



**Grand Illusions: The Impact  
of Misperceptions About  
Russia on U.S. Policy**

Eugene Rumer and Richard Sokolsky

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## Summary

A critical examination of U.S. policy misfires in dealing with Russia and its intentions and capabilities over the past several decades is long overdue. Three factors largely account for this problem. All of them continue to affect contemporary policymakers' approach to a deeply troubled relationship with Moscow. By unpacking the analytical assumptions that underlie these misconceptions, President Joe Biden's administration and other important policy players will be better equipped to ensure that U.S. policy going forward is grounded in the most realistic understanding of the challenge that Russia poses and the right kinds of tools that the United States should use to contend with it.

The first factor is the lingering euphoria of the post–Cold War period. For many Western observers, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the implosion of Russian power demonstrated the permanent superiority of the United States. The perception that Russia's decline was so deep and irreversible that it would no longer be able to resist Western initiatives made it difficult to accept Moscow's pushback against Western policies. This was a particular problem when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) pursued several rounds of enlargement in the 1990s and early 2000s under U.S. leadership. U.S. leaders ignored Russia's objections and underestimated the lengths to which Russian counterparts were prepared to go to secure the homeland against perceived threats.

Second, American policymakers and experts have long paid too little attention to the drivers of Russia's external behavior. Russian threat perceptions are part of an inheritance heavily shaped by geography and a history of troubled relations with other major European powers. They are compounded by the trauma of the loss of its empire, the lingering ideology of greatness, and a sense of entitlement based on its sacrifice in World War II. President Vladimir Putin stokes all of them for domestic political gain.

Third, U.S. policymakers have not fully internalized the lessons of the two biggest crises of the Cold War—the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 and the Euromissile crisis of the early 1980s. In both cases, the Soviet Union went to great lengths to counter what its leaders perceived was a unilateral U.S. threat to the Soviet homeland that could not be tolerated. In 1962 they almost triggered a nuclear war. In 1987, they agreed to eliminate an entire class of intermediate-range nuclear weapons to secure the homeland from U.S. missiles. In both situations, U.S. missiles deployed in Europe would deny the Kremlin the advantage of strategic depth and decision time in a crisis. The lessons of those crises were ignored as anachronisms when NATO embarked on its eastward expansion on the assumption that it would no longer need to worry about, let alone maintain the necessary capabilities for the territorial defense mission. After all, Russia was permanently weakened. When Russia proved otherwise, the alliance was caught by surprise.

In another surprise for the United States and its allies, Russian foreign policy has become increasingly assertive, adversarial, and ambitious over the past decade. In the post-Soviet space, the Middle East, Latin America, and parts of Africa, Russia has deployed a diverse tool kit rich in hard, soft, and gray zone power instruments to assert itself as a global power. Russian foreign policy agility and even daring have repeatedly caught the West by surprise and sparked fears of its return as a major threat to Western interests. In reality, Russian gains and tools used to accomplish Moscow's objectives have not been all that impressive. But Russia has made up for it by capitalizing on mistakes made by the United States and its allies or moving into power vacuums left by them.

Still, Russian muscle-flexing and agility in deploying its tool kit, certain to be enriched as new and even more disruptive technologies become available, will remain a top-tier challenge for the president and his senior national security aides. Russia will also remain a serious national security concern for the United States because of its nuclear arsenal and conventional and cyber capabilities—and because of the U.S. commitment to NATO, which is locked in a tense standoff with Russia, in close proximity to its heartland, for the foreseeable future.

Getting Russia right—assessing its capabilities and intentions, the long-term drivers of its policy and threat perceptions, as well as its accomplishments—is essential because the alternative of misreading them is a recipe for wasted resources, distorted national priorities, and increased risk of confrontation.

In responding to this challenge, it is important to set priorities and differentiate between primary and secondary interests. Europe is the principal theater of the East-West confrontation where Russian actions threaten Western security. Beyond Europe, Russia's gains have been considerably less than often portrayed and pose a less serious challenge to U.S. interests.

The continued tendency to dismiss Russia as a “has-been” or declining power whose bark will always be worse than its bite can lead to the United States overextending itself, making unrealistic commitments, and risking a dangerous escalation with the one country that is still its nuclear peer competitor. The push to expand NATO without taking into account the possibility of Russia reemerging as a major military power was an example of such thinking, which is to be avoided in the future.

At the same time, the scope and scale of the threat that Russia's global activism poses to U.S. interests will depend largely on how Washington defines those interests in regions where Russia has expanded its footprint over the past decade. Absent a sober assessment of Russia's gains and tools for power projection, the United States will position itself to needlessly chase after the specter of Russian expansionism in distant corners of the world where major U.S. interests are not at stake.

## Introduction

A critical examination of repeated U.S. policy misfires in dealing with Russia and its intentions and capabilities is long overdue. Russia is frequently portrayed as an expansionist power with global ambitions determined—in partnership with China—to sweep away the world’s democracies and the liberal international order and create a new global order based on illiberal principles and rules made by the United States’ two authoritarian great power competitors.<sup>1</sup>

But it is just as often dismissed as a state in decline, possibly terminal. Russia is described as clinging to the remnants of its superpower status and suffering from a demographic decline that cannot be reversed in the foreseeable future, an economy overly dependent on resource extraction that it is unwilling and unable to modernize, and a sclerotic political system.<sup>2</sup>

A more nuanced understanding of Russia’s geopolitical intentions and capabilities is needed. Exaggerating its military might and economic potential—and the Kremlin’s will to use these tools for coercive purposes—can lead to a waste of resources at best and a dangerous arms race and confrontation at worst. Conversely, underestimating Russia’s capabilities and its will to use them when, in the Kremlin’s view, this is warranted by what is at stake can lead to miscalculation and an escalation of tensions that also increases the risk of military conflict. It is equally important to understand those drivers of Russia’s policy that determine its resolve to use military force, especially in a crisis. Effective crisis management and de-escalation, risk reduction, and conflict prevention—which should be among the paramount goals of U.S. policy toward Russia—require a firm grasp of the sources of Russian conduct and the factors shaping it. These considerations can play a far more important role in determining the outcome of crises than simply counting the military hardware that Russia has at its disposal. In other words, understanding Moscow’s vantage point and how it defines Russian vital interests is just as important as calculating the military balance accurately. Understanding the other side’s perspective is not the same as accepting it.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the causes of the chronic problem of U.S. misperception of Russian capabilities and intentions, and what can be done to avoid repeating past mistakes. It consists of assessments of: the evolution of U.S. perceptions of the Soviet/Russian threat from the 1950s to the present day, the dominant current narrative of the Russian threat and its drivers, the Russian threat to key U.S. regional interests, and the consequences of misreading Russian intentions and capabilities.



The paper builds on our recent study, in which we argue that Russian strategic culture is a product of the country's long history of adversarial relations with other major European powers and its geography that lacks an effective barrier to check its expansionist impulses or shield it from external threats, and therefore underscores the value of strategic depth as a measure of its security.<sup>3</sup> This paper makes four central arguments:

- First, in proceeding with NATO enlargement in the 1990s and early 2000s under U.S. leadership, the alliance ignored key lessons of the Cold War and the long-term drivers of Russian policy—namely, threat perceptions and the lengths to which its leaders were prepared to go to secure the homeland.
- Second, outside Europe, which is the principal theater of East-West confrontation, Russia's gains have been considerably less significant than commonly portrayed.
- Third, while Russia's global activism is a challenge to U.S. interests, the scale of that challenge is determined largely by how narrowly or expansively the United States defines its interests in those regions where Russia has expanded its footprint over the past decade.
- Fourth, for the foreseeable future Russia will remain a top tier challenge on the national security agenda of the United States and must be dealt with by the president and his most senior national security officials.

## U.S. Perceptions of the Soviet/Russian Threat

The United States misreading the Soviet/Russian threat has a long history dating back to the outset of the Cold War. The history of that confrontation is rich in episodes when the two superpowers stepped closer to the brink due to their misreading and misunderstanding of the other side. The misreading of the Soviet threat was made worse by the closed and secretive nature of the Soviet state.

