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Russia's Global Ambitions in Perspective

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+ CONTENTS

Back to the Future	1
The Troika of Russian Foreign Policy	3
Old Habits Don't Die	9
The Past Is Prologue	16
About the Authors	18
Notes	19

Over the past several years, the international community has witnessed the return of Russia as an important global actor. Is this a fundamentally new phenomenon, or is it the result of the Kremlin's opportunism under President Vladimir Putin and the transformation of his foreign policy?

The current activist Russian posture in many far-flung corners of the world goes beyond the two previously articulated key elements of its foreign policy: its claim to a sphere of privileged interests around its immediate periphery, which was staked out in the wake of the 2008 war with Georgia, and its refusal to accept the post–Cold War security order in Europe, decisively affirmed with the 2014 annexation of Crimea. More recently, the Kremlin has expanded the geographic scale of its foreign policy with active outreach in parts of the world where a Russian presence has not been a factor for nearly three decades, since the Soviet Union scaled back its overseas ambitions.

At first glance, Moscow's attempts to create a web of relationships and project influence in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and other parts of the world appear to be a new element of Russian foreign policy. However, that conclusion would be mistaken. Russian foreign policy has been building up to its present expansive phase for over two decades. Moreover, its ambitions have much deeper roots. Continuity with the Soviet era and even earlier periods of Russian history is a hallmark of the Kremlin's current foreign policy and the toolkit it relies on to advance its goals. It is therefore essential to review the foreign policy legacy of the Soviet Union. Core components of the current Russian toolkit have withstood the test of time, and there is every indication that Moscow will continue to rely on them, even in a post-Putin era.

Back to the Future

While usually associated with Putin, Russia's contemporary activist foreign policy was, in fact, launched before he even became president. It was first launched by Yevgeny Primakov, who was appointed Russian foreign minister in 1996. He formulated what became known as the Primakov Doctrine. According to Primakov, Russia would no longer follow the lead of Western powers, especially the United States, but would instead position itself as an independent center of power on the world stage, contributing to the development of a multipolar world as an alternative to the U.S.-led unipolar order. Primakov's successor as foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, summed up his predecessor's influence in October 2014, saying:

The moment he took over the Russian Foreign Ministry heralded a dramatic turn of Russia's foreign policy. Russia left the path our Western partners had tried to make it follow after the breakup of the Soviet Union and embarked on a track of its own.¹

This vision has guided Russian foreign policy ever since. Many Western policymakers and observers were slow to take Primakov's vision at face value, convinced that Russia was too weak to go it alone, let alone develop an alternative to the post-1989, U.S.-led international order. As the Russian economy improved and the Kremlin acquired more resources to implement the doctrine, its policy evolved from a relatively passive refusal to accept Western initiatives to a more active form of resistance; eventually it morphed into an activist foreign policy with an ambitious geographic scope. In addition to leveraging the significantly greater resources at its disposal, Russian foreign policy has reflected the Kremlin's willingness to take advantage of a propitious external environment and chip away at the U.S.-led international order.

Success begets more success, and since Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, his record has been enhanced by what Russian officialdom sees as several important wins. The annexation of Crimea, the war in eastern Ukraine, the military deployment in Syria, the tense military standoff with the West in the Baltic and Black Seas, and the interference in U.S. and European domestic politics have all enhanced Russia's image as a major power with significant power projection capabilities, as well as Putin's reputation as a bold and skilled leader. These victories have also demonstrated to the world Russia's propensity for risk-taking and punching above its weight, along with its improved capabilities for warfare and operations short of war in multiple domains—land, air, space, sea, cyber, and information operations.

Moreover, the Kremlin's record since 2012 suggests that it will not be deterred or constrained by economic difficulties. The Russian economy has performed poorly since then, with growth hampered by a failure to institute long-overdue structural reforms and excessive dependence on exporting hydrocarbons and other raw materials. But economic difficulties have not put a brake on Russian activism abroad. To the contrary, the Kremlin's ability to withstand both domestic economic difficulties and Western sanctions without changing course is a sign of Moscow's commitment to an activist foreign policy as a long-term choice of the country's leadership.

