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Russia and the World: The View from Moscow

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Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

In 1939, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill famously observed that Russia was “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” Less remembered but equally significant is what Churchill said next: “Perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.”¹

Much has changed in Russia and the world since 1939, but in many ways, Churchill’s observation is as valid today as it was then. What is Russia’s national interest? How do Russia’s leaders, especially Russian President Vladimir Putin, view their country’s national interest? And how can their viewpoints be determined?

This is a challenging but not impossible task. Many factors that determine Russia’s worldview (“mirovozzrenie”) and which drive Russian assessments of Russian national interests (“natsional'nyye interesy”) are derived from Russia’s history. Similarly, the threats, dangers, and risks that Putin and others in the Kremlin perceive today must be determined, as must the way in which they respond to them diplomatically, militarily, and otherwise. Finally, the Kremlin’s regional and global foreign and defense policy priorities and actions must be assessed. Together, these inputs allow the overarching strategies that Russian leaders pursue to be deciphered.

Using these tools, this essay will examine: 1) the impact of history on Russia’s worldview and the Russian leadership’s assessments of the Russian national interest; 2) international threats, dangers, and risks as seen from Moscow today; 3) Russia’s current geopolitical and regional priorities and actions; and 4) Russia’s global grand strategy—assuming it has one.

The Impact of History on Russia’s Worldview

History plays a significant role in Russia's worldview and its leaders' assessments of their country's national interest. For centuries, czarist Russia and then the Soviet Union were among the world's great powers. Memories of these glory days linger today even though Russia no longer has the same global reach or influence that its (especially Soviet) predecessor had.

Similarly, Russian memories of how foreign countries visited destruction, devastation, and death on Russia remain strong, including personal reminders caused by their own leaders.

Finally, past domestic historical factors and present domestic factors must be considered when assessing the Russian worldview and how Russian leaders see their country's national interest. These specifically include Russia's past authoritarian and totalitarian governments, its continuing economic uncertainty, and the Putin factor.

These three factors together determine the contemporary Russian worldview and Russian assessments of the Russian national interest.

Russia and the Soviet Union as Eurasian and Global Powers

Contemporary Russian views of Russia as a major power and a significant international player date back centuries, at least to the time of Ivan III, also called Ivan the Great, who ruled Russia from 1462 until his death in 1505. During his reign, Ivan III ended Mongol rule over Russian lands, tripled the size of the state as he initiated what came to be known as "the gathering of the Russian lands," and began restoration of the Kremlin. Equally important, shortly before Ivan III gained power, Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. To many in Russia, especially those in the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow had become "The Third Rome."²

As Russia expanded eastward and southward, it clashed with the neighboring Chinese, Persian, and Ottoman empires. In the east, the 1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk gave Russia 93,000 square miles of territory and set the boundary between Russian Siberia and Chinese Manchuria.³ In the south, Russia defeated Persia in two wars after which Persia ceded vast territories to the Czar. In the southwest, the Ottoman Empire resisted Russia for two centuries, but it too eventually ceded land to Russia, including Crimea and land around the Sea of Azov. And in the eighteenth century, Russia gained entry to the Middle East as the 1774 Russian-Ottoman Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca recognized Russia as the protector of Christian sites of worship and Christian pilgrims in the Holy Land.⁴ By the time Peter the Great declared Russia an empire in 1721, Russia was a major force in Eurasian affairs.

Indeed, at the height of its reach in 1895, Imperial Russia controlled as much as 15 percent of the world's landmass, second only to Great Britain's 24 percent in 1913.⁵ Russia's nineteenth century imperial reach extended even beyond Europe and Asia, as it owned Alaska until 1867 and provided weapons to Ethiopia in the 1890s.

After the Bolshevik Revolution and the disasters of collectivization, the U.S.S.R. in 1945 emerged from the horrors of World War II as one of the world's two global superpowers, far outstripping the global reach and influence of czarist Russia. For 45 years, the Soviet Union held ideological influence and policy sway over many governmental and non-governmental allies, friends, fellow-travelers, and soulmates in Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Europe. Russia was the heart and soul of the Soviet Union.

Then, with the decline and dissolution of the Soviet Union, this changed. The new Russia was no longer a global power. To some, it was no longer even a Eurasian power.

Given czarist Russia's long-standing reign as a Eurasian empire and the Soviet Union's status thereafter as one of only two global superpowers, Putin and other Russian leaders undoubtedly long for a return of their country's former prestige—and intend their foreign and defense policies to be early steps in the restoration of historical Russian and Soviet glory. This, then, is the first input to the current Russian worldview and Russian assessments of Russia's national interest.

Russia as a Marchland

Nor can it be overlooked that during the past two centuries, few countries experienced as much externally-imposed and sometimes internally-initiated devastation, destruction, and death as Russia and the Soviet Union. In the 130 years from 1812 to 1942, Russia and the Soviet Union were invaded three times by Western European armies. This indelibly imprinted fears about the outside world and its intentions towards Russia in its leaders' assessments of Russian national interests.

In 1812, Napoleon invaded Russia. As Russian forces retreated, they initiated a scorched-earth policy, leaving nothing in the wake of their retreat for French use. At least half a million Russians died, and Moscow was burned. The Russian winter and supply shortages eventually forced the French to retreat, but Russia was devastated.⁶

A century later, after initial military successes in World War I, Russia was again forced to retreat, this time by Germany and Austria-Hungary. After the Bolshevik Revolution, the Soviet Union signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany and other Central Powers, losing large swaths of territory. Even worse, as many as 3.4 million people were killed, and another 3.8 million were wounded.⁷

Then, twenty-three short years after World War I ended, Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Hitler's Operation Barbarossa reached the gates of Moscow before being thrown back. Somewhere between 20 and 25 million Soviet citizens died during World War II.⁸

Three times in 130 years, Russia suffered death, devastation, and destruction in warfare unleashed by Western European powers. Given this, in addition to desiring to be recognized as a great power, Putin and other Russian leaders place a high priority on Russian security.

Domestic Inputs: An Authoritarian Past, Economic Uncertainty, and the Putin Factor

For centuries, Russia has been ruled by authoritarian and totalitarian governments, first under the czars and then under communism. While Russia today is not quite the totalitarian state it was under the czars and commissars, it is by no means a democracy.

Between 2010 and 2018, the Economist Intelligence Unit's "Democracy Index" downgraded Russia's ranking from "hybrid regime" to "authoritarian regime." Similarly, Freedom House's "Freedom in the World" has consistently ranked Russia under President Vladimir Putin as "not free," nor is today's Russia a model of honest government. Transparency International's 2017 "Corruption Perceptions Index," ranked Russia 135 out of 180 countries.

At the same time, the Russian economy has been on a roller-coaster ride since the Soviet Union collapsed. In the 1990s, Russia struggled as it attempted to transition from a planned economy to some form of a market economy, with Russian data indicating that by the mid-1990s, Russia's gross domestic product (GDP) had dropped by about 50 percent, driven by declines in agriculture, energy, heavy industry, and the military-industrial complex.

In the early twenty-first century, Russia's economy made real strides during Putin's first two terms in office (2000–2008). Buoyed substantially by high prices for oil exports, which

reached almost \$150 per barrel in 2008, the Russian economy early this century grew by about 7 percent per year, according to the International Monetary Fund's World Economic Outlook Database. In 2007, Russia's GDP finally exceeded that of the last year of Soviet rule, 1990.⁹

Then, in 2008–09, the global economy slid into recession and Russia's economic growth slowed. Oil prices plummeted by as much as 70 percent; Russia's war with Georgia drove external investments away; Russia devalued the ruble; and Russian stock markets tumbled. The Russian economy did not grow again until 2010 when oil prices stabilized. This growth, though slower than before, continued until 2014 when the Russian economy again receded, driven once more by falling oil prices which declined by almost fifty percent from the mid-2014 high until 2017. Nor can one overlook the impact of Western economic sanctions on Russia, imposed in 2014 after Russia annexed Crimea and intervened militarily in eastern Ukraine.¹⁰

Russia's authoritarian past and its on-going roller-coaster economy inevitably impacts how Russian leaders see both the world and Russia's national interest. So too does it impact Russian President Vladimir Putin (in his twentieth year in power in 2019) at both the policy and operational levels. Not unlike Soviet leaders before him, Putin controls the levers of Russian authority and power and dominates Russian views of what the world looks like and what Russia's interests are.