Examples of the United States misreading Soviet capabilities and intentions include the fears of a “missile gap” and the Gaither Report in the late 1950s and 1960s, when the Soviet Union was assessed to be driving for strategic nuclear superiority over the United States.<sup>4</sup> Similar concerns resurfaced in the 1970s, when there were estimates that the Soviet Union would achieve the capability of knocking out enough U.S. strategic nuclear systems to prevent it from launching a retaliatory strike.<sup>5</sup> The Soviet Union's buildup of strategic nuclear systems was projected to result in a “window

of vulnerability” for the United States.<sup>6</sup> Also in the 1970s, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency was challenged by a group of outside experts for allegedly underestimating Soviet capabilities—a charge that led to the establishment of a Team B of outside experts to come up with alternative assessments of Soviet strength and intentions.<sup>7</sup> Over time, and especially after the Cold War ended, declassified documents provided ample evidence that reports of Soviet strength had often been exaggerated.<sup>8</sup>

Exaggeration in assessing adversary strength is a common phenomenon, especially when one confronts a country that is not easily accessible to outsiders, intent on concealing its capabilities, belligerent, and guided by a seemingly powerful and all-encompassing ideology. It was not unreasonable to conclude that a country that allocated far more resources to guns at the expense of butter was indeed committed to nefarious goals. Planning on the basis of worst-case scenarios was prudent when dealing with such a potent and apparently ideologically driven and hostile adversary. But Soviet military capabilities and posture needed to be considered in the context of factors that have long shaped and guided Soviet and Russian defense policy and threat perceptions. Key among these are the quest for strategic depth coupled with concerns about the vulnerability of the homeland and an adversarial relationship with and sense of inferiority vis-à-vis Europe.<sup>9</sup>

### Two Cold War Crises—Different, Yet Similar

While the history of the Cold War is punctuated by many crises in which U.S. misperceptions of Soviet intentions and capabilities threatened to result in a military clash, two major ones stand out because they brought the superpowers and the rest of the world to the brink of nuclear war. The first was the relatively brief but dramatic Cuban missile crisis of 1962, and the second was the much more protracted Euromissile crisis of the early 1980s. The former was triggered by the U.S. discovery of Soviet preparations to place medium- and intermediate-range missiles in Cuba, which would enable the Soviet Union to put much of the United States’ homeland at risk. The latter was caused by the Soviet deployment of intermediate-range SS-20 missiles that could put all of Europe at risk and, in response, the U.S. deployment in 1983 of ground-launched cruise and ballistic Pershing II missiles in Europe that could reach targets well inside the Soviet Union.

Notwithstanding their different geographic theaters, the two crises shared an important characteristic: the Soviet Union’s concern about its asymmetric vulnerability to the United States. As Stephen M. Meyer wrote in a seminal 1983 study, from the earliest days Soviet thinking about theater nuclear war emphasized stability of the rear as a “necessary condition for the successful prosecution of war”—that is, “a secure and stable area where forces were based, reserves could be mobilized, supplies and logistics could be organized and military industries could maintain continuous production of weapons and war material.”<sup>10</sup>



*During the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962, the U.S. Navy ship USS Barry steams alongside the Soviet freighter Anosov, which was believed to be carrying nuclear missile parts destined for Cuba. (Poperfoto via Getty Images/Getty Images)*

With that in mind, it is hard to escape the conclusion that in 1962 the Soviet “strategic rear” was vulnerable to U.S. medium-range nuclear missiles deployed in Italy and in Turkey. Those weapons systems had in effect done away with the margin of safety afforded the Soviet Union by its territorial gains at the end of the Second World War and the strategic depth resulting from those gains. To put the United States’ “strategic rear” at risk, the Soviet Union would have to rely on its intercontinental ballistic missiles and thus confront the likelihood of an all-out nuclear war. Even though the Soviet leadership firmly rejected the possibility of a limited nuclear war and insisted that a strike against the Soviet Union from Europe would be viewed in the same way as a strike launched from

the territory of the United States, the United States could avoid—at least in theory—the risk of a full-scale war by containing the conflict to the European theater.<sup>11</sup> Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet leader who took the fateful decision to proceed with the deployment of missiles to Cuba, explained in his memoirs:

The United States had already surrounded the Soviet Union with bomber bases and missiles. We knew that American missiles were aimed at us in Turkey and Italy, to say nothing of West Germany. Our vital industrial centers were directly threatened by planes armed with atomic bombs and guided missiles tipped with nuclear warheads. As Chairman of the Council of Ministers, I found myself in the difficult position of having to decide on a course of action which would answer the American threat but which would also avoid war.<sup>12</sup>

The deployment of Soviet missiles to Cuba was intended to level the playing field.<sup>13</sup> It was meant to expose the United States to the same threat that the Soviet Union faced, while providing the Soviet leadership with the same options as the United States had at its disposal. It was intended, in other words, to establish symmetry in the two countries’ vulnerability to each other, which geography could not offer Russia, and not to establish strategic nuclear superiority or a first-strike capability over U.S. nuclear forces, as much of the conventional wisdom at the time suggested.

Two decades later, another crisis unfolded stemming from the same kind of U.S. misperceptions of Soviet intentions and capabilities. It was triggered by the Soviet deployment beginning in the mid-1970s of the new SS-20 intermediate-range ballistic missiles. Their deployment, which eventually exceeded 400, was pursued by the Soviet leadership as an evolutionary improvement of existing capabilities for theater warfare.<sup>14</sup> But it was viewed by NATO as a quantum leap in Soviet capabilities and an equally significant escalation of the Soviet threat.<sup>15</sup> From the standpoint of the leaders of the alliance and its military planners, this required a commensurate response.



*The RSD-10 Pioneer/SS-20 Saber Soviet intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM) with a nuclear warhead, first deployed in 1976. (I. Baskakov/Sputnik via AP)*

From the perspective of the Soviet political and military leadership, NATO's decision in 1979 to deploy cruise and Pershing II missiles in Europe presented the Kremlin with a revolutionary new threat. Since the mid-1960s, when its Thor and Jupiter missiles were withdrawn from Europe, the United States had not deployed land-based missiles on the continent that could target the territory of the Soviet Union.<sup>16</sup> Both of NATO's new intermediate-range missiles made the "strategic rear" of the Soviet Union vulnerable to land-based as well as the existing sea- and air-based weapons. In the eyes of Russian military planners, this created a new class of weapons that would once again put the Soviet Union at a significant disadvantage, enabling the United States to strike targets inside the country without putting at risk its own homeland.<sup>17</sup> For the second time since the end of the Second World War, U.S. actions would negate the gains in security the Soviet Union had achieved at the price of millions of lives.

It is easy to overlook the lessons of those crises since they ended peacefully and, in the case of the Euromissile crisis, contributed to the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It was a victory for NATO, won without firing a single shot. In retrospect, however, their lessons should have been given much greater weight when the alliance began its post-Cold War chapter and took on the challenge of transforming the security of the whole of Europe. Unfortunately, those two lessons—namely, enduring Russian perceptions of an existential threat from the West, driven by

history and geography, and the lengths to which Russia's leaders were prepared to go to defend the homeland, including eliminating a whole class of weapons, were ignored as the alliance embarked on a new chapter in its history: the enlargement of the alliance into the states of the former Soviet Union. But first it is necessary to revisit the 1990s and the dominant themes and perceptions that shaped U.S. policy toward Russia after the Cold War ended.

## From Superpower to Has-Been

Just as it is impossible to understand Russian security policy during the past two decades without taking into account the experience of the late 1980s and 1990s, it is impossible to comprehend U.S. attitudes and perceptions of Russia without considering the U.S. experience during that tumultuous period at the close of the twentieth century. The end of the Cold War and the rapid disintegration of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union, which nobody had predicted until its inevitability became obvious to nearly all, contributed to a deep and lasting impression that Russia was finished—that it was in no position to challenge the U.S. and Western vision of a European security architecture, and that Washington no longer needed to take Russian interests, as Moscow defined them, into account.

In the eyes of many Western observers, these two decades spelled the end of Soviet and then Russian power, and demonstrated the permanent superiority of the United States. The victory of the United States was seen by the American security establishment, pundits, and politicians as so complete that a return to great power competition seemed utterly improbable. U.S. superiority encompassed all four dimensions of the competition between Washington and Moscow—ideological, military, economic, and diplomatic—and manifested itself in the unequivocal acceptance of the transformational effect of the end of the Cold War. The sudden collapse of Russia as a military power was so convincing that the alternative—the reconstitution of its Cold War military capabilities and return to policies guided by long-standing security requirements and threat perceptions—was hardly ever imagined. Had this outcome been considered, had the alliance in other words taken the potential Russian military threat more seriously, NATO enlargement would have been undertaken on very different terms, without effectively disarming NATO for dealing with the potential threat from the East, and probably without ambitious promises to extend membership and thus security guarantees to Georgia and Ukraine that the alliance could not deliver on because it lacked the political consensus and capabilities. In this hypothetical but all too plausible scenario, the outcome could have been different for all concerned—the United States and its allies, Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia. It is easy to see, however, why Washington and Brussels engaged in such linear thinking.

First, not only did the United States win the Cold War over the Soviet Union, but communist ideology also suffered a fatal blow at the end of the Cold War. In quick succession, Moscow's Eastern European satellites rejected the ideology and embraced free markets and democracy as the foundational principles for reconstituting their political and economic systems after the Cold War and four decades of Soviet occupation. The Soviet Union followed suit as Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* progressed and the fallacy of the reigning ideology was revealed to the citizenry.<sup>18</sup> As most of the socialist world shed its old ideology and declared its commitment to democratic capitalism, the "end of history" appeared to be at hand.

