</sup>

Whatever occurred, it is clear that most Western leaders had no premeditated plan in 1990–1991 to expand NATO; it was only in 1994 that the intention to enlarge was announced. Over time, and a changing situation that included Eastern and Central European nations clamoring

to be part of the alliance, a careful and methodical enlargement by deserving nations abiding by rule of law became part of NATO's policy.<sup>158</sup> Notably NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP), its key interoperability program to prepare nations for potential NATO membership, was not established until 1994; Russia even briefly became a participating PfP member in 1995.<sup>159</sup>

By 1990, a reunited Germany was in NATO, and in 1999, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic entered the Alliance.<sup>160</sup> Throughout the process, the Russians were consulted, and to any informed observer, the militaries joining the Alliance were not a conventional threat to Russia.<sup>161</sup> In 2004, a second major tranche joined the alliance—Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.<sup>162</sup> Of the seven, all with small militaries, three are former Soviet republics bordering contemporary Russia, something that Moscow has not taken lightly. 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 enlargement process by issuing incendiary statements over Montenegro's invitation and ultimate entry into NATO in 2017 has further damaged the fragile NATO-Russia relationship.<sup>163</sup>

The main takeaway from this is that there was no preordained, opportunistic stampede to enlarge NATO after the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics; rather, it was a slow, methodical, and difficult diplomatic process within NATO and its aspirant nations. Even if the United States understood Russia's concerns about an expanded NATO, it was impossible to ignore the democratic will to join within each of these nations. The post-Cold War era was about these countries deciding their own destinies, independently from Russia. Despite this, the eastern expansion of NATO will always be perceived as a threat to Russia, as it questions the necessity of the Cold War institution in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—in Russian eyes, its mere existence signals that Russia does not fit into the modern international order.

Judging from the Russian reaction to tiny Montenegro, with just 2,000 military personnel who pose no threat, there will be a continued and robust Russian political and gray zone effort to undermine any serious Serbian or any other Balkans state joining the European Union. The Serbian leadership with some division is still considering the EU option while striving to keep good relations with Moscow. However, Russia, with its strong historical and cultural ties to Serbia, continues to aggressively counter any such move politically and by other disruptive hybrid methods. These include efforts to destabilize Kosovo and to back the ethnic-Serbian Republika Srpska in Bosnia-Herzegovina.<sup>164</sup> To date, Russia's reaction to the future Republic of North Macedonia's signing of an accession protocol on February 6, 2019, to become NATO's 30<sup>th</sup> member state has been measured.<sup>165</sup>

As Dimitar Bechev of the European Policy Institute in Sofia, Bulgaria, stated, “Russia sees the West meddling in its backyard, and President Vladimir V. Putin shows he wants to reciprocate. They see the Balkans as the West’s underbelly, and they use it to throw their weight around and project power on the cheap.”<sup>166</sup> These efforts will be a key Balkans development to watch. One can only look at Russia’s aggressive reaction to Ukraine’s drive toward EU association in 2013 as a barometer of how it may act, especially if Serbia were to move toward more European integration. Such a move would also require the intermediary step of Serbia’s reconciliation and ultimate recognition of Kosovo’s statehood, something that Russia is adamantly against.<sup>167</sup>

While a natural progression from the Western perspective, NATO’s enlargement and its embrace of reforming Central and Eastern European nations desiring Article 5—collective defense—sanctuary was seen by the Russians ominously through a prism steeped in the centuries-long historiography of traditional 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 viciously prosecuted a war of annihilation by Nazi Germany that led to the deaths of a staggering 20–26 million Soviets, many of whom were civilians.<sup>168</sup> 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 a mere 85 miles.

Russia also harbors a deep suspicion toward NATO/EU soft power. 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 continued, difficult, and still bloody confrontation between Moscow and Kyiv.<sup>169</sup> Russia’s reaction following Yanukovich’s ouster—surreptitiously committing special forces to seize Crimea and backing proxy forces in Eastern Ukraine—shed light on evolving Russian geostrategic thought, especially regarding the regions on its periphery. The perception that democratic revolutions designed toward regime change are the greatest existential threat to the Russia state has heavily influenced Russian interventions since.<sup>170</sup> In both cases, Russia took both overt and covert military action to achieve its objectives, which should give policymakers insight into how Russia might preemptively react over future events involving FSU nations Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Moldova (Transnistria), Ukraine, and, most dangerously, NATO’s Baltic allies. Closely watching future secession scenarios, for example in Belarus and Kazakhstan, will be instructive, though the succession of power after the long-time autocrat President Islam Karimov’s 2016 death in Uzbekistan was surprisingly peaceful and smooth.<sup>171</sup>

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, exercising impressive imagination and operational security, were successful with their masked invasion and illegal annexation of Crimea, follow-up efforts using proxies and nonattributed Russian forces to secure large tracts of Eastern Ukraine on behalf of its large ethnic Russian population bogged down after initial successes.<sup>172</sup> Efforts to use variations of hybrid, nonlinear warfare, seemingly so effective in Crimea, failed to create the conditions necessary to seize Kharkiv, Mariupol, and Odessa. The likely unwitting Russian proxy downing of Air Malaysia MH-17 packed with EU civilians in July 2014 signaled a nadir for Russian efforts in Eastern Ukraine and international marginalization that did not improve until after Russia's bold intervention in Syria 15 months later.<sup>173</sup>

From 2014 through 2016, four new strategic factors emerged that continue to influence the greater Ukraine 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.<sup>174</sup> Over 32 million Ukrainians, while not necessarily anti-Russian, were now proudly pro-Ukrainian. They would fight to protect their identity and their homeland. This was a significant strategic miscalculation by Russia, which used the idea of protecting “ethnic Russians” to promote its efforts in Ukraine.
- The EU managed to implement effective and sustained sanctions that have remained in place despite Russian countermeasures and the aftermath of the Brexit vote, adding pressure on both the Russian economy and public well-being.<sup>175</sup>
- NATO sharpened its strategic Article 5 European focus after the transition of its International Security Assistance Force mission in Afghanistan to Operation *Resolute Support's* role of advise and support. This NATO realignment was another key strategic development that Russia had not counted on. Shortly afterward, Russia shut down its already diminished Northern Distribution Network, which had provided strategic transit routes to Afghanistan.<sup>176</sup>
- Russia in 2014 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 and by extension, the regime's long-term Achilles' heel, the pro-regime cohesion of its population.<sup>177</sup>

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

Neighboring Ukraine, and not part of any security alliance except Russia's weak CSTO, is Alexander Lukashenko's prickly Belarus. Other than Ukraine, the easily trafficable Belarus is the other major component of any traditional buffer between the West and Russian heartland. Directly astride the main invasion route between Central Europe and Moscow, Belarus was the pathway toward Moscow and Russia's vitals both for Napoleon's 1812 frozen march to oblivion, and within the lifetime of its senior citizens, the brutal onslaught of Hitler's Nazi legions in 1941. As a result, over 2 million of Belarus's approximately 8 million citizens perished during World War II, the worst loss by any country or state republic during the war.<sup>178</sup>

For these mostly "buffer zone" territorial reasons, major concern was evinced about the viability of the Lukashenko regime in early 2017, triggering discussions about what Putin would do if the current regime collapsed and Minsk was to be seen leaning West in its orientation. This regime change narrative is probably, other than Ukraine, the scenario that could most trigger a Russian military intervention to prop up pro-Russian interests in Minsk that incidentally did not support Russia's 2014 reactive invasion of Ukraine.<sup>179</sup> Such a scenario would be extremely dangerous and could regionally spill—either by accident or calculation—into dangerous brinkmanship involving Russia and its Kaliningrad exclave, Poland, the Baltics, and Ukraine into a worst-case scenario Article 5 conflict. In September 2017, there were major concerns that the Russians would insert additional forces into Belarus using the widely publicized 2017 quadrennial military exercise Zapad (West) for cover as it has done with other exercises.<sup>180</sup> Such a move, however, would have been totally counterproductive for Russia; why antagonize the mostly pliant Lukashenko regime by inserting forces without its assent and lose one of its few allies while incurring potential resistance and even more stringent international sanctions? Strategically, however, if Russia generally thought war was imminent, Belarus's position and role would be perceived as massively important for both Russia and its neighbors.

Another nearby state is Moldova, with its breakaway republic of Transnistria that pulled away from Moldova in a post-Soviet 1992 civil war. Wedged between Moldova and Ukraine, this tiny elongated ethnic Russian-dominated swath of land along the Dniester River remains a "frozen conflict" that effectively freezes Moldova out of any realistic near-term prospect for EU or NATO membership.<sup>181</sup> In recent years, Moldova and the EU have forged a closer bond,



fostering stronger economic and political ties. For example, Moldovans can now travel in the Schengen Zone without a visa. Relations at present, involving Russia and Moldova, are complicated as seen with the political infighting that led to the January 2018 suspension of its pro-Russian President Igor Dodon.<sup>182</sup>

Concerns persist that Russia could enhance conflict and destabilize the region—including Romania and Ukraine—using hybrid techniques in breakaway Transnistria as a springboard. Russia maintains its “14<sup>th</sup> Army” in Transnistria—about 1,200 troops—which remains ostensibly to protect the interests and autonomy of its majority ethnic Russian population of about 385,000.<sup>183</sup> This would be, however, a difficult military proposition for Russia, as reinforcing Transnistria would require an air or sealift through unfriendly airspace in crisis. For now, despite dependent Transnistria’s expensive support costs, it appears Russia will keep the region fomenting and unresolved.<sup>184</sup>

Overall within and along the periphery of the Black Sea, the always edgy geostrategic situation turned increasingly dangerous in late 2018. The November 25 incident when Russian ships seized three Ukrainian vessels trying to enter the Sea of Azov through the narrow Kerch Strait, where Russia in 2017 completed a 12-mile bridge, encapsulates many of the strains and tensions in the greater region, especially between Ukraine and Russia. The next day, the Ukrainians placed its military on full alert and declared martial law. Russia bristles at internationally supported Ukrainian freedom of navigation through the strait and provisioning of the coastal cities of Mariopol and Berdiansk. Moscow directly challenges that due to the proximity of the annexed Crimean and Russian-mainland Kerch land-mass that it has legal primacy as to who should transit the strait and sail within the Sea of Azov. Since the incident, as of February 2019, Moscow is still holding 24 Ukrainian seamen captive, and the region remains tense with concerns that these moves could presage more aggressive Russian actions including a military sea-land offensive to link up its mainland near Rostov over land to Crimea. This would support the aspirations of those still advocating for a czarist-era “New Russia,” a fateful step that would net Russia vociferous worldwide condemnation and sanction. While unlikely, this military scenario is plausible if overall tensions continue to grow, piling on with the ongoing bloodshed in Eastern Ukraine, the breakaway Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and eyes on a likely contentious Ukrainian election in March, 2019.<sup>185</sup>

