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CONFRONTING THE RUSSIAN CHALLENGE: A NEW APPROACH FOR THE U.S.



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ISW
INSTITUTE FOR THE
STUDY OF WAR





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Cover: SIMFEROPOL, UKRAINE - MARCH 01: Heavily-armed soldiers without identifying insignia guard the Crimean parliament building next to a sign that reads: "Crimea Russia" after taking up positions there earlier in the day on March 1, 2014 in Simferopol, Ukraine. The soldiers' arrival comes the day after soldiers in similar uniforms stationed themselves at Simferopol International Airport and Russian soldiers occupied the airport at nearby Sevastapol in moves that are raising tensions between Russia and the new Kiev government. Crimea has a majority Russian population and armed, pro-Russian groups have occupied government buildings in Simferopol. (Photo by Sean Gallup/Getty Images)

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CONFRONTING THE RUSSIAN CHALLENGE: A NEW APPROACH FOR THE U.S.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russia poses a significant threat to the United States and its allies for which the West is not ready. The West must act urgently to meet this threat without exaggerating it. Russia today does not have the military strength of the Soviet Union. It is a poor state with an economy roughly the size of Canada's, a population less than half that of the U.S., and demographic trends indicating that it will lose strength over time. It is not a conventional military near-peer nor will it become so. Its unconventional warfare and information operations pose daunting but not insuperable challenges. The U.S. and its allies must develop a coherent global approach to meeting and transcending the Russian challenge.

The Russian Threat

President Vladimir Putin has invaded two of his neighbors, Georgia and Ukraine, partly to stop them from aligning with NATO and the West. He has also illegally annexed territory from both those states. He has established a military base in the eastern Mediterranean that he uses to interfere with, shape, and restrict the operations of the U.S. and the anti-ISIS coalition. He has given cover to Bashar al Assad's use of chemical weapons, and Russian agents have used military-grade chemical weapons in assassination attempts in Great Britain. Russia has threatened to use nuclear weapons, even in regional and local conflicts. And Moscow has interfered in elections and domestic political discourse in the U.S. and Europe.

The Russian threat's effectiveness results mainly from the West's weaknesses. NATO's European members are not meeting their full commitments to the alliance to maintain the fighting power needed to deter and defeat the emerging challenge from Moscow. Increasing political polarization and the erosion of trust by Western peoples in their governments creates vulnerabilities that the Kremlin has adroitly exploited.

Moscow's success in manipulating Western perceptions of and reactions to its activities has fueled the development of an approach to warfare that the West finds difficult to understand, let alone counter. Shaping the information space is the primary effort to which Russian military operations, even conventional military operations, are frequently subordinated in this way of war. Russia obfuscates its activities and confuses the discussion so that many people throw up their hands and say simply, "Who knows if the Russians really did that? Who knows if it was legal?"—thus paralyzing the West's responses.

Putin's Program

Putin is not simply an opportunistic predator. Putin and the major institutions of the Russian Federation have a program as coherent as that of any Western leader. Putin enunciates his objectives in major speeches, and his ministers generate detailed formal expositions of Russia's military and diplomatic aims and its efforts and the methods and resources it uses to pursue them. These statements cohere with the actions of Russian officials and military units on the ground. The common perception that he is opportunistic arises from the way that the Kremlin sets conditions to achieve these objectives in advance. Putin closely monitors the domestic and international situation and decides to execute plans when and if conditions require and favor the Kremlin. The aims of Russian policy can be distilled into the following:

Domestic Objectives

Putin is an autocrat who seeks to retain control of his state and the succession. He seeks to keep his power circle content, maintain his own popularity, suppress domestic political opposition in the name of blocking

a “color revolution” he falsely accuses the West of preparing, and expand the Russian economy.

Putin has not fixed the economy, which remains corrupt, inefficient, and dependent on petrochemical and mineral exports. He has focused instead on ending the international sanctions regime to obtain the cash, expertise, and technology he needs. Information operations and hybrid warfare undertakings in Europe are heavily aimed at this objective.

External Objectives

Putin’s foreign policy aims are clear: end American dominance and the “unipolar” world order, restore “multipolarity,” and reestablish Russia as a global power and broker. He identifies NATO as an adversary and a threat and seeks to negate it. He aims to break Western unity, establish Russian suzerainty over the former Soviet States, and regain a global footprint.

Putin works to break Western unity by invalidating the collective defense provision of the North Atlantic Treaty (Article 5), weakening the European Union, and destroying the faith of Western societies in their governments.

He is reestablishing a global military footprint similar in extent the Soviet Union’s, but with different aims. He is neither advancing an ideology, nor establishing bases from which to project conventional military power on a large scale. He aims rather to constrain and shape America’s actions using small numbers of troops and agents along with advanced anti-air and anti-shipping systems.

Recommendations

A sound U.S. grand strategic approach to Russia:

- Aims to achieve core American national security objectives positively rather than to react defensively to Russian actions;
- Holistically addresses all U.S. interests globally as they relate to Russia rather than considering them theater-by-theater;

- Does not trade core American national security interests in one theater for those in another, or sacrifice one vital interest for another;
- Achieves American objectives by means short of war if at all possible;
- Deters nuclear war, the use of any nuclear weapons, and other Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD);
- Accepts the risk of conventional conflict with Russia while seeking to avoid it and to control escalation, while also ensuring that American forces will prevail at any escalation level;
- Contests Russian information operations and hybrid warfare undertakings; and
- Extends American protection and deterrence to U.S. allies in NATO and outside of NATO.

Such an approach involves four principal lines of effort.

Constrain Putin’s Resources. Russia uses hybrid warfare approaches because of its relative poverty and inability to field large and modern military systems that could challenge the U.S. and NATO symmetrically. Lifting or reducing the current sanctions regime or otherwise facilitating Russia’s access to wealth and technology could give Putin the resources he needs to mount a much more significant conventional threat—an aim he had been pursuing in the early 2000s when high oil prices and no sanctions made it seem possible.

Disrupt Hybrid Operations. Identifying, exposing, and disrupting hybrid operations is a feasible, if difficult, undertaking. New structures in the U.S. military, State Department, and possibly National Security Council Staff are likely needed to:

1. Coordinate efforts to identify and understand hybrid operations in preparation and underway;
2. Develop recommendations for action against hybrid operations that the U.S. government has identified but are not yet publicly known;
3. Respond to the unexpected third-party exposure of hybrid operations whether the U.S. government knew about the operations or not;
4. Identify in advance the specific campaign and strategic objectives that should be pursued when the U.S. government deliberately exposes a particular hybrid operation or when third parties expose hybrid operations of a certain type in a certain area;

5. Shape the U.S. government response, particularly in the information space, to drive the blowback effects of the exposure of a particular hybrid operation toward achieving those identified objectives; and
6. Learn lessons from past and current counter-hybrid operations undertakings, improve techniques, and prepare for future evolutions of Russian approaches in coordination with allies and partners.

The U.S. should also develop a counter-information operations approach that uses only truth against Russian narratives aimed at sowing discord within the West and at undermining the legitimacy of Western governments.

Delegitimize Putin as a Mediator and Convener.

Recognition as one of the poles of a multipolar world order is vital to Putin. It is part of the greatness he promises the Russian people in return for taking their liberty. Getting a “seat at the table” of Western-led endeavors is insufficient for him because he seeks to transform the international system fundamentally. He finds the very language of being offered a seat at the West’s table patronizing.

He has gained much more legitimacy as an international partner in Syria and Ukraine than his behavior warrants. He benefits from the continuous desire of Western leaders to believe that Moscow will help them out of their own problems if only it is approached in the right way.

The U.S. and its allies must instead recognize that Putin is a self-declared adversary who seeks to weaken, divide, and harm them—never to strengthen or help them. He has made clear in word and deed that his interests are antithetical to the West’s. The West should therefore stop treating him as a potential partner, but instead require him to demonstrate that he can and will act to advance rather than damage the West’s interests before engaging with him at high levels.

The West must not trade interests in one region for Putin’s help in another, even if there is reason to believe that he would actually be helpful. Those working on American policy in Syria and the Levant must recognize that the U.S. cannot afford to subordinate its global Russia policy to pursue limited interests, however important, within the Middle East. Recognizing Putin

as a mediator or convener in Syria—to constrain Iran’s activities in the south of that country, for example—is too high a price tag to pay for undermining a coherent global approach to the Russian threat. Granting him credibility in that role there enhances his credibility in his self-proclaimed role as a mediator rather than belligerent in Ukraine. The tradeoff of interests is unacceptable.

Nor should the U.S. engage with Putin about Ukraine until he has committed publicly in word and deed to what should be the minimum non-negotiable Western demand—the recognition of the full sovereignty of all the former Soviet states, specifically including Ukraine, in their borders as of the dates of their admission as independent countries to the United Nations, and the formal renunciation (including the repealing of relevant Russian legislation) of any right to interfere in the internal affairs of those states.

Defend NATO. The increased Russian threat requires increased efforts to defend NATO against both conventional and hybrid threats. All NATO members must meet their commitments to defense spending targets—and should be prepared to go beyond those commitments to field the forces necessary to defend themselves and other alliance members. The Russian base in Syria poses a threat to Western operations in the Middle East that are essential to protecting our own citizens and security against terrorist threats and Iran. Neither the U.S. nor NATO is postured to protect the Mediterranean or fight for access to the Middle East through the eastern Mediterranean. NATO must now prepare to field and deploy additional forces to ensure that it can win that fight.

The West should also remove as much ambiguity as possible from the NATO commitment to defend member states threatened by hybrid warfare. The 2018 Brussels Declaration affirming the alliance’s intention to defend member states attacked by hybrid warfare was a good start. The U.S. and other NATO states with stronger militaries should go further by declaring that they will come to the aid of a member state attacked by conventional or hybrid means regardless of whether Article 5 is formally activated, creating a pre-emptive coalition of the willing to deter Russian aggression.

Bilateral Negotiations. Recognizing that Russia is a self-defined adversary and threat does not preclude direct negotiations. The U.S. negotiated several arms control treaties with the Soviet Union and has negotiated with other self-defined enemies as well. It should retain open channels of communication and a willingness to work together with Russia on bilateral areas in which real and verifiable agreement is possible, even while refusing to grant legitimacy to Russian intervention in conflicts

INTRODUCTION

The Russian challenge is a paradox. Russia's nuclear arsenal poses the only truly existential threat to the United States and its allies, but Russia's conventional military forces have never recovered anything like the power of the Soviet military. Those forces pose a limited and uneven threat to America's European allies and to U.S. armed forces, partially because many U.S. allies are not meeting their NATO defense spending commitments. Russia is willing and able to act more rapidly and accept greater risk than Western countries because of its autocratic nature. Its cyber capabilities are among the best in the world, and it is developing an information-based way of war that the West has not collectively properly understood, let alone begun developing a response to. That information-based warfare has included attempts to affect and disrupt elections in the U.S. and allied states.

The complexity and paradoxical nature of the Russian threat is perhaps its greatest strength. It is one of the key reasons for the failure of successive American administrations and U.S. partners around the world to develop a coherent strategy for securing themselves and their people and advancing their interests in the face of Russian efforts against them. The West's lack of continuous focus on the Russian challenge has created major gaps in our collective understanding of the problem—another key reason for our failure to develop a sound counter-strategy.

American concerns about Russia are bifurcated, moreover. Many Americans see the Russian threat primarily as a domestic problem: Moscow's interference in the

beyond its borders. Such areas could include strategic nuclear weapons, cyber operations, interference in elections, the Intermediate Nuclear Forces treaty, and other matters related to direct Russo-American tensions and concerns. There is little likelihood of any negotiation yielding fruit at this point, but there is no need to refuse to talk with Russia on these and similar issues in hopes of laying the groundwork for more successful discussions in the future.

2016 presidential election, attempts to interfere in the 2018 midterm election, and efforts to shape the 2020 elections. The U.S. national security establishment acknowledges the domestic problem but is generally more concerned with the military challenges a seemingly reviving Russia poses to U.S. NATO allies and other partners in the Euro-Atlantic region; with Russia's activities in places like Syria and Venezuela; and with Russia's outreach to rogue states such as North Korea and Iran.

Even that overseas security concern, however, is pervaded by complexity and some confusion. The recommendations of the current U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) and National Defense Strategy (NDS) are dominated by responses to much-trumpeted Russian investments in the modernization of conventional and nuclear forces. At the same time, those documents acknowledge the importance of Russian capabilities at the lower end of the military spectrum and in the non-military realms of information, cyber, space, information, and economic efforts.

Americans thus generally agree that Russia is a threat to which the U.S. must respond in some way, but the varying definitions of that threat hinder discussion of the appropriate response. Russia has entangled itself sufficiently in American partisan politics that conversation about the national security threat it poses is increasingly polarized. We must find a way to transcend this polarization to develop a strategy to secure the U.S. and its allies and advance U.S. interests, despite Russian efforts to undermine America's domestic politics.

AMERICAN INTERESTS—WHAT IS AT STAKE

The Ideals of the American Republic

The stakes in the Russo-American conflict are high. Russian leader Vladimir Putin seeks to undermine confidence in democratically elected institutions and the institution of democracy itself in the United States and the West.¹ He is trying to interfere with the ability of American and European peoples to choose their leaders freely² and is undermining the rules-based international order on which American prosperity and security rest. His actions in Ukraine and Syria have driven the world toward greater violence and disorder. The normalization of Putin's illegal actions over time will likely prompt other states to emulate his behavior and cause further deterioration of the international system.

Moscow's war on the very idea of truth has been perhaps the most damaging Russian undertaking in recent years. The most basic element of the Russian information strategy, which we will consider in more detail presently, is the creation of a sense of uncertainty around any important issue. Russia's strategy does not require persuading Western audiences that its actions in Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula or the Kerch Strait, which connects the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, for example, were legal or justified.³ It is enough to create an environment in which many people say simply, "who knows?" The "who knows?" principle feeds powerfully into the phenomena of viral "fake news," as well as other falsehoods and accusations of falsehoods which, if left unchecked, will ultimately make civil discourse impossible. The Kremlin's propaganda does not necessarily need its target audiences to believe in lies; its primary goal is to make sure they do not believe in the truth.

This aspect of Putin's approach is one of the greatest obstacles to forming an accurate assessment and making recommendations. It is also one of the most insidious threats the current Russian strategy poses to the survival of the American republic. The good news is that the war on the idea of truth does not involve military operations or violence, though it

can lead to both. The bad news is that it is extraordinarily difficult to identify, let alone to counter. Yet we must counter it if we are to survive as a functioning polity.

American Prosperity

The debate about the trade deficit and tariffs only underscores the scale and importance of the role Europe plays in the American economy. Europe is the largest single market for American exports and the second-largest source of American imports, with trade totaling nearly \$1.1 trillion.⁴ American exports to Europe are estimated to support 2.6 million jobs in the U.S.⁵ Significant damage to the European economy, let alone the collapse of major European states or Europe itself, would devastate the U.S. economy as well. American prosperity is tightly interwoven with Europe's.

American prosperity also depends on Europe remaining largely democratic, with market-based economies, and subscribing to the idea of a rules-based international order. The re-emergence of authoritarian regimes in major European states, which would most likely be fueled by a resurgence of extremist nationalism, would lead to the collapse of the entire European system, including its economic foundations. European economic cooperation rests on European peace, which in turn rests on the continued submergence of extremist nationalism and adherence to a common set of values. Russian actions against Western democracies and support for extremist groups, often with nationalist agendas, reinforce negative trends emerging within Europe itself. These actions therefore constitute a threat to American prosperity and security over the long term.

The American economy also depends on the free flow of goods across the world's oceans and through critical maritime chokepoints. Russia posed no threat to those chokepoints after the Soviet Union

fell, but that situation is changing. The establishment of what appears to be a permanent Russian air, land, and naval base on the Syrian coast gives Russia a foothold in the Mediterranean for the first time since 1991. Russian efforts to negotiate bases in Egypt and Libya and around the Horn of Africa would allow Moscow to threaten maritime and air traffic through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea.⁶ Since roughly 3.9 million barrels of oil per day transited the Suez in 2016, to say nothing of the food and other cargo moving through the canal, Russian interference would have significant impacts on the global economy—and therefore on America's economy.⁷

Russia's efforts to establish control over the maritime routes opening in the Arctic also threaten the free movement of goods through an emerging set of maritime chokepoints.⁸ Those efforts are even more relevant to the U.S. because the Arctic routes ultimately pass through the Bering Strait, the one (maritime) border America shares with Russia. Russian actions can hinder or prevent the U.S. and its allies from benefiting from the opening of the Arctic. Russia is already bringing China into the Arctic region through energy investment projects and negotiations about the use of the Northern Sea Route, despite the fact that China is a state with no Arctic territory or claims.⁹

NATO

The collective defense provision of the NATO treaty (known as Article 5) has been invoked only once in the 70-year history of the alliance: *on September 12, 2001, on behalf of the United States*. NATO military forces provided limited but important assistance to the U.S. in the immediate wake of the 9/11 attacks, including air surveillance patrols over the United States, and have continued supporting the U.S. in the long wars that followed. NATO established military missions in both Iraq and Afghanistan in the next two decades, deploying tens of thousands of soldiers to fight and to train America's Iraqi and Afghan partners. American allies, primarily NATO members, have suffered more than 1,100 deaths in

the Afghan war, slightly under half the number of U.S. deaths.¹⁰

The non-U.S. NATO member states collectively spent roughly \$313 billion on defense in 2018—about half the American defense budget.¹¹ The failure of most NATO members to meet their commitment to spend 2 percent of their GDP on defense is lamentable and must be addressed. But the fact remains that the alliance and its members have spent large amounts of blood and treasure fighting alongside American forces against the enemies that attacked the U.S. homeland two decades ago, and that they provide strength and depth to the defense of Europe, which remains of vital strategic importance to the United States. The U.S. could not come close to replacing them without significantly increasing its own defense spending and the size of the U.S. military—to say nothing of American casualties.