The "end of history" proposition put forth by Francis Fukuyama in 1989 interpreted history as a competition of ideas in which the principles of liberal democracy and free markets had scored a decisive victory over communism.<sup>19</sup> Fukuyama's proposition that these principles were the only viable path for countries seeking to organize their politics and economies if they wanted to be successful and stable, contributed to the widely held perception that the Soviet Union had been vanquished and that Russian power was at its end. There was no pushback from Moscow, where the prevailing mood of the late-Soviet and early Russian years was of acceptance that free-market capitalism offered the only way forward. In other words, the "end of history" left no doubt about winners and losers.

Second, the period in the late 1980s and 1990s surrounding the end of the Cold War also marked a major military setback for the Soviet Union and Russia, and cemented the impression of undisputed U.S. military superiority. The military competition drained the Soviet Union's resources. With minimal expenditure, the United States forced it to end the decade-long war in Afghanistan. The withdrawal from Afghanistan was followed by a far greater retreat from Eastern Europe and former Soviet republics. The extent of Russia's retreat and collapse of its military power was demonstrated during the disastrous campaign in Chechnya, in which its once-mighty army struggled for years to extinguish the separatist insurgency fought by small bands of irregulars. Not only had Russia lost the strategic depth so prized by its leaders, its territorial integrity seemed to be at stake.

By contrast, the United States was reaching the apogee of its military power. It achieved a spectacular victory in the Gulf War that demonstrated to the world for the first time the immense destructive power of the new generation of its weapons. It emerged as a major security manager throughout much of Europe, setting the dominant framework for Euro-Atlantic security by means of NATO enlargement, expanding a web of security relationships throughout the former Soviet republics, and waging a war against Serbia with little regard for Moscow's protests. It even managed and paid for programs to dismantle and secure in Russia the remnants of the Soviet nuclear arsenal. In terms of its military capabilities, the United States was unquestionably the mightiest nation, willing and able to project its power to distant corners of the world without anyone to oppose it.

The 1990s proved also wildly successful for the U.S. economy and the underlying philosophy of neoliberalism. For most of that period, the United States experienced “the best economic performance” in three decades.<sup>20</sup> Not only had it experienced impressive economic growth at home, it also emerged as the undisputed economic rule-maker for the world, dictating its recipes for success to other nations without anyone to challenge it.<sup>21</sup> To outside observers, the U.S. “unipolar moment” made Russia’s retreat and surrender to post–Cold War, post-Soviet realities seem complete. Some even wondered whether there would soon be a “world without Russia”—in other words, Russia would become a marginal presence on the world stage, in permanent decline, rather than a state capable of pursuing an independent and effective foreign policy.<sup>22</sup> Rather than worry about great power competition with Russia, many U.S. national security experts were more concerned about the country’s collapse and the disastrous consequences it could unleash. Russia’s gradual recovery after the terrible decade of the 1990s did little to erase the indelible impression of foreign and even some domestic observers that Russia was the new “sick man” of Europe.

Third, in the final years of the Soviet Union the country’s economy collapsed. With the failure of economic reforms, the Soviet leadership had no choice but to go to the West hat in hand seeking massive amounts of assistance.<sup>23</sup> What followed in the 1990s proved even more dramatic with the Russian economy struggling along from one crisis and one International Monetary Fund bailout to the next. By the time of the 1998 financial crisis, the country was seen as a perennial pauper and a hopeless case doomed at best to alternating cycles of booms and busts, unable to control its economic destiny.<sup>24</sup>



*An elderly woman receives alms in Moscow in December 1998. (ALEXANDER NEMENOV/AFP via Getty Images)*

Fourth, the outlook for Russia—in the eyes of many outside observers—was further clouded by its dire demographic situation and predictions for its future.<sup>25</sup> Demographically, the country was declared “finished” and unlikely to recover its economic strength and military muscle because of labor shortages and an aging population.<sup>26</sup>

Fifth, Russia withdrew from most of its foreign commitments in the 1990s and remained largely passive diplomatically. Its presence in the Middle East, the Asia-Pacific, Africa, and the Western Hemisphere was at best a pale shadow of Soviet ambitions to project power and diplomatic presence on a global scale, even as late as the

mid-1980s. Former satellites in Central Europe were knocking on the doors of NATO and the European Union (EU), and even some former Soviet republics expressed interest in joining the U.S.-led Euro-Atlantic institutions.

Even Russia's return to economic growth and domestic political stability during the 2000s left many doubting the viability and durability of its recovery. Its economic growth was impressive, especially compared to the collapse of the 1990s, and the political stability of Vladimir Putin's presidency stood in stark contrast with the chaos of the Boris Yeltsin era. Nonetheless, many—if not most—U.S. observers still viewed Russia as a weakling with dim longer-term prospects because it lacked three essential ingredients for a sustainable recovery: democratic governance, a free-market rather than state-dominated economy, and economic diversification.<sup>27</sup> The country was undemocratic and increasingly authoritarian, and therefore inherently unstable; its economy was still vulnerable to the whims of state planners; and as a petro-state, it relied too much on a single commodity.<sup>28</sup>

In the 2000s Russia's gross domestic product (GDP), while vastly bigger than during the previous decade, was still a fraction of the United States'. Its military was still viewed as a lumbering, inefficient, and obsolete establishment struggling to end the insurgency in the North Caucasus and unable to shed its old Soviet-era baggage through a series of unsuccessful reforms. Russia's attempts to reclaim superpower status came up short—and labels such as “energy superpower” only highlighted the limits of its capabilities and shaky foundations of its ambitions.<sup>29</sup>

Diplomatically, Russia was still too weak to assert itself on the world stage. It had no choice but to acquiesce to the membership of three former Soviet republics—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—in NATO and the EU, as both organizations entertained plans for extending their web of relationships further east. The perception of Russian weakness was reinforced by the two wars the United States launched early in the new century, which further contributed to the perception of its unrivaled military capabilities. Moscow objected to the invasion of Iraq, its one-time client, but could not stop it. And in Afghanistan, after a spectacularly brief and successful campaign, the United States appeared to have won the victory that had eluded the Soviet Union during the entire 1980s. Spurred into action by the tragedy of the September 11 terror attacks, Washington articulated ambitious plans for a web of bases around the world to prosecute the war on terror, including some in the former Soviet states.<sup>30</sup> Again, an unhappy Russia was unable to do anything to stop those plans.

### NATO Enlargement—The Enduring Post-Cold War Crisis

The perception of Russian weakness, however, proved to be misguided. It fed the erroneous view among U.S. policymakers that Russia's power was not a force to be reckoned with and that the long-standing security concerns of generations of its leaders and drivers of its security policy—



including those that shaped its posture in the Cuban missile crisis and the Euromissile crisis—would no longer apply. This in turn led to a fundamentally different discussion about the requirements for admitting new members into NATO and the implications of security commitments to them than if greater attention had been paid to those enduring factors shaping Russian national security policy and threat perceptions—strategic depth, a history of invasions from the west, and inherently difficult relations with other major European powers. Had these factors been taken into account, the discussion would have considered the much greater hard-security requirements associated with the commitment to defend the new members from external threats, including from Russia. Taking Russia's weakness as the “new normal” would prove to have far-reaching consequences for European security.

The 1995 NATO Enlargement Study that prepared the groundwork for admitting new members was based on the assumption that the alliance would sustain and expand cooperative ties with Russia as a means of alleviating its concerns about membership for Eastern European countries.<sup>31</sup> The NATO-Russia relationship would remain cooperative, and the possibility of its breakdown was not mentioned. While there were discussions at this time about the need for the United States to maintain a nuclear hedge against a revanchist Russia, the likelihood of a new Cold War in Europe was not discussed as a likely political or military contingency for the alliance to consider.

One of the earliest and most influential statements arguing for NATO to admit new members—a 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article by Ronald Asmus, Richard Kugler, and Stephen Larrabee—outlined six preconditions for such a bold move. The question of how to deal with Russia was fifth on the list, ahead of only that of how to deal with Ukraine.<sup>32</sup> Nowhere did the authors raise the issue of the actual military requirements associated with the commitment to defend new neighbors. The question of how to deal with Russia hinged on whether it would become democratic. If it did, then Russia “could play a crucial role as a pillar of security and stability in Europe and Asia.” The consequences for security if it did not become democratic were not considered. In the three authors' narrative, Russia was no longer treated as a source of credible military threats, and NATO was no longer in a position of concentrating on the “strategic luxury of territorial defense” as an outdated mission.<sup>33</sup> A 1996 study by the same influential authors offered an estimate of likely costs of the enlargement that was “anchored in the premise of avoiding confrontation with Russia, not preparing for a new Russian threat.”<sup>34</sup>

In the same vein, when testifying before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1997 on the subject of the costs associated with the expansion of NATO, then secretary of state Madeleine Albright argued that “a larger NATO will make us safer by expanding the area in Europe where wars simply do not happen.”<sup>35</sup> The received truth that a democratic peace was dawning on a Europe “whole and free,” and that Russia would be part of the new club of democracies, was reflected in significant changes NATO made to its mission, force structure, and capabilities beginning in the early 1990s and running through the first two waves of NATO expansion from 1999 to 2004.