### **Turkey**

Due to its geostrategic crossroads position, Turkey mandates specific mention. A stable, supportive Ankara appears an increasingly unlikely challenging proposition for the United States



and NATO, the European Union, and the numerous nations it regionally abuts. Ankara's policies and inclinations appear increasingly as a Near Middle Eastern nation first and a NATO Ally second, troubling trends that Russia appears to be opportunistically exploiting.<sup>186</sup> Russia's deft handling of Turkey after the loss of one of its fighter bombers to a Turkish F-16 fighter in November

2015 was impressively measured and nonkinetic. Not only did Russia shortly afterward insert S-400s into Syria, but relations burgeoned after an initial frost between autocratic President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Putin. Contact further accelerated between Moscow and Ankara after the failed Turkish military-led coup against Erdogan in July 2016.<sup>187</sup> Despite this, Ankara is working alternatives that include Azerbaijan, Central Asia, and Qatar to mitigate Turkey's dependence on Russia for about 55 percent of its natural gas imports, which gives Moscow additional leverage on Turkish affairs.<sup>188</sup>

While major differences separate Russia and Turkey regarding Ankara's anti-Asad posture and the Turkish military cross-border push in northern Syria, implacability regarding the Kurds,<sup>189</sup> and ongoing complicated machinations in the Caucasus regarding Georgia and Armenia<sup>190</sup> relations have improved between the two autocrats, making future events in the Middle East and Southeast Europe even more unpredictable.

One must remember, however, the difficult history regarding Turkey and Russia. Their traditional centuries-long tensions, magnified by Russia's restless push against the Ottoman Turks to dominate the Black Sea and Dardanelles while supporting Orthodox friends in the Balkans, are factors that led to numerous bloody conflicts between the two nations.<sup>191</sup> While Russia may temporally revel at the growing estrangement between the United States, NATO, EU, and Turkey that even includes the Turks agreeing to buy Russian S-400 missile systems, Moscow should take a deep look into the next generation and think carefully about the risks of Ankara unanchoring from a stability-based organization such as NATO and evolving back into a large, increasingly conservative Sunni Islamic nation directly to its south. Turkey still borders substantial Russian interests and has recently been a conduit for transiting terrorists. Short-term geopolitical gains regarding Moscow and Ankara could very well come at the expense of Russian internal security when growing Sunni-based demographics will play an even larger role in future Russia. Notably as recently as August 17, 2017, according to Pew polling, despite all the recent Ankara-Moscow engagement, up to 54 percent of Turks still had a negative view of Russia.<sup>192</sup>

### **The Arctic and the High North**

Russia is significantly building its presence in the Arctic and High North in a strategically defensive posture that we would describe as "aggressively status quo." It is placing several ground brigades in the north, reactivating a chain of mutually supporting Soviet-era airbases, and aggressively consolidating territory that it claims is within its territorial span laid out in the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS).<sup>193</sup> It is also modernizing and building ports and search and rescue

stations near the fast-melting Northern Sea Route (NSR) to accommodate Russian and international shipping, including the Chinese.

To manage this effort, the General Staff created out of the Northern Fleet a new Arctic-focused headquarters in Severomorsk named the Joint Strategic Command North, in essentially a 5<sup>th</sup> Military District added to the Western (St. Petersburg), Central (Ekaterinberg), Southern (Rostov), and Eastern (Khabarovsk) military districts.<sup>194</sup>

Its security concerns are multifaceted. First, the relentless melting of the polar ice pack is opening up a large channel from the Barents to the North Atlantic. When coupled with the inexorable thawing of vast tracts of Russia's northern permafrost emitting large gouts of methane and unsettling gas pipelines, the NSR is creating both a strategic economic opportunity and strategic vulnerability for Russia with a heightened risk for accidents and environmental disasters. Russia, with some foreign aid, is investing billions into an industry that will produce short- to mid-term gains, but generationally is not sustainable. Despite real efforts, especially in the realms of information technology and agriculture, Moscow struggles to adequately diversify its economy.<sup>195</sup> In the long term, major Russian energy buyers like the EU may transition to cleaner forms of energy entirely, leaving Russia further in debt with unused infrastructure. Notably, the Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation now accounts for 20 percent of the entire Russian GDP, an impressive feat considering that the new Russian pivot toward the Arctic only started in 2007.<sup>196</sup>

Russia has accelerated the construction of its already numerous icebreaking fleet by laying the keel of the nuclear-powered *Sibir*, the largest in the world, in September 2017.<sup>197</sup> In all, Russia has over 40 icebreakers in its fleet, 6 of which are nuclear. No other country possesses such a nuclear icebreaker fleet.<sup>198</sup> In contrast, the U.S. Coast Guard has two icebreakers, one of which is constantly under repair with up to six more set as a requirement; Sweden, Finland, and Canada have small fleets.<sup>199</sup> China has two, with one more planned for 2019.<sup>200</sup>

To Russia, the value of the Arctic north is multifold. First, it is a strategic bastion for its strategic ballistic missile submarines concentrated near the Kola Peninsula and its southeast toward the Sea of Okhotsk. Second, as Siberian oil and natural gas are increasingly depleted, or made more difficult to extract due to the thawing permafrost, it is a potentially valuable asset in terms of its deposits of oil and gas. However, such assets require major effort and a safe environment to extract. Third, the NSR promises trade advantages, especially if it becomes commercially viable for major long-haul shipping as an alternative to potentially more vulnerable southern routes, especially if, for example, a crisis were to break out near the Strait of Malacca, choking off Asian supply. It also has a major cost-savings benefit. Using the Northern Sea Route instead of the Suez Canal to travel from Rotterdam, Netherlands, to Dalian, China, for example,



would shorten the trip by 13 days, which is nearly 20 percent.<sup>201</sup> A drawback, however, for major NSR growth as a commerce conduit is that without icebreaking, it is seaborne trafficable for only about four months a year.

While the Russian military's actions in this region seem aggressive, in totality, they appear strategically defensive. With its already stretched military and sheer inhospitality of the Far North, it is unfeasible that Russia has any realistic notion of "conquering" the entire Arctic region, as some argue. More realistically, it is firmly consolidating its position and putting itself in a military posture to support the Arctic claims that it is trying to stake out via UNCLOS.<sup>202</sup> This is doubly important to Russia, as the bulk of its GDP even with fallen prices is oil- and gas-derived. Therefore, the Russians see no other choice but to expand their extraction to the north.<sup>203</sup> As Konstantin Simonov, director of the Moscow-based National Energy Security, found "Russia's current predicament is very simple. . . . Gas fields discovered in the 1960s laid the foundation for Russia's decades-long dominance of the global natural gas market. Now these Soviet-era giants are in decline. Moving farther north into the Arctic is the next logical step."<sup>204</sup>

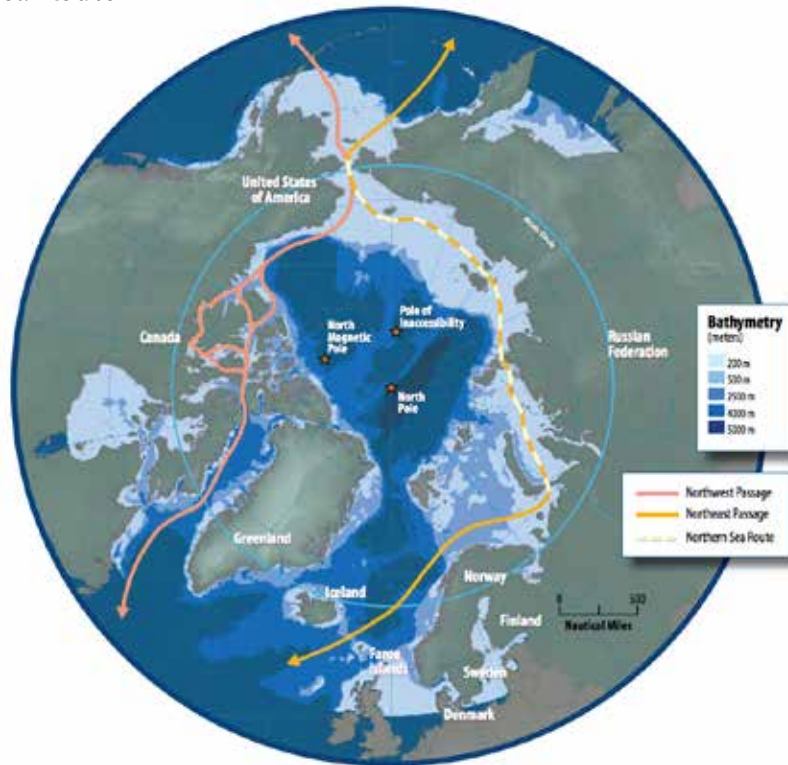
The Arctic is an arena where there may be a basis for real cooperation primarily through the auspices of the eight-nation Arctic Council. It is in the interest of these nations—Canada,



Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and United States—to avoid excessive militarization of the Arctic’s pristine climate and fragile ecosystem, as well as to prevent it from becoming a battleground. All these countries are wary of other nations making claims in this vast area that could unsettle the unwritten balance in the region.<sup>205</sup> Therefore, it will be essential in the years ahead that all members, including NATO Allies, sail and tread carefully in the High North.

For example, northeast of the strategic GI-UK (Greenland-Iceland, United Kingdom) Gap are Norway’s Svalbard Islands. Well north of the Arctic Circle, they are relatively near sensitive Russian nuclear-focused naval installations in the Barents and White Sea. Their international legal status is complex. While made sovereign to Norway, the 1920 Treaty stipulated that citizens of the signatory nations all have access to Svalbard and that Svalbard remains demilitarized. This includes Russia, as the Soviet Union became a signatory in 1925, and today the second-largest settlement on Svalbard is a Russian mining settlement called Barentsburg that maintains the northernmost consulate in the world. The Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin controversially visited the settlement by air in 2015.<sup>206</sup>

### Northern Sea Route



Source: Arctic Council/Susan Harder

While disputes are mostly linked to maritime limits within the Barents Sea and fishing rights beyond Svalbard's territorial zone, this appears to be an area ripe for tension and exploitation if tensions were to worsen between Russia, Norway, and by extension NATO and the Arctic overall.<sup>207</sup>

Similar but different dynamics are important to consider for the waters abounding the Russian Far East, especially near Kamchatka Peninsula, Sakhalin, and the Sea of Okhotsk where, in 1983, the ill-fated off-course Korean Air Lines 007 was shot down by a Soviet interceptor in one of the most dangerous incidents of the Cold War.<sup>208</sup> While all nations militarily plying these waters must be carefully measured, Russia in particular must show restraint with its increasingly dangerous naval and aerial saber-rattling in the region, as an accident or incident in the High North could be exceedingly perilous for all parties concerned.