In addition to its determination and the considerable resources at its disposal, the Kremlin's foreign policy record has benefited from opportunities presented by the West's actions or inaction. For example, the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine took place against the backdrop of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) making clear that it would not intervene and risk a war with Russia over Ukraine. Similarly, Russia's military deployment to Syria took place after the United States and its allies had demonstrated that they had little appetite for intervening there.

Elsewhere, long-term conflicts, such as those in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, or the unfinished business of post-conflict reconstruction, such as in the Balkans, have presented Russia with opportunities to insert itself and create new facts on the ground. In the United States and Europe, growing political divisions, the proliferation of information providers, and popular frustration with

governing elites in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis have exposed targets for Russian interference.

Russian agents did not cause these long-term conflicts or cleavages inside Western societies, but they have used them to advance their goals, which vary depending on the circumstances. In many instances, the Kremlin has relied on a diverse toolkit that creates the appearance of operating one step removed from the Russian government (through a range of actors including state-owned corporations such as Rosatom and Rosneft, private security companies such as the Wagner Group, organized crime syndicates, hackers, and information operation organizations such as the Internet Research Agency).

Western perceptions of post-Soviet Russia have been heavily affected by the country's economic and political implosion and foreign policy retreat during the 1990s. Against that backdrop, the ambition and dynamism of Russian foreign policy since Putin's 2012 return to the presidency appears to be a relatively new phenomenon. It isn't. Moscow's post-2012 foreign policy fits comfortably in the long-standing historical and intellectual tradition of Soviet and even pre-Soviet Russian foreign policy.

The Troika of Russian Foreign Policy

Contemporary Russian foreign policy displays the unmistakable presence of three centuries-old drivers of Moscow's posture on the world stage. Chief among these drivers is Russia's quest for strategic depth and secure buffers against external threats, which, considering the country's geography and absence of natural protective barriers between it and neighboring powers, has guided its geographic expansion. Along with physical insecurity and expansion, the second key driver of Russian foreign policy has been its ambition for recognition as a great power, which the Kremlin has long seen as necessary for legitimizing its geographic conquests and geopolitical ambitions. The third driver, related to the first two, is Russia's complicated relationship with the West, which combines rivalry with the need for cooperation.

These recurrent themes are important. They highlight the degree to which Russian foreign policy in the Putin era is a continuation of many pursuits that are, by turns, decades- and centuries-old and were embraced by previous Russian governments regardless of their political persuasion. The historical record also performs an important legitimizing function for the citizens of the Russian state, which is less than three decades old, cementing the state's claim to be the heir to a long, illustrious tradition dating back centuries. References to this tradition thus legitimize the Putin government's ambitious overseas pursuits and present them as a matter of historical continuity and as an integral part of what Russia is.

Geography and Strategic Depth

It is hard to overestimate the role of geography as a driver behind Russia's foreign policy. The Russian state and its security policy have been shaped by the absence of natural geographic barriers—oceans, rivers, or mountains.² Geography has shaped Russian identity and its rulers' understanding of security throughout the entire existence of the Russian state.

Throughout the centuries, contemporary Russia, the Soviet Union, imperial Russia, and the principality of Muscovy have all faced the challenge of securing a vast stretch of territory from neighbors perceived to be hostile to the west, south, and east. To secure its territory, the Russian state acquired more territory, which, in turn, had to be secured from ever-present external threats of one kind or another. In the words of historian Stephen Kotkin, "Whatever the original causes behind early Russian expansionism—much of which was unplanned—many in the country's political class came to believe over time that only further expansion could secure the earlier acquisitions. Russian security has thus traditionally been partly predicated on moving outward, in the name of preempting external attack."³

The loss of territory, as was the case after the two great dislocations Russia experienced in the twentieth century—first after the 1917 revolution and the 1918 Brest-Litovsk Treaty, and later after the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union—resulted in a profound sense of Russian insecurity and a renewed quest to regain strategic depth. Regaining that depth was the key task of the Soviet government as soon as the country began to recover from the trauma of the revolution and the civil war, and again after Moscow regained a measure of strength after the collapse of the 1990s.