NATO is also the most effective alliance in world history by the standard that counts most: it has achieved its founding objective for 70 years. The alliance was formed in 1949 to defend Western Europe from the threat of Soviet aggression, ideally by deterring Soviet attack, and has never needed to fight to defend itself. The United States always provided the preponderance of military force for the alliance, but the European military contribution has always been critical as well. American conventional forces throughout the Cold War depended on the facilities and the combat power of European militaries, and the independent nuclear deterrents of France and Great Britain were likely as important to deterring overt Soviet aggression as America's nuclear arsenal. The Soviets might have come to doubt that the U.S. would risk nuclear annihilation to defend Europe, but they never doubted that France and Britain would resort to nuclear arms in the face of a Soviet invasion.

Has NATO become irrelevant with the passing of the Cold War and the drawdown of U.S. forces from Iraq and Afghanistan? Only if the threat of war has passed and Europe itself has become irrelevant to the United States. Neither is the case. Europe's survival, prosperity, and democratic values remain

central to America's well-being, as noted above, and today's global environment makes war more likely than it has been since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is not a given that Europe will remain democratic and a part of the international rules-based order if NATO crumbles.

The U.S. can and should continue to work with its European partners to increase their defense expenditures and, more to the point, military capabilities (for which the percent of GDP spent on defense is not a sufficient proxy). The U.S. must also recognize the centrality of the alliance to America's own security, as both the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy do.¹² The maintenance and defense of NATO itself is a core national security interest of the United States.

Cyber

Russia is one of the world's leading cyber powers, competing with the U.S. and China for the top spot, at least in offensive cyber capabilities. Russian hacking has become legendary in the U.S. thanks to Russia's efforts to influence the 2016 presidential campaign, but Russia has turned its cyber capabilities against its neighbors in other damaging ways. Russia attacked Estonia in 2007 with a massive distributed denial-of-service attack. It attacked Ukrainian computers with the NotPetya malware in 2017, which eventually caused billions of dollars in damage, including in the Americas.¹³ It also employed cyberattacks in coordination with its ground invasions of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. Fears of Russian cyber capabilities are warranted.

This report does not consider the Russian cyber challenge in detail because others with far more technical expertise and support are actively engaged

The more the U.S. relies on an over-the-horizon strategy of precision strikes against terrorists actively planning attacks on the American homeland, the more vulnerable it becomes to the potential disruption of those strikes by Russian air defense systems

in combating it, defending against it, and deterring it. Our sole contribution in this area will be to consider it in the specific context of information operations support for hybrid operations in the recommendations section below. This approach stems from the recognition that the Kremlin's cyber operations largely serve as enablers for its larger campaigns, rather than as a main effort. One must note, however, that while deterrence with conventional and nuclear forces prevents attacks, the United States is

subject to cyberattack every day and has not established an effective means of retaliation, and thus deterrence.

Weapons of Mass Destruction

Russia's nuclear arsenal is large enough to destroy the United States completely. The U.S. currently has no fielded ability to defend against a full-scale Russian nuclear attack—nor can Russia defend against a U.S. nuclear attack. American missile defense systems, by design, do not have the characteristics or scale necessary to shoot down any important fraction of the number of warheads the Russians have aimed at the U.S. from land- and sea-based launch platforms. America's security against Russian nuclear attack today rests on the same principle as it has since the Russians first acquired nuclear weapons: deterrence. Russia also lacks the ability to shoot down American land- or sea-launched missiles and may not even be able reliably to shoot down U.S. nuclear-armed fifth-generation bombers.

Deterrence is extremely likely to continue to work against Putin, who is a rational actor without the kinds of apocalyptic visions that might lead another leader to opt for annihilation in pursuit of some delusional greater good.¹⁴ The U.S. must pursue necessary modernization of its nuclear arsenal

to sustain the credibility of its nuclear deterrent forces, but there is no reason to fear that deterrence will fail against Putin if it does so.¹⁵

It is less clear that Russia will continue to abide by its commitments to abjure chemical weapons, however. Russian agents have already conducted several chemical attacks, bizarrely using distinctive, military-grade chemical agents in attempted assassinations in the United Kingdom.¹⁶ Putin has also given top cover to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons against his own people, despite Russia's formal role in guaranteeing Assad's adherence to his 2013 promise to destroy his chemical weapons stockpile and refrain from any such use.¹⁷ Periodic Russian-inspired "rumors" that Western military personnel and Ukraine—which has no chemical weapons program—were planning to use chemical weapons on Ukrainian territory raise the concern that Russian agents provocateurs might conduct false flag operations of their own.¹⁸ Russia has the capability to produce chemical weapons at will—as does any industrialized state—but it is now showing that it may be willing to do so and to use them.

The Soviet Union also maintained a vibrant biological weapons program. Russia has not thus far shown any signs of having restarted it or of having any intent to do so. The completely false claims that the U.S. has built biological weapons facilities in Russia's neighboring states raise some concern on this front, since they could theoretically provide cover for the use of Russia's own biological weapons, but they are more likely intended to influence the information space and justify other Russian actions.¹⁹

Terrorism

Russia poses several challenges to any sound American approach to counter-terrorism. In addition to Iran, the world's most prolific state sponsor of terrorism, Moscow's preferred partners in the Middle East are those whose actions most directly fuel the spread of Salafi-jihadi groups. Russia encouraged and supported systematic efforts to

eliminate moderate, secular opposition groups in Syria to the benefit of the Salafi-jihadi groups. Putin aims to expel or constrain the U.S. in the Middle East and establish his own forces in key locations that would allow him to disrupt American efforts to re-engage.²⁰

Russia is the co-leader of a political and military coalition that includes Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah, the Assad regime, and Iranian-controlled Iraqi Shi'a militias.²¹ Russia provides most of the air support to that coalition in Syria, as well as special forces troops (SPETSNAZ), intelligence capabilities, air defense, and long-range missile strikes.²² That coalition's campaign of sectarian cleansing has driven millions of people from their homes, fueling the refugee crisis that has damaged Europe.²³ The coalition seeks to reimpose a minoritarian 'Alawite dictatorship in Syria and a militantly anti-American and anti-Sunni Arab government in Iraq.²⁴ The atrocities Russian forces themselves have committed, including deliberate and precise airstrikes against hospitals, have increased the sense of desperation within the Sunni Arab community in Syria, which Salafi-jihadi groups such as ISIS and al Qaeda have exploited.²⁵

Russia supported Assad's campaign to destroy the non-Salafi-jihadi opposition groups opposing him—particularly those backed by the U.S.—to aid the narrative that the only choices in Syria were Assad's government or the Salafi-jihadis.²⁶ That narrative was false in 2015 when Russian forces entered the fight but has become much truer following their efforts.²⁷ Russia backed this undertaking with military force, but even more powerfully with information operations that continually hammered on the theme that the U.S. itself was backing terrorists in Syria and Russia was fighting ISIS.²⁸

The insidiousness of the Russian demands that the U.S. remove its forces from Syria is masked by the current U.S. administration's desire to do exactly that.²⁹ One can argue the merits of keeping American troops in Syria or pulling them out—and this is not the place for that discussion—but the choice should be America's. At the moment it

still is. The consolidation of Russian anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) systems in Syria, however, together with the prospect of the withdrawal (or expulsion) of American forces from Iraq (or the closure of Iraqi airspace to support U.S. operations in Syria), could severely complicate American efforts to strike against terrorist threats that will likely re-emerge in Syria over time.³⁰ The more the U.S. relies on an over-the-horizon strategy of precision strikes against terrorists actively planning attacks on the American homeland, the more vulnerable it becomes to the potential disruption of those strikes by Russian air defense systems, whether operated openly by Russians or nominally by their local partners.

RUSSIA'S OBJECTIVES

Mention of Putin's objectives or of any systematic effort to achieve them almost always elicits as a response the assertion that Putin has no plan: Putin has no strategy; there is no Russian grand strategy, and so on. The other extreme of the debate considers Putin a calculated strategist with a grand master plan. The question of whether Putin has a plan, however that word is meant by those who assert that he does not, has important consequences for any American strategy to advance U.S. interests with regard to Russia. The trouble is that it is not clear what it would mean for Putin to have a plan or to lack one. We must first consider that more abstract question before addressing whether he has one.

To have a plan usually means to have articulated goals, specific methods by which one will seek to achieve those goals, and identified means required for those methods to succeed. Goals, methods, and means can range from very specific to extremely vague and can be more flexible or more rigid. Specificity and flexibility can vary among the elements of this triad, moreover—goals may be very specific and rigid, methods general and flexible, means specific and flexible, or any other logical combination. When considering the question of Putin's plan, therefore, we must break the discussion down into these four components: Does he have goals? Has he determined methods of achieving his goals? Has he specified resources required for those methods? How specific and how flexible are his goals, his methods, and the resources he allocates?

Putting this discussion in context is helpful. Does a U.S. president have "a plan"? Not in any technical or literal sense. Every U.S. administration produces not a plan, but a National Security Strategy that is generally long on objectives—often reasonably specific—and very short on details of implementation (methods). Different national security advisers oversee processes within the White House to build out implementation details to greater or

lesser degrees, but the actual implementation plans (methods) are developed by the relevant Cabinet departments. Those departments are also generally responsible for determining the resources that will be needed to implement their plans. The White House must then approve both the plans themselves and the allocation of the requested resources—and then must persuade Congress actually to appropriate the resources in the way the White House wishes to allocate them. This entire process takes more than a year from the start of a new administration and is never complete—the world changes, personnel turn over, and annual budget cycles and mid-term elections cause significant flutter. The one thing that does not happen is that a president receives and signs a “plan” with clear goals, detailed and specified methods, and the specific resources required, which is then executed.³¹

Putin does not have more of a plan than the U.S. does. It is virtually certain that he also lacks any such clear single document laying out the goals, methods, and means that he and his ministers are executing. But does he have as much of a plan as Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump have had? By all external signs, he does.

Putin has clearly articulated a series of overarching objectives and goals for Russia’s foreign policy and national security. Putin has been continuously communicating them through various media, including Russia’s doctrinal documents, regular speeches, his senior subordinates, and the Kremlin’s vast propaganda machine for the past two decades.

Russia has a foreign policy concept similar in scope and framing to the U.S. National Security Strategy, a military doctrine similar to the U.S. National Defense Strategy, and a series of other strategies (such as maritime, information security, and energy security) relating to the other components of national power and interest.³² These documents remain very much living concepts and have gone through multiple revisions in the decades since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Through regular speeches, Putin consistently communicates his goals and the key narratives that underpin Russian foreign policy. He makes an annual speech to the Russian Federal Assembly that is similar in some respects to the U.S. president’s State of the Union address. Putin’s addresses tend to be even more specific (and much more boring) in presenting the previous year’s accomplishments and an outline of goals and intentions for the next year.³³ Russia’s doctrines and concepts match Putin’s speeches closely enough to suggest that there is some connection between them. Putin also makes other regular speeches, including at the UN General Assembly, the Valdai Discussion Club, the Munich Security Conference at times, and during lengthy press conferences with the Russian media. These remarks are usually rather specific in their presentation of his objectives and sometimes, some of the means by which he intends to pursue them. Such speeches are neither less frequent nor less specific than the major policy speeches of American presidents.

The widespread belief that Putin is simply or even primarily an opportunist who reacts to American or European mistakes is thus erroneous. Nor is Putin’s most common rhetorical trope—that he is the innocent victim forced to defend Russia against unjustified Western aggression—tethered to reality.³⁴ Putin’s statements, key Russian national security documents, and the actions of Putin’s senior subordinates over the two decades of his reign cannot be distilled into a “plan,” but rather represent a set of grand strategic aims and strategic and operational campaigns underway to achieve them.

Putin has remained open and consistent about his core objectives since his rise to power in 1999: the preservation of his regime, the end of American “global hegemony,” and the restoration of Russia as a mighty force to be reckoned with on the international stage. Some of his foreign policy pursuits are purely pragmatic and aimed at gaining resources; others are intended for domestic purposes and have nothing to do with the West.

Putin has articulated a vision of how he wants the world to be and what role he wishes Russia to play in it. He seeks a world without NATO, where the U.S. is confined to the Western Hemisphere, where Russia is dominant over the former Soviet countries and can do what it likes to its own people without condemnation or oversight, and where the Kremlin enjoys a veto through the UN Security Council over actions that any other state wishes to take beyond its borders.³⁵ He is working to bring that vision to reality through a set of coherent, mutually supporting, and indeed, overlapping lines of effort. He likely allows his subordinates a great deal of latitude in choosing the specific means and times to advance those lines of effort—a fact that makes it seem as if Russian policy is simply opportunistic and reactive. But we must not allow ourselves to be deluded by this impression any more than by other Russian efforts to shape our understanding of reality.

Putin's Domestic Objectives

Putin is an autocrat. His core objective is the preservation of his regime.

Maintaining relative contentment within his power circle is a key part of regime preservation. Putin has a close, trusted circle of senior subordinates, including several military and intelligence officials who have been with him for the past 20 years.³⁶ His power circle has several outer layers, which include—but are not limited to—major Russian businessmen, often referred to as “oligarchs.”

The use of the term “oligarch” to describe those who run major portions of the economy is inaccurate, however. Those individuals have power because Putin gives it to them, not because they have any inherent ability to seize or hold it independently. He shuffles them around—and sometimes retires them completely—at his will, rather than in response to their demands.³⁷ They do not check or control Putin either individually or collectively, and they rarely, if ever, attempt to act collectively in any event. Putin

controls Russia and its policies as completely as he chooses.

This situation is different from the way in which the Soviet Union was ruled after Joseph Stalin's death in 1953. The post-Stalin USSR really was an oligarchy. Politburo members had their own power bases and fiefdoms. They made decisions—including selecting new members, choosing new leaders, and even firing one leader (Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev)—by majority vote. There is no equivalent of the Politburo in today's Russia, no one to balance Putin, and certainly no one to remove him.

Putin seeks to keep the closest circle of subordinates and the broader Russian national security establishment content, as they form one of the core pillars of his power. He thus seeks to maintain a relative degree of contentment within various layers of his power structures, including among the “oligarchs.” For example, the Kremlin offered to help mitigate sanctions-related consequences for Russian businessmen.³⁸ Kremlin-linked actors, in another example, reportedly embezzled billions of dollars in the preparations for the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia—the \$50 billion price tag of which was the highest for any Olympic games.³⁹

Putin can still retire any of the “oligarchs” at will without fear of meaningful consequences—yet his regime is much more stable if they collectively remain reasonably satisfied. This reality will drive Putin to continue to seek access to resources, legal and illegal, with which to maintain that satisfaction.

Maintaining popular support is a core objective of Putin's policies. Putin is an autocrat with democratic rhetoric and trappings. Putin's Russia has no free elections, no free media, and no alternative political platforms. He insists, however, on maintaining the “democratic” façade. He holds elections at the times designated by law (even if he periodically causes the law to be amended) and is genuinely (if decreasingly) popular.

Nor is his feint at democratism necessarily a pose. The transformation of the Soviet Union into a democracy was the signal achievement of the 1990s.⁴⁰

Putin played a role in that achievement, supporting St. Petersburg mayor Anatoliy Sobchak, then Boris Yeltsin, in their battles against attempts by communists to regain control and destroy the democracy, and then by an extreme right-wing nationalist party to gain power.⁴¹ Putin has called out many weaknesses of the Yeltsin era—but never the creation of a democratic Russia.

Putin has not yet shown any sign of formally turning away from democracy as the ostensible basis of his power, although he has constrained the political space within Russia to the point that the elections are a sham. However, were he to abandon the democratic principles to which he still superficially subscribes, he would need fundamentally to redesign the justification of his rule and the nature of his regime.

Nevertheless, he can only maintain even the fiction of democratic legitimacy if he remains popular enough to win elections that are not outrageously stolen. He has not been able to fix the Russian economy, despite early efforts to do so. The fall of global oil prices from their highs in the 2000s, as well as the Western sanctions imposed for his actions in Ukraine, among other things, are causing increasing hardship for the Russian people.⁴² Putin has adopted an information operations approach to this problem by pushing a number of core narratives, evolving over time, to justify his continued rule and explain away the failures of his policies. He has also grown the police state within Russia for situations in which the information operations do not work to his satisfaction.

Putin's justification of his rule has evolved over time. He first positioned himself as the man who will bring order. The 1990s was a decade of economic catastrophe for Russia. Inflation ran wild, unemployment skyrocketed, crime became not only pervasive but also highly organized and predatory, and civil order eroded. Putin succeeded Yeltsin with a promise to change all that. His "open letter to voters" in 2000 contained a phrase fascinating to students of Russian history: "Our land is rich, but there is no order." That phrase is similar

to one supposedly sent by the predecessors of the Russians at the dawn of Russian history to a Viking prince who would come to conquer them: "Our land is rich, but there is no order. Come to rule and reign over us." By using the first part of that line, Putin, like Riurik, the founder of Russia's first dynasty, cast himself as the founder of a new Russia in which order would replace chaos.⁴³ Putin's initial value proposition to his population was thus order and stability.

He did, indeed, attempt to bring order to Russia's domestic scene. Putin strengthened government institutions and curbed certain kinds of crime. He restored control over the region of Chechnya through a brutal military campaign. He tried to work with economic technocrats to bring the economy into some kind of order. The task was immense, however—Soviet leaders had built the entire Russian industrial and agricultural system and economic base in a centralized fashion. Undoing that centralization and creating an economy in which the market really could work was beyond Putin's skill and patience. He largely abandoned the effort within a few years, both because it was too hard and because it seemed unnecessary.⁴⁴ The rising price of oil in the early 2000s fueled the Russian economy and filled the government's coffers on the one hand.⁴⁵ The genuine structural reforms and innovation that were needed, on the other, also became antithetical to Putin's ability to maintain control, as government corruption is a powerful tool of influence in Russia. Putin began to erode civil liberties in that period offering the unspoken but clear exchange: Give me your liberties and I will give you prosperity and stability.