China, having already acquired two icebreakers and planning to build another, is a notable concern. Despite such concerns, China, along with India, Italy, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, were welcomed as observer states to the Arctic Council in 2013. In a new white paper published in January of 2018, China documented its belief that it is a “near-Arctic” nation, announcing its plan to become heavily involved in the region while following international law.<sup>209</sup> The stated goal of such policy is to establish a “Polar Silk Road,” enhancing the attractiveness of BRI by making resource-strapped China less reliant on southern sea routes.<sup>210</sup> Such involvement may raise further concerns for Russia about the competition and threat of an increased Chinese Arctic presence interested in commercial navigation, and resources including not only oil and natural gas but also its still bountiful fish stocks. Yet China could also serve as a near-term development partner in the region, especially filling the vacuum of former mutual investors such as ExxonMobil that, due to sanctions pressure, pulled out of its relationship with Rosneft in early 2018.<sup>211</sup> Russia would benefit financially from an enhanced Chinese presence, particularly as new Russian ports are developed. In the near term, this partnership could serve Russia's strategic interest, especially if it is able to improve its financial situation—although this could become problematic by the next generation if Chinese-Russian relations become more strained and competitive with China is more firmly rooted in the region.

### **The Russian Military**

The Russian military, though much improved as an overall fighting force, is not the juggernaut it is sometimes perceived 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 about how and when to best employ their military.<sup>212</sup> Therefore, its aggressive yet carefully calibrated and continued

### Norway's Svalbard Islands



Source: Rob984/Wiki Commons

intervention into Syria was of major significance. Even so, despite much diplomatic rhetoric, its careful non-escalatory steps surrounding the aforementioned battering by U.S. forces in February 2018 of overly aggressive Russian military contractors in Syria, followed in April by U.S., British, and French strikes against the Asad regime's chemical warfare capabilities, perhaps best reveal its own real perception of the limits of its out-of-area military reach in the face of a world-class military opponent.<sup>213</sup>

Russia's current demographic and economic challenges make it difficult to sustain large standing field forces especially abroad.<sup>214</sup> 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 (FSB), include roughly a quarter-million MVD interior troops, who compete in the same Russian personnel pool as the regular armed forces. The role of the MVD has devolved to primarily law enforcement and physical security activities, while the regime's recently constituted "national guard" continues to flesh out to a force of over 300,000 that could be employed internally or externally with a type of "Praetorian Guard"



allegiance to the regime.<sup>215</sup> 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, major inconsistencies remain in terms of force preparedness and budget.<sup>216</sup>

Despite its major and partially successful effort to create a volunteer force, the expenses, current sanctions, and social challenges have slowed progress.<sup>217</sup> The Russian military, especially the land forces, still consists 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.<sup>218</sup> Conscription is generally unpopular in Russia, though due to major reforms and successes since the 2008 Georgian conflict, the popularity of the Russian military has grown in recent years, reaching 58 percent approval in 2017.<sup>219</sup> However, for career leaders and trainers, the challenges of annually bringing in and assimilating several hundred thousand temporary, 1-year recruits into formed units remain quite daunting.<sup>220</sup> What has helped is that in Syria, outcomes aside, many forces were able to get ground experience.<sup>221</sup> *Dedovshina* (hazing) of recruits remains a problem despite overall improvements in military quality of life. Moving forward, Russian decisionmakers will have to think long and hard before deploying conscript-heavy, social media-connected ground units into complicated, sensitive, and potentially divisive cross-border arenas such as Eastern Ukraine, the Baltics, or even Syria.<sup>222</sup>

Russia’s standing nuclear forces (Strategic Rocket Forces, Strategic Aviation, and navy) still command the *crème* of the Russian military personnel system. Elite forces such as the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (otherwise known as the GRU) and FSB Spetsnaz, airborne forces, and naval 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 with direct and indirect (hybrid) conflict in Crimea, Donetsk-Luhansk, and Syria. These forces have been heavily used in the past 4 years and despite their major advancements are likely in major need of rest and refit. Cracks have appeared in the facade of even elite elements, as revealed by their occasional capture in cross-border locations such as Eastern Ukraine, followed usually by official nonattribution as Russian military by the Putin regime.<sup>223</sup>

Notably, the entire Russian nonnuclear military has been recently exercised and challenged in a troika of three major military operations between 2014 and 2019. Each operation—from the mostly nonviolent 2014 stealth invasion of Ukraine’s Crimea directly after the Sochi Olympics, followed by the still ongoing shadow conflict within Eastern Ukraine, to the full-blown, conventionally tactical and strategic intervention into Syria in late 2015—that has stretched into 2019—has improved the overall fighting prowess and organization of the Russian military. In these operations, especially in Eastern Ukraine and Syria, the Russians have made great

strides in refining complex military capabilities using increasingly sophisticated intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets including extensive use of drones and cyber and electronic warfare capabilities. Knitted within a robust and speedy cyber backbone, these capabilities increasingly enable Russia's enhanced tactical to strategic command and control of joint air, ground, and sea operations, as well as special forces employment. This also has extended into coalition operations with their Syrian, Iranian, and Hizballah partners.<sup>224</sup>

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 doctrine and recently announced National Security Strategy.<sup>225</sup> However, they are preparing their military and society for potential conflict with the West.<sup>226</sup> Closely noting our U.S. and allied lessons learned most notably during the two operationally decisive Iraq campaigns in 1991 and 2003 (that highlighted our revolution in military affairs) and ongoing strategic investment in high-tech offsets, Moscow has worked on a tech-heavy offset of its own. Calling it "New Generation Warfare," this Russian effort incorporates a wide range of tactics from nonkinetic gray zone activities to full-fledged combat operations.<sup>227</sup>

The Russians are well aware of their overall deficiencies and lack of allies.<sup>228</sup> Its military is also quite spread out, attenuated along Russia's vast periphery with high-quality forces directly engaged in Syria and discreetly in Eastern Ukraine, with standing garrisons in Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Transnistria. Therefore, any major prospective action must involve some mobilization and internal regrouping with concentrations masked and distracted by pre-hostility corrosive soft power "hybrid" activities before launching a surprise first strike that must be fast, deep, precise, and multispectral.

Every year the Russian military, with large elements of its society supporting the effort, undertakes a major military exercise rotating annually through the regional military districts. During these preplanned, widely publicized exercises, a wide array of joint forces in essentially a national effort stretch the nation's transportation and logistics network supporting scenarios involving major foreign threats. The Zapad (West) 2017 wargame that occurred primarily in the Western Military District—including near the Baltic and Belarusian borders—riveted the region as concerns proliferated that Russia would use the exercise as a guise to invade the three NATO Baltic nations and/or slip major forces into Belarus. While there was much maneuvering and exercising, no such invasion occurred. In 2018, all eyes were on the Vostok (East) exercise in the Russian Far East, advertised as Russia's largest ever exercise, a major signal given that the Soviet Union also held huge exercises during the Cold War. Vostok 2014, set just months after Crimea's annexation, was also billed as Russia's largest exercises to date.<sup>229</sup> Notably, regional

partners such as China and Mongolia participated. With reportedly 3,200 soldiers directly involved, the Chinese role was substantive, but still relatively small. It did, however, connote a further deepening of military-to-military relations between these traditionally wary nations who share a vast, formerly contentious border. This development must be closely watched to determine if these highly publicized Chinese-Russia military exchanges are just interactive and largely symbolic in nature, or, more ominously, will they become increasingly focused on interoperability with an eye on future collaborative coalition operations. While at Zapad 17, there was much “flash and bang”; in Vostok 2018, there is no specific threat that would envision a scenario in which Russian forces would intervene across the border in Asia unless further west in Central Asia within the southern lands of the FSU.

Another potential threat to monitor are the numerous “snap exercises” ordered on short notice by the Russian Ministry of Defense, focusing on unit and infrastructure readiness, that could put large standing forces traveling by ground, sea, air, and rail into proximity of a perceived vulnerability, regional hot spot, or target of opportunity. These major exercises—whether announced or snap—must be closely monitored as they could set a precondition for intervention or invasion as occurred with exercise Caucasus 2008 just before Russia’s military seizure of Georgia’s Abkhazia and South Ossetia in August 2008.<sup>230</sup>

While there are those who wish for the geographic reknitting of the Soviet Union, most pragmatic 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, the ability to commit swift deployable forces that could, for example, overturn a looming color revolution within a failing former FSU capital such as Minsk or Astana, or even the ability to conduct limited out-of-area operations in strategically important regions such as Syria. Without a significant mobilization, the Russian military, especially with its conscript-reliant ground forces, cannot hold large expanses of contested ground as would have been the case if it made, or still considers, a 120-mile deep attempt at seizing Crimea’s Isthmus of Perekop via Mariupol.