Map 1: Russia in Europe in 1914



Source: The Map Archive, <https://www.themaparchive.com>

Map 2: Russia in Europe According to the Brest-Litovsk Treaty (March 1918)



Source: The Map Archive, <https://www.themaparchive.com>

Map 3: Russian Federation in 1991



Source: The Map Archive, <https://www.themaparchive.com>

Great Power Ambitions

The quest for recognition as a great power has been both the result of Russia's geographic expansion and its driver. Geographic expanse was and is, in the eyes of Russian leaders, central to their claim to recognition as a great power. Such recognition, in turn, has been needed to lend a veneer of legitimacy to territorial conquests. Perhaps precisely because they have had to struggle repeatedly for such recognition, Russia's rulers have been particularly sensitive to any suggestion that Russia does not belong in the ranks of major powers.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Russian historian and writer Nikolay Danilevsky complained about Russia's unfair treatment by Europe, which had turned a blind eye to Prussian and Austrian aggression against Denmark following the annexation of two Danish provinces yet criticized Russia's efforts to protect the rights of its coreligionists in "barbaric" Turkey.⁴ Danilevsky's complaint was, in effect, a precursor of Putin's lament about the West's double standards in dealing with Russia's annexation of Crimea and the severing of Kosovo from Serbia.⁵

For the leaders of the independent Russia that emerged from the Soviet collapse, the Soviet and Russian imperial legacy appeared to serve as both an inspiration and a justification for their claim to great power status. They found ample philosophical rationales for their claim. In the words of noted Russian political philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, empire and great power status constitute the essence of Russian identity even when the country is experiencing challenges and setbacks, in large part because of its spiritual and material wealth.⁶ As early as 1993, the official Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation included, among other foreign policy priorities, the objectives of "furthering integration of the Commonwealth of Independent States" and ensuring Russia's active role on the world stage as a "great power."⁷ With Primakov's rise to the helm of the Russian foreign policy establishment in 1996, great power ambitions again became the Kremlin's driving force. In his first news conference as foreign minister, Primakov said, "Despite the present difficulties, Russia was and is a great power and its foreign policy should correspond with that."⁸ Putin embraced this vision when he became president in 2000, and it has served as a cornerstone of his leadership ever since.

Of particular importance to the Putin government has been the military record of the Russian state and its numerous conquests. Putin issued a presidential order in 2012 reconstituting the Russian Military-Historical Society.⁹ Long-serving Russian Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky has been an active patron of the society as well. The expansion of the Russian state by force of arms—including numerous victories over Poland, Sweden, the Ottoman Empire, and Central Asia—make up an integral part of the foundational narrative of the contemporary Russian state. This narrative is reinforced by a sprawling state propaganda apparatus, official government activities, and educational curricula.

Several historical events are featured prominently in this narrative. Russia's defeat of Napoleon has been treated as a uniquely important event because of its significance to the European order in the nineteenth century, as well as for being an accomplishment that cemented Russia's status as a great power. The victory over Nazi Germany in World War II is treated as the crowning achievement of the Soviet state, which saved not just the Soviet Union and Europe but the whole world from fascism. This triumph presently makes up the most important part of Russia's national narrative.

As a whole, this legacy provides both the justification and the motivation for Russia to pursue its ambitions not just around its vast periphery but well beyond its shores.

Uneasy Relations With the West

Moscow's uneasy relationship with the West for centuries has been one of the most prominent features of its foreign policy. On the one hand—from Peter the Great's founding of the new Russian capital on the Baltic shores to Catherine the Great's engagement with leading European Enlightenment thinkers of the day, Czar Alexander I's securing Russia's place in the circle of major European powers to Joseph Stalin's consolidation of the Soviet Union's hold on Eastern Europe—Russia long has been an integral part of Europe and its political and security fabric.