During that period, the alliance shifted its emphasis from maintaining high-readiness forward deployed heavy forces to lighter and more mobile units and rapid reaction forces for new expeditionary missions, reflecting the popular view in the middle of the 1990s that NATO had to “go out of area or out of business.” The significant reductions in non-U.S. NATO defense spending and force levels, deployments of U.S. forces and tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, and land, air, and naval forces committed to NATO were all predicated on the assumption that,<sup>36</sup> regardless of Moscow’s threat perceptions of NATO enlargement, the alliance was preparing for a new kind of relationship with Russia that had very little purchase in the Kremlin.

Although Russia’s resentment of and opposition to NATO expansion had been known from the earliest days of the discussions about admitting new members, the perception that it was unable to stop this became so entrenched that Russian actions to do so came as a shock to Western diplomats and policymakers. The pivotal point was Putin’s speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, in which he warned the United States against pursuing its policy of expanding NATO, which he claimed would destabilize Europe and threaten Russian security.<sup>37</sup>

The sequence of events that followed Putin’s Munich speech is well known. The allies largely dismissed his blunt warning as retrograde rhetoric that belonged in the past. At the 2008 Bucharest summit they made a vaguely worded pledge to Georgia and Ukraine to admit them to the alliance at some point in the future; the announcement was a compromise that resulted from a last minute lobbying campaign by an outgoing U.S. president (George W. Bush) and strong pushback by Germany and other NATO members.<sup>38</sup> A few months later, Russia crushed Georgia in a brief and conclusive war that sent a powerful message to the allies that NATO membership for more former Soviet republics was off the agenda.

The shockwaves from the war were strong, far-reaching, and lasting. Its significance was not in the military victory over tiny Georgia but in the symbolic victory over NATO. Russia, with only a fraction of the Soviet might, stopped the far more powerful alliance from pursuing its long-established policy of expanding the Euro-Atlantic institutions. It also did so by military force, long after the conventional wisdom in Europe held that this was no longer acceptable as a means of settling interstate disputes on the continent.



*Russian soldiers ride an armored personnel carrier in August 2008, near Igoeti, on the road from Tbilisi to Gori, Georgia. (Uriel Sinai/Getty Images)*

The experience of the 2008 war offered another major revelation: the metrics that the West had used to measure Russian power after the Cold War and to formulate its policies turned out to be inadequate. The state of its economy did not indicate great national strength, its political system was not as stable as most European democracies, and its military was badly in need of reform—and yet Russia enjoyed other advantages, some intangible but no less important when it came to projecting power.

Having retreated from its outer and inner empires, Russia still enjoyed one significant advantage over the United States and its NATO allies in the historically contested terrain of Eastern Europe—geographic proximity. Furthermore, neither NATO’s European members, which had sought to capitalize on the “peace dividend” after the Cold War and had long looked to Washington as their indispensable partner in confronting Russia, nor the United States, which was engaged in two wars elsewhere and disadvantaged by the long distance and complicated logistics, were in a strong position to contest Russian military encroachment upon Eastern Europe.

An equally important factor was Russia’s willingness to use force to advance or protect its core interests—and to pay a higher price in resources and lives to achieve its goals than NATO was willing to sacrifice to halt Russian aggression. As seen by its security establishment, the 2008 war with Georgia was one of necessity, signaling to the West that Russia was committed to protecting its exclusive sphere of influence. It was a move against a much weaker adversary with little or no risk of U.S. or NATO intervention to protect a nontreaty ally. The payoff was disproportionate—NATO’s eastward expansion was effectively stopped and the Russian core interest of securing a buffer zone along its periphery was protected.

That same logic—on both sides—manifested itself again six years later in Ukraine. For Russia, preventing the country from slipping from its orbit was a matter of necessity and a defensive rather than an offensive move. It launched the war probably realizing that this would mark a fundamental break in its relationship with the West. Again, as this paper has emphasized, geographic proximity and a long historical legacy were major enabling factors for Russia. And, once more, the West was taken by surprise that Russia would jeopardize their relationship and resort to force in pursuit of its objectives. Little did it matter that the Kremlin was evidently also taken by surprise by the course of events in Kyiv and likely acted out of desperation with the failure by Viktor Yanukovich’s regime to handle the situation.<sup>39</sup> The use of force in defense of a core Russian geopolitical interest—keeping Ukraine in its orbit—was evidently beyond the expectations of Western policymakers.

When viewed in the context of long-standing drivers of Russian security policy—the quest for strategic depth and adversarial relations with other major European powers—the wars with Georgia and Ukraine were ones of necessity. They were waged to prevent further (after the collapse of the outer and inner Russian empires) loss of strategic depth and to make sure that an alliance seen as hostile not gain a foothold on Russia’s doorstep. But the sudden collapse of Russia as a military power in the 1990s had blinded the U.S. national security community to the real possibility that Russia would be able to reconstitute its military capabilities and return to policies guided by long-standing security requirements and threat perceptions.



*Russian military personnel move toward a Ukrainian military base on March 19, 2014, in Perevalnoe, Ukraine. (Dan Kitwood/ Getty Images)*

Had the possibility of Russia’s military comeback been treated as a more realistic prospect, NATO enlargement would have been undertaken with much greater attention paid to the mission of territorial defense considered by some in the early 1990s a “strategic luxury,”<sup>40</sup> without exposing its newest members in the Baltic region to the threat from the east—and probably without promises of membership to Georgia and Ukraine that the alliance could not deliver on because it lacked the consensus and the capabilities. In this counter-factual but all too plausible scenario the outcome could have been different for the United States and its allies, Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia.

## The Drivers of Russian Foreign Policy

Russia presents a complicated challenge for U.S. foreign policy. Unlike China, which has been elevated to the status of near-peer or even peer competitor, it is often seen as a distraction. It is one that cannot be ignored or filed away and dealt with only when the need arises, however, considering U.S. interests and commitments in Europe, the Middle East, and elsewhere, Russia’s standing in the international system, and its capable and agile diplomacy and disruptive capabilities.

Russian national power is greater than the size of its GDP. While the size of its economy provides a useful measure of its economic potential and standing relative to other countries, Russia's position on the world stage and its foreign policy ambitions have been shaped and magnified by a combination of its history, geography, ideology, and domestic politics.

## The Military

It is widely accepted that since the war with Georgia in 2008, which revealed major gaps in their capabilities, Russia's armed forces have undergone far-reaching reform and their capabilities have improved dramatically. There are three critical aspects to this. First, Russia's military capabilities are more than enough for it to dominate the post-Soviet region, which is the terrain deemed essential by the national security establishment. Second, its nuclear arsenal, which is undergoing a major modernization to include weapons systems based on new technologies mostly outside the existing arms-control framework, is more than enough to deter NATO from attacking Russia. Third, the military has demonstrated the capability to project power beyond the country's immediate periphery and to serve as an instrument of the Kremlin's ambitions for global reach and geopolitical influence. Beyond traditional hard-power tools, Russia's tool kit for "gray zone" or "hybrid" operations has emerged as an important instrument in the standoff with NATO in Europe and, on a more far-ranging basis, with the United States. Ranging from disinformation to cyber weapons, these capabilities are certain to improve as new technologies become available and are adapted by the military and security services. Russia's hybrid arsenal—backed up by its conventional and formidable nuclear capabilities—will remain its principal tool deployed against the United States and its NATO allies, and thus a major threat to their security.

## The Economy

The ills and failings of Russia's economy are well known: corruption, technological obsolescence, oppressive state intervention, brain drain, lack of foreign or domestic investment, and excessive reliance on exports of commodities, especially oil and gas. The economy is, in the words of a senior Russian official, in a state of "permanent stagnation."<sup>41</sup> However, it would be a mistake to dismiss the country as an economic basket case and underestimate its resilience. Since 2014, when the annexation of Crimea triggered the break with the West, the existing Russian economic model has weathered Western economic sanctions, repeated drastic drops in the price of oil, intense competition for a share of the European gas market, the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic, and the burden of intensifying military competition with NATO and the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Thanks to fiscal austerity, Russia has not only avoided major downturns and generated over \$500 billion in total

reserves, but also paid for the military to continue to upgrade its arsenal and operate in a handful of conflict zones. After seven years of mounting pressure, the unexpected resiliency of the economy has enabled the leadership to stay the course and even escalate its confrontation with the West.