A KGB foreign intelligence officer for sixteen years, Putin entered politics in 1991 working for St. Petersburg Mayor Anatoly Sobchak. When Sobchak lost his 1996 re-election bid, Putin went to Moscow, rising rapidly under President Boris Yeltsin. In August 1999, Yeltsin appointed Putin Prime Minister. When Yeltsin unexpectedly resigned in December 1999, Putin became Acting President, soon thereafter winning the March 2000 presidential election with 53 percent of the vote. Re-elected to a second four-year term in 2004, Putin could not run for a third

term in 2008 because of a constitutional limitation on the number of consecutive terms a president could hold office. When Dmitri Medvedev won the election, Medvedev immediately appointed Putin Prime Minister, a post he held until 2012. In May 2012, after the presidential term was extended to six years, Putin was elected president for a third time.¹¹

After his 2012 election, Putin steadily enhanced his own authority, curtailed civil liberties, and limited freedom of speech and the media. Indeed, especially after his 2012 election and in subsequent years, Putin had no compunction about dealing forcibly and sometimes terminally with opponents.¹²

This is not to say that Putin faces no internal opposition. In April 2017, as many as 60,000 protesters turned out across Russian cities to support opposition leader Alexei Navalny's anti-corruption campaign, the largest day of anti-government demonstrations since 2012. In late January 2018, anti-Putin demonstrations broke out once again in Moscow and other cities across Russia, and Navalny, already banned from running in the March presidential elections, was briefly arrested.¹³

Even so, the March 2018 presidential election well-illustrated the extent to which Putin dominated Russian political processes. Running as an independent rather than as a candidate of the United Russia party which he headed in 2012, Putin won 77% of the vote.¹⁴ Indeed, even before the election took place, it was a foregone conclusion that Putin would win, both because of his popularity and because of the tight constraints placed on other candidates. Almost all candidates who opposed Putin were little known within Russia, and Putin's best-known opponent, opposition leader Alexei Navalny, was banned from running because of alleged corruption. Not surprisingly, then, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe,

which sent 500 observers to the 360 polling stations in Russia for the election, concluded in its June 6, 2018 report on the election that:

“The 18 March presidential election took place in an overly controlled legal and political environment marked by continued pressure on critical voices . . . After intense efforts to promote turnout, citizens voted in significant numbers, yet restrictions on the fundamental freedoms of assembly, association and expression, as well as on candidate registration, . . . limited the space for political engagement and resulted in a lack of genuine competition . . . the extensive and uncritical coverage of the incumbent as president in most media resulted in an uneven playing field.”¹⁵

However, three months after the election, Putin’s popularity suffered a major blow, tumbling nearly 20 points to 60 percent, when his government proposed raising the male retirement age from 60 to 65 and the female retirement age from 55 to 63. Demonstrations against the proposed changes broke out in several Russian cities, and a July poll conducted by the Levada Center (an independent Russian polling organization) indicated that as much as 89 percent of the Russian population opposed the plan. Backpedaling, Putin in August suggested the female retirement age be raised only to 60, but retained the proposed male retirement age at 65. While this response stopped the decline in Putin’s popularity, most Russian and Western polls indicated he did not recover his one-time popularity, which by September remained between 57 and 63 percent. Shortly thereafter, the Moscow-based Levada Center in December 2018 reported that 66 percent of the Russian population approved of Putin, and 33 percent did not.¹⁶

Despite the problems caused by the increase in retirement age, Putin’s popularity by Western standards remains strong; indeed, in Western Europe and the United States, most politicians would be pleased with a 57–66% popularity rating. To solidify this, Putin himself, as

he has done in the past, continues to buttress his domestic support by cultivating an image of himself as a nationalist, outdoorsman, athlete, pilot, and protector both of animals and the environment.¹⁷

Thus, for example, Putin in his April 2005 State of the Nation address declared, “The collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century,” quickly adding in his often-overlooked following sentence that he lamented not the end of the Soviet Union but rather what the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. did to the unity of the ethnic Russian nation:

As for the Russian nation, it became a genuine drama as tens of millions of our co-citizens and co-patriots found themselves outside Russian territory. Moreover, the epidemic of disintegration infected Russia itself.¹⁸

Even more strikingly, the following month in an interview with the German TV channel ARD/ZDF, Putin chastised those who longed for the return of the Soviet Union, declaring “Whoever does not miss the Soviet Union has no heart. Whoever wants it back has no brain.”¹⁹

Telling for Russian nationalists, during the 19 years that Putin has ruled, the Russian Orthodox Church has made a significant comeback, often with the encouragement and assistance of Putin and his government. Indeed, on many social, economic, and foreign policy issues, there is no difference between the positions of the Russian government and the Russian Orthodox Church.²⁰ Thus, for many reasons, it is understandable why many Russians see Putin as a Russian nationalist, not a Soviet apologist.

Thus, despite an occasional hiccup, Putin’s primacy, power, popularity, and personality must be taken into account when calculating the Russian worldview and how Russia assesses its national interest. It is not surprising that all aspects of Russian domestic and foreign policy carry his imprint, and that imprint is one of a Russian nationalist.

International Threats, Dangers, and Risks

Russia's perceptions of the international threats, dangers, and risks it faces can be garnered from a combination of official policy documents, leadership statements, and foreign and defense policy actions. Chief among Russian official foreign and defense policy documents are the December 24, 2014, Russian Military Doctrine²¹ and the November 30, 2016, Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation,²² both of which were officially approved by Putin.

Russia's 2014 Military Doctrine contains 58 paragraphs, many with sub-paragraphs, that identify external and internal military risks. Stated external risks include but are not limited to:

1. NATO's eastward expansion
2. American deployment of strategic missile defense systems
3. Nuclear and weapon technologies proliferation
4. Terrorism
5. Opponents' use of information and communication technologies for military-political purposes
6. Establishment of hostile regimes in states contiguous to Russia.

Internal risks include but are not limited to:

1. Efforts to change Russia's constitutional system
2. Terrorism
3. "Subversive information activities" aimed at "undermining historical, spiritual, and patriotic traditions"
4. Provocation of domestic Russian inter-ethnic, social, and religious enmity

The 2016 Foreign Policy Concept supersedes a similar 2013 document, also signed by Putin.²³ The 2016 concept has 108 paragraphs that assert:

1. A multi-polar international system is emerging, with global power shifting toward the Asia-Pacific region
2. International instability is increasing because of western powers' attempts to maintain their positions
3. Nuclear arms control and non-proliferation regimes must be strengthened
4. Cooperation with the United States must increase, especially in arms control and resolving conflicts
5. The Russian media must increasingly be used to influence foreign public opinion
6. The Russian Orthodox Church must support government and diplomatic policies
7. Multilateral organizations such as the Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (BRICS) framework, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Russia-India-China (RIC) platform, and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) must be strengthened
8. Increased international cooperation is required to combat international terrorism.

These documents, together with leadership statements and Russian foreign and defense policy actions, lead to the conclusion that the primary but not exclusive threats, dangers, and risks perceived by the men in the Kremlin are: 1) NATO's eastward expansion; 2) externally-fomented unrest and opposition in the near-abroad and Russia itself; 3) declining credibility of Russia's conventional military and nuclear deterrence capabilities; and 4) terrorism.