On the other hand, throughout Russian history since the time of Peter the Great, Russian elites, political thinkers, and cultural figures have questioned Russia's European choice and relationship with Europe. In a more recent and very telling sign of that ambivalence, Foreign Minister Lavrov wrote in 2016 that, over the centuries, Russia has seen itself as part of Europe and the West, as better than the West, as different and unique from the West, and as representing a crucial link between the East and the West.¹⁰ The biggest obstacle that has kept Russia from having a closer and more stable relationship with Europe, according to Lavrov, has been Europe's inability or unwillingness to simply let Russia be Russia, and its insistence on having Moscow conform to European norms—something that no Russian leader or the people of Russia would ever accept. Moscow's claim to great power status has derived from its victories in the West, against Napoleon and Hitler. But Russia's biggest setbacks too have been delivered by the West—in the Crimean War and in the Cold War—and these setbacks remain the biggest drivers of Moscow's security and defense policy.¹¹

As was the case during the Cold War, Russian policy toward the West has long had an important ideological dimension. During the Soviet era, the ideological competition was between Soviet communism and democratic capitalism. After a relatively brief period when Russia attempted to join the West, Moscow has embraced an overtly anti-Western ideology. Communism has been replaced by a mix of nationalist, authoritarian, and state-capitalist ideas as an alternative to the West's notion of liberal democratic capitalism. The concept of Russia as a besieged fortress facing hostile Western designs and influences is a key tool the regime uses to mobilize the political support of Russian elites and ordinary citizens alike.

Old Habits Don't Die

In addition to a legacy of complicated geopolitics, great power ambitions, and a difficult relationship with the West, the new Russian state has inherited from its Soviet predecessor a time-tested foreign policy toolkit. While some elements of this toolkit fell into disuse early in the post-Soviet period

when Russia was struggling with a series of domestic crises, these tools have been taken up again by the country's foreign policy and national security establishment as Moscow has returned to the world stage as an increasingly assertive actor.

George Kennan wrote in "The Sources of Soviet Conduct":

. . . the Kremlin is under no ideological compulsion to accomplish its purposes in a hurry . . . and it can afford to be patient. These precepts are fortified by the lessons of Russian history: of centuries of obscure battles between nomadic forces over the stretches of a vast unfortified plain. Here caution, circumspection, flexibility and deception are the valuable qualities . . . Its [the Soviet Union's] political action is a fluid stream which moves constantly, wherever it is permitted to move, toward a given goal. . . . The main thing is that there should always be pressure, unceasing constant pressure, toward the desired goal. There is no trace of any feeling in Soviet psychology that that goal must be reached at any given time.¹²

Russian foreign policy in the Putin era fits Kennan's description from more than half a century ago. The Kremlin's approach has involved the relatively low-cost, limited use of military force in combination with other nonmilitary instruments of national power. Information operations, propaganda and disinformation, cyber operations, trade embargoes, and a vast array of other tools have been integrated into what has become commonly known as hybrid warfare. The current policy discussions in Western capitals often create the impression that Moscow has come up with a fundamentally new toolkit. In reality, an extensive reliance on such tools has long been a feature of Russian domestic politics and foreign policy.

An Instrument of Domestic Political Consolidation

From its earliest days, the Soviet state and its leaders weaponized information and ideology in their struggle for survival at home and in pursuit of greater influence abroad. Manipulation of information for political purposes was adopted by the Bolshevik government as a key tool for controlling the population. The Bolsheviks saw information and propaganda as essential for mobilizing the masses in support of the new regime.