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 and threatening—as reinforced by the recent deployment of SS-26 Iskander short-range ballistic missiles to Kaliningrad—even though these areas should be among the quietest and most peaceful of all Russia’s borders.<sup>231</sup>

## Further Afield: Latin America and Africa

Although this survey focuses on the extended geostrategic “girdle” of nations that are contiguous to or near Russian borders, for comprehensiveness, a short mention should be made of major peripheral regions where the Russians—economizing force and resources by use of asymmetric means—are also active. While not major staging areas for their military, Latin America and Africa are certainly platforms for aggressive Russian diplomacy, economy, intelligence, and corrosive asymmetric gray zone activities. National Security Advisor John Bolton outlined that the Trump administration plans to counter Russian and Chinese investment in Africa by increasing economic ties in the region.<sup>232</sup>

### Latin America

In Latin America, Russia seeks to rebuild and cultivate relationships with some of its former Soviet-era partners, such as Nicaragua and El Salvador and the new “ALBA Bolivarian Alliance,” both for economic influence reasons and to chip away at American regional dominance.<sup>233</sup>

In recent years, especially after its retrenchment in the 1990s, Russia has pushed major inroads within Latin America across a broad front of activities. These include:

- An increasing surge of senior-level Latin American visitors with Russia, which far outstrips corresponding visits to the United States.<sup>234</sup>
- A growing number of regional nations are enthusiastically supporting Russia’s agenda and seek to aid it in displacing what they see as U.S. hegemony in Latin America. These nations include Nicolas Maduro’s Venezuela, Daniel Ortega’s Nicaragua, and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front’s El Salvador. Furthermore, the above-mentioned 14-nation ALBA bloc, founded in 2004 by the mercurial former president of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez, and Cuba’s Fidel Castro is increasingly supporting Russia’s growing diplomatic, economic, and military activities in the region.<sup>235</sup>
- Russia, adept in gray zone media manipulation, has expanded its media presence in Latin America, opening outlets aimed at state and nonstate entities that promote Russian and partner activities while expounding a corrosive anti-American narrative in the region.<sup>236</sup>

- Specifically, in Nicaragua, in addition to military and other projects, Russia is supporting the Ortega regime with intelligence expertise and counternarcotics assistance. Reportedly one Russian facility may contain satellite equipment conducting international surveillance.<sup>237</sup>
- Russian arms sales have significantly risen to the broad region, reaching approximately \$10 billion since 2000.
- Russian cyber security and surveillance cooperation have also expanded in Latin America in recent years. The Russian Protei ST company has been particularly involved in several regional projects.<sup>238</sup>
- In countries such as Guatemala, Russian government and related oligarchic financial entities are increasingly able to manipulate host governments into giving them advanced accesses and privileges that include taking actions against Russian citizens that they disfavor. Notably in 2003, the Russian oil tycoon Alexander Khodorkovsky was sentenced to 10 years in a Guatemalan prison after he fell into displeasure with the Putin regime.<sup>239</sup>
- In Cuba, Russia is regaining its presence and influence. Economically, it is expanding its trade role, with an estimated 81 percent increase in exports to Cuba in 2017. While China remains Cuba's main trading partner, Russia has gained traction with its old ally.<sup>240</sup> Additionally, Putin spoke of strengthening Russia's "strategic partnership" with Cuba on the recent election of Miguel Diaz Canel-Bermudez to president, replacing Raul Castro and ending 59 years of Castro rule.<sup>241</sup> While discussion emerged in 2016 about Russia reestablishing a military base in Cuba, no tangible evidence of such has been noted.<sup>242</sup>
- Finally, the 2019 crisis in Venezuela has put Russia in the challenging position of having to support a clearly failed and internationally unpopular leader in a broad region where Moscow's influence, while disruptive, is clearly limited. Moscow's support for Maduro reveals how differently Russia (and China) looks at the world politically and philosophically. Recent, visible attempts to publically shore up the Maduro regime, while unambiguously messaging the United States and the world, was highlighted by the fly-in of two strategic, nuclear capable Blackjack bombers in December and by staunchly supporting the Maduro regime in its efforts to survive a growing popular movement set on its overthrow.

Summarizing Russia's position in Cuba, and perhaps in Latin America overall, a senior Obama official stated, "Russia is a much less important economic player in the hemisphere than China. Russia has fewer interests in the Americas, but likes to meddle in what they perceive as our backyard."<sup>243</sup>

## **Africa**

Russia has also staked out interests in Africa. Moscow views Africa as a significant investment opportunity and a means to generate future support at the UN. From 2000–2012, trade between Russia and Africa overall increased tenfold.<sup>244</sup> It reached \$17.4 billion in 2017, and from 2012 to 2017, Russia doubled the amount of weapons that it was selling to African countries.<sup>245</sup> Since Russia was sanctioned for its actions in Crimea, it has signed 19 military cooperation deals with countries in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>246</sup> Russia's heightened interest in Africa has included the following:

- More Russian soldiers are involved in peacekeeping in Africa than those from France, the United States, and United Kingdom combined.<sup>247</sup>
- After the United States denied a Nigerian request for attack helicopters, Nigeria turned to Russia, investing in Russian aircraft. It also canceled a U.S. training program and allowed Russia to fill the void.
- In February 2015, Russia and Uganda signed a \$4 billion deal to develop and operate a crude oil refinery. In the same month, Russia and Zimbabwe signed a \$3 billion deal for the development of a platinum mine.<sup>248</sup> After a January 2019 meeting in Moscow between Vladimir Putin and President of Zimbabwe Emmerson Mnangagwa, a deal was announced for Russian investment in Zimbabwe's diamond industry, two finance deals worth \$267 million, and a fertilizer supply contract.<sup>249</sup>
- Russia has pursued a dual strategy in Libya. It has pursued a relationship with General Khalifa Haftar, assisting his troops located near western Egypt. At the same time, it has also maintained contact with the Government of National Accord. Its ultimate goal is to have an influence on the future of Libya.
- Algeria and Russia share intelligence on terrorism in North Africa and have publicly announced plans for higher levels of military cooperation.

- Tunisia and Russia have also shared intelligence and announced a nuclear energy co-operation agreement in 2016. By 2016, Russian tourism had also increased tenfold in Tunisia.
- In October 2016, Morocco and Russia announced 11 agreements in agriculture, military, and energy, including the sale of Russian liquefied natural gas.<sup>250</sup>
- In 2017, with UN Security Council approval for an arms embargo exception, Moscow sent weapons and contractors to the Central African Republic (CAR) to train local soldiers and protect mining projects.<sup>251</sup> In January 2019, the CAR's defense minister stated that there was a possibility that Russia could open a military base in the country.<sup>252</sup>
- A growing controversy in the CAR is the presence of Wagner, a Russian paramilitary company that is also involved in Syria and Ukraine. In July 2018, three Russian journalists were killed while investigating the group in the CAR.<sup>253</sup>
- Other relationships with Kenya, Somalia, Eritrea, Uganda, and Ethiopia are also in development.<sup>254</sup>

Russia is positioning itself to be a significant development partner for African countries, trying to compete with the United States and China along with others. It will likely remain a junior partner in the near term but could still complicate matters in the region for the United States, particularly as it is actively seeking involvement in the military and energy sectors.<sup>255</sup>

### **Reemerging Nuclear Concerns**

The pending U.S. withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), formalized on February 2, 2019, with a 6-month period to be fully consummated, has focused the world on the ever-dangerous perils of nuclear weapons. Undoubtedly, the world was lucky to survive the Cold War nuclear competition between the United States and Soviet Union. Typically, nations that build lethal weapons of strategic scope almost always eventually use them—the Cold War with its Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) being the most notable exception. The surreal days of major Civil Defense exercises that stretched into kindergarten classrooms with “duck and cover” drills catalyzed in 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis were brought back into stark reality with the recent false nuclear alarm in Hawaii that panicked millions.<sup>256</sup> The Cuban crisis showed how close the world came to nuclear annihilation; the Cold War was

no longer just a theory, but a real threat to global peace and security. Subsequently, steps were taken that led to the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972, later paving the way toward a sustained, global effort to limit nuclear arms and reduce the threat implicit in the MAD doctrine.

Since the ascent of Putin 19 years ago and the rise of an increasingly assertive Russia, we have reentered the uncomfortable continuum of renewed nuclear tension with Russia. It appears that no major breakthroughs in arms control are on the horizon, although overall strategic stability, including arms control, initially appeared to be the most positive and actionable item discussed at the 2018 Putin-Trump Helsinki Summit.

Nuclear weapons serve as a strategic guarantor for Russia's generally outgunned and outmanned conventional military that feels forced to address numerous potential threats, real and perceived, across its vast periphery. It is an up-and-down nuclear dance with the West that has gone on for generations and, while occasionally dangerous and always uncomfortable, is a paradigm both sides understand.

We must remember, however, that Russia also shares a long border with China that would be enormously difficult to conventionally defend. While relations at present are pragmatically cordial with the declared "strategic partnership" between these nuclear-tipped behemoths, Russian defense planning must take into account a worst-case scenario that could conceivably put Russia and China at loggerheads in the next generation. Medium-range missiles of which China, not an INF signatory, has several hundred could be part of that equation. In this scenario, nuclear weapons would be a strategic balancer both for deterrence and for conflict, as unlikely as it may seem today.<sup>257</sup> Several Russian senior military and think tank researchers have stated their long-term concerns about China, especially if its currently peaceful economic expansion becomes more aggressive via major Eurasian projects such as the BRI or more direct access to natural resources. More specifically, for the current generation of Kremlin leaders, nuclear weapons are part of what makes Russia a global superpower and a nation to be respected and reckoned with. As such, nuclear weapons have broad political and military utility; they are a potent means to intimidate and coerce during both peacetime and crisis and play an important role in Russia's approach to contemporary conflict. Russia's renewed push in the nuclear realm has recently manifested itself by:

- A persistent and insistent pattern of nuclear saber-rattling and threats, such as against Denmark in 2015 and both Norway and Sweden in late 2016, that seeks to induce fear, caution, and, ultimately, paralysis among governments that would have to contemplate whether and how to counter Russian aggression.<sup>258</sup>



- Continuously evolving military doctrine that envisions the possibility of initiating the use of tactical nuclear weapons in order to “deescalate” a regional conventional war.
- Weakening the 1987 INF that as touched on previously mandated the elimination of the entire class of ground-launched intermediate-range ballistic missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 miles and overall strategic stability by the likely violation of that treaty.<sup>259</sup> The likely violation in question was the introduction of the SSC-8 Novator ground-launched cruise missile. It could launch from the same mobile launcher as the Iskander-M and, along with U.S. and allied calls to respond by fielding a similar missile risks breaking the enervated remainder of the remaining arms control regime.<sup>260</sup>
- Continued investment in modernized nuclear forces of all ranges and types.<sup>261</sup>
- Overall, a general refusal to reengage on the question of additional nuclear arms control and threat reduction beyond existing agreements and programs.

The risks to strategic stability are equally evident. Concerns are growing due to the introduction of increasingly capable long-range conventional munitions, including cruise missiles, that can potentially threaten adversaries with nuclear strike and counterstrike capabilities.<sup>262</sup> Coupled with this is a Russian aversion to any Western platform with anti-ballistic missile capability, no matter what threat that it is directed toward. Despite its hundreds of defense-inundating delivery systems, such an aversion extends even to reasonable responses regarding the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs. The U.S. unilateral decision in 2002 to withdraw from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty no doubt fed into this sensitivity.