NATO's Eastward Expansion

Aside from a nuclear confrontation, the most serious security threat that Moscow sees is NATO's eastward expansion. Of NATO's twenty-nine current members, thirteen had communist governments during the Cold War (the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland, which joined NATO in 1999; Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia, which joined in 2004; Albania and Croatia, NATO members since 2009; and Montenegro, a member since May 2017).²⁴

As troubling from the Russian perspective is the possibility that Georgia and Ukraine, both of which border Russia, may join NATO. According to some analysts, Russian concerns about this possibility were contributing factors to Russia's 2008 military actions against Georgia that led to the Russian-proclaimed independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia, and to Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and support for pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. Even more strikingly, Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev in 2018 warned that a "horrible conflict" would erupt if Georgia joined NATO.²⁵

Even so, despite the certainty of adverse Russian reaction, Ukraine's parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, in June 2017 passed legislation making integration with NATO a national priority. The following month, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko announced he would seek to open negotiations with NATO regarding membership. The U.S. stated its support for Georgian NATO membership both in July 2017, when U.S. Vice President Mike Pence visited Georgia's capital Tbilisi, and December 2017, when U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson urged NATO to admit Georgia during the Brussels meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers. And in September 2018, the Ukrainian parliament approved amendments to the constitution that would make Ukrainian accession to NATO and the EU a central foreign policy objective. Thus, Russia's concerns about NATO expansion continue.²⁶ (Before March 2018, NATO listed three states—Georgia, Bosnia

and Herzegovnia, and Macedonia—as “aspiring members” but did not include Ukraine. In March 2018, NATO added Ukraine to the list of aspiring members.²⁷⁾

Russia is also deeply concerned about the expansion of NATO military infrastructure and deployments in NATO states near Russia’s borders. As Russia’s 2014 Military Doctrine states, “bringing the military infrastructure of NATO member countries near the borders” of Russia and “deploying military contingents of foreign states on territories of states contiguous with the Russian Federation and its allies . . . [to] exert political and military pressure” present security challenges to the Kremlin.²⁸

Two concrete measures of Russia’s concern about NATO’s eastward expansion are the deployment of S-400 surface-to-air missiles and nuclear-capable Iskander systems in the exclave of Kaliningrad, announced in November 2016, and Russia’s once-every-four-years “Zapad” (“Western”) military exercises. Previously conducted in 2009 and 2013, Zapad-2017 ran for four days in September 2017 in Russia, Belarus, and the North and Baltic Seas. Most Western analysts assert that as many as 100,000 military members took part in previous Zapad exercises, far superseding the 13,000-participant limit for military exercises established by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s 2011 Vienna Agreement. Western analysts generally agreed that the 2017 Zapad exercises were within OSCE limit.²⁹

Externally-Fomented Unrest, Opposition, and Regime Change in Russia and the Near Abroad

Closely related to Russian concerns about NATO expansion are Russian concerns about externally-fomented unrest, opposition, and regime change in countries near Russia and even within Russia itself. Russian commentators often mention these concerns, but the 2014 Military Doctrine was the first official document to highlight them as a military threat.

Implicitly, Russia's 2014 Military Doctrine accuses the United States and its allies of orchestrating the establishment of hostile regimes in states neighboring Russia by "destabilizing the situation in individual states and regions," "undermining global and regional stability," "establishing regimes whose policies threaten the interests of the Russian Federation in states contiguous with the Russian Federation," and "overthrowing legitimate state administrative bodies." Pointing to the twenty-first century "color revolutions," particularly the 2003 "Rose Revolution" in Georgia, the 2004 "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine, the 2005 "Pink Revolution" in Kyrgyzstan, and the 2009 "Grape Revolution" in Moldova, as proofs of the allegations, Russian spokesmen maintain that the U.S. and its allies have launched a campaign "aimed at undermining [Russia's] spiritual and patriotic traditions."³⁰

More specifically, Putin in his March 18, 2014, address to the Russian Federal Assembly after the referendum on annexation of the Crimea detailed his views on U.S. foreign policy:

The U.S. prefers to follow the rule of the strongest, not international law. They are convinced they have been chosen and they are exceptional, that they may shape the destiny of the world, that it is only them that can be right. They act as they please. Here and there they use force against sovereign states, set up coalitions in accordance with the principle: who is not with us is against us.³¹

Shortly thereafter, speakers at the May 2014 Russian Ministry of Defense-sponsored Moscow Conference on International Security—including Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov—asserted that color revolutions were a form of information warfare, also termed hybrid warfare, used by the West to remove independent governments in favor of ones controlled by the West to force Western values on the world.³² Putin weighed in again in 2015, declaring, "We see the tragic consequences of the wave of so-called color

revolutions, the shock experienced by people in the countries that went through the irresponsible experiments of hidden, or sometimes brute and direct interference with their lives.”³³ He again condemned color revolutions on Mir TV on April 12, 2017, stating that, “We must not allow anything of this sort, and we will by all means take appropriate actions in Russia to support our partners.”³⁴

A special report prepared by a Russian parliamentary committee in June 2017 went further, accusing Radio Free Europe, Voice of America, and CNN of biased and “anti-Russia” coverage of Russia’s 2016 parliamentary elections, as well as “unfairly questioning the democratic nature of the Russian electoral system.” The parliament also established a new commission to “protect state sovereignty and prevent interference in Russia’s domestic affairs.”³⁵

As the March 2018 Russian presidential elections approached, Russian sources increasingly claimed that the United States meddled in Russia’s internal politics. In late January 2018, Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov charged that the United States was interfering in Russia's presidential election by releasing a U.S. Treasury Department report on Putin's inner circle that listed the net worth, U.S. assets, and evidence of corruption on the part of financial oligarchs and political figures close to Putin.³⁶ The report, which led to the possibility of more U.S. economic sanctions on Russia, was authorized by Trump in August 2017 in response to charges of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.³⁷

All this may be dismissed as Russia’s response to American charges of Russian meddling in the 2016 American presidential election, charges vehemently denied by Putin and other Russian spokesmen. Even so, Putin at a June 1, 2017, meeting with heads of international news agencies at St. Petersburg International Economic Forum could not help himself from slyly commenting:

Hackers can be anywhere. They can lurk in any country in the world. Of course, the general context of inter-state relations should be taken into account . . . because hackers are free people like artists. If artists get up in the morning feeling good, all they do all day is paint. The same goes for hackers. They got up today and read that something is going on internationally. If they are feeling patriotic they will start contributing, as they believe, to the justified fight against those speaking ill of Russia.³⁸

Declining Credibility of Conventional Military and Nuclear Deterrent Capabilities

Even though the Cold War is over, from Moscow's perspective, neither the conventional nor nuclear arms race has subsided. At the conventional level, the Kremlin has concerns about NATO's intentions; the ability of the U.S. and other Western states to foment unrest and revolution in the Near Abroad; China's long-range intentions in Asia; and the ability of Russia to project power to further its interests further abroad. At the nuclear level, Russia is concerned that its deterrence capabilities may be declining because of ongoing modernization efforts in the U.S. nuclear arsenal as well as American development of anti-missile capabilities and systems.