Vladimir Lenin, the founder of the Soviet state, understood the role of ideas as a tool for motivating people and controlling the masses. The Bolsheviks relied on then novel, but now familiar, techniques—posters, fliers, mass rallies, news manipulation, and cooptation of the creative community of writers, poets, filmmakers, and artists. Specially dedicated trains reached distant rural audiences with content manipulated specifically to strike an emotional chord, transcend great distances, and bridge ideological differences between Moscow and far-flung provinces. By applying

these techniques in combination with violence, the Bolsheviks succeeded in imposing their vision on the population of the vast country.¹³

In Service of a Young State's Foreign Policy

In 1919, the Bolshevik government established the Communist International—also known as the Comintern. Its initial purpose was to control foreign Communist parties and promote revolutionary ideology and the revolutionary struggle in the capitalist camp. But as the revolutionary fervor subsided in Europe and as the Bolsheviks consolidated their victory over the old regime in Russia, they focused on the task of state building. The Comintern morphed from an instrument of revolutionary subversion of the Soviet Union's capitalist opponents. Instead, it became a vehicle for spreading Soviet influence abroad through a network of agents and front organizations, financial assistance, engagement with and infiltration of foreign Communist parties, and intelligence collection.

Throughout its existence, the Comintern adjusted its institutional positions to suit the needs of Soviet foreign policy. When Soviet foreign policy pursued a system of collective security against Nazi Germany, the Comintern overcame its ideological differences with other left-leaning European parties in the name of their shared opposition to fascism. But with the shift in Soviet foreign policy toward Germany and the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939, the Comintern welcomed the pact and embraced the policy of nonintervention.¹⁴ That stance changed again when Germany attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, and the Comintern embraced the Allied cause. As an extension of that shift and a step toward strengthening the anti-German alliance with the United Kingdom and the United States, the Comintern was dissolved in 1943 with its final appeal endorsing the anti-Hitler coalition and the liberation war against “fascism and its allies and vassals.”¹⁵

With the end of World War II and the start of the Cold War, the Soviet government reconstituted elements of the former Comintern network in 1947 under the title of the Communist Information Bureau, or the Cominform. It resumed some of the old Comintern's coordinating functions to help ensure Soviet control over Communist parties in Europe and mobilize them as agents of Soviet foreign policy in Moscow's confrontation with the West. The Cominform existed until 1956, when it was disbanded as part of the relative thaw and ideological relaxation that followed the death of Stalin. Subsequently, the task of managing relations with foreign Communist parties and movements fell to the International Department of the Soviet Communist Party Central Committee.

Targeting the West and the Rest

The lower public profile of the new organizational home of the Kremlin's foreign influence operations did not mean that its reliance on the familiar toolkit—including ideological subversion and manipulation, disinformation, use of proxies, assassinations, and intelligence gathering, as well as other economic and military means—had ended. On the contrary, the Kremlin expanded its arsenal for international engagement to include—besides the International Department of the Central Committee and (obviously) the Committee for State Security (KGB)—a wide range of academic, cultural, and commercial organizations; the Peace Committee; and even the Russian Orthodox Church, to name just a few. Moscow used these entities for a wide range of activities that included providing cover for outright KGB intelligence gathering and enlisting friendly and often unsuspecting agents of influence in support of Soviet-championed causes.¹⁶

The history of the Cold War is rich in examples of Soviet reliance on all of these organizations in order to target hostile émigré groups; penetrate Western societies and, in particular, political and national security elites and undermine their political cohesion; shape public opinion; and mobilize significant segments of the population in support of Soviet policies. A 1981 U.S. State Department study noted:

The approaches used by Moscow include control of the press in foreign countries; outright and partial forgery of documents; use of rumors, insinuation, altered facts, and lies; use of international and local front organizations; clandestine operation of radio stations; exploitation of a nation's academic, political, economic, and media figures as collaborators to influence policies of the nation.¹⁷

One of the most vivid examples of Soviet influence operations was Moscow's campaign intended to undermine the U.S.-Egyptian relationship and the Camp David peace process. The Kremlin's campaign relied on forgeries, such as a fake State Department document, delivered to the Egyptian embassy in Rome, that made offensive references to then Egyptian president Anwar Sadat and other Arab leaders. Similarly, a fake Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) report, which was cited in a Cairo-based news magazine, was critical of Islamic groups and alleged that they posed an obstacle to U.S. policy.¹⁸