The 2008 global financial crisis collapsed oil prices, and the post-2014 sanctions regime removed the patches and workarounds Putin had used to offset his failure to transform Russia's economy. Continuing low oil prices (and sanctions) have prevented it from recovering with much of the rest of the global economy, even as Putin has continued to eschew any real effort to address the systemic failings holding Russia's economy back. Putin has therefore refocused on a different value proposition: Give me

your liberties and I will give you greatness. He is increasingly linking the legitimacy of his own autocracy with Russia's position on the world stage and with Russia's ability to stand up to American "global hegemony."⁴⁶

Putin has simultaneously erected a narrative to deflect criticism for Russia's problems onto the West. The West, supposedly fearful of Russia rising and determined to keep Russia down, has thwarted its rightful efforts to regain its proper place in the world at every turn. Putin claims the Russian economy is in shambles because of unjust and illegal sanctions that have nothing to do with Russia's actions and are simply meant to keep "the Russian bear in chains."⁴⁷

Putin has also consistently fostered a complex narrative that combines diverse and—from the Western perspective—often conflicting elements, including Soviet nostalgia, Eastern Orthodoxy, Russian nationalism, and the simultaneous emphasis on Russia's multiethnic and multireligious character. The importance Putin gives this narrative is visible in things large and small. He has named Russia's ballistic missile submarines after Romanov tsars and Muscovite princes.⁴⁸ He issued a decree in 2009 mandating the introduction of religious education in Russian schools, which began in 2012.⁴⁹ He continues to place a major emphasis on Soviet-era achievements. Putin and his information machine take these various elements, refine and tailor them, and produce a mix of ideas to cater to various parts of the Russian population.

We can expect Putin's narratives to continue to shift to accommodate changing realities, but the current rhetorical linkage between Russia's position on the world stage and the legitimacy of Putin's domestic power is concerning. It suggests that Putin may be more stubborn about making and retaining gains in the international arena than he was in the first 15 years of his rule, as he seeks ways to bolster his popularity, which is flagging, and on which his mythos relies.

Blocking a "color revolution" in Russia is the overarching justification Putin gives for the erosion of political freedom and the expansion of Russia's police state. Revolutions overturned post-Soviet governments in Georgia (the Rose Revolution in 2003), Ukraine (the Orange Revolution in 2004), and Kyrgyzstan (the Tulip Revolution in 2005). Putin blamed all of them on efforts by the West, primarily the U.S., to undermine pro-Russian governments, even though all three emerged indigenously and spontaneously without external assistance. He regarded the Ukrainian EuroMaidan Revolution of 2014 as an extension of this phenomenon.⁵⁰

The rhetoric Putin and other Russian officials and writers use about "color revolutions" is extreme. It paints them as part of a coherent Western effort aimed ultimately at overthrowing the Russian government itself. It is quite possible that Putin believes that there is such an effort underway and that the events that rocked the post-Soviet states were a part of it. Even if he did not believe this when he started to talk about it, he may well have convinced himself of it after 15 years of vituperation on the subject.

The notion of a "color revolution" conspiracy against Russia is also a convenient way for Putin to discredit any opposition, an easy way to tar political opponents as foreign agents and traitors, to control and expel foreign non-governmental organizations, and generally to justify the erosion of civil liberties, human rights, and free expression in Russia. It externalizes resistance to Putin's increasing autocracy while simultaneously providing scapegoats to blame for Russia's problems.

It also creates the narrative basis for casting any Western efforts to constrain Russian actions anywhere as part of a larger effort to set preconditions for a "color revolution" in Moscow. It fuels a narrative to which Russians are historically amenable: that Russia is surrounded and under siege by hostile powers trying to contain or destroy it. Putin can cast almost any action foreign states take of which he does not approve as part of this effort.⁵¹

The net effects of this narrative are threefold. First, it tends to consolidate support behind Putin as he presents himself as the defender of Russia against a hostile world—and his near-total control of the information most of his people receive makes it difficult for many to hear and believe any other side. Second, it constantly confronts the West with the suspicion that someone really is trying to orchestrate a conspiracy to cause “regime change” in Russia. Although no state or alliance has had any such objective since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the negative connotations of even the idea of attempting regime change create opposition to policies labeled in this way. Third, it also creates opposition to a potential peaceful change in the nature of the Russian regime from within, as Putin has associated the idea of political change with the “color revolution” prism of chaos, destruction, and an inevitably worsening economy. Putin presents his people a simple (but false) choice between the prospect of going back to something like the chaos and poverty of the 1990s ... or Vladimir Putin.

Using the bogey of the “color revolution” conspiracy theory and other narratives, Putin is expanding the already-significant state control over his people’s communications and moving to a more rigid authoritarian model. He has prevented the emergence of any significant political opposition party or leader. Key opposition figures have been murdered, imprisoned, poisoned, and otherwise attacked.⁵² Putin’s regime suppresses—sometimes brutally—political dissent in the form of peaceful street protests or demonstrations, despite their small sizes.⁵³ The political environment in Russia today is not markedly different from that of the Soviet Union in its last decade.

Putin has brought the overwhelming majority of significant Russian media outlets into line with his own desired narratives, presenting the Russian people with a coherent stream of propaganda virtually without deviation. He appears to have decided that even this level of information control is insufficient, however, and has recently begun to assert even greater technical and policy control over Russians’ access to the internet.⁵⁴

He has not yet matched these activities with recreation of an internal security apparatus on the scale needed to control the population through coercion, intimidation, and force, but he has been steadily expanding the internal security services during his two decades of rule. He has centralized some elements of the internal security apparatus under the control of a loyal lieutenant, but he would need to expand it considerably to be able to rely on it to maintain order by force beyond Moscow and St. Petersburg.⁵⁵ In assessing whether Putin aims to shift the basis of his rule to more overt dictatorship, one of the key indicators to watch for is further expansion of that apparatus. It is also an indicator of the degree to which he sincerely believes that any sort of “color revolution” is in the offing.

Expansion of the Russian economy remains an important component of Putin’s ability to sustain and grow his assertive foreign policy, popular support, and the resources subsidizing his close circle. Putin seems largely to have given up the idea of reforming the economy and has thus set about at least two major undertakings to improve it without reform.

Undermining the Western sanctions regime. The imposition of major sanctions on Russia following the invasion of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 has inflicted great damage on the Russian economy. Putin has launched a number of efforts to erode and break those sanctions, both in Europe and in the U.S. Despite repeated declarations about the ineffectiveness of sanctions, Putin clearly believes that nothing would improve the economy more dramatically and rapidly than their elimination.

The Mueller Report amply documents Putin’s fear of new sanctions after the 2016 elections and his efforts to deflect them or have them nullified.⁵⁶ He even went so far as to promise not to retaliate against the sanctions the Obama administration imposed, in hopes of persuading the incoming Trump administration to reverse or block them. His efforts failed, however, as Congress insisted on new sanctions and President Trump did not stop them.

Russian activities in Europe have aimed in part to suborn one or more members of the European Union (EU) to refuse to renew the sanctions imposed following Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine. Openly pro-Russian governments in Budapest and now Rome, along with other states that have indicated greater reluctance to continue the sanctions regime, have not yet cast the vote to stop the renewal of sanctions. Putin has not given up, however, and continues to work to shape the political, informational, and economic environment in Europe to make it safe for one country to vote against sanctions renewal—and one vote is all he needs in the consensus-based EU model.

The collapse of the sanctions regime and a flood of foreign direct investment into Russia could dramatically increase the resources available to support Putin's foreign and defense efforts, even without fundamentally addressing the problems of the Russian economy. Putin would likely use those resources to return to the aggressive conventional military buildup he was pursuing before the imposition of sanctions in 2014 and to supercharge his economic efforts to establish Russian influence around the world.

Developing new revenue streams is another obvious approach to bringing cash into the Russian economy and government. Russia is at a disadvantage in this regard because of the structural weaknesses of its economy. Its principal exports are almost entirely in the form of mineral wealth—oil, coal, and natural gas, as well as other raw materials. Weapons and military training services are the major industrial export. The use of private military companies (PMCs) such as the Wagner Group is a foreign policy tool for the Kremlin, but also one of the main exportable “services.” Civilian nuclear technology is a niche expertise that Putin is willing to sell as well.

Putin has worked hard to expand Russia's economic portfolios in all these areas. He has pushed both the Nord Stream II and the Turk Stream natural gas pipelines to make Europe ever more heavily dependent on Russian natural gas and to eliminate Russia's dependency on the Ukrainian gas transit system. His lieutenants are actively negotiating

deals throughout the Middle East and Africa to sell civilian nuclear technology. This generates continuous revenue because the states that commit to using Russian nuclear reactor technology will likely become dependent on Russian equipment and expertise to keep it running.⁵⁷

Russia's military activities in Syria can be described as a massive outdoor weapons exposition.⁵⁸ The Russian armed forces have ostentatiously used several advanced weapons systems that were not required for the specific tactical tasks at hand.⁵⁹ The Russian military staged these displays with the informational and geopolitical aim of demonstrating Russia's renewed and advanced conventional capabilities. They also showed the effectiveness of weapons and platforms whose export versions are for sale.

Russian military hardware salesmen are active throughout the Middle East and are having success. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan seems committed to purchasing the S-400 air defense system, despite vigorous American and NATO opposition and the threat that the U.S. will refuse to complete planned sales of the F-35 stealth aircraft to Turkey.⁶⁰ The U.S. should certainly not deliver the F-35 to Turkey if Erdogan proceeds with purchase of the S-400. A Turkish trade of the F-35 for the S-400 would nevertheless be a significant victory for Putin in both economic and political terms.

Putin's efforts to steal arms business from the U.S. would also be assisted by legislation or executive decisions blocking the export of weapons systems to Saudi Arabia over the conduct of the war in Yemen. Income from such sales is a trivial percentage of American net exports, to say nothing of U.S. GDP, but would be much larger in the Russian ledgers, where totals are more than an order of magnitude smaller.

The proliferation of Russian PMCs is another potential source of revenue—in addition to being a Kremlin foreign policy tool—although it is hard to assess its significance because of the secrecy surrounding the entire PMC enterprise. The reported numbers of mercenaries deployed by various Russian PMCs are generally in the low

hundreds here and there—not large enough, in principle, to suggest that the income from them would be very great. There is no knowing the terms of their contracts, however, or what other activities they might engage in while stationed in poorly governed states rife with corruption and organized crime.

None of these activities is likely to generate floods of money into Russia's coffers in the near term, which is likely why Putin remains so heavily focused on sanctions relief.

Putin has no other viable options for obtaining resources on a large scale. A significant increase in the price of hydrocarbons—either oil or natural gas—would once again flood Russia with cash. But Putin has no obvious way of directly causing such an increase in the price of oil, since Russia's share of the oil market is not large enough to allow him to force price increases on OPEC. His ability to manipulate the price he charges Europeans for natural gas is also constrained. If he raises it too high, he could drive the Europeans to search harder for alternative sources of fuel or, given the Trump Administration's willingness to export American liquefied natural gas (LNG), to rely on the U.S. instead of Russia. Such a European turn away from Russian gas would be a disaster for Russia. Without the ability to export LNG on a large scale, Russia can only sell gas where the pipelines go—and right now, they go to Europe.

Russia could expand cooperation with China to create another major source of cash. Putin is very likely aware of the long-term risks of growing Chinese influence over Russia and its neighbors, yet he still may pursue greater economic ties with Xi Jinping's China, given the likely calculation that he can control this relationship in the near term. Even so, Chinese cash usually comes with a heavy non-cash price, and Putin is savvy enough to be wary of becoming too dependent on Beijing's largesse.

Russia's economy is therefore likely critical but stable. None of the economic efforts Putin has put into effect will fix the Russian economy's fundamental structural flaws. All are palliatives with half-lives. Putin lacks a meaningful plan in this sense—nothing he is

saying or doing will create a stable economic basis for Russia's future. Neither, on the other hand, is Russia heading for a crash. The current level of economic stagnation is likely stable and sustainable—a constraint on Putin's ability to expand his conventional capabilities and use economic instruments of power abroad, but not a threat to his rule.

Russia has been a relatively poor country for much of its history. Yet it has proved capable of asserting itself on the European or global stage for most of that time. Russians are used to being a “poor power”; this is a normal state. These realities do not undercut the value of Western economic pressure on Russia; they should, rather, help set the proper objectives and expectations in applying such pressure.

Retaining power constitutionally and managing a succession are the last major domestic campaigns in which Putin is engaged. Putin faces a significant watershed when his current presidential term ends in 2024, as he is constitutionally prohibited from running for re-election again in that cycle. He faced this dilemma in 2008 and chose then to allow Dmitrii Medvedev to become president while he retained effective control of Russian policy from the post of prime minister. He could pursue a similar model in 2024, but it is unlikely that he will do so. Among other things, Medvedev appears to have made at least one decision of which Putin violently disapproved—the failure to veto the UN resolution authorizing intervention in Libya against Moammar Ghaddafi—but he chose not to stop or reverse it. His ability to continue to control Russian policy and, even more, manage his succession from a position nominally subordinate to even a puppet-like president could also become more problematic as he ages.

Putin could always cause the Duma to adjust the constitution again to let him run for another term, but he has not been laying the groundwork for such an approach (although it is admittedly early days yet for such an action). He might be pursuing an effort that offers a more interesting potential resolution to the dilemma in the form of further implementation of the Union Treaty with Belarus.

He has been actively “negotiating” with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko to create a full integration of the Russian and Belarusian armed forces and security services, bringing Belarus nearly completely back under de facto Russian control.⁶¹ Belarus would nevertheless remain a nominally independent sovereign state. The integrated forces would function under the rubric of a union of the two states, which would naturally have a president. Putin might shift to that role, retaining full control over the security apparatuses of both states, as well as the dominance he holds by virtue of his control of Russia’s economy and kleptocracy. He could then allow a puppet to take over as Russia’s president but now in a role subordinated to him rather than nominally superior to him.

External Objectives

Putin has been as explicit as it is possible to be in his overarching foreign policy aims: he seeks to end American dominance and the “unipolar” world order, restore “multipolarity,” and reestablish Russia as a global force to be reckoned with. He identifies NATO as an adversary and a threat and clearly seeks to weaken it and break the bonds between the U.S. and NATO’s European members.

Breaking Western unity is thus one of Putin’s core foreign policy objectives. Three major lines of effort support this undertaking: invalidating the collective defense provision of the North Atlantic Treaty (Article 5), weakening or breaking the European Union, and destroying the faith of Western societies in their governments and institutions.

Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty states that an attack on one member of the alliance is an attack on all, with the requisite defense commitments. The provision’s activation is far from automatic, however. A member state under attack must request support from the alliance whose political body, the North Atlantic Council (NAC), must then vote unanimously to provide it. The alliance has activated Article 5 only once, as noted above, and on behalf of the United States. Putin is working to ensure that it is never activated again.

Putin can achieve this by creating a situation in which one or more member states votes against a request to activate Article 5, or in which a member state under attack does not request such a vote for fear that it will fail. If a state under Russian attack does not seek or fails to secure the alliance’s support, then the collective defense provision that is the bedrock of the alliance will have been weakened badly if it has not collapsed entirely.

Putin’s efforts to secure Hungarian and also Italian support to end the renewals of EU sanctions help him in this undertaking as well, since both Hungary and Italy are NATO members. Hungary’s Viktor Orbán in particular is so overtly pro-Russian that he could well seize on any doubt about the reality of a Russian hybrid intervention to refuse to vote for an Article 5 activation.

Putin has acquired a potentially more interesting route to Article 5 nullification, moreover, in his entente with Turkey, also a NATO member, over Syria. His noteworthy failure to respond to the downing by the Turkish Air Force of a Russian fighter that crossed the Turkish border in 2015 has paid dividends. His efforts to sell the Turks the S-400 system are also advancing the aim of driving a deep wedge between Ankara and Washington. Erdoğan’s suspicions that the U.S. backed the failed 2016 coup against him make very real the possibility that he would come before even Orbán in refusing to vote for an Article 5 action in the case of a hybrid campaign in Latvia, for instance.

The question of how much Putin seeks to destroy the collective defense provisions of the NATO treaty rather than simply to regain formerly Soviet territories should loom large in considerations of possible military scenarios. The direct deployment of regular, uniformed Russian armed forces personnel in one of the Baltic states would make it very difficult for any NATO member state to refuse to honor a request to invoke Article 5. Erdoğan, Orbán, or some other leader might still find a way, but the pressure to show alliance solidarity in such a situation would be intense. A Crimea-type scenario, then, in which the hybrid war starts with

“little green men” (Russian soldiers out of uniform) but then escalates quickly to the use of conventional Russian military personnel, with their equipment and insignia, is much less likely if Article 5 is the target.

A better Russian approach in that case would be the model Putin used in eastern Ukraine: Russian soldiers out of uniform work with local proxies, some already existing, others created as they go along, and try hard never to show themselves overtly.⁶² Russian information operations work around the clock to obfuscate emerging evidence of any Russian military presence, while the Kremlin praises the brave warriors of the Russian-speaking patriots within the target state, who are surprisingly well armed and well led. In such a case, Putin is more likely to attempt to leverage an insurgency (which he probably created) to break the government and create chaos of some sort than to move to overt deployment of conventional forces—at least until he is as sure as he can be that even such a deployment would not rouse the alliance to invoke Article 5 at the last moment. He might well accept or even prefer an ostensible “failure” to gain control of the target country (at that time) in return for making obvious to all that NATO is dead. After all, once the collective defense provisions of the alliance and the Western will to defend the Baltics are destroyed, Putin can pick them off at his leisure.

Weaken or break the European Union. Putin has been energetically supporting Euroskeptic parties for many years—his financial aid to Marine Le Pen in France is the most ostentatious example, but there are numerous others.⁶³ He stands to benefit from weakening or breaking the European Union in several ways.