Following the Soviet Union's 1991 collapse, the Russian military had major challenges, the most immediate of which was returning Soviet nuclear weapons based in Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. Eventually all were either dismantled or returned to Russia.³⁹

More vexing was the relocation of military equipment and personnel from Eastern Europe and the Near Abroad to Russia as returning military forces were reintegrated into Russian-based forces. Russia's military also faced dramatic budgetary, readiness, and personnel shortfalls. As the budget was cut, the military-industrial complex struggled, new weapons systems were not fielded, military units lost training funds, pay was often in arrears, and force

readiness declined. Many young Russian men also avoided military service, and Russian generals complained about the poor quality of conscripts they did receive. These trials and tribulations were displayed in the first Chechen war in 1994–95 as poorly trained Russian forces struggled.⁴⁰

Recognizing this, Russia in the late 1990s began discussing and implementing military reform. However, by the early 2000s, most reform plans were unimplemented or abandoned. One exception was the creation of “permanently ready forces,” a subset of forces with better manning and equipment levels. These units fought during the second Chechen conflict (1999–2004) with significantly more success than was achieved during the first Chechen war.⁴¹

Even with success in the second Chechen conflict, the Russian military by the early twenty-first century remained primarily based on Soviet-style force structures with older equipment. Shortfalls in modern command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance equipment and capabilities were fully displayed during Russia’s 2008 five-day war with Georgia. Although Russia was victorious, air and artillery strikes missed targets, units could not communicate, and Georgian air defenses brought down several Russian planes.⁴²

These shortfalls spurred Moscow to initiate a new set of reforms called the “New Look,” several of which were under discussion before the Georgia War. However, reforms moved slowly until a new Minister of Defense, Sergei Shoigu, took office in 2012. Under Shoigu, reforms accelerated and the “New Look” conventional military began to take shape.

The New Look sought to change the Russian military from a Cold War-style mobilization force to a modern professional military able to respond quickly to small conflicts. Partially-manned Soviet-style divisions were reorganized into fully-manned brigades; officer ranks were

cut; Russia's six military districts were reshaped into four joint commands that controlled all military assets in their areas; and a major armament program began that projected devoting 1.1 trillion rubles over ten years and equip Russia's military with 70 percent new equipment by 2020.⁴³

Russia's hybrid warfare concept, also called non-linear warfare, asymmetric warfare, or the Gerasimov Doctrine after Chief of Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Valeri Gerasimov, was related to the development of the New Look program. In February 2013, Gerasimov's article "The Value of Science is in Foresight," published in *Military-Industrial Courier*, observed that:

In the 21st century we have seen a tendency toward blurring lines between war and peace. Wars are no longer declared and, having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template . . . The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, has exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness. The focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other nonmilitary measures—applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population.⁴⁴

Gerasimov pointed specifically to U.S. and Western involvement in the removal of governments in Libya, the Arab Spring, and the color revolutions as proof of such U.S. political-military methodologies. In March 2017, Gerasimov published another article, "The World on the Brink of War," in the same journal, this time referencing U.S. actions in Syria and the Middle East, the 2015 U.S. cyberattack on Iran, and the importance of social networks in achieving political-military objectives.⁴⁵

As importantly, Russia's New Look military engaged in operations outside Russia, two of which employed hybrid warfare tactics. In early 2014, even though Moscow denied their

presence, Russian naval infantry, special forces, and airborne troops seized the Crimea. Later in 2014 through today, Russian special forces and troops mobilized, led, and supported separatist militias in eastern Ukraine.⁴⁶ More conventionally, Moscow in September 2015 initiated its first overseas operation since the Soviet era, providing combat aircraft, helicopters, advisors, artillery, and other military support to Syria, keeping Syrian President Assad in power.⁴⁷

Today's conventional Russian military is not the same Soviet force that depended on large operational maneuver groups with tanks and other heavy equipment. It is a smaller, balanced, and more mobile force that has proved it can effectively intervene in countries on Russia's periphery and in the Middle East. The new Russian military is now being used to underpin Moscow's ambitions of being a significant force in a multipolar world, at least in the Near Abroad, the Middle East, and potentially other areas near Russia.

At the strategic nuclear level, as the Bush and the Obama administrations began to modernize American nuclear weapons delivery systems including ICBMs; cruise missiles such as the Long-Range Standoff Weapon; and bombers such as the B-21 Long Range Strike Bomber, Moscow also began developing new ICBMS such as the SATAN 2 RS-28 Sarmat. Putin himself in his March 1, 2018, State of the Country address lauded Soviet advances in ICBMs, atomic powered cruise missiles, and submarine launched drone missiles, including showing a computer simulation of a strategic missile targeted on a peninsula that looked suspiciously like Florida.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, while U.S. programs proceeded reasonably well, numerous observers throughout 2018 speculated that Russian programs had encountered difficulties. Even so, Putin in late December 2018 again stressed that Russia would continue to emphasize development of new strategic nuclear weapons systems.⁴⁹

More perplexing from the Russian perspective is the U.S. development of anti-missile defense systems including the Patriot, the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system (THAAD), and Ground-based Midcourse Defense (GMD). The Patriot is deployed in numerous places; THAAD deployment is underway in South Korea and elsewhere; and GMD is under development, having been successfully tested most recently in May 2017 against an ICBM-equivalent target. Overall, However, GMD has succeeded only ten times in eighteen attempts.⁵⁰

Despite GMD's difficulties, Russia remains concerned that on-going American nuclear modernization efforts and American anti-missile defense systems will weaken the credibility of its nuclear deterrent. To the men in Moscow, this is perhaps even more unsettling than the impact that U.S.-initiated hybrid warfare may have in and around Russia.

Terrorism.

Despite the January 2019 claim by Secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikolai Patrushev that terrorism in Russia “has decreased by more than 20 times over the course of five years” and that only “five crimes motivated by terror and one terrorist act were committed in [Russia]” in 2018, terrorism remains a major concern in today's Russia, particularly terrorism initiated by Chechen radicals and supporters of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Conversely other Russian data reported that 1,566 crimes “motivated by terror” were reported in the first eleven months of 2018. Earlier, according to the “Global Terrorism Database” of the University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism, Russia experienced 1,182 actual terrorist incidents in which 1,114 people were killed and 2,278 injured from the beginning of 2008 to the end of 2016 when the Consortium stopped reporting.⁵¹

These numbers do not include 224 people killed in October 2015 when a bomb planted by ISIS destroyed a Russian plane flying from Egypt to St. Petersburg; the December 2016 assassination of the Russian ambassador to Turkey by a lone ISIS gunman; the April 2017 bombing in a St. Petersburg subway bombing that killed fourteen and hurt 50; two other separate 2017 incidents in Astrakhan and Dagestan in which four policemen were killed; a knife-attack in Surgut which injured seven people; and a December 2017 bomb in a St. Petersburg supermarket that injured 13.⁵²

Contrary to Patrushev's claim, terrorist attacks in Russia in 2018 included a February ISIS attack on a Christian church in Dagestan that left five dead; four terrorist incidents in May including two near Stavropol with no fatalities other than the terrorist; one in Nizhny Novgorod with no fatalities other than the terrorist; one in Chechnya with seven dead including four terrorists; and one in Grozny in August with seven police injured and two terrorists killed. Two terrorist attacks occurred in October, one in Archangelsk in an attack on security offices that left two police injured and the terrorist killed, and another in Kerch, Crimea, in which an armed student broke into an industrial college, opened fire with an assault rifle, killed twenty, and committed suicide. Over 50 people were wounded, including fifteen in critical condition caused by the shooting and the explosion of a shrapnel-filled improvised explosive device (IED). The police and security services found a second IED that had not exploded. Although police at first considered the assault a terrorist attack, it has since been described as a school shooting.⁵³

Recognizing the seriousness of terrorism and the need to fight it domestically and internationally, both the 2014 Russian Military Doctrine and the 2016 Russian Foreign Policy Concept called for international cooperation against terrorism and extremist ideologies. The Foreign Policy Concept also called for international efforts to "block financing channels used by

terrorists.”⁵⁴ Several Russian spokesmen have also asserted that one reason for Russia’s deployment of combat forces to Syria in 2015 was to combat ISIS-led terrorism.⁵⁵

Putin also used the threat of domestic terrorism to crack down on domestic dissent. In 2004, he ended direct elections of governors after Chechen militants massacred schoolchildren in Beslan.⁵⁶ In 2010, after suicide attacks on the Moscow metro, Putin supported legislation to control the internet.⁵⁷ In 2013, after a terrorist attack at Moscow’s Domodedovo airport, the definition of “extremism” was expanded to include dissident environmentalists and historians. This pattern played out again after the April 2017 St. Petersburg bombing as the Deputy Chair of the Duma’s Defense Committee suggested a moratorium on public protests and another legislator proposed laws to criminalize online calls for unsanctioned demonstrations and to require social media users to register their passports with police, neither of which as of early 2019 have become law.⁵⁸

It is also worth noting that despite the recent deterioration in Russian-U.S., the CIA in December 2017 provided information to Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB) that prevented planned terrorist bombings at crowded St. Petersburg sites including Kazan Cathedral, the landmark Orthodox Christian church. As a result of the tips, the FSB arrested seven terrorist suspects.⁵⁹

Russia’s Geopolitical and Regional Priorities

Russia maintains diplomatic relations with virtually every country in the world, but a combination of differing great power, socio-cultural, security, and economic considerations influences it to focus on four broadly-defined geopolitical and regional priorities: 1) former Soviet republics, called by Russia “the Near Abroad,” 2) Europe and the United States; 3) China,

India, Japan, and select other countries in Asia; and 4) the Middle East. Depending on the issue, Russia's prioritization of these regions can and does shift.