Furthermore, the atrophying state of the arms control regime assiduously built during the Cold War by legions of hard-working and often disagreeing diplomats, scientists, and bureaucrats makes the current environment potentially even more dangerous. Much of the arms control foundation, which by its sheer existence was a colossal confidence-building measure for all involved parties, has significantly eroded.<sup>263</sup> Major pillars of such measures are all either discontinued or on life support.<sup>264</sup> While all eyes are now focused on the final outcome for INF and the future of the New Start Agreement in 2021, one should recall the substance of prior treaties and agreements now eliminated or suspended. For example, in 2015, Russia withdrew from the Conventional Forces–Europe Treaty and canceled the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program.<sup>265</sup> The Open Skies Agreement has been increasingly questioned, and the Anti-Ballistic

Missile Treaty was scrapped in 2002 by the United States.<sup>266</sup> 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.<sup>267</sup> The erosion of this major layer of depressurizing points of contact that paradoxically were more robust and established during the Cold War bodes ill for the future.<sup>268</sup>

Risk-taking behavior by the Russians could lead to a crisis or even unintended nuclear escalation as could U.S. and/or allied actions misinterpreted by Moscow. This is especially dangerous given the lack of communication between key American and Russian regional military intermediaries—especially the U.S. combatant commands with Russian regional military districts—which could possibly deescalate a potentially disastrous crisis before it engulfs Moscow and Washington decisionmakers. Russia's described deliberate escalation to the tactical nuclear level in a regional conflict could also trigger a series of exchanges well beyond Moscow's ability to predict or control. The whole debate could be specious as it is the view of these authors that the Russian or American use of just one nuclear weapon in the current environment, with the current state of weakened fail-safe mechanisms, would lead to an exchange that likely would end our civilization as we know it.

The danger is that Putin and his circle may well believe they can avoid or control such risks by operating in a preconflict gray zone and conventionally under a "nuclear shadow." This belief seems central to the way Moscow would seek to achieve a rapid fait accompli against a NATO member particularly in the Baltics, or Turkey, and then essentially engage in nuclear blackmail to deter a meaningful collective defense response from the Alliance. Should this attempt at coercion fail, Russia seems prepared to consider the actual use of tactical nuclear weapons to achieve its objectives rather than wage war against NATO forces that, when fully mobilized, would bring superior combat power to the fight.<sup>269</sup> Such actions are those of an insecure nation with major regional aspirations that also realizes it is outgunned and outnumbered both conventionally and diplomatically. This imbalance will only increase into the next generation.

The dangers of Russian nuclear coercion are quite real to those European states most exposed to them. Moscow's preemptively reactive aggression in Ukraine has renewed fears that Europe once again could become a battleground in a conflict that carries no small risk of nuclear use. As a result, NATO finds itself engaged in serious discussions about how to leverage its own conventional and nuclear forces to deter Russia and to deny it the ability to gain advantage from a strategy of nuclear coercion and escalation control. The task of credibly deterring Moscow requires the West not only to shed outdated assumptions and mindsets about Russia but

also to reconstitute its ability to understand Russia as a political and military rival—as well as a potential adversary in war.

An added factor to consider—an enormous tactical-to-strategic leap—is the reemerging Soviet doctrine of using tactical nuclear weapons to “deescalate” a conflict.<sup>270</sup> Additionally, it is unknown exactly how far along in development, or operationally ready, is an entire new generation of conventional and nuclear weapons that Moscow—including Putin in his last two state of the union speeches, the most recent on February 20, 2019, to the Federal Assembly—has noisily declared to the world and the Russian people. These consist of a wide array of enhanced capabilities including a powerful new intercontinental ballistic missile, the RS-28 Sarmat, replacing the aging multiple-warhead SS-18 Satan; an intercontinental hypersonic missile named Avangard that ostensibly can fly to targets at 20 times the speed of sound;<sup>271</sup> the controversial “Kanyon” long-range nuclear torpedo; and an already deployed Kindzal hypersonic missile in the Southern Military District with a range up to 1,250 miles.<sup>272</sup> Notably, Putin emphasized in his 2019 speech that Russia would react to any U.S. repositioning of nuclear missiles to Europe by targeting nations that pose “direct threats.” Additionally, implying the U.S. mainland, he stated that Russian missiles could be targeted on “where the centers of decisionmaking are located.”<sup>273</sup>

Furthermore, according to Putin, who emphasized that “Russia had no plans to be the aggressor,” Moscow has been developing a nuclear-powered cruise missile. He stated that “the launch and the set of ground tests allow to get to creating a radically new type of weaponry—a strategic nuclear weaponry complex with a missile fitted with a nuclear-powered engine. It ostensibly has unlimited range and unlimited ability to maneuver.”<sup>274</sup>

Finally, adding even more to this already jagged narrative, and the regime’s obsession with aspects of regime change, was General Gerasimov’s strange declaration in March 2019 during a speech at Moscow’s Academy of Military Sciences. He stated that the United States was developing a “Trojan Horse” plan to hit Russian missile defense sites with long-range precision-strike weapons in support of domestic anti-government demonstrations.<sup>275</sup>

## 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 cyber-enabled *maskirovka* (deception) and *disinformatsiya* (disinformation) to mask its intent. This has been a core aspect of Soviet-Russian thinking and planning since Stalin’s era and has manifested in the Russian General Staff’s perception of Russia’s territorial and societal “strategic uniqueness” and the need for an asymmetrical mindset and approach to maximize its strengths and offset its vulnerabilities.<sup>276</sup> War could be sparked by the fear of

regime change, a bordering color revolution, or some incendiary incident that rapidly moves to brinksmanship. One increasingly feasible possibility is that conflict could erupt from a failed attempt to subvert a NATO state protected by Article 5.

While preparing its population and the world with an intense media and disinformation campaign, Russian moves would also involve an initial cyber and electronic warfare onslaught to blind, deafen, and confuse U.S. and allied command, control, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, as well as space and navigational capabilities. Kinetic strikes would follow to attack U.S. and allied capital ships—especially aircraft carriers—and forward-based aviation with an opening barrage of precision munitions. The loss of these symbols of Western power and prestige, coupled with a Russian rapid seizure of its objectives, would be followed by a declaration of Russian readiness for a fait accompli political settlement backed by a threat to use nuclear weapons if the United States and Allies were to launch a major counteroffensive or threaten its own nuclear response.<sup>277</sup>

These approaches suggest a strategically defensive mindset by a nation that understands it is globally outmatched, except in the first phase of a military conflict and in the nuclear realm. In any initial phase of a conflict, Russia would use both asymmetric and conventional surprise and confusion to leverage shock and speed as decisive force multipliers. For any major pre-planned scenario, Russia would have to stage a discreet mobilization and call-up of reserves to buttress its standing forces. Another crucial consideration would be the role or non-role of major military powers such as increasingly global China as well as Iran, as they would likely have to assess their own future positions if Russia was isolated and defeated in a major conflict with the West.

One hindrance to Russia's military buildup and modernization is the effects of ongoing sanctions and the overall weakened state of the Russian economy.<sup>278</sup> This resulted in the announcement of a 5 percent reduction in the 2016 modernization budget,<sup>279</sup> while debate about 2017's cuts ranged between 25 percent to a more modest 5 to 7 percent, depending on how one assesses Russian accounting procedures.<sup>280</sup> In January 2019, the Defense Ministry announced that it planned to spend 1.44 trillion rubles (\$21.5 billion) on military procurement in 2019. This figure is half of what the government had planned to spend in 2019.<sup>281</sup> Unless Russia is able to diversify its economy, any military modernization will be hindered in the future.

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.<sup>282</sup> As mentioned, major nuclear treaties have ended or been eroded in recent years. Besides actively working to reduce nuclear arsenals and to moderate the development of new destabilizing weapons, these treaty regimens were also confidence-building measures that reduced tensions and enhanced understanding between the United States and 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 the written and spoken media. Russia continues to work to divide Western Allies and partners politically, domestically, and economically (principally through energy deliveries). Its domestic 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 Luhansk, 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 in a short, limited campaign such as an assault to connect to Crimea by land could emerge victorious against Ukraine, but would then be forced to confront a large, seething Slavic population, a ruined economy, and a hostile global community. Greater Russian pressure on Ukraine will only drive Western upgrades to the Ukrainian military, adding even more modern defensive weapons to Ukraine's arsenal. Furthermore, Russia could see added sanctions by an increasingly resolute West punctuated by its airstrikes in Syria, and reinforced by the continued 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 by Russia 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 not afford to maintain over time. It would also shake Sweden's and Finland's neutrality, bringing the two closer to Russia's Western foes.

As discussed, a Russian intervention in Belarus would not necessarily be successful long term and would once again confirm Western doubts about the revisionist nature of the Russian regime. 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 endeavor, Russia would be forced to use its main units in an area bounded by NATO and Ukrainian forces. And then there is an angry and increasingly unpredictable Turkey, a strategic nation that, de-

spite recent unsettling events, is still a NATO Ally with a strong military. Even after its internal failed coup and warming relations with Russia, Turkey will always—due to its difficult history, geography, and increasingly conservative Sunni religious orientation—present challenges for Moscow.

### **Internal Concerns**

Any complete geostrategic discussion about the Russian Federation must address its unpredictable internal characteristics. Domestically, despite a generally supportive population that occasionally breaks into patriotic, and more narrowly, nationalistic outbursts, many citizens gradually appear to be losing their patience with the regime. Quite fundamentally, large segments of the population, old and young, were outraged by the regime proposal announced in June 2018 during the palliative of the World Cup that the retirement age for men would be raised from 60 to 65 years old and for women 53 to 60. Recoiling from the intensity of the protests, the regime in late August softened its position, announcing that the retirement age for women would be revised to 55.<sup>283</sup> It had to be unnerving to the regime that according to the generally balanced Levada polling service, over 89 percent of the population was somewhat or strongly against this declaration and support for the mainstream United Russia party that swept Putin to presidential victory plummeted in its wake.<sup>284</sup> This “reform” has mutated into a major issue for the regime as it strikes at the core of Russian concerns about its low-life expectancy (67 for men and 77 for women), endemic health issues, and sense for its hard-working people of a longstanding “social contract” with the regime.<sup>285</sup>

Despite a strong effort to manage post-2014 inflation (as of August 2018, the ruble had rebounded by 65 percent from its 2015 low, and unemployment hovers between 4 and 5 percent), life is tough for the majority of the Russian populace. As Russia economically muddles through, the sanctions seem to bite more as an irritant than as decisively coercive as they looked between 2014–2016. Russia appears to be exercising its own national “resilience” as workarounds proliferate, including a burgeoning greenhouse agricultural effort, while imports of foodstuffs and material seep to Russia through its broad borders from China, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and sub rosa even from Europe. Nonetheless, there is less of everything than before the Ukraine invasion and much of the gains of the pre-2014 Putin regime have been marginalized or reduced. The gray zone conflict in Eastern Ukraine continues to sap Russian will and resources, and even the heretofore successful but open-ended mission to prop up the Asad regime in Syria faces growing critics. Offsetting this somewhat for the near term is a renewed sense of Russian pride, viability, and ascendancy best manifested by the popular support for the banned Russian squad

in the South Korean Winter Olympics and highly successful summer 2018 World Cup held in 12 cities throughout western Russia that garnered it favorable reviews from the hundreds of thousands of international tourists that attended this massive event.