First, the EU is an exclusive economic club that Russia will be unable to join in Putin’s lifetime.

The corruption and opacity of the Russian economy are too deeply established for Putin to imagine a time when Russia might meet the standards for EU membership—and Putin relies on this corruption and opacity, as we have noted, for continued control over the major economic actors in Russia. Nor is he likely to desire such membership. Sitting around a table on an equal basis with Luxembourg and Belgium is not appealing to a man who aspires to be one of the poles in a multipolar world.

But the EU collectively wields great economic power through its ability to control trade with the bloc and impose sanctions. Putin would do much better in a Europe where he could negotiate and pressure individual states on a bilateral basis—and a Europe that was unable to impose multilateral sanctions on him and require all member states to abide by them—and he appears to understand that.

Second, the Euroskeptic parties are generally extremely nationalistic. The reemergence of nationalism within Europe poses an enormous challenge to the stability of intra-European relations and could even undermine the long peace that has held in Western Europe since 1945.⁶⁴ It would likely translate into conflict at the North Atlantic Council and could well drive increased tensions between individual European countries and the United States. Putin appears to be untroubled by the prospect of a reemergence of German nationalism, even though that ideology historically has targeted Russia. He may believe that the benefit of shattering the Western bloc outweighs risks that he likely expects to be able to handle in other ways.

Weakening Western will and trust in democratic institutions is another line of effort Putin is pursuing to break the Western bloc. His interference in the Western political systems and information space is intended to destroy Westerners’ trust in their governments and in the idea of

Neither, on the other hand, is Russia heading for a crash. The current level of economic stagnation is likely stable and sustainable—a constraint on Putin’s ability to expand his conventional capabilities and use economic instruments of power abroad, but not a threat to his rule.

democracy, as much as to bring about the election or defeat of particular candidates—if not more so.⁶⁵ He is explicit in his attacks on the Western political system: “Even in the so-called developed democracies, the majority of citizens have no real influence on the political process and no direct and real influence on power,” he said in 2016, adding that “it is not about populists ... ordinary people, ordinary citizens are losing trust in the ruling class.”⁶⁶

This effort benefits from trends in Western societies that were already undermining popular faith in institutions. Americans’ confidence in institutions generally has dropped by about 10 percent from its post–Cold War high in 2004.⁶⁷ The Iraq War, the 2008 financial crisis, and revelations of classified U.S. surveillance programs, among other things, have eroded Americans’ trust in institutions almost across the board. The military is a remarkable exception to this trend.

The massive, unauthorized release of classified materials by Edward Snowden was particularly important in this regard, as it has cemented the erroneous impression that the U.S. government was listening to the phone calls and reading the e-mails of all its citizens and those of many other countries. That impression has widened the wedge between some major technology companies and the government, hindering the development of a national cyber-defense capability and even the government’s ability to contract for advanced software.⁶⁸ It is not surprising that Snowden ended up in Moscow or that Putin has granted him asylum. Snowden advanced a major Russian line of effort, apparently without any orders from Putin.

These negative trends in the West have created openings that Putin is working to exploit by compromising elections, supporting extremist candidates, and pursuing aggressive information operations that stoke divisions and mistrust within Western societies.

Establishing Russian suzerainty over the states of the former Soviet Union is a second major foreign policy objective. Suzerainty is “a dominant state controlling the foreign relations of a

vassal state but allowing it sovereign authority in its internal affairs.”⁶⁹ It is the most precise way of capturing Putin’s aims vis-à-vis the former Soviet states and the limitations of those aims. He is not attempting to reconquer the lost territory nor to govern it directly from Moscow. He has asserted, rather, that the world must recognize that post-Soviet states have only a truncated sovereignty over their own affairs. They may not freely join alliances such as NATO or economic blocs such as the EU without Moscow’s permission, for example. Putin further claims that Russia has the right to protect Russian speakers in those states against oppression or discrimination (as defined and determined by Putin), and that it may use military force to do so.

Assertion of the right to defend Russian speakers abroad is not Putin’s innovation. Boris Yeltsin’s government articulated it in the early 1990s, but Yeltsin never acted on it.⁷⁰ Opposition to NATO’s expansion also originated in the Yeltsin era, and the 1997 National Security Concept identified such expansion as a “national security threat.”⁷¹ But whereas Yeltsin nevertheless continued to try to work with NATO and establish a relationship with it, Putin has been frankly antagonistic toward the alliance.

The actual expansion of NATO to include the three Baltic states as well as Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Slovenia in 2004 was likely a tipping point in Putin’s attitudes. The critical nuance to consider is that Putin has always been more concerned about the loss of control over Russia’s perceived sphere of influence than an actual NATO threat to Russia.⁷² NATO expansion coincided with the first of the “color revolutions” in Ukraine, which clearly fueled Putin’s fears that the former Soviet states were at risk of slipping entirely out of Moscow’s orbit. Putin initiated active efforts to regain control over the former Soviet states shortly after he took office in 1999–2000, but it took several years before he adopted a more combative tone and aggressive policies. Putin’s speech before the Munich Security Conference in 2007 and then his invasion of Georgia in 2008 underscored this overt turn.⁷³ He has clearly made it a priority to ensure that no more former Soviet states join NATO or the EU, while

working to undermine the bonds linking the Baltic states to the alliance.

Putin's claims to suzerainty over the former Soviet states have been met with ambivalence in the West. Russia experts and others often defend the assertion of a unique Russian sphere of influence over those states on historical or geopolitical bases.⁷⁴ Even the seizure and annexation of Crimea has been presented as somehow ambiguous. Putin's argument—that Soviet Communist Party secretary general Nikita Khrushchev's transfer of the region from Russia to Ukraine was an internal matter that should not have led to the peninsula's inclusion in an independent Ukraine—has gotten a surprising amount of traction in the expert community.⁷⁵

Examined closely, however, Putin's claims over the former Soviet states are completely indefensible. All 15 of the Soviet Socialist Republics, including Russia, were recognized as sovereign states after the USSR collapsed, and they were admitted to the UN on an equal basis with all other UN member states. The Russian Federation recognized them all and their UN accessions without reservations. The subsequent complaints by Yeltsin's foreign minister, Yevgenii Primakov, and then Putin, about the folly of Yeltsin's decisions to do so does not change or invalidate those decisions.⁷⁶

The 15 former Soviet states thus have all the same rights as every other member of the UN—including the right to make such alliances and join such blocs as they choose without needing the permission of another power, and the right to govern their own people, including minorities, as they wish. It is ironic, to say the least, that Putin vigorously defends Assad's right to conduct horrifying atrocities against his own people on the grounds of sovereignty, while claiming that alleged discrimination against the use of Russian language in post-Soviet states justifies his own military intervention in those states.

Russia can certainly decide that the shift of post-Soviet states into the NATO or EU orbit poses such a significant threat to its security and interests that it must use force to stop or reverse it, just as any sovereign state can see threats in the actions of its

neighbors and decide that it must respond with force. But the resort to force in such circumstances is aggression, not a defensive move, and must be regarded and treated as such by the international community. Accepting the Russian argument that Moscow has an inherent right to intervene, including militarily, in its neighbors based on their treatment of their Russian minorities or their intentions to join alliances is a truncation of their sovereignty that undermines the entire basis of international law and the UN Charter. Putin is actively working to establish precisely that principle as a matter of international norm and is making a distressing amount of progress.

Both Yeltsin and Putin have retained Russian suzerainty over some post-Soviet states in legal and legitimate ways as well. Russian ground and air forces have remained in Armenia, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan almost continuously since the fall of the Soviet Union at the invitation of the governments of those states. A small Russian military contingent also remains in Moldova in more ambivalent circumstances. The government in Chisinau does not welcome its presence and the parliament has called on it to depart, but the Moldovan government has not formally ordered the Russians to leave.⁷⁷ These deployments give Russia significant influence in the Caucasus, eastern Central Asia, and Moldova. The deployment in Tajikistan also creates a platform for Russian engagement and interference in Afghanistan.

The situation in Belarus is the most worrisome of the legal reconsolidation efforts because of the strategic impacts it could have on NATO's ability to defend the Baltic states (see Appendix I for a more detailed consideration of this problem). Negotiations currently underway could lead to the merging of the Russian and Belarusian armed forces and the technical subordination of the governments of Russia and Belarus to some new Union State. It is tempting, as we have noted, to imagine Putin taking control of this new combined polity after the end of his current presidential term, thereby finding an elegant solution to the constitutional problems of extending his reign.

Returning Russia to the status of a global power shaping the international system is the last major external objective Putin is pursuing. Several lines of effort support this objective:

Regain a global military footprint. Putin has been working to regain parts of the Soviet global military position lost in the late 1980s. A principal aim of this undertaking is to impose increasing costs on America's efforts to continue operating around the world as it chooses and to offset part of the huge financial deficit holding Putin back from pursuing his larger aims. It is not meant to create platforms for global or even major regional wars, still less to advance an ideology (one of the Soviet objectives in creating the footprint in the first place).

Putin's establishment of a long-term air and naval base in Syria was the first significant step in this effort.⁷⁸ He has also been cultivating the leaders of other states that were formerly Soviet clients and partners, including Egypt, Libya, Iraq, Sudan, and Cuba.⁷⁹ In addition, he has recently added to the list by deploying Russian mercenaries (at least) in Venezuela and solidifying an entente with Iran that the Soviet Union never had.⁸⁰

The Russian armed forces and/or mercenaries are now openly operating out of bases in Syria, Ukraine, and Venezuela. Russian PMCs have also reportedly been operating in Sudan, Central African Republic, and Libya.⁸¹ Russian forces have episodically used bases in Iran as well.⁸² This footprint is far smaller than the Soviets', but is a dramatic change from Russian policies and capabilities between 1991 and 2013.

Indications are that Putin intends to expand further using the sale of advanced weapons systems as the entry wedge. One major reason the U.S. is unwilling to give Turkey the F-35 if Ankara proceeds with the Russian S-400 air defense system purchase is that Russian technical specialists would be stationed in Turkey with its deployment.

For the U.S., the military implications of these efforts are complex. The Russian military does not now have the capability to deploy large enough numbers of advanced offensive conventional weapons systems to bases beyond its borders to challenge a major American military effort to destroy them. The defensive systems, especially advanced A2/AD systems like the S-300, S-400, and Bastion anti-ship cruise missile system pose much greater challenges.⁸³ But the U.S. military could defeat the limited numbers of such systems the Russians have emplaced in Syria and might emplace elsewhere if it chose to allocate the necessary resources.

The most immediate consequence of the expanded Russian global conventional footprint, then, is the requirement that the U.S. and its allies ensure the availability of the forces that might be needed to handle the Russian systems. That resource requirement is significant. Neither the U.S. nor NATO has anticipated having to fight in the Mediterranean since the end of the Cold War, and the alliance does not have the necessary assets permanently allocated to respond to such a threat. It has instead generally used the resources that would be needed to counter Russian positions to conduct counter-terrorism operations throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The Russian deployments thus force on the alliance, in the event of

Accepting the Russian argument that Moscow has an inherent right to intervene, including militarily, in its neighbors based on their treatment of their Russian minorities or their intentions to join alliances is a truncation of their sovereignty that undermines the entire basis of international law and the UN Charter. Putin is actively working to establish precisely that principle as a matter of international norm and is making a distressing amount of progress.

an escalation with Moscow, the choice of reducing counter-terrorism operations, reallocating forces from the Indo-Pacific theater (not really an option in the current geostrategic environment), or creating and deploying new forces to deal with the emerging threat.

In this context, the loss of Turkey as a reliable U.S. partner is very damaging. The Turkish air force is significant in its own right, although it is still recovering from Erdogan's post-coup attempt purge, and the ability to use Turkish bases for operations against Russian positions in Syria would be strategically very significant.⁸⁴ But the burgeoning Russo-Turkish entente means that the U.S. and NATO cannot count on Ankara in a showdown, further raising the requirement to develop and deploy new resources.

The Russian deployments in Syria, Venezuela, and elsewhere are, in fact, part of a hybrid operation aimed not at preparing to fight a conventional war, but rather, at persuading the U.S. and its allies to withdraw from the threatened regions or limit their operations. Putin likely aims to increase both the risk and the cost of continuing to conduct military operations in the MENA area to a level at which the U.S. yields to its ever-growing impulse to pull back from the region entirely.

This operation is surely also aimed at securing economic resources. Recent Russian deployments to Venezuela have gone to key oil-producing areas, and Putin's financial interactions with Nicolas Maduro are well reported.⁸⁵ Russian forces in Syria are also supporting Putin's efforts to gain at least partial control over the reconstruction resources expected to flow into that country if ever he can persuade the international community to send them.⁸⁶ Putin's Syria campaign has already helped leach resources for his inner circle. For example, a Russian company run by Yevgeniy Prigozhin, a close Putin associate central to Russia's attack on the U.S. political system, secured a stake in Syrian oil and gas fields via the Assad regime.⁸⁷

It is vital in assessing Russia's apparent reconstruction of the Soviet global military posture to

recognize the essential differences in aims driving Putin from those motivating the Soviets. Putin intends to raise the cost to the U.S. of being a global power to levels higher than he thinks Americans will wish to pay. The U.S. must recognize the limitations of his ambitions in this regard as it develops intelligent responses at reasonable cost, even while being clear-eyed about the real threats Russia's expanding global footprint present.

Normalize Russia's violations of international law. The Russian cyberattack against Estonia in 2007; invasion of Georgia in 2008, with the subsequent annexation of the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; invasion of Ukraine in 2014; deliberate attacks against civilians in Syria; defense of Assad's use of chemical weapons and other crimes against humanity; chemical-weapons attacks on Russian expatriates in the UK; and seizure of Ukrainian naval vessels and personnel attempting to transit the Kerch Strait are all violations of international law.

Russia has paid virtually no price for any of them except the invasion of Ukraine. On the contrary, Putin has positioned himself as a mediator in Syria (although not a successful one) by convening a pseudo-peace process in Astana that competes with the internationally recognized Geneva Process (which has also been unsuccessful, to be sure). Putin continues to portray Russia as a mediator even in the Ukraine conflict where he is a belligerent. He successfully obfuscated the illegality of his actions in and beyond the Kerch Strait, and has deflected some of the opprobrium his activities in Syria deserve by accusing the U.S. of supporting terrorists and the Syrian opposition of conducting the chemical weapons attacks.⁸⁸ The expulsion of Russian officials—including intelligence officers—by the U.S., UK, and other states in response to the chemical weapons attacks in Britain was hardly a crippling response.⁸⁹

The net result of these repeated violations of international law that do not result in meaningful consequences is their normalization. Each one establishes a precedent that Putin can and will then use to defend similar or even more aggressive

activities. If the West accepted the clearly illegal seizure of Ukrainian ships in international waters near the Kerch Strait, how will it react if Russian forces seize some other ship on a trumped-up pretext while it attempts to transit the opening Arctic shipping route? Having taken no action against Russia for its defense of Assad's use of chemical weapons, how would the West respond to a covert Russian operation to use chemical warfare in Ukraine while attributing the incident to the Ukrainian or a Western government?

The principled answer is that, of course, failure to act in one case does not preclude action in subsequent cases. If the West has not responded adequately to most of these Russian transgressions, neither has it explicitly condoned them—yet. That is a line that we must be very wary of inadvertently crossing.

Imagine an unlikely but not an impossible situation in which Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky, elected in April 2019, asks the U.S. and the EU to waive Russian sanctions for Ukraine—or lift them altogether—as part of a deal he is negotiating to “end the conflict” in his country. It would be difficult to resist such a request since ending wars is desirable, especially if it can be done with the apparent acceptance of both sides. The net effect of endorsing such a deal, however, which would surely leave Crimea in Russia's hands and eastern Ukraine in a changed political relationship to Kyiv, would be to endorse retroactively the violations of international law Putin committed in 2014. Doing so would indeed establish a precedent that Putin can impose his will on other states as long as he subsequently succeeds well enough to convince or coerce those states into recognizing his actions.

There is, of course, no new principle at work here. It has always been true in the modern states system that a successful aggressor can have his aggression legitimized by a subsequent peace agreement, even one forcefully imposed on the defeated state. The novelty in this situation is twofold. First, Russia has not been universally identified as the aggressor—Putin's efforts in Ukraine are not generally accepted as the offensive land-grab they actually were—and Putin's role in any deal would be as mediator rather

than belligerent. It is one thing to accept that Putin launched, waged, and won a war of aggression, the outcome of which the defeated state chose to accept; it is another to say that he facilitated and mediated a peace agreement in a conflict to which he was not actually party, when, in fact, he initiated it and directly benefited from it.