The Near Abroad

The "Near Abroad" is the term Russians often use to refer to the other fourteen Soviet successor states. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, three dominant views emerged in Russia about how to approach relations with the Near Abroad.

First, some reformers argued that Russia's great power days were temporarily over, and that Russia should therefore seek closer ties with the West, become integrated with the global economy, and join the developing European security system. This implied that Russia should allow events in the Near Abroad to develop more or less on their own.

Second, a group of Eurasianists asserted that Russian policy toward the Near Abroad should take into account Russia's history, culture, geography, economics, and security interests and needs beyond the Near Abroad and Europe. For the most part, while adherents to this middle position wanted Russia to remain involved in unfolding events in the Near Abroad, they advocated that Russia concentrate more on developing relationships with China, Iran, Turkey, and even Japan.

Third, traditionalists and nationalists advocated that Russia adopt what might be described as a neo-imperialist policy that at a maximum would recreate the Russian and Soviet empires, and at a minimum would forge stronger ties between Russia and the other former Soviet republics, with Russia in the dominant position.

The reading of Putin as a Russian nationalist and not, as discussed earlier, a Soviet apologist, becomes even more persuasive when it is realized that 12–16 million ethnic Russians

who lived in the Soviet Union before the U.S.S.R.'s dissolution now live in Near Abroad states. Approximately 8.0–8.5 million Russians live in Ukraine (18–20 percent of Ukraine's population), 3.6 million in Kazakhstan (roughly 20 percent of Kazakhstan's population), and .6 million in Latvia (of a population of 2.1 million). Latvia is of particular interest both because of its location and its NATO membership. (Interestingly, of the 20–25 million Russians in the diaspora, the U.S. is home to the third largest total, with 3.1 million people.)⁶⁰

Putin's view that the "epidemic of disintegration infected Russia itself" is one explanation of Putin's willingness to use military force in the Near Abroad. For example, between 1994 and 1999, Islamic separatists in Chechnya fought for and obtained a modicum of independence from Boris Yeltsin's Russia. After the so-called Islamic International Brigade of Dagestanis, Chechens, and other Islamist fighters invaded Dagestan from Chechnya in mid-1999, Putin just after he assumed the premiership ordered Russian forces to re-establish Russian rule in Dagestan and Chechnya. By late 2000, Russia had re-established its rule in both, but significant fighting continued until 2009, after which time all but guerrilla warfare ceased.

Russia's use of military force in the Near Abroad was not restricted to Chechnya. In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia, detaching both Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In 2014, Russia used special operations forces and other military units to take the Crimea from Ukraine. Later in 2014, Russia began to provide covert combat forces and military assistance to pro-Russian separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern Ukraine, which it continues to do today. As fighting escalated in December 2017, U.S. Special Envoy for the Ukraine Conflict Kurt Volker declared that 2017 was the deadliest year in the region since fighting began in 2014. Although in December 2017, Russia withdrew its delegation from the special OSCE committee set up to try to mediate the conflict, sporadic conversations have continued between Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and

OSCE Secretary General Thomas Greninger about how to resolve the conflict in eastern Ukraine, most recently in November and December 2018, but with little success.⁶¹ However, the combination of Russia's November 2018 capture of three Ukrainian ships in the Kerch Straights and continued fighting in eastern Ukraine virtually guaranteed that these talks would not succeed.

Elsewhere in the Near Abroad, Russia has also supported pro-Russian separatists in Moldova's Transdnistria region and attempted to influence Moldova to move away from accession to the European Union.⁶² These tensions also continued into 2019.

Given the significant Russian populations in Crimea, Donetsk, Luhansk, and Transnistria, Russian nationalists undoubtedly view Russia's actions in these regions under Putin as a twenty-first century version of Ivan the Great's "gathering of the Russian lands."⁶³ From the Russian perspective, this was especially true about the Crimea, which had been part of Russia since 1783 until Khrushchev in 1954 simply assigned it to Ukraine, the Soviet republic that he led during World War II. Khrushchev's legal authority to do this was uncertain, but no one challenged him. Thus, when Putin annexed Crimea in 2015, he was actually returning it to Russia which had governed it for all but sixty-one of the preceding 232 years.

Moscow also has security concerns elsewhere on Russia's southern Central Asian and Caucasus borders, including the possibility of increased Chinese and American influence; challenges to energy transit rights regarding exclusive rights for gas and oil flows from the region to Europe; radical Islamism, terrorism, and drug smuggling; and the still unresolved status of Nagorno-Karabakh, also called the Artsakh Republic.

(As an aside, in Atlanta, the Georgia legislature on March 6, 2016, became the sixth U.S. legislature to recognize Artsakh independence. On March 30, 2016, the U.S. Embassy in

Azerbaijan issued a declaration that U.S. foreign policy is determined at the federal level, not the state level, and the United States does not recognize the Artsakh Republic.)⁶⁴

As for trade, Russia remains the largest trading partner of most Near Abroad states. However, only Belarus and Ukraine consistently rank among Russia's top ten trading partners. Even there, the conflict in Ukraine's east cut deeply into Russian-Ukrainian trade. In 2013 before Ukraine's Euromaidan protests, Ukraine exported \$15 billion of goods to Russia. In 2014, that figure fell to \$9.8 billion; in 2015 to \$4.8 billion; and in 2016 to only \$3.6 billion. At the same time, Ukraine began reducing imports of Russian natural gas, completely halting them by 2016 and replacing them with direct imports of second-sale Russian natural gas from neighboring European Union states such as Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia.⁶⁵

Additionally, Russia has created international organizations with significant membership of Near Abroad states such as the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the Eurasian Economic Union. However, it is not clear how much of an impact these organizations have on Russia's efforts to maintain influence and control in the Near Abroad. Many analysts see them more as window-dressing than meaningful policy tools.

The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) is a case in point. Created in 2015 by Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, and Armenia, the EEU seeks to reduce trade barriers and promote integration among its members by easing cross-border trade and labor migration problems. However, it also raised external tariffs and oriented member's economies away from global trade. So far it has had little success. At the same time, the EEU faces political difficulties. Even though Russia may have hoped that the EEU would be a way to expand influence over member states and balance the European Union, several non-Russian EEU states continue to seek deeper relationships with the EU. Thus, while the EEU and other Russian-dominated

international organizations in the Near Abroad underline the importance that Russia attaches to the Near Abroad, the EEU and similar organizations struggle to have meaningful purposes.⁶⁶

In sum, the Near Abroad is critically important to Russia for a host of great power, socio-cultural, security, and economic considerations, and Russia is clearly intent on maintaining significant influence in the Near Abroad and expanding it if possible. On the other hand, even if it preferred, Russia is too weak to create a second Soviet Union.

Europe and the United States.