Undoubtedly, since Putin's ascent to power in 2000 in the rubble wake of the post-Soviet Yeltsin years, the Russian economy, fueled by high oil prices and a sturdier leadership helm, has made significant gains. In 2000, Russia was essentially bankrupt.<sup>286</sup> From 2000 to 2008, real incomes in Russia rose by 250 percent and real wages tripled, while poverty and unemployment rates dropped by 50 percent.<sup>287</sup> Despite beginning the difficult road to economic recovery, the policies that enabled this growth have been met with sporadic discontent, as they allowed for a new wave of oligarchs and moneyed interests to gain great political influence and wealth.<sup>288</sup> It is no secret that Russia has among the highest number of billionaires by country in the world.<sup>289</sup>

Russian economic policy has been further scrutinized in the face of crippling sanctions, as they have affected a majority of the country. Since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, the ruble lost 20 percent in value against the U.S. dollar by August of 2016, after losing 44 percent against it in 2015.<sup>290</sup> One response to sanctions was to ban EU food products; this has hiked the cost of food in Russia considerably,<sup>291</sup> as goods like produce are scarcely developed and native to Russia, creating a shortage. GDP per capita dropped from \$15,500 in 2013 to \$9,000 in 2017.<sup>292</sup> Economic growth decreased by 3.7 percent in 2015.<sup>293</sup>

In good news for Russia, the International Monetary Fund projected that the economy will grow between 1.5 and 1.8 percent from 2018 to 2020,<sup>294</sup> with the World Bank framing Russia as now having a moderate recovery.<sup>295</sup> How this growth will respond to challenges, like continuously high poverty and unemployment rates, remains to be seen. So far, it has not been enough to stem rising discontent over how the Putin regime has handled itself. Protests ignited on March 28 and June 12, 2017, inspired by dissident Alexei Navalny's exposing the gross corruption—the Achilles' Heel—of the Russian regime via YouTube and the Internet. Demonstrators—while lower in number than in 2017—hit the street in April 2018 protesting Putin's new 6-year presidential term.<sup>296</sup> Corruption appears to have struck a sensitive chord among an otherwise supportive younger Russian populace, many of whom may viscerally revere their president, but are emotively angered by the displays of corruption by regime members and the moneyed elite.<sup>297</sup> They again protested in the thousands when the state attempted to force the popular Internet messaging app Telegram to give Russian security services access to normally encrypted private conversations. While seeking to deny access to Telegram, the state also blocked millions of IP addresses. In the ensuing drama, many Russians turned to proxies and virtual private networks to work around the ban, highlighting how Internet-connected much of

Russia is, and the sensitivity of its population, especially youth, with the regime interfering with their internet access and privacy.<sup>298</sup>

Moreover, the current Russian millennials have not been able to benefit from the “get rich quick” opportunities of the “anything goes 1990s” and the early post-2000 phases of Putin’s oil-fueled prosperity in which a new class of oligarchs and moneyed interests were created. In contrast to the political and financial successes of the oligarchs, the youth unemployment rate was at 15.48 percent in 2016.<sup>299</sup> Managing Russia’s youth expectations is potentially very dangerous for a Russian regime that builds its narrative on patriotism and Russianness—after all, as one narrative goes, how can a Russian leader or financier be both a true patriot and egregiously corrupt?

These fundamental domestic concerns increased in severity in the runup to the March 2018 Russian presidential election. In December of 2017, Russia’s Central Election Commission moved to prevent Navalny from registering as a candidate, citing his controversial corruption convictions that many believe were fabricated by the regime.<sup>300</sup> During 2017, Navalny was arrested three times, moves that buttressed the legal framework to prevent his candidacy from moving forward.<sup>301</sup> Putin soon after announced his run for reelection as an independent,<sup>302</sup> instead of as a member of the United Russia or the People’s Front parties, in order to market himself as a candidate for all Russians.<sup>303</sup> This was likely a move to consolidate his grip on power, even though as of June 2017 he maintained an 87 percent rating on his handling of foreign affairs.<sup>304</sup> Putin’s reelection in 2018 was likely seen by the regime as a mandate to continue pursuing his foreign policy agenda in Ukraine, Syria, and other primarily—but not exclusively—FSU states and conflicts.

The corruption issues have abated somewhat since Putin’s resounding reelection, primarily because the regime with the World Cup successfully redirected the population’s focus from media-accentuated ire stemming from the rapid succession of difficult foreign policy setbacks, ranging notably from the Olympic ban, Wagner contractor fiasco, fallout from the Skripal poisoning, and allied air strikes in Syria—as well as increased sanctions that Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov exclaimed as “Genocide by Sanctions” in the beginning of 2018.<sup>305</sup>

With the 66-year-old Putin’s reelection in March 2018 for another 6-year term to 2024, this could be his last term in office, although, as in 2012, the succession rules could be rewritten for yet another 6-year-term to 2030. He is likely already planning what his role and life will look like after his career ends, as well as the legacy that he seeks to leave behind. For example, where will he safely retire? How? Under what circumstances? How will he protect his considerable financial assets from scrutiny if an opposition candidate comes to power? While hazardous to speculate, one option could be that he creates a new role for himself where he still maintains a degree of



influence on politics. He already appears to be managing the influence of rising political stars within and without the Kremlin, who will begin to wrestle for Putin's seat.<sup>306</sup> For example, two names on opposite poles of the political spectrum, Minister of Defense Sergey Shoygu and Ksenia Sobchak, daughter of Anatoly Sobchak, the former St. Petersburg mayor who was an early patron of Putin, are mentioned as possible heirs apparent; however, the field is unformed and opaque, just as it was in 2000 when few anticipated Putin's ascendancy to president. Notably, while there are numerous possible candidates well left of Putin who desire reform, dangerously there will likely be those far right who are more reactionary and therefore could be even more dangerous than the difficult but sane Putin who is, after almost two decades, "the devil we know."

The lack of clarity regarding what Russia will look like after Putin only shows the danger of having one person control a political environment for so long; the battle for succession will likely be ugly and fraught with uncertainty and byzantine power struggles. Unless dramatic changes occur, a credible, regulated democratic process will likely not play a large role in choosing the next successor. All this will have major consequences for Russia generationally, complicating any optimistic assessment out to 2040–2050.

### **The Renewed Foundational Role of Religion**

Religion in Russia, especially the renewed role of the Russian Orthodox Church, has become a central social aspect of the post-Soviet era. As such, addressing its role in contemporary Russia is essential. It is important to note that religion in Russia, along with Russia's increasingly polyglot population, is surprisingly inclusive, unless faiths are excessively proselytizing or express positions inimical to the regime. For example, Islam in Russia, still largely secular despite a dangerous and growing Sunni radical fringe, remains a political target of the Putin regime.

Beginning with the 1917 revolution, religion was heavily suppressed, though it discreetly flickered in many Soviet homes and makeshift houses of worship across the vast empire. Institutions such as the Orthodox Church were forced underground or into exile. The one exception to this was when Josef Stalin permitted worship services to be resurrected as part of the patriotic core of Mother Russia during the Great Patriotic War.<sup>307</sup> After the Cold War, the role of religion significantly shifted. Putin has come to accept the Orthodox Church as a legitimate organization, likely in no small part because it benefits him politically to do so.<sup>308</sup>

Putin assuredly recognizes that even though religion was banned during the Soviet Union era, many Russians in their homes and a few select churches still discreetly practiced their religion, as one author personally observed in 1989 Kalinin.<sup>309</sup> The Orthodox Church today is seen by most as a trusted institution within Russia and an upholder of morals and traditional values

that increasingly run counter to much of Western-promulgated liberal democratic expression, and it has been picked up by several increasingly “illiberal” democratic states in Eastern Europe.<sup>310</sup> As a result, Putin, likely increasingly a believer himself, allies himself with Orthodox leadership and attends important religious services in order to further legitimize his rule. This has helped him institute more socially conservative domestic policy and consolidate his position as a near Czar-like figurehead of Russia.

With his support, Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu has built a robust military chaplain corps that deploys with Russian troops.<sup>311</sup> Putin likely believes that if he is seen close to Orthodox leadership, he can maintain a higher approval rating, especially in the face of controversial policies. While the church is currently rock solid in the people’s esteem and core, in the long term the church could lose significant legitimacy if the recent wave of anti-corruption protests gains traction against it due to its reported excesses.<sup>312</sup> The church will, however, continue to be a societal bastion for ethnic Russians in the FSU and southern Russia, particularly if the overall demographic inevitably tilts even more heavily to the burgeoning and increasingly less secular Muslim minority.

Notably, the Russian Orthodox Church has come under recent difficulty in Ukraine. Incendiary to Putin was the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I’s, approval of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church’s request for autocephaly (independence) from the Russian Orthodox Church in October of 2018. In January 2019, this separation became official. Ukrainian churches have had to choose to either associate with the Kiev Patriarchate or Moscow Patriarchate, the latter of which severed ties with Istanbul after autocephaly was approved. For Ukraine, the independence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church furthers its independence from Russia.<sup>313</sup> Yet for Russia, this is concerning. If such a powerful institution like the Russian Orthodox Church is unable to maintain influence over what the government views as ethnic Russians in Ukraine, the possibility increases that in the future the Russian government will not be able to use traditional institutions to maintain its popularity and support.