## History

The disappearance of the Russian empire and the Soviet Union does not mean that the ideas that animated their expansionist policies for centuries vanished with them. The history of the Russian state is one of geographic expansion driven by a mix of considerations—economic growth, defense of the homeland from encroachment by other major powers, protection against threats to the regime, religion, and the ambitions of the country’s rulers.

The leaders of post-Soviet Russia inherited a powerful legacy of difficult relations with every neighboring country. Unlike the United States, which has long enjoyed peaceful borders if not always harmonious relations with its immediate and weaker neighbors to the north and south, Russia does not have a relationship with a single neighbor that can be described as harmonious. Some relationships are better than others, but all of them—from that with Norway in the Far North to that with China in the Far East—are marred by histories of imperial conquests, territorial disputes, and ideological or religious tensions.

The end of the Soviet Union was so swift and so complete that it allowed Russia little time for reflection about the right historical and ideological foundations upon which to build its new foreign policy. There was no precedent in its history for anything other than the pursuit of an empire in one form or another. It was the only foundation that Russian foreign policy could easily fall back on, especially as the transition to democracy and markets at home proved exceedingly painful and disruptive. Moreover, in geographic terms the transition entailed the country’s rollback to frontiers that it had not been confined to not just in decades, but in centuries.

As a result, the post-Soviet transition did little to change some of the most powerful and enduring drivers of Russian foreign policy. Key among them is the geography of the western frontier, which offers neither a meaningful barrier to its expansionist impulses nor a reliable defense against threats to the homeland. The principal feature of foreign policy since the days of Peter the Great, when Russia became an integral part of European geopolitics, has been the struggle for control of the flat and open terrain between Moscow and Berlin. At the end of the Second World War, the Soviet Union had achieved the greatest geographic security the state had ever enjoyed in its history. The loss of that strategic depth at the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union resulted in the rekindling of Russia’s long-standing insecurities.

## Geography

Russia's sense of vulnerability exposed by the breakup of the Soviet Union was heightened with the expansion of the Euro-Atlantic institutions to include its former satellites and one-time possessions. This presented a two-fold challenge to Russia. First, it posed a military threat in the eyes of a national security elite deeply rooted in the Soviet experience and reeling from the demise of the old empire. Second, the loss of strategic depth underscored another long-standing vulnerability in that a conflict with NATO would probably start in Europe and thus put Russia at far greater risk to its homeland than the United States. Whereas the United States could target Russia within the context of a theater war, Russia would have to resort to an all-out nuclear exchange to expose the United States to the same level of risk.

However, along with these perceived vulnerabilities, NATO's eastward expansion resulted in several important asymmetries favoring Russia. The wars against Georgia and Ukraine highlighted the advantage Russia enjoys by virtue of geographic proximity to what it considers its "sphere of privileged interests." Post-2014 NATO planning for defending the Baltic states has highlighted the fact that the alliance would face a major challenge in reinforcing and resupplying its forward deployed forces in the event of a military confrontation with Russia there, especially one that started with little warning.

## Elite Worldview

For the current generation of Russians in charge of foreign policy the dissolution of the Soviet Union was indeed the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century, as Putin famously stated. They are the children of the Soviet Union's "greatest generation" that through incredible sacrifice had won the Great Patriotic War, as the Second World War is known in the country. They grew up in a country that was recovering from the trauma of war yet managed to conquer space, to build a military that was second to none, and to maintain a great empire. The system was good to them; they had promising careers in the security services—the elite institutions of the old regime—and the prospect of promising careers. The ideas that the old system was built on had delivered for them. Then, after that system suddenly collapsed, ideas imposed by countries that throughout their careers had been their adversaries failed miserably as Russia struggled to survive the 1990s. The alternative—authoritarian politics, limited personal freedoms, and state capitalism—was obvious to them.

Having seen the benefits of a market economy, Russia's leaders had little incentive to go back to socialism and central planning. But they had little incentive to allow such elements of the new ideology as free elections and the rule of law to stand in the way of their ability to extract rents from the economy. The result is a hybrid system that combines elements of the free market with authoritarian politics and hostility to the West, fears of encirclement, Soviet nostalgia, and above all a sense of entitlement to its security rooted in the suffering and sacrifice of another generation.

## Unpacking the Challenge of Russia's Foreign Policy Activism

Another unexpected development of the post-Cold War era has been the re-emergence of Russia's global ambitions. Since 2015—despite oil prices falling in 2014, which caused a major blow to the economy—the Kremlin has undertaken a series of steps to project its power and influence at long distances—including military deployments to Syria and Libya, and a paramilitary deployment to the Central African Republic—and closer economic ties with Nicolás Maduro's regime in Venezuela. Russia also took the fight to the heart of its principal adversary's territory, intervening in the U.S. presidential elections in 2016 and 2020 and conducting damaging cyber attacks against critical infrastructure. These exploits added a new dimension to the prevailing U.S. narrative about Russia—that of a “malign” or “disruptive” actor, whose ambitions exceed its capabilities and therefore resorts to questionable means to achieve its goals.<sup>42</sup>

Over the past decade, Russia's foreign policy has become increasingly assertive and adversarial, constituting a multidimensional effort to expand its global influence at the expense of the United States and other Western countries.<sup>43</sup> This has been animated by several objectives. The most important are: undermining democracy in the United States and Europe; delivering further blows to the U.S.-led liberal international order and creating a multipolar one; fracturing Western political and security institutions; demonstrating Russia's return as a global superpower; bolstering Putin's domestic legitimacy; defending Russia's sphere of privileged interests in its “near abroad”; and promoting Russian commercial, military, and energy interests.<sup>44</sup>

It would be an exaggeration, however, to say that Russia's foreign activities follow a well-conceived and systematic strategy; to the contrary, its actions have been frequently opportunistic. It has taken advantage of U.S. and Western missteps and growing antiestablishment, populist, and nationalist



sentiments in Europe and North America. Over the past four years, it has also capitalized on U.S. retrenchment and the power vacuums caused by former president Donald Trump’s “America first” foreign policy. Russia’s global activities are not the root cause of the political, economic, and social problems confronting other countries, but it is determined to capitalize on them to the detriment of U.S. interests.

For several reasons, Russia’s assertiveness will remain an enduring challenge for the United States. First, it has employed relatively inexpensive diplomatic, military, intelligence, cyber, trade, energy, and financial tools to wield influence and expand its global footprint. Second, the Kremlin has been generally successful in managing the economic costs (for example, Western sanctions) of its foreign transgressions while garnering some benefits. Third, Putin’s nationalist agenda and the anti-Western orientation enjoy widespread support among Russian elites and a large swath of the Russian public. Finally, the Kremlin is likely, largely for domestic political reasons, to up the ante in response to efforts by the administration of President Joe Biden to push back against Russian expansionism, subversion, disinformation, and human rights abuses.<sup>45</sup>

The Kremlin wants to push back on U.S. primacy in areas that it considers within its sphere of privileged interests and to bend international norms, rules, and standards to benefit its interests. In other words, Russia’s overseas posture is not unique among major powers, including the United States.<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, an overview of Russia’s global activism suggests that, while continued U.S. vigilance and responses will be required, its global influence has been exaggerated.

### The Former Soviet Republics

Even before its invasion of Ukraine in 2014, there was a universal consensus among Russia’s national security establishment and political class that the former Soviet republics formed a “sphere of privileged Russian interests” and that Moscow was entitled to control their policies and behavior. This is an ambitious goal in today’s world of hyper-nationalism; transnational flows of ideas, people, technology, and money; and acute sensitivity about sovereignty. It is not surprising, therefore, that Russia’s grasp has fallen short in achieving its objective.

#### *Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine*

The three western former Soviet republics—Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine—are the most important ones for Russia, but they have proved difficult targets for attempts to keep them in its sphere. Relations with Belarus have been much more challenging than the existence of the 1999 treaty establishing a union state with Russia would suggest. President Alexander Lukashenko has driven hard

bargains with Putin to gain maximum economic benefits in exchange for geopolitical loyalty. He has resisted pressure for closer political ties, and until recently he had engaged in geopolitical balancing between Russia and the West, with cyclical overtures to Western countries and occasionally even a relatively relaxed—by the standards of his regime—domestic political atmosphere.

The dramatic deterioration of relations between the Lukashenko regime and the West after the brutal suppression of large-scale protests in Belarus following the deeply compromised August 2020 presidential election, and especially now after the forced landing in May of a passenger plane in Minsk and illegal detention of a prominent Belarusian dissident, has limited space for geopolitical maneuver between Russia and the West. However, Lukashenko has demonstrated impressive skills in handling Putin's demands and is likely to remain a difficult customer in any future negotiation about closer integration.