Despite Russia's 2016 Foreign Policy Concept statement that global power and development are shifting toward the Asia-Pacific region, Russia's national interest and worldview remain substantially but not exclusively focused on Europe and the United States. There are several reasons for this.

First, although only 25 percent of Russia's land is in Europe, 77 percent of Russia's people live there, many in Moscow and St. Petersburg. This geopolitical reality guarantees that Europe will be a central focus of Russia's worldview and national interest.

Second, despite the Asia-Pacific region growing importance, the international system remains centered on Euro-Atlantic institutions. Russia recognizes this, and therefore has been a member of the Council of Europe since 1996, the European Union-Russian Partnership and Cooperation Agreement since 1997, the EU Customs Union since 2012, and the World Trade Organization since 2012. (It is also a member of several Asian-centered organizations, discussed below.)

Third, Russia's main foreign political, security, and economic interests have been and remain primarily oriented toward Europe and the United States. Politically, Russians have looked

west ever since Peter the Great and are likely to do so for the foreseeable future. Similarly, Russia today is vitally concerned about European and American political affairs, and in recent years has been accused of meddling both in European and American politics to influence elections, charges that Russia vehemently denies. Russian security concerns regarding Europe and the U.S. have already been detailed, and will not be repeated here.

As for economic relations, European states collectively are Russia's largest trading partner. In 2017, Russia exported \$359 billion worth of products, 54 percent of which went to Europe. (Only 3 percent went to the United States.) Much of the Russian-European economic relationship is based on energy, with the European Union in 2017 importing 30 percent of its crude oil from Russia, a figure reached a peak of 32.8 percent in 2011. As for natural gas, the EU in 2017 imported almost 39 percent of its natural gas from Russia.⁶⁷

However, since Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and military support for break-away groups in eastern Ukraine, both the EU and United States have imposed major economic sanctions on Russia including cancelling the 2014 EU-Russian summit; excluding Russia from the G8, which now meets as the G7; freezing individual, corporate, and state assets; and restricting travel for over 150 people. These sanctions had a major impact on EU-Russian trade, which according to EU data dipped from a trade turnover in 2011 of 339 billion euros to 191 billion euros in 2015, rebounding to 231 billion euros in 2016.⁶⁸

Not surprisingly, Russia condemned the sanctions, claiming they were both confrontational and the precursor to a trade war. When the U.S. in August 2017 extended and expanded sanctions, Russia immediately reacted by once more condemning the sanctions and by ousting 755 U.S. diplomatic staffers in Russia. Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev was particular scathing, declaring that the new U.S. sanctions "end hope for improving our relations

with the new [Trump] administration,” adding that “relations between Russia and the United States are going to be extremely tense,” and predicting “a rise to international tensions and refusal to settle major international issues.”⁶⁹

Russia’s responses to the new U.S. sanctions were noteworthy given that, a month earlier at the July 2017 Hamburg G20 meeting, Putin met with Donald Trump and observed that despite difficulties in the Russian-American relationship, Russia and the U.S. could work together on terrorism, cyber-crime, energy, and aviation.⁷⁰ Both Putin and Trump echoed these observations during their July 2018 summit in Helsinki.⁷¹ However, as of early 2019, the extent to which such cooperation could take place is open to question given additional U.S. sanctions on Russia and the continued deterioration in overall Russian-American relations.

Nevertheless, even with the deterioration in Russian-European and Russian-American relations, Russia’s worldview and national interest remain substantially focused on Europe and the United States. But there is no denying that recently, Moscow expanded its attention to Asia and is engaged in a balancing act in which it attempts to expand and enhance its involvement in Asia without lessening or further damaging its involvement with Europe and the U.S.

Asian Balancing Act

Given that most of Russia’s territory is in Asia, Moscow legitimately claims it is an Asian state. Indeed, it has met with virtually no opposition from Asian countries as it expands its Asian role. Russia is a major player and moving force in several multi-lateral Asian organizations such as the Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, since 1998; the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, since 2001; BRICS, since 2009; and the Eurasian Economic Union, since 2015. At

the state level, Russia has focused on China, India, and Japan, but its relations with other Asian states cannot be overlooked.

One clear measure of expanding Russian involvement in Asia is that Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping met three times in 2017: in May 2017 in Beijing at the “One Belt One Road” meeting of the Eurasian Economic Union, attended by dozens of heads of state to discuss Central Asian economic development; in June 2017 in Kazakhstan at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit; and in Moscow before the July 2017 Hamburg G-20 meeting. During the Moscow meeting, Putin declared that Russian-Chinese relations were “the best in history,” and Xi stated that the two countries were each other’s “most trustworthy strategic partner.”⁷² Also at the Moscow meeting, the two leaders agreed to create a \$10 billion investment fund for infrastructure as part of the “One Belt One Road” project, sometimes called the “Silk Road” project, which intends to create the world’s largest platform for economic cooperation, policy coordination, trade and financing collaboration, and social and cultural cooperation. Notably, even before the agreement, China was Russia’s largest single state foreign trade partner, accounting for 14.3% of Russia’s total 2016 foreign trade.⁷³

Putin and Xi met four times in 2018, with: a June meeting in Beijing, where Xi described Putin as his “best, most intimate friend;” in July at the BRICS summit in South Africa; in September in Vladivostok (Xi’s seventh visit to Russia since becoming China’s president), where they again pledged to further strengthen ties between their two countries; and in November at the G-20 summit in Brazil.⁷⁴

Russian-Chinese cooperation extends beyond economics and meetings. During their July 2017 Moscow meeting, Putin and Xi agreed to a joint position on North Korea to defuse tensions around its missile program, also agreeing to call on Washington to stop deployment of the

THAAD missile system in South Korea. In addition, the Russian and Chinese navies have conducted joint exercises in the Mediterranean and Black Seas in May 2015; the South China Sea in September 2016; the Baltic Sea in July 2017; and the Sea of Japan and the Sea of Okhotsk in September 2017. In September 2018, Putin himself visited the joint land, sea, and air military exercises Russia and China conducted in Siberia.⁷⁵

As for India, Russian-Indian relations declined for a number of years following the end of the Soviet Union. Recently, however, they been on the upswing. In June 2017, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi met with Putin in St. Petersburg. Putin described the talks as “substantive” and declared the India-Russian relationship a "partnership [that] is developing into a strategic and privileged one." The Joint Declaration issued after the talks said that "the Indian-Russian special and privileged strategic partnership is a unique relationship of mutual trust between two great powers," stating that the relationship covered all areas of cooperation, including political relations, security, trade, economics, military and technical fields, energy, scientific, cultural and humanitarian exchanges, and foreign policy. The two countries also agreed to hold the first tri-Services military exercises, which took place in three locations in Russia in October 2017; to begin joint manufacturing of frigates; and to continue co-production of military helicopters. The two leaders met again in Sochi in May 2018, furthering the improvement in Russian-Indian relations.⁷⁶

Even so, Russia walks a fine line with India. Striving to develop cordial relationships both with China and Pakistan, countries with which India has had multiple confrontations, Moscow must find a strategy that will lessen New Delhi’s concerns. To this end, Putin following his 2017 meeting with Modi observed that Russia did not have tight military relations with Pakistan, commenting further that Russia’s relations with Pakistan had no impact on trade

between India and Russia. At the same time, it was clear that Putin and Modi had a cordial personal relationship judging by the two men's meetings both in Sochi in May 2018 and in Delhi in October 2018. Notably, at the October meeting, the two men also concluded an agreement under which India bought five Russian S-400 air defense systems for five billion dollars.⁷⁷

Historically, Russia's recent relations with Japan have been contentious because of continuing tensions over the disputed Northern Island and because of Moscow's views of Japan as a close American ally. Despite some recent indications that this might be changing, relations between Russia and Japan remain stalemated. Thus, even though Japanese Prime Minister Abe and Putin met at the September 2018 Vladivostok Eastern Economic Forum—and Putin put the possibility of concluding a peace treaty with Japan on the table—subsequent negotiations failed to resolve the status of the disputed islands. In January 2019, Abe confirmed in a speech to the lower house of the Japanese Diet that his government's position on the Northern Territories had not changed: they remained Japanese territory.⁷⁸ Thus, despite hints of improvement, Russian-Japanese relations remain stagnant.