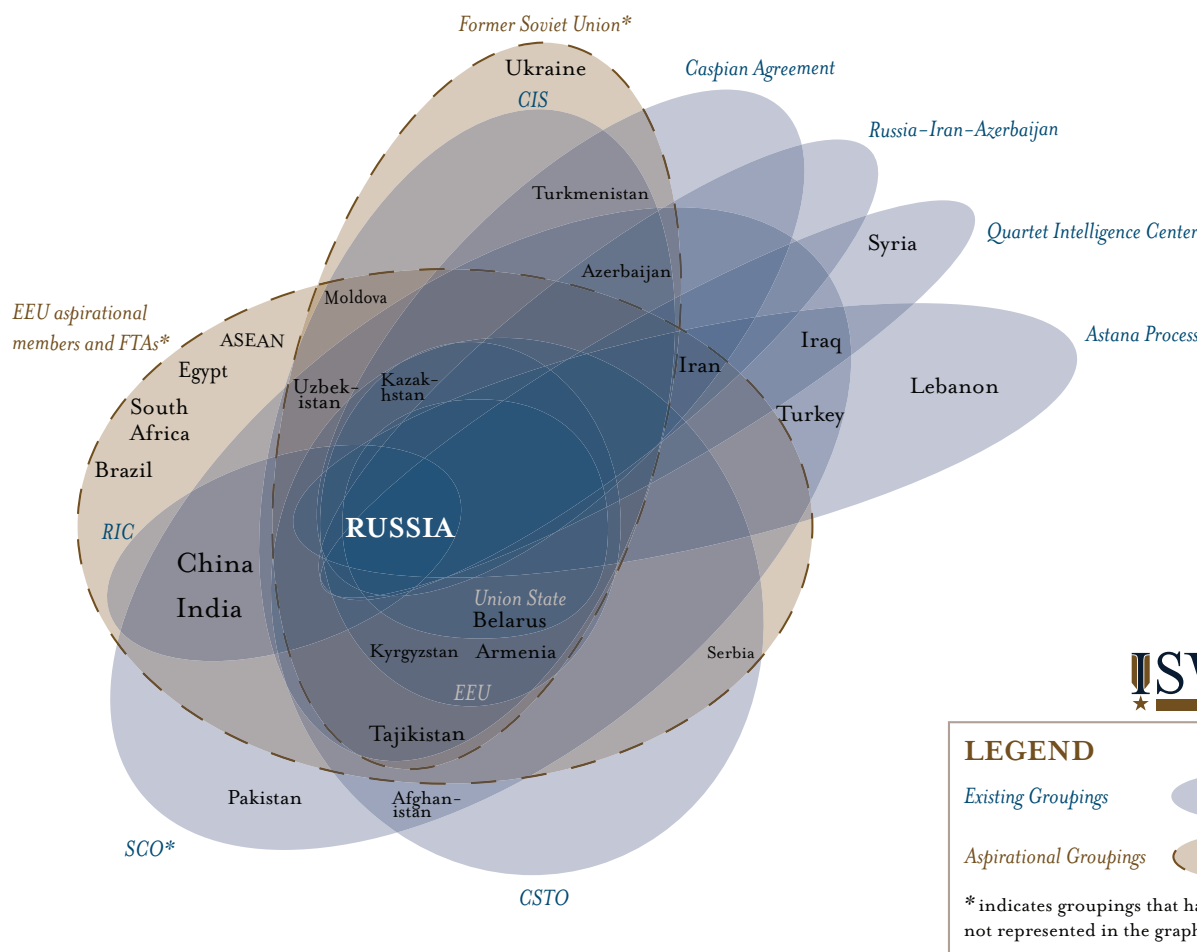
Second, the principle at issue goes beyond the straightforward one of legitimizing a forcible conquest—it also touches on the nature of the post-Soviet states' sovereignty. Putin has asserted, as we have argued, that Russia has the right to intervene by force in any of the post-Soviet states and the international community has no right to interfere (including even by offering an opinion). Recognizing his activities in Ukraine *ex post facto* recognizes this principle as well. It establishes as a firm precedent, reinforcing the precedent already established by the invasion of Georgia, that there are degrees of sovereignty in the international community and that some states are more sovereign than others. Putin is clearly attempting to establish precisely that principle. The West must resist the temptations he may offer to allow him to do so.

Create a constellation of alliances and friendly states that gravitate toward Russia. Putin has been working hard to create multiple blocs and groupings of which Russia is either the sole center or one of a small number of core states, as an alternative to the U.S.-dominated international order he so opposes.⁹⁰ Few of these individual efforts have been particularly effective, nor is it clear that the sum of them will result in a truly Russia-centric constellation of states. But the tenacity with which he has pursued this objective and the sheer number of attempts to reach it demonstrate, if nothing else, the importance he seems to attach to it.

Some of these groupings offer Russia little inherent influence. BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) began simply as an acronym to describe major emerging markets, for example. It has no formal decision-making process, nor are its members aligned with one another on political or economic policies. It has no military component at all.



The Kremlin's Gravitational Pull



GROUPINGS AND ORGANIZATIONS

UNION STATE: 1999 Union Treaty between Russia and Belarus
EEU: Eurasian Economic Union
CSTO: Collective Security Treaty Organization (Serbia and Afghanistan are observers)
CIS: Commonwealth of Independent States
FORMER SOVIET UNION: Former member states of the USSR
RIC: Russia-India-China Foreign Ministerial Meeting
SCO: Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Iran, Afghanistan, and Belarus are observers; Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Armenia are dialogue partners)
CASPIAN AGREEMENT: 2018 Convention on use of the Caspian Sea between Azerbaijan, Iran, Russia, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan

EEU ASPIRATIONAL MEMBERS AND FTAs: EEU observers; countries that have signed free trade agreements with EEU; countries in talks about joining the EEU or signing FTAs with the EEU
RUSSIA-IRAN-AZERBAIJAN: Trilateral summit between Russia, Iran, and Azerbaijan
QUARTET INTELLIGENCE CENTER: Russia-Iran-Syria-Iraq intelligence sharing forum
ASTANA PROCESS: Russia, Iran, and Turkey cooperation on Syrian peace process; Iraq and Lebanon have been invited as observers
ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations

Some, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) require Russia to compete with China for predominant influence.⁹¹ That competition is not going well for Moscow, at least in the case of the SCO, leading Putin to de-emphasize this forum for the moment.

Some, like the Eurasian Economic Union, remain largely aspirational. They have not yet established themselves as meaningful associations through which Russia could hope to exert influence now, nor is it clear that they will gain more significance over time—although Putin continues to work at it.⁹²

Others are operational and meaningful. The Astana Process tripartite has not brought peace to Syria, but it has helped establish Putin at the heart of a triad with Iran and Turkey that is shaping Ankara's drift away from NATO and toward Moscow. The Quartet Intelligence Center has not yet integrated the Iraqi military or government into the Russian orbit as fully as Putin might like, but it gives form to the very real military coalition of Russia, Iran, and Syria that is fighting in Syria.⁹³

Still others, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Commonwealth of

Independent States (CIS) are largely moribund at the moment, but the Union Treaty with Belarus had also been dormant almost since its creation in the 1990s, and Putin is attempting to reify it.⁹⁴ We cannot discount the possibility that he may do so with one of the other agreements that are legacies of the 1990s.

The purpose of laying out these various efforts is not to suggest that they are likely to succeed, or that their success would have dire consequences for American national security—it might or might not, depending on the circumstances. The purpose is, rather, to demonstrate again the coherence between Putin's stated grand strategic vision and the undertakings the Russian state is pursuing to achieve it.

Putin's goals are antithetical to the security and national interests of the United States and its allies. We must prevent him from achieving them, without resorting to major war if at all possible. We turn next, therefore, to the means by which Putin and his subordinates pursue his aims—an examination that will show the tremendous challenges his methods pose, on the one hand, and the opportunities to respond with means well short of war, on the other.

THE RUSSIAN WAY OF WAR

The Russian way of war today is based on recognition of Russia's fundamental weaknesses and the fact that Russia is not a near-peer of the U.S. and will not become one any time soon. It is designed to achieve Moscow's objectives without fighting a major war against the West that Russia would likely lose if it did not escalate to using nuclear weapons.⁹⁵ Its technological emphases have therefore been on less-expensive and asymmetric capabilities such as information operations, cyber operations, A2/AD systems, and nuclear systems. Its intellectual development has focused on the category of political-informational-military activities encapsulated in the terms "hybrid war" or "gray zone" conflict.⁹⁶

Russia is optimizing itself to fight a poor man's war because it is poor and will remain so. Putin is sufficiently in contact with reality to know that he will fail if he attempts to regain anything approaching conventional military parity with the West.

Assessing the novelty of this Russian approach is difficult. None of the concepts or technologies on which it relies is new or unique to it. Most of the key intellectual framework goes back to the early days of Soviet military thinking. Some can be traced back centuries to Sun Tsu. Nor has Russia abandoned traditional military approaches and conventional capabilities. It would be both wrong and dangerous

to ascribe to Russia the invention of an entirely new way of war that is the only way in which it will fight now, or in the future.

There are nevertheless important differences between the current Russian approach and the approach that characterized Russian military and national security strategy and doctrine in the 2000s and the 1990s, to say nothing of the Soviet period. The differences lie partly in emphasis and partly in the degree of intellectual development of certain concepts at the expense of others. It would be equally wrong and dangerous, therefore, to see the current Russian approach to war as the same as, or even congruent with, all of the post-Soviet period.

The Russian military in the 1990s and 2000s focused largely on acquiring the capabilities it most envied in the stunning conventional American military victories against Iraq in 1991 and 2003. It sought to acquire long-range precision-strike capabilities that the Soviet military never had, stealth technology, and tanks and aircraft roughly equivalent with the mainstay technologies of NATO countries.⁹⁷ It also sought to transform itself from a mass cadre-and-reserve conscript force into a volunteer professional military, recognizing the tremendous value the U.S. transition to the all-volunteer force had brought on the battlefield.⁹⁸

It has managed to achieve only partial success in most of these measures after nearly three decades. It has re-equipped many, but by no means all, of its combat units with weapons systems roughly equivalent to American fourth-generation aircraft (such as the F-15E Strike Eagle), M1 tanks, etc. It has struggled to field a force of fifth-generation aircraft and is unlikely to build a large enough arsenal of such aircraft to pose a serious challenge to American capabilities in any short period of time.⁹⁹

It has acquired and demonstrated the ability to employ precision weapons, including long-range precision missile systems. Its mix of those systems and “dumb bombs” in Syria, however, was more similar to the mix the U.S. used in 1991 than to the mix American forces use today—the large majority

of Russian munitions dropped in Syria were not precision-guided munitions because the Russian stockpiles are not large enough to support their widespread employment.¹⁰⁰

The Russian military has notably failed to transition fully to an all-volunteer force, moreover, and has given up the effort. It has become, therefore, a segmented force with a volunteer element (so-called contract soldiers) and a large body of conscripts serving one-year terms (half the two-year service requirement for conscripts in the Red Army). This partial professionalization will continue to exercise a drag on its ability to complete its modernization programs; one-year conscripts simply cannot learn both how to be soldiers and how to use very advanced modern weapons systems.

Russia’s modernization efforts lurched dramatically in 2008 with the appointment of Anatolii Serdyukov as defense minister.¹⁰¹ Serdyukov’s mandate was to reduce the cost of the Russian military significantly in response to the collapse in global oil prices resulting from the global financial crisis. He sought to make major personnel cuts, to restructure weapons system acquisition, and to reorganize the military, especially the ground forces, in a way that would have severely degraded its ability to conduct large-scale conventional warfare without optimizing it for any other sort of warfare. Serdyukov’s successor, Sergei Shoigu, along with Chief of the General Staff Valeriy Gerasimov, have reversed many, but not all, of those reforms. It is important to note, therefore, that some of the changes being made to the Russian military that enhance its ability to fight maneuver war are reversals of changes made in 2008 for cost-cutting purposes, rather than new improvements on an already-sound structure.

The emphasis in Russian military development has changed significantly since the start of Russian involvement in Ukraine in 2014 and Syria in 2015. Gerasimov published a noteworthy article in 2013, discussion of which in the Western press gave rise to the phrase “Gerasimov doctrine.”¹⁰² The author of that phrase subsequently not only retracted it, but also aggressively attacked the idea of its existence.¹⁰³

As with “hybrid war” and “gray zone,” this paper will not attempt to defend or attack the validity of the term, but will explore the collection of concepts and actions to which it could meaningfully be said to apply and that do actually comprise the current Russian approach to war.¹⁰⁴

The heart of this approach is the conclusion that wars are won and lost in the information space rather than on the battlefield. Russian military thinkers have gone so far as to argue that every strategic, operational, and even tactical undertaking should be aimed first at achieving an effect in the information space, and that it is the information campaign that is decisive.¹⁰⁵ Formal Russian doctrine has not gone this far, nor has Russian military activity on the ground, but the extreme statement is a measure of how important the concept is.¹⁰⁶

The importance of information operations is old hat for any Sovietologist. The Soviets were renowned for the “active measures” of the KGB, for “disinformation” and various efforts to suborn groups in the West, sometimes unwittingly, to advance their ideological and concrete agendas. The Soviet military evolved an elaborate theory of deception, bringing the term “maskirovka” into common parlance among those who studied it.

The Soviets also built out a concept called “reflexive control” that is the most noteworthy element of Putin’s ability to play a poor hand well.¹⁰⁷ Reflexive control is a fancy way of saying “gaslighting.” It is the effort to shape the information space in which an adversary makes decisions so that he voluntarily chooses to act contrary to his own interests and his own benefit—all the while believing that he is actually advancing his own cause.

Reflexive control is a form of intellectual jiu-jitsu, which may be one reason it appeals to Putin, who is a long-time and high-level practitioner of the Russian form of judo known as sambo.¹⁰⁸ It uses the enemy’s strength against him in the best case, but at least causes him to avoid bringing his strength to bear against you.

None of this, again, is new. Even the additions of cyber operations and cyber-enabled information operations such as bots and troll farms are not new or unique to the Russian approach to war. The novelty comes in part from the relative emphasis in Russian operations on efforts to shape the information space and the frequent subordination of conventional military operations and the threat of such operations to those efforts. Another novel aspect is the vulnerability of Western societies to these kinds of efforts, resulting in part from the effects of changes in the technological shape of the information space and the way in which it interacts with the psychology and sociology of Western individuals and societies.

The current information environment favors the attacker over the defender for several reasons. The extremely widespread penetration of the internet in Western societies gives an attacker almost universal access to the population, unfiltered by government agency or corporate leadership. The anonymity made possible by the internet makes it difficult or impossible for individuals to know who is speaking to them. The decentralization of sources of information magnifies the effect of that anonymity by allowing it to seem that multiple independent sources verify and validate each other even when a single individual or group controls all of them. And the psychological asymmetry of outrage and retraction means that corrections and fact-checking almost never fully undo the damage done by a false accusation and often have little effect. These characteristics of the modern information space have created the ideal environment in which ideas first developed and attempted by the Soviets can flourish in ways the Soviets could never have imagined.

We must be careful to avoid attributing too much brilliance to Putin and Gerasimov. It is not necessarily the case, or even likely, that they perceived the opportunities these phenomena would present and skillfully designed a “doctrine” to take advantage of them. On the contrary, they and their Russian and Soviet predecessors have been trying to make these approaches work all along. The increased intellectual, doctrinal, and organizational emphasis on them, starting overtly in 2015, likely results instead

from the realization that they were suddenly working very well. As with all important military innovations, therefore, the emergence of the current Russian approach to war was almost certainly the result of theory, action, experience, and reflections on interactions with the adversary rather than a sudden explosion of insight.

Whatever its origins and novelty or lack thereof, this Russian approach has allowed Putin to make gains he could never have hoped to make with conventional military forces alone.¹⁰⁹ Syria is a case in point. Russia could never have established a lodgment on the Syrian coast and then expanded it to encompass a naval facility, a permanent and expanded military airbase, and a ground forces garrison—all protected by advanced air defense systems—through conventional military operations, against the wishes of the U.S. and its allies. Russian aircraft flying to Syria must transit either NATO airspace (through Turkey or Romania or Bulgaria and then Greece) or Iraqi airspace (via Iran) that the U.S. dominates. Had the U.S. been determined to prevent Russian planes from getting to Syria, the Russian Air Force could not have penetrated the defenses the U.S. and its allies could have put up. But the U.S. and its allies made no such decision. They have, on the contrary, worked hard to avoid any risk of military confrontation with Russian aircraft—a project made challenging, not unironically, by the periodic aggressiveness of Russian pilots. The prospect of a Russian naval expedition forcing its way into the Tartus naval facility in the face of efforts by the U.S. Sixth Fleet to stop it is even more fanciful.

The key to Putin's success in this gambit lay in his ability to persuade American and NATO leaders that Russia's military presence in Syria was not a threat and might even be helpful—while simultaneously stoking the belief that any U.S. effort to

oppose or control the Russian deployment would lead to major, possibly nuclear, war.

The key to that success, in turn, lay in the fact that neither the Obama nor the Trump administration wanted to be in Syria or wished to fight any kind of conflict with Russia. President Obama, on the contrary, invited Putin into Syria in 2013 to help him out of the trap he had created by announcing that any further use of chemical weapons by Assad was a “red line”—without actually being willing to enforce that red line when Assad crossed it.

Obama's decision to reach out to Moscow likely resulted in part from the long bipartisan trend of seeking to “reset” relations with Russia, bring Russia back into the fold of responsible international stakeholders, and generally return to what Americans saw as the golden age of U.S.-Russian cooperation in the 1990s. This trend began in the first years of the George W. Bush administration, shortly after

Putin's accession to power. It continued with Hillary Clinton's vaunted push of the “reset” button and Donald Trump's praise for Putin and continued attempts to find ways to cooperate with him toward supposedly common objectives.¹¹⁰ The conviction that a Russian reset and a return to the golden years of the 1990s is just one phone call or summit away has become one of the few truly bipartisan foreign policy assumptions in this increasingly polarized era. Putin has used it skillfully to advance his own projects while offering few or no concessions in return.

Conventional military forces play a critical role in the Russian

approach to war nevertheless. Russian airpower and long-range precision-strike capability were critical to preserving, stabilizing, and then expanding the Assad regime and the territory it controlled in Syria. Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah, and the other components of the pro-regime coalition all lack

Another novel aspect is the vulnerability of Western societies to these kinds of efforts, resulting in part from the effects of changes in the technological shape of the information space and the way in which it interacts with the psychology and sociology of Western individuals and societies.

similar capabilities. The hardening of opposition defenses in various parts of Syria before the Russian intervention raised the requirement for continued regime offensive operations beyond what the pro-regime coalition could provide.¹¹¹ The Russian intervention was therefore essential to the survival of the regime and remains essential to its precarious stability and to any hope it has of regaining control of the rest of Syria. The very limited deployment of a few dozen aircraft and salvoes of long-range missiles made Russia indispensable to the pro-regime coalition and gave Putin enormous leverage in Syria at relatively low risk and low cost.

