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per Concordiam

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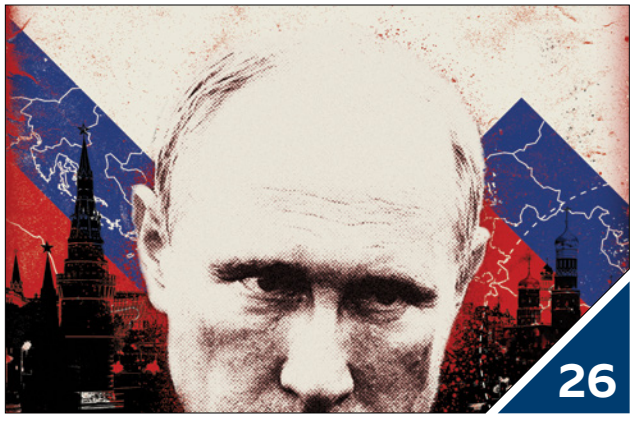
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Book Review



Russia's Global Reach: A Security and Statecraft Assessment

Edited by **Dr. Graeme P. Herd**
Reviewed by **Patrick Swan**, per Concordiam contributor

Russia's activities across the globe make it clear that a revanchist Russia undermining Western values, institutions and security can neither be ignored nor encouraged.

On the Cover



President Vladimir Putin looks to expand Russia's influence in Europe and beyond.
PER CONCORDIAM PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

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GEORGE C. MARSHALL
EUROPEAN CENTER FOR SECURITY STUDIES

Welcome to the 44th edition of per Concordiam. In 1992, then-Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev predicted in an influential article in Foreign Affairs magazine: "No doubt Russia will not cease to be a great power. But it will be a normal great power. Its national interests will be a priority. But these will be interests understandable to democratic countries, and Russia will be defending them through interaction with partners, not through confrontation. In economic matters, too, once on its own feet and later, after acquiring a weight commensurate with its potential in world trade, Russia will be a serious economic competitor to many but, at the same time, an honest partner complying with the established rules of the game in world markets."

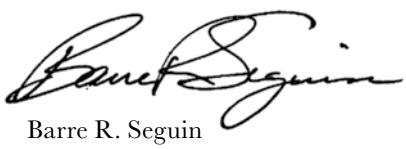
As this issue illustrates, that vision of a post-imperial "normal great power" has not emerged. The issue begins with a framework by Dr. Graeme P. Herd, chair of the Marshall Center's Research and Policy Analysis Department, for understanding Russian strategic behavior in its self-identified "sphere of influence" in this era of great power competition.

The issue then moves to different case studies that illustrate Russia's core strategic goals, as well as the ways and means it employs to achieve those ends. The first is by Lt. Col. John Berger, a U.S. Air Force fellow at the Marshall Center, who examines Russia's crisis diplomacy and coercive mediation toward Belarus. The second is a joint analysis by three Marshall Center faculty — Dr. Herd, Dr. Pál Dunay and Dr. Cüneyt Gürer — assessing the consequences of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 2020. Following that, a group of distinguished Marshall Center alumni scholars — Dr. Nikola Brzica, Dr. Olivera Injac, Endrit Reka, Dr. Vasko Shutarov and Nikola Veličković — examine Russian disinformation in the Balkans and how to counter it.

The focus then shifts to evolving great power relations. Dr. Nika Chitadze, a professor at the International Black Sea University and Marshall Center alumni, focuses on United States-Russia relations. Lt. Col. Ryan B. Ley, another U.S. Air Force fellow, asks of the functional if not friendly Russia-China axis: Are they aligned or allied? Dr. Paweł Bernat, who lectures at the Polish Military University of Aviation, takes both these themes into outer space, providing an analysis of Russia's strategic shift in space policy away from the U.S. and toward China. Lastly, Dr. Cyprian Aleksander Kozera, assistant professor at the War Studies University in Warsaw, highlights the relationship between Russia's use of proxy forces and great power competition in Ukraine, Syria, Libya and the Central African Republic.