Perhaps the biggest campaign ever mounted by the Soviet Union's foreign influence apparatus was aimed at the issue of NATO theater nuclear forces modernization in Europe. This intense, multiyear, multipronged Soviet effort relied on widespread disinformation, intimidation and fear mongering, the exploitation of genuine public concerns about an escalating nuclear arms race, the use of proxy agents, and the infiltration of bona fide public organizations. The Kremlin helped fuel a groundswell of opposition to NATO deployments of Pershing II and ground-launched cruise

missiles in Europe in response to the Soviet Union's deployment of SS-20 intermediate-range nuclear ballistic missiles.¹⁹

Other less expansive, but no less malign, disinformation activities also took place. These efforts included KGB-promoted stories in the Indian press about the United States' purported involvement in the assassination of prime minister Indira Gandhi and plans by senior U.S. officials to break up India,²⁰ and fake documents ostensibly proving that a U.S. military lab developed and spread the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) as part of a bioweapons program.²¹

Expanding the Kremlin's Global Reach

Soviet competition with the West was not limited to Europe and the Middle East. With the weakening and eventual demise of the West's colonial empires in Africa and parts of Asia, and the rise of leftist movements in Latin America, the Kremlin saw new opportunities to expand its global reach. The most notable examples of Soviet global ambitions include the forging of a long-term relationship with Cuba, which brought the Soviet Union and the United States to the brink of nuclear war in 1962; involvement, both direct and through surrogates, in the protracted civil war in post-colonial Angola beginning in 1975; support for the African National Congress's struggle against the apartheid government in South Africa; and assistance to various anticolonial and leftist movements in Africa—including those in Mozambique, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo to name just a few.

Soviet involvement in these countries consisted of direct military support in conflict zones, arms sales, the deployment of military advisers and technicians, civilian technical assistance, and educational opportunities in Soviet universities, such as Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow, that specialized in the training and (on occasion) the recruitment by Soviet intelligence services of professionals from countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In addition to direct Soviet involvement, Moscow extended its influence through personnel from Soviet bloc countries—including East Germans, Czechoslovaks, and Cubans—who helped deliver security assistance, intelligence training and operational support, economic development projects, and ideological indoctrination.

In the Western Hemisphere, Soviet involvement manifested itself in the support provided to leftist governments and movements. Soviet engagement in the hemisphere had deep roots reaching back to the early post-1917 revolution period, when leftist or communist Latin American intellectuals—like Mexican artists Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, as well as Peruvian intellectual José Carlos Mariátegui—were inspired by the example of the first proletarian state, its socialist experiment, and its vibrant revolutionary culture. In that respect, these Latin American intellectuals were no different

from many European counterparts who entertained hopes that the Soviet experiment would provide a viable alternative to capitalism and, later, fascism.

The socialist current in Latin American politics during the Cold War, which gave rise to a number of leftist governments, was suppressed by a series of reactionary coups in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Guatemala. Washington supported these coups to varying degrees, thus feeding a narrative of resistance to U.S. imperialism in Latin America. This narrative, in turn, created a favorable contrast for Soviet policy toward the region, support for Cuba's revolutionary government, and anti-imperialist rhetoric. Moscow's limited reach and U.S. opposition kept the Soviets from gaining a foothold in Latin America, but it was not for a lack of trying.

A few particular examples are noteworthy. In Chile, for instance, the Soviet Union embraced the socialist government of president Salvador Allende and was highly critical of the military government of General Augusto Pinochet, who led the 1973 coup that overthrew Allende. Perhaps the most ambitious Soviet effort to gain a foothold in Latin America—besides Cuba—occurred in Nicaragua in the 1980s. Through direct engagement and Cuban proxies, Moscow delivered multifaceted assistance to the leftist Sandinista government that came to power after the previous government led by Anastasio Somoza Debayle was overthrown in 1979. In this instance, the Soviets provided financial support, economic development projects, humanitarian assistance, and—most importantly—security and military assistance as well as weapons deliveries.