The deployment of Russian S-300 and S-400 anti-aircraft systems to Syria dramatically increased that leverage, again at very low risk and cost. The American military could destroy those systems and operate freely over Syrian airspace even against Moscow's wishes, but the cost in U.S. aircraft and missiles devoted to the operation, in time, and possibly in casualties and aircraft losses would be significant. The range of the S-300 and the reported locations at which launchers were deployed, moreover, means that most Israeli Air Force and some Turkish Air Force aircraft are within range of those systems the moment they take off from airbases in Israel and Turkey. That fact has not been lost on Israeli or Turkish leaders.

Putin has also used conventional military forces on a limited scale in Ukraine. He relied on the naval infantry forces already deployed in Crimea, reinforced by small numbers of special forces and other units, to seize control of that peninsula in 2014. Small numbers of conventional forces battalion tactical groups and similar-sized formations helped local proxies seize and hold ground in eastern Ukraine, while highly skilled special forces elements supported them in the battle area and in the rear of the Ukrainian forces.¹¹² Russia has provided air defense capabilities and significant electronic warfare support to its Ukrainian proxies and also to its fighters and allies in Syria. The highly targeted assistance of Russia's conventional military is probably even more essential to Putin's proxies in Ukraine than in Syria. The Ukrainian Armed Forces are

likely to regain control over the Russian-occupied territories in Ukraine if the Russian military stops supporting its proxies on the battlefield.

The current Russian way of war, therefore, truly is hybrid. It requires the use of limited numbers of highly capable conventional forces able to conduct expeditionary operations beyond Russia's borders. However, it also relies on the creation and maintenance of a political and information environment that facilitates the presence and activities of those forces without serious opposition from any state or actor that could meaningfully challenge them.

The conventional forces themselves are enablers to a larger political-informational campaign rather than being the main effort. Evidence for that assessment lies in Putin's response to the several occasions on which his conventional forces suffered losses—specifically, the Turkish downing of a Russian aircraft in 2015; the accidental downing of another Russian plane by Syrian forces during an Israeli airstrike in 2018; and the killing of several hundred members of the Wagner PMC during an attack by that group on an outpost in eastern Syria held by the opposition, where American advisers were also present.¹¹³

Washington and the world held their breath in each case, worrying about Putin's possible response. The U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph Dunford, reached out immediately to Gerasimov to send messages of both deterrence and de-escalation each time.¹¹⁴ Putin did not retaliate militarily on any of these occasions. He responded to the Turkish shoot-down by deploying Russian S-300 systems operated by Russian troops, and to the Syrian shoot-down by completing a contract with the Assad regime for S-300 systems of its own, which had long been held up. He made no meaningful response to the Wagner incident and did not even use his air defense systems to disrupt the massive U.S. air operations against the attacking Wagner forces as they were destroyed.

Putin has similarly refrained from using his own S-300 and S-400 systems to shoot at Israeli aircraft

during any of Israel's repeated airstrikes against regime targets within Syria and has, reportedly, prevented the Syrians from using their S-300 system.¹¹⁵ Nor has Putin retaliated against Israel for those strikes or against the U.S. for the 2017 missile strikes Washington launched against the Shayrat airbase in response to Assad's renewed use of chemical weapons.

The aircraft and missile systems Putin has deployed to Syria, therefore, are clearly not meant to give him control over Syria's skies. They are also obviously not meant to challenge the ability of the U.S., Turkey, or Israel to conduct anti-regime operations, at least within the current limits of such operations. Lastly, they are not meant to enable Putin to retaliate in any symmetrical tit-for-tat manner for Russian losses suffered directly or indirectly at the hands of the U.S., Turkey, or Israel. The relative inaction of Russia's aircraft against those states could be at least partially explained by Moscow's focus on fighting the opposition. But the air defense systems can only be intended to defend against the U.S., Turkey, and Israel, since the opposition has never had aircraft against which those systems are effective.¹¹⁶ The Kremlin has, in other words, deployed systems to defend against attacks that have, in fact, come—and yet not used those systems to defend against those attacks.

This conundrum can only be resolved by recognizing that the purpose of those systems is to shape the behavior of the U.S., Turkey, and Israel rather than to fight openly against them. The deployments of advanced air defense weapons, and also of some of the air-to-air-optimized aircraft Russia has periodically sent to Syria, support a political-informational campaign rather than a conventional military operation (even if we regard counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism as being in that category).

Circumstances might, of course, arise in which Putin would authorize his troops to use some or all of their capabilities conventionally against the U.S. and its partners and allies. That fact drives the fear of escalation that leads the U.S. Joint Chiefs chairman to jump on the phone to Moscow every time a major incident occurs. It also shapes

American, Turkish, and Israeli calculations about military options they might choose. This is exactly the point from Moscow's perspective. Putin's S-300 and S-400 systems in Syria work best if they are never used.

Problems of Escalation—for Russia

The U.S. military and those who study it are preoccupied, understandably, by its shortcomings and inadequacies. The shortcomings are real, and the military is, indeed, inadequate for the global requirements it must meet. The preoccupation with our own failings has tended to obscure an objective assessment of the relative risks to the U.S. and Russia of a conventional military confrontation in Syria, however. The U.S. has therefore tended to overestimate the likelihood that a crisis with Russia in Syria will escalate to the point of such a major confrontation and, as a result, has allowed Putin's very limited deployment of combat power and good use of the information space to drive a high degree of American self-deterrence.

Russia has rarely had more than a couple of dozen combat aircraft at its airfields in Syria at any given time.¹¹⁷ Most of them are usually ground-attack planes (principally Su-25 Frogfoots, which are roughly similar to the U.S. Air Force A-10), and they have limited ability to conduct air-to-air combat against U.S. fighter bombers. The rest are generally variants of the Su-30 fighter bomber, sometimes with a few more-advanced airframes optimized for air-to-air combat, including, occasionally, the Su-57 stealth fighter bomber.

A single U.S. carrier strike group has around 48 strike fighters, all with air-to-air and air-to-ground capabilities. The U.S. Navy alone has more than 775 strike aircraft (including all variants of the F/A-18 and the F-35).¹¹⁸ The U.S. Air Force has more than 1,240 fighters and fighter bombers, as well as around 140 strategic bombers.¹¹⁹ The single carrier strike group—almost invariably in the Mediterranean or in or near the Persian Gulf—thus outguns the Russian aircraft in Syria by a significant margin, and the

U.S. Air Force and Navy could rapidly begin to flow crushing numbers of reinforcements to the theater.

The Russian Air Force, by contrast, has a total of roughly 745 fighter bombers in its entire inventory, according to the most recently published Defense Intelligence Agency estimates.¹²⁰ It has an additional 215 attack aircraft (mostly Su-25s) and another 141 strategic bombers. It is thus somewhat larger than the U.S. Navy, considerably smaller than the U.S. Air Force, and about one-third the size of both together. These numbers exclude the roughly 240 F-16s in the Turkish Air Force—which have demonstrated their ability to shoot down Russian fighters in limited engagements, and so should not be dismissed—as well as those of America’s other NATO allies, not to mention the Israeli Air Force, one of the best in the world.

The U.S. thus has absolute escalation dominance in an air-to-air fight over the skies of Syria, unless one imagines that Russian aircraft and pilots are an order-of-magnitude more lethal than their American counterparts—a notion there is no evidence for, and considerable evidence against.¹²¹

Critics of this argument need not challenge this assertion, but could argue instead that it is beside the point. The U.S. military cannot focus solely on fighting the Russians in Syria. It must support American ground forces deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan; conduct counter-terrorism operations throughout Africa; and deter and be ready to respond to aggressions by China, North Korea, and Iran, at least. The concentration of aircraft, ships, and pilots needed to fight a significant air war against Russia in Syria would severely degrade the U.S. military’s ability to meet these other requirements. This fact more than any fear of confronting the Russian military in the Middle East explains the self-paralysis of the U.S. military.

Putin, by contrast, has projected a willingness to mix it up in Syria. His pilots ostentatiously fly close to American aircraft, engage in risky maneuvers near them, lock targeting radars on them, and in other ways portray almost an eagerness to engage in

a fight.¹²² The Turkish downing of a Russian aircraft in 2015 resulted from repeated violations of Turkish airspace by Russian pilots in another set of deliberate provocations.¹²³ Putin’s message through these actions has consistently been: You will not fight me here, but I am willing to fight you. Yet on each occasion when blows have been traded, Putin has backed down.

One reason is that his escalation calculus is far worse than America’s. The Russian Air Force also has essential tasks outside Syria that would prevent it from concentrating all, or even most of its available assets there. It must cover Russia’s enormous periphery, the largest land border of any country in the world, including a long border with China. Putin would be foolish to strip aircraft from St. Petersburg, a short flight from NATO airfields, while fighting the U.S. in Syria. Nor could he denude his forces in Crimea, linked to the Russian mainland by a single bridge, or his forces in and near eastern Ukraine. He could not even prudently strip his far east of all advanced aircraft. He might—or might not—decide that China would not take advantage of any weakening of his defenses, but the U.S. can threaten him from carriers in the Pacific even if Japan opts to deny the use of its bases in a conflict with Russia to which it is not party.

Would the U.S. bomb St. Petersburg or Vladivostok while fighting Russia in Syria? Of course not. But strategic calculus does not work that way. It is a fact that the U.S. could conduct such attacks, and any professional military staff forced to confront the prospect of an escalation to major conventional war in one theater would have to consider the possibility that such a war might spread to other theaters. Best professional military advice in such a situation would be to maintain sufficient combat power in any other vulnerable theater to deter and, if necessary, defeat enemy attempts to transfer the conflict there. It is equally true, after all, that a rapid U.S.-Russia dustup in Syria would be very unlikely to trigger a Chinese military adventure or a North Korean invasion of South Korea. Yet the U.S. military allows the fears of just such scenarios to undermine its willingness to contemplate fighting Russia in Syria—and the Russian military will behave no differently.

Even that calculation is not Russia's most serious problem with the idea of escalation to conventional conflict in the skies over Syria. The biggest problem is actually financial. Russia could not afford to replace the losses it would inevitably take in such a fight, whereas the U.S. could. Bad as the differential in aircraft looks for the Russians, we must recall that the differential in overall economic power and in defense budgets looks much worse. The Russian economy and defense budgets are less than one-tenth the size of America's. Its military is struggling to "modernize" to a level of technology similar to what the U.S. has had for decades. The cost of having to replace many lost modern aircraft would disrupt Russian defense programs for years. The U.S. could make good such losses in short order if it chose.

Nuclear Escalation

The prospect of the world's two largest nuclear powers going to war, even in a limited conventional way, is of course terrifying. The U.S. certainly should do everything in its power to achieve its objectives without resorting to major combat operations against Russia—that is the guiding principle of current national security documents and of this report.

The straightforward equation sometimes made between any such local conflict and global nuclear war, however, is entirely unjustified. It simply is not the case that any major conventional war will lead inevitably, or even probably, to nuclear war.

One can trace escalation paths from a conventional war Putin is losing in Syria to his use of a theater nuclear weapon, either to change the odds or to try to force the U.S. to back down. He could use such a weapon to destroy a U.S. airfield in one of the regional states (Turkey, perhaps, or Kuwait) or a U.S. aircraft carrier strike group. The destruction of any single airbase or carrier would not prevent the U.S. from carrying forward an air war to successful conclusion. There are simply too many bases and carriers the U.S. could use for the elimination of a single one to terminate a campaign. Unless Putin were willing to destroy many airbases in many

different countries (most of them NATO members) and sink every carrier moving into the theater, he could not prevent the U.S. from destroying his assets in the Middle East.

It is impossible to predict the American response to such a use of nuclear weapons—regardless of the occupant of the White House. The U.S. could respond by using theater nuclear weapons of its own against Russian forces in the Middle East (which this report emphatically does not support or recommend)—and here, a single nuclear device dropped on the airfield near Latakia would pretty much destroy Russian capabilities to continue the air war in the region. Alternatively, Washington could engage in either conventional or nuclear retaliation against Russian forces beyond the region, including in Russia proper (and, again, this report does not support or recommend using nuclear weapons under any circumstances, except possibly *in extremis* situations far more dire than those under consideration here).

Putin would then be forced to decide whether to escalate further. He could conduct a larger nuclear strike against NATO (since any effort seriously to disrupt U.S. military capabilities in and around Europe would require breaking or badly damaging the alliance). He could also go directly for a strike on the U.S. homeland. If he chose the latter and launched an all-out strike, the U.S. president would likely respond in kind, leading to the destruction of both Russia and the U.S.—and possibly life on Earth. One could endlessly consider lesser variants, but they all lead to dramatically increased risk of Armageddon.

Thus, the real questions are, would Putin risk Armageddon for Syria, or is he likely to miscalculate an American response to a nuclear escalation badly enough to end up there against his will?

Full-scale global thermonuclear war is an insane undertaking. The reason for maintaining large arsenals of strategic nuclear weapons is to deter such a war, not to fight it. A tiny handful of leaders in the past have been willing to accept their own total destruction in pursuit of some larger cause—Hitler

being the prime exemplar of this, as of so many evils—but none of them, mercifully, has had nuclear weapons. Putin does not fall anywhere near this category. He is a thoroughly rational actor who has prospered by taking prudent risks and backing down, rather than escalating, on almost every occasion when the breaks did not go his way.¹²⁴ He holds to no ideology that transcends his own existence sufficiently to cause him to prefer obliteration to defeat. Considerable evidence opposes the idea that he would accept, let alone embrace, full-scale nuclear war if given any choice to avoid it.

The real risk of such a war emerging from a regional crisis, therefore, comes from the risk of miscalculation. It comes, in other words, from the notion that Putin might persuade himself that he could safely use a nuclear weapon of his own without triggering a nuclear retaliation that could escalate to total destruction.

Putin himself has set conditions, for fear of precisely this kind of miscalculation, through his discussions of “de-escalation” with regard to scenarios for warfare in the Baltic states. The Russian military has openly discussed using one or a small number of nuclear weapons to terminate a conventional, even a regional or local, conflict on its own terms.¹²⁵ It is by no means clear, of course, that all three of the nuclear NATO states (the U.S., Britain, and France) would choose not to retaliate against a nuclear attack on another NATO member state. But neither is it obvious, in the current circumstances, that they would. Putin might have some reason to think he could successfully “escalate to de-escalate,” given the general ambivalence within some NATO capitals about the desirability of even fighting for the Baltics to begin with.

It is harder to imagine him making such a calculation in the context of the Syria scenario being considered here, however. In this scenario, the conflict involves American versus Russian forces directly, and the attack would be on American troops, with thousands or tens of thousands killed in the nuclear strike. The U.S. president would already have demonstrated a willingness to escalate

to a high level conventionally, a fact that would weigh heavily against the notion that that president would tamely accept a Russian escalation to a higher level of conflict. Putin would have to be an imbecile, or a gambler of epic proportions, to persuade himself that he could safely escalate to de-escalate in such a conflict. Assuming deterrence continues to work at the strategic level, in other words, it is very likely to continue to work at the operational and tactical levels, even in a major conventional conflict involving American and Russian forces, at least outside of Russian territory.

The purpose of the foregoing discussion was not in any way to suggest that a U.S.-Russian conventional war in Syria or anywhere else is safe, would definitely not spread, and could not lead to nuclear war. Still less was it a brief to advocate for any such conflict. The aim, rather, was to show that the escalation paths from the current situation to higher levels of conflict look much worse for Putin than they do for the U.S., and that even adding the notion of the risk of nuclear war or escalation to de-escalate, Putin has every reason to believe that outright confrontation with the American military will end badly for him.

That is one of the main reasons behind his preference for hybrid warfare. It is the reason he is unlikely to abandon that preference any time soon but seems, rather, to be doubling down on it. This has implications far beyond Syria. It goes into the Baltics, Poland, NATO, and even Ukraine and Belarus with various important modifications. The current Russian way of war reflects the realities of Russia’s situation and the correlation of forces between Russia and the U.S. for the foreseeable future. This is the way of war against which the U.S. and its allies must most urgently prepare, and from which they must not allow themselves to be distracted, even while taking necessary steps to address deficiencies in conventional combat power and other areas. Hybrid war is not a façade or a fad—it is the only realistic way Putin has to achieve his objectives by force.

THE BLOWBACK PHENOMENON

Putin has suffered significant harm as the result of two of his major foreign undertakings—his response to the EuroMaidan Revolution in Ukraine in 2014 and his interference with the U.S. election in 2016. He achieved some, but not all of his original objectives in both cases, but also ended up paying a much higher price than he intended. This phenomenon presents an opportunity for the U.S. to develop a counter-strategy for Russia's hybrid warfare approach.

The 2014 Ukrainian revolution caught Putin by surprise. It ousted President Viktor Yanukovich, who was largely pro-Russian, and brought pro-Western Petro Poroshenko to power. Putin tried to save Yanukovich for a time, but had to adopt new objectives and means and a new timeline when Yanukovich fled Kyiv. Putin first focused on securing the Crimean Peninsula, important to Russia because the port of Sevastopol had remained the home base of the Russian Black Sea Fleet after the Soviet Union's fall. He then intervened in the heavily Russian-speaking areas of eastern Ukraine as part of a larger effort to collapse the new government and regain dominant influence in Ukraine. That effort failed at the time. Putin likely perceives an opportunity to influence President Zelensky, but he has not yet achieved his aim of warping Kyiv back into Moscow's orbit.¹²⁶

He has paid a very high price for his efforts in Ukraine, however. For the foreseeable future, Putin has eliminated the option of having a leader in Kyiv who is openly pro-Russian and politically viable. Both the U.S. and the EU imposed an escalating series of sanctions on various Russian individuals and entities, which have seriously harmed the Russian economy and constrained Putin's access to foreign direct investment, technology transfer, and other important resources. Those sanctions proved surprisingly durable, despite considerable Russian pressure on EU members to abandon them. Putin has failed utterly thus far to persuade any state that is not a proxy or close ally to recognize his annexation of Crimea.