Religiosity in Russia is expanding outside the purview of the Orthodox Church. While statistics are unreliable, estimates of the Russian Orthodox population reveal approximately 15 to 20 percent are true believers and worshipers, with up to 75 percent overall associating themselves with the church. Muslims account for an estimated 8 percent of the population, of which over 90 percent are Sunni.<sup>314</sup> Putin and his regime consider increasing Muslim self-identification and rapid demographic growth to be threats to his consolidation on power and, more worrisome, the long-term survival of Russia.<sup>315</sup> Since the annexation of Crimea, Russia has cracked down on the approximate 300,000 to 450,000 Tatars remaining in the region, and authorities are

attempting to shut down the Tatar Mejlis, a legislative body that seeks to gain rights this sizable minority.<sup>316</sup> Senior figures have been arrested by Russian authorities, and mosques across the region are under surveillance.<sup>317</sup>

In Chechnya, the hard-headed Russian proxy and Muslim Ramzan Kadyrov continues to be accused of human rights abuses and practicing his own brand of “traditional values” Chechen style.<sup>318</sup> Russian concerns regarding IS recruitment and Chechen insurgency have given Kadyrov and his security team carte blanche to conduct local counterinsurgency operations.<sup>319</sup> With insurgencies currently in stasis, the traditionally fiercely independent violence-prone Caucasus societies such as Chechnya and Dagestan are risk-prone considering their growing Muslim demographics, youth bulge, and poor living conditions. Coupled with likely disgruntled returning jihadists from Iraq and Syria, this will likely create major future problems for Russian stability. It is likely that any IS recruitment and insurgencies will only be strengthened by poorly managed federal crackdowns that also focus on the soft power, quality-of-life issues within these seemingly intractable Caucasus mountain regions.

### **Strategic Deception and the Gray Zone**

It is evident that the Russians, as the Soviets before them, are acutely aware of their material, societal, and geographical contradictions and vulnerabilities. Enabled by new age cyber technologies and a relentless 24/7 media cycle, Russia has learned to somewhat mitigate its perceived vulnerabilities by leveraging these new age characteristics into a “Strategic Front” of disinformation and deception that in peacetime erode and corrode the resolve and confidence of its potential adversaries in a way that modern open societies find difficult to respond to.

Therefore, the use of disruptive, nonattributable, cyber-enabled gray zone tactics will be limited only by imagination and capability.<sup>320</sup> An intent to societally disrupt perceived foes and competitors has been proved. In the contemporary information environment, only coordinated and creatively specific defensive measures with a major society-wide emphasis on education starting with young students can be effective inoculating tools within this informational ecosystem.

The disinformation onslaught on primarily Western institutions by Russia and other threats is particularly effective because they rely on a degree of ambiguity to avoid international approbation and likely economic punishment, or worse, a military response from their opponents. If international law has not clearly been violated, it is harder for the international community itself to craft a legitimate and legal response to action. In Ukraine, this looked like sending “little green men” into Crimea instead of the overt Russian military, giving Russia plau-

sible deniability.<sup>321</sup> Outside of covert military campaigns, Russia relies on disinformation to disrupt the flow of information to individuals around the world. Disinformation is not a new concept for Russia—the Soviet Union used similar methods conceptually to combat ideological challenges from the outside world; it is just that enabling technologies and “delivery systems” are different today.<sup>322</sup> What used to be “whispering campaigns” that moved gossip, rumors, and the era’s “fake news” in days, weeks, and months are delivered today in just seconds, minutes, or hours, making swift defense and mitigation extraordinarily difficult. The government controls its media arms and spins a pro-Russian narrative that is difficult to counteract domestically, and no real alternative exists. Despite state measures such as restraining the Telegram messaging app, the Russian Internet is still connected via creative workarounds to the greater world.<sup>323</sup>

Such tactics have leveraged cyber warfare as a key and versatile weapons system capable of disrupting military operations while also striking deep into the heart of a nation’s body politic. As part of Russia’s belief that there exists a gray zone of a constant state of conflict and siege in traditional peacetime, it assumes that all powerful countries are developing cyber capabilities to wreak havoc on their foes.<sup>324</sup> Over the past few years, Russia has worked to recruit elite computer scientists and hackers to create the cyber infrastructure necessary to affect NATO Allies and partners in particular.<sup>325</sup> Attacks against these countries have been attributed to Russian military and intelligence services or to groups believed to be sponsored by the former. In perhaps what could be considered the operational dawn of nonattributed state-directed cyberattacks, Estonia in 2007 suffered a wave of attacks that severed its international Internet communications and targeted the Web sites of the Estonian Parliament, banks, and political parties, among others,<sup>326</sup> paralyzing many for at least 24 hours. Similar entities in Georgia were targeted in 2008 during the Russo-Georgian conflict.<sup>327</sup> Ukraine has been the target of attacks since 2013, as hackers target critical Ukrainian infrastructure, including its power grid in 2015.<sup>328</sup> More recently, the United States had its own rude shock and resultant “wake up” as the target of such meddling by Russian hackers during the 2016 Presidential election.

With social media and the 24-hour news cycle, cross-border disinformation campaigns have become even more prevalent transnationally, as well as more difficult to detect and counter. How this will look in the next generation with the operationalization of artificial intelligence and other quantum technologies not yet foreseen or invented is arguably our new arms race. These emergent—and emerging—technologies must be arrested now by credible “arms control” style mechanisms that control the most “lethal” of state-sponsored capabilities and levy punitive international measures for noncompliance on whatever is internationally agreed upon. Meanwhile, a

strong, focused U.S. and allied cyber deterrent must be further developed to make clear that this is not a domain our foes would want to engage us within.

Still, 2 years after the 2016 U.S. election, social media companies are revealing the extent of Russia's presence in election-related material and developing strategies to prevent interference in the future upcoming American elections. In addition to U.S. sanctions, other countries are taking steps against Russia. France and Great Britain successfully lobbied Facebook to disable thousands of fake accounts used to influence voters.<sup>329</sup> The German cabinet enacted legislation to impose up to multimillion-dollar fines on social media companies that fail to remove "hate speech."<sup>330</sup> If Russia does not curtail its activity in this arena, the international response will only intensify and unify in a manner that will further stress Russia.

While discussing the gray zone disinformation continuum between war and peace, we must never lose sight of the aforementioned possibility of a full-throated preemptive cyber "Pearl Harbor" style first strike proceeding multispectrum surprise military operations if tensions rise to preconflict levels. All the work in the societal gray zone leading up to any such strike would be intended to soften, weaken, and confuse resolve, while a full attack would be aimed to drastically blind, cripple, and paralyze any cogent initial phase defense while making effective political and military command and control decisions, including marshalling consensus for swift response, extremely difficult.<sup>331</sup>

### **The United States and Russia**

Despite initial Russian optimism regarding a budding friendship or partnership between Presidents Trump and Putin, as confirmed before the July 2018 summit, the American public sees Russia quite negatively. In February of 2017, 70 percent of Americans viewed Russia either very or mostly unfavorably.<sup>332</sup> In turn, as of August 2017, just 29 percent of Russians view the United States favorably.<sup>333</sup> As of March 2018, Putin's favorability in the United States, never high, was at 16 percent.<sup>334</sup> In contrast, as of August 2017, Trump's popularity in Russia was at 53 percent, though it has dipped since then.<sup>335</sup> The investigation on Russian interference in the 2016 Presidential election carries on, much to the chagrin of Putin and the Trump administration; the latter finds it difficult to transition away from the focus of the investigation to any steady policy agenda.

In August 2017, President Trump signed the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act. Along with a stiff increase in sanctions, this bill limited how much Americans can invest in Russian energy companies. After Congress passed the bill, but before Trump had signed it, Russia responded preemptively by forcing the United States to reduce the level of staff at the

U.S. Embassy and consulates in Russia as part of an apparent retaliation for the December 2016 Obama administration expulsion of 35 Russian diplomats in Washington, DC, and the closure of two related facilities. The Kremlin also blocked access to two U.S. facilities in Russia—a country house and a Moscow warehouse.<sup>336</sup> Adding fuel to the diplomatic fire was the coordinated Western response after the March 2018 Skripal poisoning in Salisbury that led to another round of more individually targeted sanctions and, in March 2018, the tit-for-tat expulsion of 60 Russian and 60 American diplomats and the reciprocal closure of both the Russian consulate in Seattle and U.S. consulate in St. Petersburg.<sup>337</sup> In an ongoing investigation, in June 2018, two more individuals in the United Kingdom were poisoned with the same Russian-designed Novichok agent as the Skripals, with one ultimately succumbing to the poison.<sup>338</sup>

Relations became even more strained after the Syrian regime's likely chemical strike in Douma on April 4, 2018, resulting in retaliatory U.S., French, and British airstrikes against Russia's ally. This kinetic back and forth will likely continue to hamper any substantial collaboration in the short term even in the face of mutual concerns like Syria. Additionally, the contentious withdrawal by the Trump administration from the Iran nuclear deal—an initiative that Russia signed along with China and U.S. allies France, the United Kingdom, and Germany in 2015—has added regional fuel to the fire. The most notable actions were after Iranian provocation—the major May 2018 Israeli airstrikes on Iranian nodes in southern Syria risking direct Iranian-Israeli military confrontation on Syrian soil where the Russian military and its proxies are currently operating.<sup>339</sup> Any further cooperation regarding Syria beyond the current U.S.-Russian military deconfliction network already in place is still to be determined in the aftermath of the controversial Trump-Putin summit in Helsinki, where Syria was apparently discussed.

Encouraging, however, during this tense, frayed period was that again in December 2018 NATO commander, U.S. General Curtis Scaparrotti, USA, met for the second time with Russian Chief of the General Staff General Valery Gerasimov in Baku, Azerbaijan, for mutually frank talks.<sup>340</sup> General Dunford has also met Gerasimov four times for direct, candid talks, most recently in Vienna on March 4, 2019.

## **Policy Recommendations for Consideration**

In spite of all the well-advertised operations and declarations, Russia is in a strategic bind. If it continues to use military force as a preferred policy tool to exert its influence and change the status quo in the name of protecting ethnic Russian populations and maintaining unwilling buffer states, it will likely fail as a nation. The increasingly unpopular and bloody strife in Eastern Ukraine—essentially akin to a society weakening “Northern Ireland on steroids”—will

limp along in an increasingly expensive and frozen status.<sup>341</sup> Syria, despite battlefield victories, remains a public relations and moral challenge internationally and will continue to be difficult and expensive for Russia due to its unpredictability and volatility. Russians are growing weary of war and desire Putin focus more internally on economic growth especially oriented toward Asia. In order to manage its interests worldwide, Russia will have to rely on international cooperation in conflicts like Syria, and ultimately building credible ties with the United States and its EU/NATO partners.