The relationship with Belarus is a challenge for Putin: a hard intervention to subdue Lukashenko has been out of the question as it would make a mockery of the union state and of the concept of Eurasian integration. Closer ties may at times be problematic too, considering his record for brutality that rivals that of Putin. The possibility of anti-government unrest toppling Lukashenko would present Putin with a difficult choice: an outright intervention would carry with it a high risk of another protracted military involvement in a neighboring state where the population would likely turn against the occupying force, while inaction would risk Belarus slipping from Russia's geopolitical orbit and aligning with the West—a most unwelcome outcome considering the country's pivotal position between Russia and NATO.

The relationship with Ukraine is also highly problematic for the Kremlin, albeit for entirely different reasons. The 2014 invasion of Ukraine and occupation of Crimea were intended to keep the country in Russia's orbit and outside not only NATO but also the European Union, with whom the Ukrainian government was discussing and subsequently signed an association agreement. However, the war has accomplished something that few had thought would be possible—a long-term antagonism between two nations with close historical, cultural, ethnic, and other ties.



*Russian President Vladimir Putin (R) meets Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko during the BRICS/SCO Summits in Ufa, Bashkortostan, Russia on July 8, 2015. (Alexander Vilf/Host Photo Agency/Ria Novosti via Getty Images)*

Moldova suffered a brief but nonetheless traumatic conflict with Russia-supported separatists in the early 1990s. The conflict has been extinguished, albeit not settled, but Moldova remains a distant prospect when it comes to closer geopolitical alignment with Russia. Geographic distance from Russia is important in that respect, and the breakdown in Russian-Ukrainian relations has added to Moldova's margin of security. The country, boosted by its close ties to Romania, has signed an association agreement with the European Union and rejected membership in the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Despite Russian pressure to do the opposite and the presence of a pro-Russian faction in its political scene, Moldova has opted to abandon Russia's orbit and seek closer ties with the EU.

### *The South Caucasus and Central Asia*

As a result of its historical, trade, commercial ties, and military and security cooperation with countries in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, Russia still retains the capacity to project power and influence in both regions.<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, it has experienced a decline in its clout there. The Kremlin's more expansive geopolitical ambition of integrating these countries into Russia-led economic and security structures have proved to be elusive due to several factors.

First, China has emerged as a strong competitor to Russia in the realms of trade, investment, technology, and infrastructure development. Moscow lacks the economic resources to compete with Beijing's growing political and economic influence or to match the gravitational pull of Chinese demand for the region's oil and gas, Chinese state-backed lending and physical/digital infrastructure projects, and trade in consumer goods.<sup>48</sup> For Russia, the race has been effectively over for quite some time.

Second, beyond China, Russia confronts a crowded playing field in both regions—the EU, the United States, and Turkey—and more nationalistic leaders who resent its heavy-handedness and inability to deliver on its promises. Many of the countries in Central Asia and the South Caucasus rely on remittances from migrant labor in Russia, but its attractiveness as an economic or geopolitical partner has diminished.

Third, Russia and the regional institutions it has created—such as the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the EAEU—are not set up to tackle the major problems afflicting all countries in both regions—including poor governance, corruption, lack of accountability, transparency and the rule of law, and poverty and economic underdevelopment. What is more, Moscow has shown little interest in helping them.

Fourth, the EAEU, which was supposed to be the crown jewel in Moscow's efforts to integrate Eurasia under its leadership and create its own version of the EU, has floundered. Moscow has not been able to recruit new members since 2015, and the union has suffered from internal divisions.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, Russia's neighbors in these two regions have become more effective in resisting its pressure by playing it off against China and by engaging in various forms of hedging, balancing, and forming coalitions. More broadly, the development of relations with other outside actors whose presence in Eurasia has grown in importance, has been a particularly effective form of counterpunching against Russia's neo-imperialist designs in the region.<sup>50</sup>

## Europe

Historically, dealing with the rest of Europe from a position of strength has been Russia's overriding geopolitical priority. This remains the case and is likely to be true for the indefinite future. How do Russia's activities measure up to this objective? Contrary to conventional wisdom, its position in Europe has experienced a significant deterioration following its aggression against Ukraine in 2014.<sup>51</sup>

### *Europe and NATO*

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin's policy toward the big three countries of "core" Europe—France, Germany, and the United Kingdom—has been remarkably consistent: an aggressive, opportunistic, zero-sum approach that shows no signs of interest in reconciliation or in lowering tensions caused by Russia's posture in Europe.<sup>52</sup>

Moscow made the preposterous claim, for example, that Germany was behind the assassination attempt on opposition leader Alexey Navalny in the face of overwhelming evidence of the Kremlin's complicity.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, its continued interference in the internal affairs of European nations has only hardened their attitudes toward Russia. Leaders who have attempted to repair relations with Russia—notably Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, France's President Emmanuel Macron, and EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell—have been rebuffed by the Kremlin and now appear inclined toward a more hardline policy.<sup>54</sup>



*Russian President Vladimir Putin (R) and German Chancellor Angela Merkel (L) attend their meeting at Meseberg governmental house on August 18, 2018, in Gransee, Germany. (Mikhail Svetlov/Getty Images)*

Russia has persistently failed to take up opportunities for better relations with Europe, where its crude attempts at interference and blatant lies have frustrated leaders for years. Macron has been forced to reevaluate his attempted “reset” with Russia. According to France’s Armed Forces Minister Florence Parly, there has been no concrete progress between the two countries after a year of dialogue.<sup>55</sup> In January 2020, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson told Putin that after the attempted poisoning of Sergei Skripal in the United Kingdom in 2018, there would be “no normalization of our bilateral relationship” until Russia stopped its destabilizing actions.<sup>56</sup> In sum, over the past three years Moscow’s political relationships with France, Germany, and the United Kingdom have suffered blow after blow.

In the economic sphere, through its internal reforms the EU has reduced Russian leverage in energy trade.<sup>57</sup> Europe’s gas trade has been transformed from a seller’s into a buyer’s market with more competition and greater power for consumers.<sup>58</sup> Russia is still a major supplier of gas to Europe, but it no longer controls the price and has lost the leverage it used to have with the help of take-or-pay contracts.

NATO has bolstered its forces on its eastern flank and, with the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe and Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaties no longer in force, it has expanded its capacity to operate on Russia’s periphery. All NATO members on the eastern flank see Russia as a threat and have adversarial relations with it. The Kremlin may have been successful in stirring up populist and nationalist sentiments within some European countries, but it has failed to weaken transatlantic institutions. Whatever weakening has occurred in these structures in recent years was the result of the Trump administration’s contempt for alliances and multilateral institutions.

Russia’s poor relationship with Europe is not a surprise. The EU’s expansion posed a major ideological challenge to it. The union was founded on democratic ideals and shared European values—alien ideas to a country where those values have never taken hold either in its politics or society. In fact, for most of its history, Russia’s relationship with the rest of Europe has been one of ideological differences and rejection of each other’s values. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov once remarked that Western Europe has always sought to deprive the Russian people of the right to have their own faith and identity. Russia has always resisted that perceived threat to its sovereignty.<sup>59</sup> With the two sides drifting further apart as their disagreement about values becomes ever deeper, a return to an earlier hopeful era appears unlikely. For most of Europe, maintaining a moderately civil relationship with Russia is an unavoidable burden rather than a source of opportunity.

### *The Western Balkans*

Russia's involvement in the Balkans has deep historical roots.<sup>60</sup> NATO waged a short war against Serbia and established Kosovo as an independent state despite Russian opposition. The Kremlin has tried to reestablish its influence in the region. It has relied on a wide array of tools—subversion, propaganda, influence operations, trade, energy, disinformation, and support for populist and nationalist movements—to secure its foothold and undermine the Western Balkans momentum toward integration with the EU and NATO.<sup>61</sup> Russia sometimes finds receptive local audiences for its efforts, although these can also instrumentalize the relationship. For example, Moscow is not shy about playing upon Serbia's affinity with Russia—but Serbian politicians are not beyond flirting with Russia to get Europe's attention.

Russia was unable to prevent Montenegro and North Macedonia from joining NATO in 2017 and 2020 respectively, even after an attempted coup in the former with involvement by Russian operatives in 2016.<sup>62</sup> Its limited offering to the Western Balkans countries seeking help from and membership in the EU has been modest at best by comparison, and its inability to deliver has undermined its leverage there.<sup>63</sup> Russia does not shy away from relying on disinformation, exploitation of ethnic and religious rivalries, and corruption to undermine Western influence in the region, and its manipulation of these challenges amplifies some EU members' reluctance to admit new Balkans members.<sup>64</sup> Nonetheless, in sum, Russia is not the major player in the region it often claims to be.