Putin's operations in Ukraine have also changed the situation in that country to Russia's detriment in ways that are likely to endure even into, and possibly through, a pro-Russian presidency. His invasion and occupation of Ukrainian territory injected significant energy into the development of a distinctive Ukrainian national identity and sense of independent statehood. It drove Kyiv to create a reasonably effective military out of the post-Soviet decrepitude into which its armed forces had fallen. The Ukrainian security services have also learned how to work with Western militaries and advisors against the Russian armed forces—a small but potentially important step toward facilitating ultimate Ukrainian integration into NATO. Russian actions have even led the Ukrainian Rada (parliament) to alter the constitution to call for Ukraine's accession into that alliance.¹²⁷ Zelensky's presidency, or a future Ukrainian government, may nullify the push toward NATO and undermine some of these other trends, but it will not quickly reverse the consolidation of a sense of Ukrainian nationhood that had simply not existed in its current form before 2014.

Putin's interference in the 2016 American presidential elections has also resulted in backlash that he surely did not expect or desire. He had apparently set out to ensure that Hillary Clinton did not become president (that was his aim before Donald Trump was a serious candidate).¹²⁸ Hillary Clinton is not president—so, in that sense, Putin got his wish.

But Putin opposed Clinton because he did not want a president who would take the U.S. in a strongly anti-Russia direction and feared that she would do so. Trump surely does not seem to want to take a strong stand against Russia, but mistrust of Russia in general is far stronger in the U.S. than it has been since the end of the Cold War. Around 15 percent of Americans named Russia the top threat to the U.S. before the election. Forty-six percent of Democrats and 34 percent of independent voters identified Russia in that way in February 2019.¹²⁹ A majority of Americans now see Russia's military power as

threatening vital American national interests for the first time since the fall of the Soviet Union.

These attitudes have had concrete impacts on U.S. policy toward Russia. President Obama imposed sanctions on Russia for its interference in the elections in 2016, and President Trump refused to block or waive those sanctions, despite efforts by Russian proxies to persuade his administration to do so. The U.S. under Trump has imposed additional sanctions for malign Russian cyber activity and provided greater military support to Ukraine.¹³⁰ The Trump Administration has not pushed back on Russia's presence or activities in Syria (apart from crushing an attempted attack by Russian PMC Wagner on a base occupied by U.S. troops), but, then, neither had Obama. Clinton might have pushed back harder—Putin certainly thought she would—but he is at risk of creating an enduring mistrust and fear of Russia in the U.S., which had been far lower before 2016.

These policies were in contrast to the U.S. approach toward Russia for the past two decades. The U.S. tried to improve relations with Russia several times after the Soviet Union's collapse. The West hesitated for years to impose penalties on Moscow for repeated violations of international laws and norms, including its invasion of Georgia and cyberattacks on Estonia. Only gradually did the West start to impose sanctions on Russia after persistent human rights violations, including the high-profile case of a lawyer, Sergey Magnitsky, killed in the custody of Russian authorities, or indisputable aggression like the occupation of the Crimean Peninsula. However, it was not until the Kremlin's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election that most Americans and the U.S. national security establishment began to coalesce around the notion that Russia was principally a threat demanding greater attention.

These examples offer insight into the major vulnerabilities of Russia's hybrid and information operations and part of the basis for an effort to counter them. In the case of the U.S. elections, Putin attempted a significant covert activity that was blown. The attempt at secrecy made the revelation of the effort not only major news (which it would have been anyway), but also sudden and shocking. It also stoked fear, justified for the most part, that Putin is engaged in other covert actions that have not yet been revealed. The blowback against these blown covert operations has done more than lead to sanctions and changes in public opinion toward Russia; it has also sown deeper suspicion about Russia and created a drive to look for similar covert Russian activities around other elections in the U.S. and elsewhere. That suspicion and search will make it more difficult for Putin to conduct such activities and increase the likelihood of renewed outrage if, and as, others are exposed. In Ukraine, the Kremlin made major miscalculations about the dynamics on the ground, the loyalties of local powerbrokers and the population, and the nature of the pushback Russia would experience. This happened despite the extensive networks Russia had in Ukraine; the understanding of the situation there that those networks should have been able to provide; and the cover they should have been able to give to Russian stealth operations.

This blowback can and should form part of the basis for a new American and Western approach to responding to Russian hybrid warfare.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A sound U.S. grand strategic approach to Russia:

- Aims to achieve core American national security objectives positively, rather than to react defensively to Russian actions;
- Holistically addresses all U.S. interests globally as they relate to Russia, rather than considering them theater-by-theater;
- Does not trade core American national security interests in one theater for those in another, or sacrifice one vital interest for another;
- Achieves American objectives by means short of war if at all possible;
- Deters nuclear war and the use of nuclear weapons of any type as well as other WMD;
- Accepts the risk of conventional conflict with Russia while seeking to avoid it and to control escalation, but also ensuring that American forces will prevail at any escalation level;
- Contests Russian information operations and hybrid warfare undertakings; and
- Extends American protection and deterrence to U.S. allies in NATO and outside of NATO.

Specific Objectives of American Strategy vis-a-vis Russia

The key objectives American strategy should pursue toward Russia flow from general U.S. global aims:

- Ensure the physical security of the American homeland and people.
- Preserve the American way of life, specifically including the freedom to choose elected leaders without influence or interference by foreign powers and the ability to conduct political

discourse freely and without external shaping or control of that discourse.

- Protect and enhance the prosperity of the American people, specifically including ensuring the free movement of people, goods, and ideas around the world and protecting the American economy from disruption by cyberattacks.
- Preserve and strengthen America's alliances.

Principal Lines of Effort

American efforts vis-a-vis Putin hitherto have suffered from excessive geographic compartmentalization. Russian activities touch every American geographic combatant command (COCOM) and most functional combatant commands. Russian operations in Syria, for example, sit astride the seam between European Command (EUCOM), which has responsibility for Turkey (as a NATO member) and Israel, and Central Command (CENTCOM), which has responsibility for Syria, Iraq, Iran, and the rest of the Middle East. Even within the EUCOM area of responsibility (AOR), differences in America's relationship to various states introduce complexities. EUCOM relates to the Baltic states, which are NATO members, differently from the way it interacts with Ukraine or Georgia, which are not. The hard geographic boundaries on the American side have made it difficult for the U.S. to develop a coherent understanding of Russia's activities around the world, let alone formulate a coherent strategy for responding to them.¹³¹

The recommendations of this report therefore are arrayed not geographically, but within general lines of effort that cross theaters and domains—air, sea, ground, information, cyber, economic, and so on. The U.S. must indeed develop coherent approaches to Russian activities in various specific geographic regions, and some American agencies have attempted to do so. But those efforts can only succeed in the context of an overarching approach built on the

understanding of the nature of the Russian challenge and the opportunities and requirements of responding to it, generally outlined above.

Constrain Putin's Resources

Russia's relative poverty is the primary reason for its relative weakness in conventional warfare capabilities and its preference for hybrid operations. Putin has repeatedly demonstrated the desire to recreate a major conventional military capability that could indeed challenge the U.S. and its allies in modern warfare. Russian military industry has shown its ability to develop and field new weapons with capabilities similar—and in some cases superior—to those of the U.S., and to field large numbers of current-generation weapons systems. It has struggled to field advanced weapons systems at scale, however, and to overcome the challenges of converting to the professional military personnel system that would be needed to use them to their full advantage.

Sanctions

Sanctions will not change Putin's intent, but they can dampen the scale of his future foreign aggression.

Structural challenges within the Russian economy are the primary causes of Moscow's financial woes, but sanctions also play an important constraining role. Russia has repeatedly delayed and downsized planned investments in conventional military capabilities since 2014 and has reduced the military budget of the Russian Federation. This is in part a response to the effects of sanctions. Sanctions also deny Russia access to some of the most advanced technologies needed to continue developing and fielding advanced weapons systems.

The elimination or significant reduction of the sanctions regime currently constraining Putin would likely result in additional foreign direct investment in Russia in the form of cash, expertise, and technology. Putin would put some significant portion of those new resources into the defense programs he has had to curtail, allowing Russia to

begin fielding a much more formidable conventional military threat to NATO than currently. Such a development would require a reassessment of the conventional military threat to NATO even beyond the Baltic states, necessitating an even more urgent and expensive rearmament program by the U.S. and its allies just to keep pace. Growing conventional capabilities might also embolden Putin to act more aggressively and directly against his neighbors, both within NATO and outside of the alliance, and increase the likelihood of conflict and possibly escalation—particularly if Russia's conventional military capabilities rose to the level, relative to the U.S. and NATO, at which Putin could contemplate escalation scenarios with some degree of equanimity.

A significant influx of resources would also help power Putin's hybrid efforts. Such efforts by their nature are inexpensive, but they can be assisted by financial and economic activities that Russia cannot currently afford. Putin's ability to help his partners in Tehran, for example, has been severely constrained because Iran needs financial assistance that Putin cannot provide to offset the effects of the American "maximum pressure" campaign now depriving it of much of its oil revenue. A cash-rich Russia could be a much better partner for Iran and its proxies in the Middle East and beyond—as well as for Venezuela's Maduro, Libya's Haftar, and various other strongmen Putin seeks to influence.¹³² The preservation, and possibly the expansion, of the current sanctions regime against Russia is therefore a necessary defensive measure to deprive Putin of the ability to increase his conventional and hybrid capabilities.

No sanctions regime will change Putin's objectives or behavior materially. The objectives are deeply rooted in his assessment of his requirements to survive and continue to rule, as well as in his view of Russia's proper role in Europe and the world.¹³³ He has already developed methods of operating at low cost, and he will continue to improve and implement them. Nor will any conceivable sanctions regime cause Putin's regime to collapse, even were that the objective of U.S. policy (which it is not and which this report does not suggest it should be). It is

important to be very clear-eyed about the purpose of sanctions and the metric against which their success should be judged. Above all, we must recognize that they are an entirely defensive undertaking and that they are essential for keeping the cost of pursuing vital American national interests toward Russia at a level the U.S. can reasonably expect to sustain.

Disrupt Hybrid Operations

Hybrid operations offer Putin a number of advantages, as we have seen. They are much less expensive than conventional operations with a generally lower risk of escalation. They can succeed so well, if conditions are properly set, that the adversary voluntarily chooses the course of action Putin prefers without even knowing that he has been manipulated—or that he has actually lost.

They suffer from a number of vulnerabilities, however.

- Their covert elements are liable to exposure that can generate a blowback effect, costing Russia considerably more than it might gain, as considered above.
- The requirement to keep covert elements secret limits the scope of the actions Putin can take.
- They generally require the prior emplacement of human agents or the creation of cyber agents. Both of these are additional sources of possible exposure and, therefore, vulnerabilities—and they also require lead time to permit such placement and creation.¹³⁴
- They need an information environment and, frequently, political discourse within the target state that is at least conducive to the end state they are meant to achieve.

The U.S. approach to Russian hybrid operations should be broken into two tracks. One, which we will call “acute care,” responds to operations currently in preparation or underway. The other, “chronic care,” addresses ongoing Russian efforts

to set conditions to support future hybrid operations that they have not yet necessarily decided to conduct.

Acute Care

The U.S. and its allies should develop a multilateral and interagency effort to detect and disrupt Russian hybrid operations while they are under preparation, when they are launched, and as they are being executed. This effort should include the creation of an intelligence-sharing hub dedicated to this task and operating primarily in the open-source (unclassified) information arena. The focus on open source is important, both because that is where most of the hybrid operation will occur, and because it is vital to be able to share information about the hybrid operation, not only with countries that may not be part of existing intelligence-sharing programs, but also with the media and the general public. Declassification requirements take too long and are too restrictive to permit timely responses to the discovery of hybrid operations. Intelligence efforts native to the unclassified environment are essential to rapid reaction.

The discovery of a hybrid operation in preparation or underway should trigger a series of decisions about whether and how to defend against, disrupt, and/or expose it. These decisions should be made in an orderly and structured fashion in support of identified overarching campaign and strategic objectives. The U.S. should therefore consider establishing counter-hybrid operations planning cells in organizations like EUCOM and the State Department and/or National Security Council Staff. These cells could have several tasks:

- I. Coordinate efforts to identify and understand hybrid operations in preparation and underway.
2. Develop recommendations for action against hybrid operations that have been identified within the U.S. government but are not yet publicly known.

3. Respond to the unexpected exposure of hybrid operations whether the U.S. government knew about them in advance or not.
4. Identify in advance the specific campaign and strategic objectives that should be pursued when a particular hybrid operation is deliberately exposed or when hybrid operations of a certain type in a certain area are exposed spontaneously.
5. Shape the U.S. government response, particularly in the information space, so as to drive the blowback effects of exposure of a particular hybrid operation toward achieving those identified objectives.
6. Learn lessons from past and current counter-hybrid operations undertakings, improve techniques, and prepare for future evolutions of Russian approaches, in coordination with allies and partners.

The challenge of identifying a hybrid operation in preparation is daunting; that of determining when and how best to expose it to achieve the optimal effects is more so. The hardest part of all is that the U.S. must tell only the truth in that process. Autocrats have an advantage in information operations in that it can be much easier to manufacture lies and misdirections that support preconceived messaging campaigns than to rely exclusively on messy truth, which frequently does not run only in the desired direction. However, a free society cannot tolerate a government that lies to its people as a matter of policy. The recommendation to set up cells specifically dedicated to exposing hybrid operations, and managing the information operations that must accompany those exposures to achieve maximum effect, results in part from this reality. Not only must those who plan and conduct those information operations be highly skilled and well trained to succeed under the “handicap” of having to tell the truth; they also must be highly trained in the *requirement* to use only the truth, despite the temptations to use misdirection in support of a seemingly worthy cause.

A continuous cycle of exposing hybrid operations and generating blowback from them will cause the Russians to innovate in response. That will lead to an offense-defense race familiar to any student of the history of technology in war. And, as in any other realm of military technology, the results of that race at any given moment are not predictable, nor will offense or defense win permanently. The U.S. must enter this contest recognizing that it will be continuously challenged to develop, and then to retain, the ability to detect and expose hybrid operations despite improvements in the ability of Russia (and others) to conceal them and manage responses to their exposure.

Chronic Care

The Kremlin is laying the groundwork for many possible hybrid scenarios without necessarily intending to launch most of them at any given time. It must do this because it takes time to put in place the human and cyber agents needed and to shape the information environment and sometimes, the economic and political environments, to be conducive to a hybrid operation.

The U.S. and its allies can disrupt and raise the cost of this continual low-level preparation separately from efforts to detect, disrupt, and expose specific operations. They can engage in a program to expose human and cyber agents after they have been emplaced but before they have been activated to support a particular campaign. They can and should target especially the commercial and civil society organizations through which the Russians frequently manage those assets—fight clubs and judo clubs, for example, as well as corporations, political parties, and so on. They need not always or even frequently take legal action against these targets; it can be enough simply to present publicly the proof of their associations with the Kremlin to reduce their utility in a hybrid operation that relies on keeping those associations secret. The U.S. and Europe can also systematically unmask the Kremlin’s efforts to influence Western politicians and other power brokers through corrupt practices and illicit financing.

Even a steady drumbeat of such micro-exposures will not disrupt well-resourced and prioritized hybrid operations, of course—blown agents, human, cyber, and organizational, can always be replaced or used at lower levels of effectiveness or higher levels of risk. It might, however, disrupt some operations that are less important or less well-resourced. It will also impose a higher transaction cost on all the hybrid operations affected, forcing the Kremlin to allocate more resources to them and possibly to make harder choices about how to prioritize efforts.

The transaction costs that matter will most likely be non-financial. Most of the individual financial costs of any given hybrid operation are likely to be very low, which is the attractiveness of such operations to begin with. But Russia has a finite supply of talented people—people who can plan, develop, and conduct hybrid operations; people who can be good human agents; people who can set up and run believable organizational cut-outs; and people who can establish and run effective human and cyber agents on the internet. Stressing that finite supply of humans will lead to one of two likely effects: either Putin will scale back the number—and possibly scope—of his efforts to a level his human capital can support, or if he does not, his subordinates will be forced to use less-capable people. In the latter case, the overall quality of the hybrid operations will decline and the likelihood that they will have more vulnerabilities facilitating their exposure will grow. Putin has a longer-term option of grooming additional human capital, but that is a generational challenge he must undertake, and current demographic and educational trends are not encouraging.

Russia is different in this regard from China. Its population is less than one-half that of the U.S., and its educational system is generally deteriorating. It has also suffered from years of brain drain and is likely to continue to do so.¹³⁵ Xi Jinping might not have to make choices quickly based on limitations of his human capital, but Putin probably will.

Counter-Information Operations

The U.S. should not cede any information space a priori to the adversary.¹³⁶ It should even contemplate

contesting the Russian information space within the Russian Federation, but not as a priority. That target will be the most difficult to affect and the most likely to generate unexpected and possibly dangerous backlash. Putin could begin to respond more recklessly and aggressively should he sense a serious Western effort to contest his narratives in his own information space. But everything else should receive urgent attention.

Ukraine and Moldova are two states that should be short-term priorities for the U.S., as both have just gone through elections and are heading into another round. Ukraine elected a president in April 2019 but will elect a new parliament in July 2019; Moldova had a parliamentary election that produced no winners, and it will likely hold another election this fall as well.

It is easy to articulate what the U.S. should not do in such efforts. It should not attempt to pick a winner (either an individual or a party) and try to get that winner elected. Neither should it attempt to pick a loser and make that target lose. Ukrainians and Moldovans have as much right as Americans, French, British, or any other country's citizens to be angry at efforts by outsiders to determine the outcomes of their elections.