To navigate the complex relationship between Russia and the United States, we offer the following recommendations for consideration by U.S. policymakers:

- Pursue a pragmatic 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 high-level governmental and bipartisan political entities—including key U.S. and Russian civilian, defense, and operational military leadership—to increase understanding on issues, activities, and incidents that could reduce the dangerous trust deficit between our nuclear-tipped nations.
  
- Continue to firmly support and reassure Allies and partners by working closely with NATO framework nations such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom to maintain and enhance NATO and EU cooperation and cohesion. Work to shore up shaken allied confidence in U.S. foreign policy. In the same vein, maintain strong relations and assurance with non-NATO global allies such as Japan, South Korea, Israel, and Australia.
  
- Continue to reinforce Europe militarily. Position defensive forces in Central and Eastern European countries that feel threatened by Russia. Do not emplace major additional forces east of the Vistula River or Baltic States unless further Russian military actions drive this necessity. With allied and host-nation approval, return a full U.S. division headquarters with enablers to Germany with a forward command post in western Poland. Additionally, place a U.S. corps forward-liaison and planning element, collocated with a NATO headquarters in Central or Western Europe, that is designated to a specific corps in the continental United States. Regularly stress these entities with enhanced rotational exercises and deployments. Add a U.S.-flagged combat engineer company to each of the three composite NATO battalions in the Baltic states. Bring more tactical aviation and naval capability into the European theater. Continue to frequently stage units from

the United States to participate in clearly defensive exercises within NATO, including its southeastern tier with member Balkan and Black Sea nations. Ensure all 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.

- **Buttress nuclear deterrence and assurance.** Rebuild eroded U.S.-Russia arms control and confidence-building regimens. This was possibly the key potential “actionable” item that came out of the July 2018 Trump-Putin summit. INF, however, will fully expire in August 2019 if resolution is not reached concerning suspected Russian treaty violations. Unless Russia remains intransigent, work to save the INF and modify it to prevent it from totally failing, thereby preventing the reintroduction of an entire class of destabilizing medium-range nuclear weapons. Consider bringing in China, though it would be highly unlikely they would assent. Reinforce the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) and its provisos to limit strategic nuclear weapons so it survives past 2021. Update the Treaty on Open Skies to include verification procedures that are clear to all parties. Formally address and codify in focused fora key aspects and concerns about strategic stability, especially the threat posed by long-range precision conventional weapons and potentially a new generation of weapons including hypersonic and nuclear-powered missiles. Patiently and transparently chisel away at missile defense concerns.

- **Team together to limit nuclear proliferation as attempted by North Korea and Iran.** With its withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, the United States must reaffirm its commitment to diplomatically working with its allies—Russia and China—to ensure a nuclear-free Iran and North Korea. Do not withdraw forces from South Korea. The current high-level diplomacy between President Trump and Kim Jung-un will be central in determining the course of overall global nuclear weapons proliferation.

- **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.

- **Rediscover and “de-demonize” one another.** With limited and sporadic official, political, military, and societal interaction since 2014, both societies have dangerously hardened toward one another. Carefully, mechanisms—such as bipartisan congressional delegations



and Russia's State Assembly interaction and senior and operational leader linkages globally—must be restored. Few to none of most U.S. or Russian defense establishments have had counterparts in place since 2014. An entire demystifying and confidence-building network of U.S. and Russian interlocutors must be rebuilt.

- Offer exchanging modest observer missions among Russia-controlled CSTO, China-led SCO, and NATO.
  
- Continue to work with European allies on ways to provide clearly defensive armaments to threatened partner states, as the Javelin antitank missile was provided to Ukraine in 2018.<sup>342</sup> In tandem with such, establish direct conduits with Russian political and military leaders to unambiguously explain that if NATO Allies and partners are not attacked, Russian equipment will not be knocked out. Ensure that this message reaches the Russian public.
  
- Continue to communicate to Russian officials why a strong NATO is important for Russia. Make clear in every venue that Russian attempts to erode and undermine peaceful Western stability-focused institutions, such as the EU or NATO, will, in the long term, only end badly for a fundamentally vulnerable Russia that risks being engulfed by looming generational threats from the south and east. Russia, therefore, should *not* also want an unstable, anxious, and possibly reactionary Europe to its west.
  
- 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 at the same time be ready with a strong cyber response capability for any scenario that Russia or any other cyber-capable state or entity envisions and actively prepares for.
  
- Maintain sanctions and political marginalization until Russian offensive cyber, gray zone disinformation, political destabilization efforts, and nonattributed military activities deescalate and cease in Ukraine and other “stressed” nations. Review “offramps” in certain sectors for sanctions and other measures if malign Russian activities verifiably relent.

- Build redundant political and military conduits and offramps globally, including between global U.S. combatant commands and Eurasia-wide Russian military districts, to ensure both countries have rapid regional conduits that could swiftly mitigate incidents and crises before inadvertently falling 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 and temporal military pact.
- Work with the Russians, our coalition, and regional partners to ensure that the Iranians do not become more militantly expansionist in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and the Arabian Peninsula while also enabling international terror.
- Dialog frankly and directly with the Russians about their long-term designs and concerns regarding Afghanistan. Other than disrupting U.S. and coalition efforts, what are the core reasons for their liaison with the Taliban? Do they really want us out of that troubled land? What would come next, and are they—and China—generationally prepared for such, including the possible destabilization of Central Asia and the even more dangerous Indo-Pakistan relations?
- Despite current tensions, strive to deepen the fledgling cooperative arrangements—mostly operations and crisis deconfliction—between Russia and the United States—in Syria. As a confidence-building and practical next step, consider collocating U.S. and Russian military personnel, working shoulder to shoulder 24/7, at an agreed-upon location in the region to deconflict and, when politically feasible, coordinate operations. The bloody lesson learned on February 7, 2018, by the overly aggressive Russian Wagner contractors in Syria should be a cautionary note to all. Both nations have long-term interests there that converge more than diverge.
- Remember Bosnia in the 1990s. Strive to build a strong, enabled, and inclusive regional peace solution for Syria with the same focus and determination as occurred with the 1995 Dayton Accords in Bosnia.<sup>343</sup>
- Reinforce the U.S. role in a flawed and frustrating United Nations. As a major donor, continue to push for internal UN reform. Press Russia and China to promulgate and sup-

port positive UN international actions including joint peacekeeping operations in areas of mutual concern.

- The United States and Russia should maintain their generally constructive bilateral cooperation in the High North, especially via the U.S. Coast Guard and its counterpart in the FSB, the Coast Guard of the Border Service.<sup>344</sup> Use the Arctic, where interests should be clear, as a platform for cooperation. Work to curtail added militarization of the High North that adds to tensions and saps resources from Arctic nations with more pressing concerns elsewhere. Fund as a priority the six *Polar*-class icebreakers that the Coast Guard requires for its Arctic and Antarctic missions.<sup>345</sup>
- Strive to maintain strong links with the Turkish military during this period of strained political relations.
- Carefully build nascent links as pressure-relenting conduits between U.S. and Russian veteran organizations that, while having different worldviews, share common challenges.
- Reiterating the first point: Rebuild atrophied personal links and conduits between key Western and Russian political and military leaders, despite inevitable disagreements and disinformation. Seek areas where mutual interests converge and develop initiatives that build closer cooperation and trust. Establish a network of crisis “first responders” on both sides that could rapidly intervene at the regional level in the event of a fast-breaking accident or incident.

### Conclusion

This broad survey attempts to address from a global perspective the staggering and expensive amount of activities and challenges internally, regionally, and internationally that geographically vulnerable Russia is currently contending with across its vulnerably vast, demographically challenged nation.<sup>346</sup>

Looking out a generation to 2040–2050, any status quo remains ominous for Russia as current demographic, economic, political, and security trends play out. It is our opinion that Russia will fail in its current construct if it persists in a state of constant confrontation with the United States and the West. Mending this relationship offers the only viable long-term course for a coherent social and economic future. The West has a hand in this as well. While Alexander Dugin writes of Russia’s Eurasian destiny, geostrategically, Russia east of the Urals will likely

face increasingly seething borders to its south and, at best, nervously subordinate relations with resource rapacious and vastly populated China.<sup>347</sup>

All of Russia's long-term 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 shared core interests, with a reasonable appreciation for the concerns and interests of each other, a stable relationship could be regained. Despite the cynical, disruptive Russian assault on the American body politic during the 2016 American Presidential campaign, a fresh, pragmatic reexamination of just a few of the mutually worrisome issues that divide the two countries could be a much-needed catalyst to jumpstart this process and better demystify and "de-demonize" each other. Arms control, the Arctic, and improved counterterrorism cooperation come to mind. Not to attempt such measures only puts both nuclear-tipped nations and attendant allies onto an even more dangerous course toward near inevitable conflict. Without such, there is also a clear danger 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 inexorable economic decline will raise the chances of open conflict with the West—an outcome that for all sides would represent a policy and strategy failure of the first order. Managing this risk must rest unswervingly at the very top of Washington's foreign policy and national security agenda. This task requires equal doses of firmness and pragmatism; U.S. alliances and partnerships must be stoutly upheld, while Russia's core concerns—but not spheres—about 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 generation of the Russian state, and therefore the stability of the international order and the entire world writ large, will be at peril.

## Notes

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From 2012 to 2014, BG Zwack served as the U.S. Senior Defense Official and Attaché to the Russian Federation. By interacting with Russians at multiple levels since 1989, including defense, security, academia, policy, veterans, and private citizens, BG Zwack developed a unique hands-on perspective on Russia and Eurasian security affairs, especially during the turbulent period that included the recent strife in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine.

BG Zwack enlisted in the Army in 1980 and received his commission via Officer Candidate School (OCS). He subsequently served 34 years as a Military Intelligence and Eurasian Foreign Area Officer, working in diverse and challenging duty and deployment locations including Afghanistan, Kosovo, Russia, South Korea, and West Germany. He commanded at multiple echelons, including the 66th Military Intelligence Group, was the Intelligence Chief (G2) for U.S. Army Europe from 2006 to 2008, and was the Senior Army Intelligence Officer in Afghanistan from 2008 to 2009.

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