On the whole, then, Russia is confronted with a mixed picture in Asia, especially with Asia's three most important countries. It has had considerable success in upgrading relations with China, continues to improve relations with India, and is stalemated in its relationship with Japan. Thus, Russia's balancing act in Asia continues.

The Middle East

In some respects, Russia sees the Middle East, and particularly Syria, as an extension of its Near Abroad. Given that the Russian and Syrian borders are only about 700 miles apart, it is

understandable why Syria and the entire Middle East have in recent years again become more important to Russia.

Russia's key goals in the Middle East are to reduce instability, increase its own influence, and reduce American influence. Russia's 2015 introduction of combat forces to Syria, the first time since Syria's 1973 war with Israel that Russian forces were in the region to participate in an ongoing conflict, helped further these objectives, as did the 2016 signing of a 49-year Russian-Syrian agreement to increase the size and use of Russia's naval base at Tartus, Syria.⁷⁹

On the political front, in addition to supporting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Russia has actively and visibly sought ways to cooperate with other regional states to de-escalate and resolve the conflict without weakening Syria's position. For example, as part of the so-called "Astana Process," Putin met at least three times with Turkey's President Erdogan and Iran's President Rouhani (in November 2017, April 2018, and September 2018) to find a way to deescalate the conflict, with another scheduled for early 2019.⁸⁰ None of the previous meetings met with notable success.

But Russia's involvement in negotiations to resolve the Syrian situation was only part of the picture. Behind the scenes, Russian private military companies (PMCs), almost assuredly with approval from the Kremlin itself, introduced significant numbers of Russian fighters to the conflict to support Assad. This covert action reached a flashpoint in February 2018 when at least nine, and possibly as many as 200, Russians operating under the auspices of the Russian PMC the Wagner Group were killed by U.S. warplanes in Syria during an attack on a Syrian Kurdish site that had about 30 U.S. Delta Force and Ranger troops attached to it. Neither Russia nor the United States chose to make anything more of this incident.⁸¹

(Beyond Syria, Russian PMC forces operate or have operated in Crimea, Eastern Ukraine, Sudan, and the Central African Republic. At least one PMC, the Wagner Group, is funded by oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhkin, also known as “Putin's Chef.”⁸²)

Russia’s renewed Middle Eastern involvement is not restricted to Syria. It is also improving its relations with Turkey, Egypt, and even Israel.

Turkey joined NATO in 1952, precluding close Soviet-Turkish relations throughout the Cold War. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, closer Russian-Turkish economic and trade ties developed, only to be set back in November 2015 when Turkey shot down a Russian jet after it violated Turkish airspace.⁸³ Soon, however, both Turkey’s and Russia’s relations with the U.S. deteriorated. With Russia wanting to keep Assad in power in Syria and Turkey wanting to distance Russia from Syrian Kurds in Syria’s north, an opportunity developed for Russian-Turkish cooperation. Hence in August 2016, Turkish President Recep Erdogan and Putin met in St. Petersburg, and Erdogan returned to Russia in March 2017, this time meeting Putin in Moscow. Erdogan and Putin continued to meet in 2018 as well, first in Johannesburg in June and then again in Tabriz in September. As a result of these meetings, Russia and Turkey now coordinate their approaches to the Syrian conflict.⁸⁴

Russian relations with Egypt also improved in the wake of Egypt’s Arab Spring, the 2013 takeover of power by General Abdel Fattah al Sisi, and the United States’ subsequent temporary suspension of military aid to Egypt. Moscow immediately seized the opening, concluding in 2014 its first major arms deal with Egypt since the end of the U.S.S.R. Other arms agreements have since been concluded.⁸⁵

Another measure of the growing warmth in Russian-Egyptian relations is the frequent meetings between senior leaders of the two countries. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu

and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met with Sisi and other Egyptian leaders during a May 2017 visit to Cairo to discuss “a growing convergence of foreign policy, defense and security-related issues in world affairs.” This visit apparently led to a joint Egyptian-Russian military exercise known in September carried out by Egyptian paratroopers and Russian air-landing forces in Novorossiysk. Shoigu visited Cairo again in November 2017, this time reaching agreement with his Egyptian counterparts on a major military agreement that allowed military aircraft of the two countries to jointly use airbases and airspace.⁸⁶

Even more importantly, Sisi and Putin met at least seven times between 2014 and late 2018: in February 2014 in Moscow; in Moscow again in August 2014; in February 2015 in Cairo; in August 2015 again in Moscow; in September 2016 in Hangzhou, China; in December 2017 in Cairo; and in October 2018 in Moscow and Sochi. Another Sisi-Putin meeting is being planned for early 2019, according to a January 29, 2019 TASS report.

Putin’s December 2017 Cairo trip was particularly noteworthy, with the signing of contracts for Russia to build a nuclear plant in northern Egypt; resumption of Russian flights to Egypt after they were suspended in 2015 following the terrorist bombing of a Russian plane over the Sinai; and confirmation of the November 2017 agreement allowing military aircraft of the two countries to jointly use airbases and airspace.⁸⁷ (To balance the picture, Sisi met with President Trump in Washington in April 2017, leading to the U.S. providing Egypt with over 1.3 billion dollars in military aid each year.⁸⁸)

Sisi’s October 2018 visit to Russia raised Egyptian-Russian relations to even greater heights. The two countries signed a bilateral agreement on comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation including expanding trade, which in 2017 expanded by 62% to \$6.7 billion,

Russia's highest trade turn-over in the Middle East save for Turkey. Reports are that Russian-Egyptian trade expanded by as much as 25% during the first half of 2018.⁸⁹

Perhaps paradoxically, even Russian-Israeli relations warmed after Russia deployed military forces to Syria in 2015. Israel's security relationship with the U.S. clearly remains paramount for Israel, but Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu nevertheless has made at least nine trips to Moscow to meet with Putin since Russia deployed forces to Syria, most recently in July 2018. The focus of many trips was to discuss ways Russian forces in Syria could avoid Israeli forces. One notable success of these discussions was the creation in late 2015 of a Russian-Israeli "De-Conflict Center" under the Israeli General Staff. However, when in September 2018, Israel did not notify the De-Conflict Center about an Israeli airstrike on Syria, a Syrian anti-aircraft missile battery mistakenly shot down a Russian surveillance plane during the Israel airstrike, killing 15 Russians. This nearly derailed a planned November 2018 Putin-Netanyahu meeting in Paris. Although the meeting took place, it apparently accomplished little.⁹⁰ Thus, even though Russia has raised its profile in Tel Aviv, issues remain in the relationship.

Even so, as during Soviet times, Russia again sees itself as, and is, a major Middle East player.

Conclusions: Does Russia Have a Global Grand Strategy?

What then may be concluded from this assessment of the Russian worldview and Russian national interests as seen by Putin and others in the Kremlin? Does Russia have a global grand strategy? While Russian viewpoints and actions may not be organized enough and directed enough to warrant use of the term "strategy," six clear directions of Russian foreign and defense policy are apparent.