Use of Proxies and Covert Military Deployments

Whether in Latin America or elsewhere, the use of proxy agents and covert operations has been a recurring motif in Moscow's foreign policy agenda before, during, and after the Cold War. At the end of Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*, the protagonist Count Alexei Vronsky, a guards officer and a wealthy nobleman, leaves for Serbia as a volunteer in the fight against the Ottoman Empire. In the much more recent past, Russian volunteers fought in the Balkan wars in the 1990s and even more recently in eastern Ukraine. Volunteers, military personnel ostensibly on leave from their units, Cossacks, contractors hired by private security companies, and other types of proxies have returned to the toolkit of Russian foreign policy.

Long before the identification of Russia's so-called little green men and polite people in Ukraine, such tactics were a mainstay of Soviet-era foreign policy. The record of Soviet military engagement—direct, as well as through surrogates—ranges from dispatching regular military personnel under aliases to participate in the 1936–1939 Spanish Civil War to using Cuban proxies in the Angola crisis in the mid-1970s.²²

Soviet personnel and equipment were deployed covertly in crisis zones in various parts of Asia and the Middle East throughout the Cold War. Soviet military pilots secretly flew missions during the Korean War and in Yemen in the 1960s and 1970s.²³ During a 1962 military crisis between Indonesia and the Netherlands, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev secretly deployed so-called volunteers—along with Soviet submarines, naval vessels, and jets—to fight on behalf of the government of Indonesian president Sukarno, who was seeking to annex part of Papua New Guinea.²⁴ In 1970, Moscow surreptitiously sent Soviet fighter jets and air defense units to Egypt during the so-called War of Attrition with Israel, helping the Egyptian armed forces curtail Israeli air superiority. A secret operation by the Israeli Air Force later successfully lured Soviet pilots into unexpected aerial combat, leading to the unpublicized downing of five Soviet MiG aircraft.²⁵ This 1970 battle was the first and only known instance of a direct Israeli military strike on Soviet forces during the Cold War.

The Most Sinister Tool

The most sinister tool at the disposal of the Kremlin during the Cold War was the assassination of political enemies and defectors. Targeted assassinations of émigrés and political opponents, which have figured prominently in the Kremlin's various campaigns against its enemies, have deep roots in Soviet history.²⁶ One of the earliest known Soviet intelligence operations directed against an émigré political opponent was purportedly undertaken by the KGB's predecessor, the Joint State Political Directorate (OGPU), against Boris Savinkov, the leader of an anti-Soviet organization of Russian exiles in France.²⁷ In 1924, he was lured back to Russia, arrested, convicted in a show trial, and probably killed by prison guards. The OGPU operation against him served as the basis for a popular Soviet-era television miniseries glorifying the country's intelligence services.²⁸

Savinkov was not the Kremlin's only such victim. The best-known Soviet political assassination was carried out against Leon Trotsky in Mexico in 1940 by Spanish communist and Soviet agent Ramón Mercader. The assassin spent two decades in prison, but upon his release he was awarded the highest Soviet decoration for bravery.²⁹ There have been many other targets, including Ukrainian nationalist leader Stepan Bandera, who was assassinated in 1959 with poison fired from a specially designed gun,³⁰ and Bulgarian dissident writer Georgi Markov, who was killed in London in 1978.³¹

Moscow's hand in such killings often has been hard to identify or establish, according to a declassified 1964 CIA assessment.³² The Soviet intelligence services often sought to create the impression that targets had died from heart attacks, accidents, or natural causes. At the same time, the regime's appetite for such extreme methods was, in the CIA's view, tempered by the risk that such activities could be attributed to Moscow and create undesirable public controversy. The Soviet leadership rarely viewed senior foreign political figures as assassination targets. Known examples

include aborted plans in the mid-1950s for an attack on Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito and KGB involvement in the turmoil and high-level political killings that preceded the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

Most of these Soviet activities ceased with the collapse of the Soviet economy and the political turbulence that brought the Soviet Union to its end. However, as recent experience of Russian engagement in Africa, Latin America, and other far-flung locales has demonstrated, Moscow's long-range geopolitical ambitions did not disappear with the Soviet Union. Rather, they provide contemporary Russian foreign policy with important historical roots that feed it.