### *The Asia-Pacific*

Although many commentators have written about Russia's pivot to the Asia-Pacific since its 2014 invasion of Ukraine and break with the West, there is less to this than is often assumed. Russia is and will remain a European—rather than an Asian—power.<sup>65</sup> The relationship with China is at the top of Russian priorities in Asia. Its other economic, military, security, and diplomatic interests in the region are of much less importance, and it will invariably subordinate these—and its relationships with other Asian countries—to the paramount importance of maintaining and strengthening its relationship with Beijing.<sup>66</sup>

After its partnership with China, Russia's most important relationship in the region is with Japan. These ties, however, remain underdeveloped at best and strained at worst. Trade, investment, and commercial ties with Japan remain negligible—in 2019 Japanese exports to and imports from Russia totaled around \$7.2 billion and \$14.3 billion respectively, and net Japanese foreign direct investment into Russia was a paltry \$488 million in 2020.<sup>67</sup> The political relationship is stagnant, hostage to the two countries' long-standing, unresolved territorial dispute over the Kuril Islands, to the Rus-

sian-Chinese strategic partnership, and to Japan's alliance with the United States.<sup>68</sup> The history of the Russian-Japanese relationship since the end of the Cold War is one of false starts, dashed hopes, and unrealistic expectations, and prospects for a breakthrough appear bleak for the indefinite future. Former prime minister Shinzo Abe had made it a top priority of his foreign policy to resolve Japan's territorial disputes with Russia. His successor, Yoshihide Suga, does not appear to share that commitment, which is likely to lower Russia's place on Japan's foreign policy agenda.

Russia's aspirations for a more significant role on the Korean Peninsula also remain unfulfilled. Trade, energy, and investment links with North Korea remain weak—in 2019 it only imported about \$45 million and only exported about \$3 million of goods from Russia.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, Moscow has been completely shut out of U.S.–North Korean diplomatic talks on denuclearization for the past four years. Ties with South Korea tell much the same story. Seoul has little incentive to forge closer relations with Moscow because the latter has little leverage to influence Pyongyang's behavior—and because any moves by Seoul to improve relations with Moscow would likely be met with disapproval from Washington. Moscow generally follows Beijing's lead on the peninsula.<sup>70</sup>

Russia has been more active in Southeast Asia over the past several years, but the results have been disappointing. There has been a slight increase in expanding arms sales, trade, and energy cooperation with several members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations—Russia provided the region with 26 percent of its arms between 1999 and 2018 (with 61 percent of those sales going to Vietnam).<sup>71</sup> Its relations with China so dominate its agenda in the region that it even agreed to abandon an offshore oil joint venture with Vietnam under pressure from Beijing, which claims that portion of the South China Sea.<sup>72</sup>

## The Middle East

Russia has achieved important gains in the Middle East over the past decade. It has built or rebuilt productive relationships with the region's key powers—Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel—and managed to maintain a productive, if occasionally rocky, relationship with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government despite significant Russian-Turkish differences in Syria, Libya, and elsewhere. All of this was made possible due to Russia's military intervention in Syria since 2015.

By reversing the course of the Syrian civil war and saving a long-standing ally, Russia sent a message to other Middle Eastern regimes that it is a reliable partner.<sup>73</sup> The intervention was a major success, but it was not enough to conclude the war and secure peace in the devastated country. Russia has established a long-term military and naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, but is hardly the only major actor in Syria, where it has to contend with Iran and Turkey, as well as a residual U.S.

military presence. Each of these powers has its own interests in Syria, which compete or even conflict with Russia's aim of restoring the country's territorial integrity and launching the reconstruction process. These goals remain distant and will require a great deal of balancing and accommodation on the part of Russia to achieve.<sup>74</sup>

In Libya's civil war, Russia has backed—along with Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and France—the major opponent of the UN-recognized Tripoli government, General Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan National Army (LNA). Moscow has reportedly supplied weapons, mercenaries, and even combat aircraft to the LNA, but with little success, as its attempts to capture Tripoli have been stymied by Turkish-backed pro-government forces. A foothold in Libya could be a valuable prize for Russia, as it would present it with another military and naval outpost in the Mediterranean and perhaps lucrative deals to exploit the country's oil wealth. That, however, remains a distant prospect.

The 2013 coup in Egypt and the rise of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to the presidency presented an opportunity for Russia to rebuild relations with its one-time client as the country's new leadership came under criticism for its human rights practices. Sisi found a welcoming partner in Putin, who did not criticize his human rights practices and political repression, and who could perhaps help offset Washington's criticism.<sup>75</sup> Egypt has emerged as an important purchaser of Russian arms, and the two countries have inked a deal for Russia to finance and build a nuclear power plant there.<sup>76</sup> However, construction of the facility has yet to begin, and its financing remains unsettled.<sup>77</sup> Russia seems poised to move into whatever space is created by a downturn in U.S.-Egyptian relations. However, in an illustration of the limits of what Cairo is prepared to do for its Russian partner, it—presumably under pressure from Washington—appears to have backed out of an agreement to allow Russian planes access to Egyptian air bases.

Russia's main accomplishments in the Middle East also illustrate the limits of its power and influence. In a region riven by fierce geopolitical and sectarian rivalries, the ability to talk to everyone without taking sides, while providing a measure of diplomatic flexibility, has limited value. With modest capabilities for power projection and economic resources, Russia lacks the clout to resolve



*A picture taken on March 1, 2018, shows a member of the Russian military police standing guard between the portraits of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (R) and Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) hanging outside a checkpoint on the outskirts of Damascus. (LOUAI BESHARA/AFP via Getty Images)*



any of the region's myriad problems. At best, for the foreseeable future, it has positioned itself as an important geopolitical and military actor in a region of undisputed U.S. military superiority, as well as a valued interlocutor for all parties to the region's conflicts.

## Africa

A major driver of Russia's renewed attention and presence in Africa is the desire to be seen as a great power with far-flung interests and the capacity to project power and influence. In other words, it appears more focused on the symbolism rather than the substance of engagement. In October 2019, Putin hosted the first Africa-Russia summit,<sup>78</sup> underscoring the symbolic importance the Kremlin attaches to the perception that Russia is now a player on the continent. The summit generated a great deal of publicity, but few tangible results for the African countries that participated or for Russia.

The most ambitious commercial and strategic venture attempted by Russia in Africa was a massive \$76 billion agreement it signed with South Africa in 2014 to build a series of nuclear power plants.<sup>79</sup> The deal, mired in allegations of corruption and involvement by shady South African business interests, fell through, leaving Russia with few, if any, levers to make up for the blow to its ambitions in the country. Russia accounts for less than 0.5 percent of South Africa's foreign trade. In 2018 only 0.43 percent of South Africa's exports—worth \$586 million<sup>80</sup>—went to Russia, while just 0.55 percent of its imports came from there.<sup>81</sup> While Russia enjoys the residual benefits of its support for the African National Congress during the apartheid regime, that goodwill is fading as a new generation of South African leaders is emerging, and Moscow has little to offer the country to help it deal with its socioeconomic problem.

Notwithstanding the alarms sounded about Russia's greater engagement in Africa,<sup>82</sup> it has met with modest results at best. It has leveraged its involvement on the continent to generate support for UN General Assembly resolutions it backs and to expand cooperation with local intelligence and security services. Nonetheless, Russia's military and economic footprint in the region remains small. It not only faces formidable competitors in Africa—notably China, India, the United States, and the EU—but is also largely incapable, because of its limited resources, of helping African countries solve their most pressing problems, including poverty, ethnic and tribal conflicts, poor governance, and weak infrastructure. The limited success Russia has had in expanding its presence on the continent can be attributed mostly to its opportunism in taking advantage of the West's lack of interest and attention. Moscow will continue its attempts to gain footholds in Africa, but more likely than not with modest results.

## Latin America

Over the past decade, Russia has attempted to expand its presence and influence in Latin America in pursuit of geopolitical, military, commercial, and energy interests. It has scored some successes, but mostly as a result of its ability to exploit U.S. mishandling of major issues for the region (for example, immigration and trade agreements) and its relationships with countries that have long-standing tensions with the United States, notably Venezuela and Cuba.<sup>83</sup>

Russia's successes in the region include most notably a partnership with Hugo Chávez's and Maduro's regimes in Venezuela, re-engaging with Cuba and Nicaragua, and negotiating arms deals with several countries.<sup>84</sup> It has helped the Maduro regime evade U.S. sanctions.<sup>85</sup> Moscow has also engaged in a geopolitical tit-for-tat with the United States through occasional naval and air forays in the region. However, the scale and scope of Russian engagement in Latin America should not be exaggerated.