It is with pleasure that I recommend reading this issue for insights and understandings of Russian strategic behavior in our era of great power competition. As always, the Marshall Center welcomes comments and perspective on these topics. Please feel free to contact us at editor@perconcordiam.org

Sincerely,



Barre R. Seguin
Director



Barre R. Seguin

Director, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies

Barre R. Seguin retired from the U.S. Air Force as a major general in October 2020 after more than 31 years of active service. His last assignment was as the Deputy Chief of Staff, Strategic Employment, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, Belgium. He entered active duty in 1989 as a distinguished graduate of the Reserve Officer Training Corps after graduating from the State University of New York at Potsdam. His flying assignments included serving as a flight examiner, instructor pilot, wing chief of safety and operations officer, with commands at the squadron, group, wing, and Air and Space Expeditionary Task Force levels. His command and staff positions included Commander, 9th Air and Space Expeditionary Task Force-Afghanistan and the NATO Air Command-Afghanistan, Kabul, Afghanistan; Director, Strategy, Engagement, and Programs, U.S. Africa Command, Stuttgart, Germany; Commander, 31st Fighter Wing, Aviano Air Base, Italy; and Inspector General, Headquarters Air Combat Command.



Lt. Col. John Berger, U.S. Air Force, is a senior U.S. fellow at the Marshall Center. He is a C-17A instructor pilot with over 750 combat hours supporting Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom and other contingency operations. He commanded the 321st Air Mobility Operations Squadron at Travis Air Force Base in California.



Dr. Paweł Bernat is a lecturer of security studies at the Polish Military University of Aviation. His areas of expertise include strategic aspects of outer space, with a special focus on militarization and weaponization of Earth's orbit, and on proxy and hybrid warfare in Eastern Europe. He is a member of the Polish Space Professionals Association.



Dr. Nikola Brzica is a strategic risk advisor to the board of a large Croatian private enterprise. He is a United States Military Academy graduate and completed his master's and doctoral degrees in the fields of international relations and national security. He has served as assistant minister for defense policy in the Croatian Ministry of Defense.



Dr. Nika Chitadze is a specialist in geopolitics, world politics, human geography and strategic affairs. He is currently a professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the International Black Sea University, director of the Center of International Studies and president of the Marshall Center Alumni Union, Georgia – International and Security Research Center.



Dr. Pál Dunay is a professor of NATO and European Security Issues at the Marshall Center. He is involved in the European Security Seminar-East, the Program on Applied Security Studies, the Senior Executive Seminar and the Seminar on Regional Security courses at the Marshall Center. His research focus is East-Central Europe and Eastern Europe.



Dr. Cüneyt Gürer is a professor of transnational security studies at the Marshall Center. His research interests and areas of expertise comprise transnational security issues, regional security dynamics, human displacement and nonstate actors in contemporary conflicts. He lectures on the interaction of Turkey's domestic politics with its regional security policy process.



Dr. Graeme P. Herd is a professor of transnational security studies and the Research and Policy Analysis Department chair at the Marshall Center. He directs the Marshall Center's Russia Hybrid Seminar Series, which focuses on Russian risk calculus, red lines, crisis behavior and their implications for policy responses by the United States, Germany, friends and allies.



Dr. Olivera Injac is the minister of defense of Montenegro. She has served as associate professor in the Department for Security Studies at the University of Donja Gorica (Montenegro), where she was department chair from 2011 to 2016. She has also served in the Ministry of Interior of Montenegro.



Dr. Cyprian Aleksander Kozera is an assistant professor at the War Studies University in Warsaw, a researcher at the African Research Institute in Budapest, an Army Reserve officer, and a member of the Polish Africanist Society and of the Polish Association of the United Nations Peacekeeping Veterans.