First, Putin and his government are seeking to create a multipolar world in which Russia is a power at least co-equal with the United States, as well as China and Europe. From the Kremlin's perspective, this means that Russia would be an indispensable player on issues of global significance. Harking back to czarist Russia and the Soviet Union, this would reaffirm Russia as a global power, a country with global reach. Indeed, though not discussed in this study, Russia has recently again expanded its presence in Latin America, especially in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba, but also Bolivia and Peru. Most notably, in December 2018 during the visit of two Russian TU-160 "Blackjack" strategic bombers and two support aircraft to Venezuela, Russia and Venezuela reached agreement for Russia to establish a naval base and military airfield at La Orchila, an island off the Venezuelan coast.⁹¹

Putin and other Russian officials have often stated or implied Russia's intent to return as a major global player, dating back at least to February 11, 2003, when Putin declared, "If we want the world to be more predictable . . . and then safer, it has to be multipolar."⁹² Putin returned to this theme in his September 28, 2015, address to the UN General Assembly, rejecting the American-led unipolar world that dominated the last decade of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first century, stating that:

We all know that after the end of the Cold War, a single center of domination emerged in the world. And then those who found themselves at the top of the pyramid were tempted to think that if we are so strong and exceptional, we know better than anyone what to do . . . But how did this actually turn out? Rather than bringing about reforms, aggressive foreign interference resulted in flagrant destruction of national institutions and the lifestyle itself. Instead of the triumph of democracy and progress, we got violence, poverty, and a social disaster.⁹³

Even more recently, Putin at the June 2017 St. Petersburg International Economic Forum proclaimed, “The multi-polar world is becoming more of a reality and the monopolists don’t like that.”⁹⁴

Second, as demonstrated by Russian policies in the Caucasus, Ukraine, Moldova, and Central Asia, Putin and the men in the Kremlin intend to maintain and expand Russian presence, influence, and control in the Near Abroad. (For purposes of this discussion, Russia may also include the Middle East in its worldview as part of the Near Abroad.) It matters naught whether this perceived imperative is a mandate of Russian history, a requirement for Russian security, or a confirmation of contemporary Russian greatness. It is an undeniable fact both of the Russian worldview and of current Russian policy.

Third, Russia is engaged in a delicate balancing act between Europe and Asia. With most of its population in Europe and most of its economic and security interests connected to Europe and the United States, Russia must inevitably focus most of its attention there. Nevertheless, given the surging economies of Asia, China’s growing global importance, and Russia’s large Asian territories, Moscow has no choice but to expand its attention to Asia. Thus, Russia’s Eurasian balancing act is also understandable.

Fourth, Putin and his government seek to enhance the security of the Russian homeland by developing new conventional capabilities and maintaining a military stalemate with the United States at the strategic nuclear level. Thus, Russian concerns both about American hybrid warfare capabilities, nuclear modernization, and anti-ballistic missile capabilities are easily understood. Other threats, dangers, and risks, especially terrorism and even national dismemberment, all also abound from Moscow’s vantage point. All must be successfully countered.

Fifth, at the tactical level, Russia is increasingly using various forms of indirect and covert actions not easily or directly traceable to state agencies to further Russian interests at home and abroad. These efforts can best be viewed in three broad arenas: private military companies, assassinations, and tactical cyber-probes with strategic purposes.

Regarding Russian private military companies, Russian PMCs, as already discussed, are operating or have operated in Crimea, Eastern Ukraine, Syria, Sudan, and the Central African Republic. Again, as already discussed, at least one PMC, the Wagner Group, is funded by oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhkin, known as “Putin's Chef.” At least nine, and possibly as many as 200, Wagner Group operatives were killed by U.S. warplanes in Syria in February 2018 during a Syrian government attack on a Syrian Kurdish site that had about 30 U.S. Delta Force and Ranger troops attached to it.⁹⁵

Regarding assassinations, public attention has focused on the March 2018 nerve agent attack in England on former Russian intelligence officer Sergei Skripal and his daughter. But other credible sources assert that fifteen other mysterious deaths of Russians or others linked to the Russian government took place in England from 2003 to 2016.⁹⁶ And mysterious deaths of Russians critical of Putin are not limited to Russians in England. In November 2015, a former adviser to Putin and founder of the propaganda network Russia Today, Mikhail Lesin, was found dead in his hotel room in Washington. U.S. authorities said his death resulted from a drunken fall, but several FBI agents dissented, stating he was beaten to death.⁹⁷

Regarding tactical cyber-probes and cyber-attacks with strategic purposes, Russian sites have launched cyber-attacks against foreign financial, government, power, and other infrastructure targets. As early as 2007, Russia undertook a three-week denial-of-services attack on Estonia, closing down or disabling Estonian government, company, newspaper, and bank

websites. More recently, Russian cyber-attacks hacked websites in Germany (2015), Lithuania (2016), Norway (2017), France (2017), Montenegro (2017), and elsewhere. One such attack took place in 2015 and 2016 against Ukraine's power grid.⁹⁸

Closer to home, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and FBI in March 2018 issued an alert stating that a "multi-stage intrusion campaign by Russian government cyber actors" had targeted small U.S. commercial facilities "where they staged malware, conducted spear phishing, and gained remote access into energy sector networks." These attacks dated back at least to 2016. In addition to the energy sector, other targets included nuclear plants, commercial facilities, water, aviation, and manufacturing.⁹⁹

Finally, at the strategic political level, Putin and his government via disinformation and other non-violent hybrid strategies hope to plant doubts in U.S., West Europe, and broader publics about U.S. and Western policies, values, and decision-making. Indeed, without specifically stating it, Putin and other Russian leaders believe that by initiating such actions, they are taking a page out of the alleged U.S. and Western European playbook, the color revolutions as cases in point.

For the elephant in the room: Robert Mueller's February 16, 2018, indictment and persuasive analysis of Russian involvement in the 2016 U.S. presidential election in which Russia tried to influence the election in favor of Donald Trump. Numerous U.S. government reports indicate that similar Russian efforts to influence the 2018 mid-term elections were also undertaken.¹⁰⁰

Russian interventions in the 2016 presidential election and the 2018 mid-term elections were not just tactical regarding the election, but also strategic, designed to raise questions in the

U.S., Western European, and broader publics about the U.S. political system, the sanctity of U.S. political processes, and the legitimacy of the U.S. government.

In the words of the Mueller report, the three Russian businesses and thirteen Russian citizens indicted, one of whom, the same Yevgeny Prigozhin who funds the Wagner Group, is a billionaire with close ties to Putin, acted “with the strategic goal to sow discord in the U.S. political system, including the 2016 U.S. presidential election.”¹⁰¹

Did Putin know about this? The indictment did not address this question, but once again let Putin speak for himself, as he did during his June 1, 2017, St. Petersburg news conference:

Hackers are free people like artists. If artists get up in the morning feeling good, all they do all day is paint. The same goes for hackers. They get up . . . and read something is going on internationally. If they feel patriotic they will contribute to the justified fight against those speaking ill of Russia.¹⁰²

To this point we conclude: American and Western analysis of Russian interventions in recent U.S. and Western European elections has for the most part been debated and discussed as the tactical level. That is, as interventions in which Russia sought simply to influence the 2016 American presidential election, the 2018 mid-term election, and other Western Europe elections in favor of one candidate or another.

While there is truth to this analysis, it goes nowhere far enough.

What if the purpose of such interventions was not only tactical, but also strategic, to do exactly what they did: undermine faith of the American, Western European, and broader publics in their political systems and raise questions about the sanctity of U.S. and Western European political processes and even the legitimacy of ruling U.S. and Western European governments.

This is exactly what happened in the United States beginning in 2016, and in Western Europe for several years longer.

If one were a Russian strategist seeking to decrease American and Western European credibility, increase internal American and Western European divisions, enhance Russian security, and move toward a multi-polar world, one would be exceedingly pleased.

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¹⁰¹ IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA CRIMINAL NO. v. (18 U.S.C. 2,371,1349,1028A) INTERNET RESEARCH AGENCY LLC . . . ,CONCORD MANAGEMENT AND CONSULTING LLC, CONCORD CATERING, YEVGENIY VIKTORVICH PRIGOZHIN . . .

¹⁰² See again <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-economic-forum-putin-cyber-idUSKBN18S56Y>.