But the U.S. and its allies can and should help make clear to the peoples of those countries, and of others facing similar choices in the future, the consequences of certain choices they might make. Russia is a kleptocracy. Under the current regime's manner of governing, it cannot become transparent in the ways required by the community of world economies to participate fully and functionally in that community.¹³⁷ Its methods of economic interaction with its neighbors run through individuals and organizations deeply embedded in the criminal networks overseen and manipulated by Putin. States that link their economies closely with Russia's are therefore consigning themselves to the Russian economic sphere at the expense of full integration into the rest of the global economy over the long run. Such an approach will make a small number of individuals in those countries wealthy, while harming and even impoverishing many of their

citizens. The approach is also likely to lead to replication of the Russian model of governance, where people have relative stability, limited individual liberty, and ultimately no ability to choose their leaders. The Kremlin has an incentive to export its ways, as it rapidly did in Crimea after illegally occupying the peninsula in 2014, in order to ensure its long-term control. The U.S. and its allies would do well to make those facts clear to the Ukrainians and Moldovans who are choosing much more than the next parliaments, whether they recognize it or not.

The U.S. and the West are generally very poor salesmen for themselves. Russia has put a tremendous amount of energy into demonizing NATO and making clear to states like Ukraine and Georgia, which have evinced a desire to join the alliance, not only that they will thereby incur Russia's wrath, but also that they will gain nothing. NATO, in return, has made relatively little effort to explain what they actually would gain. One reason for that reticence is that NATO itself is ambivalent about whether it wants to admit them. Nevertheless, that reticence should not prevent the alliance from explaining the benefits it offers. Whether or not Ukraine, Georgia, or any other state ends up joining the alliance, NATO benefits from having the peoples of those countries wish to join it, from having them see it as a positive force in the world pursuing goals for the good of all, rather than the architect of danger and villainy that Moscow paints.

The U.S. and its allies also can and should help those countries work to achieve a level playing field in the information space. Russia continues to play a major role in the information space in those states, skewing the perceptions of voters, diminishing the chances of the reform-oriented candidates ahead of the elections, and undermining legitimate political competition. Unmasking these Russian efforts around the world could help reduce the effectiveness of Moscow's general assault on the legitimacy of democratically elected governments and their institutions.

Enable communication even under autocratic rule

Russia is following Iran, China, and North Korea into efforts to control its people's abilities to interact

with one another and the world. It has pressured and shut down or expelled companies offering end-to-end encryption technology, and it is now working to gain even greater control of, and access to, the data moving over internet wires within the Russian Federation. Putin justifies these Orwellian undertakings with Orwellian rhetoric, claiming they are defensive reactions to Western efforts to interfere in Russia's domestic affairs, which do not actually exist at all. Unlike China's or North Korea's blanket approaches, Moscow's ways are nuanced. Russians have access to most things on the global internet, except for specific sites that the Kremlin blocks. The Kremlin, however, is able to control the narrative within the country through its propaganda machine and the education system. It limits access to understanding, rather than information, in particular in Russia's remote regions, where people are less exposed to the outside world. The Kremlin's war on the truth also has negative consequences for critical thinking in the Russian informational space overall.

The U.S. has multiple interests in enabling Russians to have free access to the global information environment and to communications with each other. The ideal of freedom of speech and association is one of the most cherished Western values, enshrined in the American Constitution and in the laws of most of our allies in Europe and Asia. Americans should not quietly allow dictators to enclose their peoples in darkness, especially when those dictators are working so hard to disrupt America's own domestic discourse.

America is not at odds with the Russian people, moreover, but rather the Russian government. The solution to the current crisis over the long term lies in the will of the Russian people to force their government to change its behavior, which harms them so severely. They have done so in the recent past—the Soviet Union collapsed relatively peacefully in 1991 after all, having abandoned its military occupation and dictatorial control over its Warsaw Pact vassals with remarkably little violence. One of the reasons this happened is that the Soviet peoples demonstrated that they would not continue to tolerate its oppression of them or of others.

The U.S. could do little to facilitate the internal Soviet discourse in the 1980s, which relied in part on the unexpected proliferation of fax machines that allowed Soviet citizens to communicate with each other in ways the state found it difficult to monitor or disrupt (which is why one of the major Russian news agencies today is named Interfax). The U.S. could help today, however, and should do so. Western governments should encourage Western companies and individuals to develop and deploy software tools allowing individuals to circumvent efforts at state control of, and access to, private communications.¹³⁸ They should also encourage creation of more software facilitating access to the global internet for Russians and others within the Russian orbit. Russian experts will attempt to meet and defeat these efforts, creating another offensive-defensive competitive cycle. But the innovative power of the West is far greater than Russia can hope to harness. There is no reason to despair of putting tools in the hands of the peoples of the former Soviet Union that will let them continue to speak freely with each other and the outside world.

Cyber

Russian cyber activities have the West's full attention, but a change of perspective may help improve the Western efforts to detect and respond to them. As we have noted, many Russian cyber activities are conducted in support of information operations that themselves support hybrid operations. The cells suggested above that focus on detecting hybrid operations can and should also identify the likely ways in which cyber efforts could enable and support those operations. That assessment and forecasting could enable the detection of cyber activities at much earlier stages in their lifecycles, possibly increasing the chance of disrupting them before they can achieve their aims.

Delegitimize Putin on the International Stage

A central component of Putin's vision is to establish himself and Russia as equal or superior to the U.S. as convener, mediator, supporter of international laws, and general global influencer. He will have failed to achieve his goals, whatever else he accomplishes, if Russia is seen as a second-rate power or,

still worse, a pariah. That failure will be important to him—the promise of restoring Russia's greatness, by which he largely means its role in the world, has become one of the central themes in justifying his increasingly oppressive rule. Undermining this narrative will force Putin to find other ways to explain to his people why they should continue to accept the economic pain and deprivation of freedom that he has imposed upon them in pursuit of Russia's place in the sun. Putin will likely use his vast domestic propaganda machine to explain any international failure, but it would still raise costs for him to have to do so.

The instinctive Western desire to see Russia as a potential partner and an assistant in dealing with problems remains strong, and Putin plays heavily on it. It is time to recognize that Russia is not a potential partner, but rather a self-defined adversary. Russia will not help the West solve problems *in ways conducive to Western interests and values*. Putin convenes "peace talks" and other international mediation efforts to elevate Russia's status at the expense of the West, rather than to solve the problems at hand. Furthermore, his track record in solving those problems is dismal—Russian-sponsored talks in Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan, and elsewhere have not stopped the fighting in any state or led to any peace agreements. Russian participation in Western-led negotiations has been unhelpful at best and damaging at worst. The Kremlin, first and foremost, has fueled many of these conflicts. Putin has, in particular, shown no ability or willingness to bring his proxies to the table with anything approaching reasonable terms—neither the Assad regime nor Iran or any of its proxies, for example, has been willing to negotiate with other actors in Syria on any terms other than a demand for near-total victory.

Russia portrayed itself as a mediator in the Ukraine conflict in the context of the Minsk and Minsk II agreements. It initiated the war by invading Crimea and eastern Ukraine and kept it going by supporting proxies with out-of-uniform military forces and equipment. It was the aggressor and a belligerent—yet portrayed itself as a mediator. The West never credited Russia as a neutral in the Minsk process and the West's intent was to facilitate the dialogue

between Russia and Ukraine. The process, nevertheless, provided an opportunity for the Kremlin to use its domestic and international propaganda machine to reap the legitimacy benefits of being included in the process, which it did.

The West should stop letting Putin play these games. It should not allow him to portray himself as a mediator in conflicts in which he is a belligerent. It should not attend conferences or negotiations he convenes. It should require him to demonstrate that he has something of value to bring to the table before inviting him even to conferences or negotiations hosted by Western states or the UN. If and as Putin actually begins to restrict his own belligerent acts, reverse some of Russia's illegal actions, and coerce or persuade his proxies to change their aims and behavior, the West can re-evaluate this posture. Until then, it should treat Putin as what he is—an aggressor who pretends to be impartial and negotiates in bad faith—rather than what it wishes him to be.

It should also hold him accountable for previous failures and violations of his agreements. He entered into the international discourse and efforts in Syria in 2013 with the promise to get Assad to give up his chemical weapons program and stop using chemical weapons against his own people. Assad has neither fully met the first commitment nor stopped conducting chemical warfare against his citizens. Putin has not reined him in, but has enabled his continued chemical warfare by blaming the demonstrated incidents of the use of poison gas on the Syrian opposition. The U.S. and the West should loudly and publicly call him out not only for his failure to keep his word, but also for the outrageous information operation he has waged to defend Assad's use of this prohibited and horrific weapon.

The West must also stop letting Putinist euphemisms conceal his failures to abide by his commitments. There has been no “ceasefire” in Ukraine since the Minsk II accords—conflict within Ukraine has continued almost daily since those agreements. Yet Western media and leaders continue to refer to the situation there as a ceasefire, implying that Putin

has kept his word when he has not. Russian military aggression has continued in Ukraine virtually unabated since the 2014 invasion. Western leaders should waste no opportunity to hold Putin accountable for that fact.

Defend NATO

Two urgent requirements emerge from this study regarding the defense of NATO: the need to meet emergent conventional forces requirements and the need to deter Russian hybrid operations against the Baltics in particular.

Conventional

The establishment of the Russian lodgment in Syria has created the requirement for NATO forces able to suppress the A2/AD systems (and combat aircraft) there, in order to remain free to conduct counter-terrorism operations in the Middle East and transit the eastern Mediterranean freely. Since the Cold War ended, NATO has not maintained forces adequate for both conducting ongoing operations in the MENA region and fighting against Russian forces in the Mediterranean. Such additional forces do not exist in the current NATO militaries or any planned expansions. Further expansions are therefore necessary. The burden should be shared by the U.S. and its European partners, but it must be met. American national security faces an intolerable threat if the U.S. allows Russia to acquire a de facto veto on America's ability to conduct operations against terrorists preparing to attack the U.S. or its allies from the Middle East.

The potential challenge posed to the conventional defense of the Baltic states by the possible merger of the Russian and Belarusian militaries also creates an additional resource burden on NATO militaries (see Appendix I for a consideration of that threat). There are numerous ways to meet that challenge by relying on various possible mixes of ground, air, and missile forces—but NATO must be prepared to meet and surmount it. Again, current NATO defense programs do not include forces to handle such a contingency, creating yet another

requirement to expand those programs to meet this very real possibility.

Hybrid

The heart of the real hybrid threat to NATO lies in the possibility that during a crisis, Russia will sufficiently shape the information space so as to persuade one or more NATO members that a conflict within one of the Baltic states is internal and not Moscow-directed. It rests, in other words, on the current ambiguity surrounding how NATO would regard a truly hybrid campaign against one of its members.

NATO itself began to address this problem in the Brussels Declaration of 2018:

Our nations have come under increasing challenge from both state and non-state actors who use hybrid activities that aim to create ambiguity and blur the lines between peace, crisis, and conflict. While the primary responsibility for responding to hybrid threats rests with the targeted nation, NATO is ready, upon Council decision, to assist an Ally at any stage of a hybrid campaign. In cases of hybrid warfare, the Council could decide to invoke Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, as in the case of armed attack. We are enhancing our resilience, improving our situational awareness, and strengthening our deterrence and defence posture. We are also expanding the tools at our disposal to address hostile hybrid activities. We announce the establishment of Counter Hybrid Support Teams, which provide tailored, targeted assistance to Allies, upon their request, in preparing for and responding to hybrid activities. We will continue to support our partners as they strengthen their resilience in the face of hybrid challenges.¹³⁹

The U.S. and the other NATO states with the largest and most effective militaries could go further. They could individually or jointly declare that they regard themselves as bound to go to the assistance of a NATO member state under conventional or hybrid attack, regardless of whether the North Atlantic Council invokes Article 5. Such a declaration would be, in effect, a pre-emptive announcement of a “coalition of the willing” to come to the aid of a NATO member under attack.¹⁴⁰

There need be no fear in such a declaration that the Baltic states will be encouraged into some sort of adventurism—the Estonian Army will not be marching on St. Petersburg or the Lithuanian Army on Kaliningrad, regardless of the assurances they receive from their partners. Nor need any such declaration impinge upon constitutional requirements in the U.S. or any other state for declarations of war, or other consultations or authorizations by relevant legislatures. It would therefore not eliminate entirely the possibility that the U.S. or another state might be restrained by its legislature from carrying out the declared commitment. It would, however, reduce the ambiguity surrounding NATO’s response to hybrid conflict and, potentially, the attractiveness of Putin’s current focus on securing one or more NATO member vetoes of an activation of Article 5.

Bilateral Negotiations

The U.S. and the West should nevertheless remain willing to negotiate directly with Russia if and when it seems likely that such negotiations will advance our common interests, reduce the risk of war, or achieve some other important aim. Even at the height of the Cold War, America negotiated several arms reduction agreements with the Soviet Union. Multiple administrations have negotiated with North Korea. Rejecting Putin’s efforts to legitimize himself in international roles he does not deserve does not preclude such negotiations—it merely narrows their scope to the range of problems that exist directly between the U.S. and Putin and to circumstances in which talks are likely to lead to real progress.

CONCLUSION: REJECT INEVITABILITY

The outcome of the current conflict with Russia remains very much in doubt. It is not inevitable that Putin will regain suzerainty over the former Soviet states or that temporary gains he might make in Ukraine or elsewhere will become permanent, at least not if the West helps his victims resist. The U.S. can greatly help those states recognize the Kremlin's hybrid operations in play and patch their vulnerabilities against them. The overall trends for Russia are also rather poor. Russia's demography is disastrous—Russians are living shorter, unhealthier lives than their counterparts in the West and are moving through a period of declining population resulting from low birthrates in the 1990s and 2000s. Russia has vast mineral wealth, but its extraction industries are using obsolete equipment. China can supply new equipment if the West does not—but Chinese investment comes with a variety of non-financial prices that Putin will be loath to pay. Russia is resurgent only because Putin has developed a brilliant way to play a weak and weakening hand well, not because of any inherent increasing strength. The relationship between the Kremlin's economic strength and its foreign policy assertiveness has never been linear (as discussed above). That said, there is no reason why the West should not be able to weather the current storm and push back slowly and firmly as Russia's true and growing weaknesses drag it down.

Nor is it inevitable that Russians will define themselves and their aims as Putin has defined them. His narratives resonate with his people to be sure. Russians do value perceived stability, many do feel that Russia's opinion is being treated disrespectfully in the international arena, and many fall prey to the claim that hostile powers "encircle" them and seek to overthrow, oppress, or undermine them. But they have also demonstrated that they can pursue freedom—economic, social, and political. They peacefully transitioned from a dictatorship far more vicious and pervasively controlling than Putin is likely to establish. When Putin's false narratives are discredited—as they surely will be, for they offer the Russian people no lasting basis for greatness while stripping them of freedom and prosperity—Russians will once again reflect on what matters most to them. Another opportunity will then arise for them to choose a different path. The West must keep open the hope that they will, and the door to embrace them back into the world of our common values if they do.

APPENDIX I: RISKS TO NATO OF A RUSSIA-BELARUS MILITARY UNION

The integration of the Russian and Belarusian armed forces, as well as additional Russian basing in Belarus, would pose a major strategic challenge to NATO.

NATO's ability to reinforce the Baltic states by ground relies on the ground line of communication (GLOC) through the small stretch of border between Poland and Lithuania known as the Suwalki Gap. (Figure 1.)

The Russian exclave of Kaliningrad sits on the northwest side of this gap, and Belarus on the southeast. Russian forces in Kaliningrad are significant and include enough ground units to attack NATO troops attempting to move through this area. But Kaliningrad itself is highly vulnerable to NATO ground and air attacks (and even

in some circumstances a naval attack). Moscow could ill afford to lose Kaliningrad, which serves as the forward deployment area for Iskander nuclear-capable missiles, which form a key part of its intimidation/deterrent force.¹⁴¹ Committing the forces defending Kaliningrad to an attack against NATO troops moving through the Suwalki Gap would expose Kaliningrad to NATO counterattack and would therefore be highly suboptimal from a Russian standpoint.

Should Moscow acquire the ability to deploy its own ground forces in northwestern Belarus—around Grodno, say—it would be able to threaten the Suwalki GLOC credibly without putting Kaliningrad at risk. Such a deployment would be likely to increase substantially the risk to NATO's ability to keep significant forces in the Baltic states

Figure 1. The Suwalki Gap along the Poland-Lithuania border.



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and could change the correlation of forces in the region fundamentally.

The redeployment of Russian forces back into Belarus would also allow Russia to threaten Poland with conventional forces in a credible manner for the first time since 1991 (Russian forces were in Belarus in large numbers under the Soviet Union). It would also increase the conventional threat to Ukraine, since the southernmost tip of Belarusian territory offers a short road to Ukraine's capital, Kyiv, and direct access to western Ukraine.

The conventional threats to Poland and Ukraine resulting from a putative merger of the Russian and Belarusian armed forces would require a further expansion of the Russian mechanized warfare capability that is unlikely to materialize in the short term due to the limitations on available resources. But that threat could well emerge if this merger coincided with or followed the lifting of Western sanctions and the continued erosion of NATO's strength and cohesion.

The threat to NATO's ability to transit the Suwalki Gap, on the other hand, would result almost immediately from the merger of the armed forces because the military requirements to disrupt the movement of trains and convoys through a narrow area are much lower than those involved in waging major maneuver war.

There is likely nothing the U.S. or the West can do to prevent this merger from occurring if Putin is determined to do it. Lukashenko has long demonstrated a realization of the degree of control Putin already has over his regime and his country. There is no credible assurance that NATO could offer him to offset the very credible threats Putin can make, nor is Belarus in any way a plausible candidate for NATO membership. The Belarus regime is deeply corrupt. It has long been a pariah in Europe for its oppressive government, which stifles any internal push for reform, and shares almost none of the values required to join the alliance.

The U.S. and NATO must instead recognize this growing threat and decide on and provide resources for the efforts needed to mitigate it. These include continuing to deny Russia the resources it would need to develop Belarus into a true staging area for launching maneuver war into its neighbors.