The Past Is Prologue

In March 1918, the desperate new Bolshevik government of Russia signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which enabled it to leave World War I. Politically, economically, and militarily, the country was in ruins. The Bolsheviks retreated from vast holdings of the Russian Empire—most of Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltic states, and Finland in Europe. In the Caucasus, Russia ceded parts of its territory to Turkey. Meanwhile, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia declared independence. A decade later, most of these lands were back in the Soviet Union.

In 1991, the Soviet Union, with its economy and its political system collapsed, dissolved peacefully, retreating from Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltic states, Moldova, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. A decade later, with economic and political restoration under way, Russia was in the process of reestablishing various forms of control over its neighbors. By 2008, Russia was strong enough to assert—after a brief war with Georgia—that it was intent on maintaining its control over the vast region's security affairs and blocking any prospect of NATO and European Union enlargement in its backyard. Again in 2014, Russia reaffirmed its determination and willingness to use force with the annexation of Crimea.

Several key lessons follow from this retrospective of Russian foreign policy.

- **Today, Russian foreign policy has embraced many of the same ambitions that drove Soviet foreign policy during an earlier era.** Whether Soviet or Russian, the ambitions of the country's foreign policy far exceed the "sphere of privileged interests" claimed by then president Dmitry Medvedev in the aftermath of the 2008 war with Georgia.³³ These ambitions manifested themselves even before the country was able to act on them. Once Russia recovered a measure of its economic strength, political stability, and military muscle, it did not take long to reclaim a significant part of the legacy of Soviet foreign policy. Some significant elements of the Soviet era—rigid ideological guidelines and a vast pool of resources—are missing from a policy that now reflects greater flexibility and adaptability,

lacks ideological constraints, and blends opportunism with the careful use of relatively modest resources.

- **Along with those ambitions, Russian foreign policy has inherited a diverse and tested toolkit to advance the country's geopolitical ambitions.** The instruments in this toolkit range from information operations and propaganda to subversion and assassinations. The record of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East and Ukraine—the two most recent manifestations of Moscow's geopolitical ambitions—is a testament to the Kremlin's effective use of those instruments. Russian foreign policy since the breakdown in relations with the West in 2014 suggests that Moscow is prepared to withstand and counter economic pressure and international political isolation in pursuit of its foreign policy objectives. Russia will not be deterred by sanctions, which have constituted the bulk of the West's response to Moscow's disruptive policy to date.
- **As the confrontation with the West takes on a long-term, permanent character, neither Russian foreign policy nor the Kremlin's toolkit will stay static.** Moscow will continue to prioritize the creation of new capabilities that can protect the regime and advance the country's national interests. Moscow has repeatedly demonstrated in recent years a knack for innovation and an ability to adapt to an ever-changing political, geopolitical, and technological environment.

The use of off-the-shelf social media technologies in order to advance Russia's foreign policy objectives has been amply demonstrated in the U.S. presidential election in 2016, as well as in other situations since then. Technological breakthroughs—virtual reality and artificial intelligence, to name just two of the most frequently mentioned areas of progress—will undoubtedly be adopted by Russian state actors and their agents, adapted to their needs, and (if need be) weaponized for the ongoing confrontation with the West. These technologies may be new, and they hold out the possibility of expanding and enriching the arsenal of Russian foreign policy. Yet Moscow's driving ambitions, as well as the many other tools in that arsenal, will continue to carry a lasting imprint of Soviet foreign policy.

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