Russia's relationships with the region's most important countries—Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico—are best described as anemic. Its reach is limited not only by resource constraints, but also by its lack of appeal as an economic and technology partner, as a source of foreign investment, and destination for exports. Russia's imports from South America accounted for only about 2.5 percent of its total imports in 2018.<sup>86</sup> Moscow is advancing its agenda of challenging U.S. influence in the latter's backyard, but is not interested in helping countries there solve their problems. As a consequence, it brings little to the table that is of interest to the vast majority of countries in the region.

In sum, Russia would have to make a substantially greater investment in the region, especially in its military footprint, to chip away at the U.S. military, political, economic, and cultural predominance in Latin America.

## Conclusion

Understanding Russian power and its uses in all their dimensions poses a nuanced and complicated challenge. The United States and its allies are justifiably concerned about Russia's hard power and hybrid capabilities. Its interference in elections in the United States and Europe, use of cyber operations, disinformation, military intimidation, intelligence operations, and the like will continue to threaten their security as long as the East-West confrontation continues. So will Russia's evolving strategic arsenal, including nuclear, advanced conventional, space, and cyber weapons. Moreover,

while its modest capabilities for long-range power projection and limited soft-power appeal may not be enough to significantly expand its global influence, they can make Russia a useful partner to countries seeking to balance U.S. influence or to fill a vacuum left by the lack of U.S. interest or attention.

Russia's international activities over the past several years demonstrate the reach and the limits of its power:

- **Opportunity Knocks:** Russia's global ambitions have benefited from multiple opportunities rather than from a well-resourced strategy. It has been agile and at times daring in seizing opportunities created by the West's lack of interest or poor performance. A more competent, consistent, and coherent U.S. foreign policy as well as improved coordination with its allies could help deprive Moscow of new openings and limit its capacity to build on existing ones. Relationships built on opportunity rather than enduring interests and a commitment to partnership are often fragile.
- **The Lonely Ex-Superpower:** Russia has no real allies, only weak client states that add little to its power and influence. It is surrounded by countries that are either hostile or wary toward it. Even within what Moscow regards as its "sphere of privileged interests," other countries, notably China, have been able to achieve high levels of penetration. The former Soviet countries in Central Asia, in particular, are increasingly dependent on China for trade, investment, and infrastructure.
- **Friends Without Great Benefits:** Russia's attempts to expand its influence and geopolitical sway are self-limiting. While much of the Kremlin's activism in different regions has not been resource-intensive, it lacks many of the tools to win friends as it offers very little in the way of foreign investment, trade, or technology. There is little evidence to suggest that most countries in the developing world seek to emulate Russia's economic model. Likewise, Moscow has not been able to leverage China's growing presence and influence in these regions to its own advantage.
- **Transactional, not Transformational:** Russia's international engagement has been largely transactional, driven by geopolitical, commercial, and energy interests. It has little interest in helping countries solve their most pressing challenges—whether in organizing security in conflict-torn regions, or in offering partnerships to deal with the serious transnational challenges of pandemics, climate change, international terrorism, crime, corruption, and illicit trafficking.

- **Plucking Low-Hanging Fruit:** In most regions of the world—Africa and Latin America in particular—Russia’s strongest ties have been established with the weakest countries, which lack alternatives to dependence on it. Moscow has had little success in cultivating strong ties with regional powers such as Brazil, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, and South Africa.
- **Overreach:** In several countries, Russia has overreached, alienating local elites and squandering its influence. In the Balkans, the Russian-instigated coup attempt in Montenegro and Moscow’s effort to undercut the agreement between Greece and North Macedonia that paved the way for the latter’s admission to NATO revitalized efforts by countries in the region to achieve greater Euro-Atlantic integration. The invasion of Ukraine had a similar impact and, more importantly, doomed Russia’s dream of making the country the keystone of the struggling Eurasian Economic Union.

Formulating an effective and sustainable response to Russia’s global posture will be challenging if virtually every action taken by the Kremlin is viewed as being zero-sum. Thus, a judicious approach to the task should rely on several key questions:

- How do Russian activities affect U.S. interests, foreign policy goals, and priorities? Do they compromise core or secondary U.S. interests?
- How successful has Russia been in advancing its objectives, interests, and priorities, and can these gains be sustained?
- How have different countries reacted to Russian activities? Have these fostered a greater desire for Russian engagement or stirred resentment and pushback?
- What tools and options does the United States have to confront Russia’s behavior in different regions when it is judged to be unacceptable?
- What are the costs, benefits, and potential risks and consequences of U.S. responses to Russia’s activism?<sup>87</sup>

Russia will continue to occupy a prominent place on the U.S. foreign policy agenda. Its vast size and position on the Eurasian continent, energy resources, proximity to U.S. allies in Europe and Asia, conventional and nuclear capabilities, geopolitical ambitions, and relatively low-cost tools for projecting influence ensure that it will retain the capacity to sustain a position on the world stage that the United States cannot afford to ignore. But in responding to this challenge, it is important to

avoid acting on the impulse to push back against every instance of Russian activism and instead to proceed in pursuit of priorities based on a sober assessment of Russian motivations and capabilities. Europe is the most important theater where Russia's actions pose the most significant threats to the United States and its allies. Its ambitions in many other parts of the world—the Asia-Pacific, Africa, the Western Hemisphere, the Arctic,<sup>88</sup> and even the states of the former Soviet Union—pose less serious concerns because they have little impact on core U.S. interests of security or economic prosperity, and in many cases could lead to Russia's overextension.

The adversarial character of the U.S.-Russian relationship will persist for many years, driven by conflicting interests, values, and conceptions of global order. Because both countries engage in global pursuits, they are bound to cross paths in various parts of the world. It is critical that they manage their competition to mitigate the risk of conflict. As two noted experts have observed, the two powers are not locked into a zero-sum existential contest for global geopolitical and ideological dominance.<sup>89</sup> The United States can afford to view the manifestations of Russia's renewed global activism on a case-by-case basis and respond judiciously and selectively, weighing the costs, benefits, and consequences of alternative responses.

### Why Getting Russia Right Matters

There are three major problems associated with misestimating Russia's capabilities, misconstruing its intentions, and misreading the drivers of its foreign policy.

Threat inflation—driven by institutional and bureaucratic interests, financial incentives, domestic politics, and ideology—is an obvious problem that arises from getting Russia wrong.<sup>90</sup> Inflating its military capabilities and misreading its intentions runs the risk of dangerous escalation and wasted resources.

#### *Increased Risk of U.S.-Russian Confrontations*

Russia, like any major power, seeks to expand its influence and weaken the position of its perceived adversaries. But there is little evidence that the Kremlin operates according to some master plan or coherent grand strategy to spread its ideology around the world. Rather, Russian policy has been opportunistic but calculating. When the Kremlin sees an opening and judges the risks to be low or manageable, it will act decisively to protect or advance Russian interests, as has been the case in Syria. It will rely on military force when it sees all other options as having been exhausted, as apparently was the case with Ukraine.

The Kremlin appears likely to act with restraint when it judges the costs to outweigh the benefits. It has refrained so far from sending troops to Belarus, where the Lukashenko regime has been able to suppress the opposition and where there has been little evidence of NATO and the EU preparing to intervene politically or otherwise.

Some experts perceive Russia's assertiveness as part of a broader pattern of expansionism as opposed to discrete actions aimed at promoting specific objectives.<sup>91</sup> This does not appear to be the case. For example, Putin's decision to intervene in Syria to prevent the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime reflected several considerations, including support for a traditional ally, maintaining the Russian military's access to critical installations in the Mediterranean, defeating what he perceived as another U.S.-led effort at regime change, thwarting the ambitions of the Syrian opposition perceived by the Kremlin to be jihadist extremists, and demonstrating Russia's capacity for force projection as a symbol of its great power status. It is a big leap to extrapolate from these objectives, as some analysts have done, a Russian campaign to replace the United States as the dominant power in the Middle East.<sup>92</sup>

#### *Increased Dangers of Overextension*

But underappreciation of the threat from Russia and misreading of its security requirements are also fraught with dangerous consequences. The tendency to dismiss Russia as a "has been" can lead to the United States overextending itself, making unrealistic commitments, and risking a dangerous escalation with the one country that is still its nuclear peer competitor.

Misconstruing Russian motivations and capabilities is especially dangerous when the "correlation of forces" on the ground favors Russia rather than the United States. The U.S.-led effort to extend NATO membership invitations to Georgia and Ukraine in 2008 did not take into account either the strength of Russia's opposition to this or its capabilities for preventing the two countries from joining the alliance. The result has been a situation in which the United States has overpromised and demonstrated its inability to deliver on the pledge for well over a decade.

There is no ready-made recipe for translating these insights into off-the-shelf policies for the current U.S. administration. But internalizing the lessons from hard-edged encounters with Russian power as well as the sources of U.S. misperceptions and miscalculations that contributed to the development of sub-optimal policies, would be a good place to start.

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