Lt. Col. Ryan B. Ley, U.S. Air Force, is a senior U.S. fellow at the Marshall Center. He has served in operations worldwide as an F-16 instructor and evaluator pilot and as an F-15E weapons systems officer, accumulating over 2,500 combined hours and 433 combat hours. He has served in multiple nonflying roles at the squadron, group and wing levels.



Endrit Reka has served as director for security policy at the Albania Policy Center and head of the national security department of the Albanian Democratic Party. His education and research focus on international security studies.



Dr. Vasko Shutarov has 20 years of experience in the security sector of North Macedonia. He holds a bachelor's degree in political science, a master's degree in public policy and management, and a doctorate on the interplay of religion and ethnicity. His professional interests include countering violent extremism and strategic communications.



Nikola Veličković is a strategic communications and government relations advisor for Canadian and Australian natural resource companies. After serving in defense policy with the Serbian Ministry of Defense, he worked with Serbian communication agencies and media outlets with a focus on corporate positioning, crisis communications and reputation management.

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Contributing Editor
Dr. Graeme P. Herd

George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies

Leadership

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Contact Us:

per Concordiam editors
Marshall Center
Gernackerstrasse 2
82467 Garmisch-Partenkirchen
Germany
editor@perconcordiam.org

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RUSSIA'S 21st CENTURY IMPERIALISM

Understanding Russia's regional reach in an era of great power competition

By **Dr. Graeme P. Herd**, Marshall Center professor | Photos by The Associated Press

Russia conceives of itself as a great power, with Moscow as the controlling civilizational center within a geopolitical bloc, a sphere of influence that encapsulates "historical Russia." As such, Russia has the historical duty to act as the "sword and the shield" within this space. Russia determines who is friend and who is enemy, the extent to which third-party activity can occur, and the strategic orientation of lesser, controlled states within the sphere. We can identify five fundamental drivers of Russian strategic behavior that help explain its interactions with states within its sphere: regime continuity and great power status; threat perception; ingrained imperial attitudes; ability to effectively coerce as the ultimate means of legitimizing Russian President Vladimir Putin's political authority; and a return to messianism in foreign policy.

First and foremost, the declaration of a sphere of influence denotes great power status, which in turn legitimizes regime continuity: All politics is local and personal. Putin's Russia uses the notion of Russia as a besieged and encircled great power, a sovereign and strategically autonomous great power with global reach, and a global player able to shape global order. As such, the Russian people can feel pride in a state that has "risen from its knees." Russian journalist Alexander Golts argues that Putin's own worldview is critical to how Russia exercises this role: "The world is ruled by the strong; the weak are pushed and shoved. The world belongs to the brave. If Russia has nuclear weapons, then the country's leader can do whatever he wants. And no one will dare to object to him, even when he tells obvious lies. Why should he not tell lies, if the population under his control likes them? After all, there's no such thing as democracy; it is just that hypocritical Westerners deceive their people more skillfully. That said, we're doing rather well in this field also these days."



Russian troops disembark from a landing boat during drills in Crimea amid tensions with Ukraine in April 2021.

Second, Russia's view of space is conditioned by threat perception and strategic psychology, born to strategic vulnerability and anxiety. Russia's strategic culture has been shaped by the indefensibility of its natural borders, resulting in a fear of external intervention and a complex dynamic between offense and defense that has characterized Russian military campaigns for centuries. Russia's lessons from history demonstrate that it can and has transitioned from stability to collapse, disorder and anarchy extremely quickly.

The sources of instability are multiple. When Russia is weak, external actors take advantage. Spheres of influence are viewed as spatial zones within which three threats should be countered: the threat that states might join foreign military alliances or, in some cases, economic blocs; the threat of the establishment of permanent foreign military bases or operations; and the threat of political interference that undermines regime stability. As a result, liberal democratic ideologies must not flourish, while authoritarian ideologies can thrive. This geopolitical sphere of interest can be imagined variously as: a *Russkiy mir* (Russian world), a new post-sovereign, cultural and civilizational space; a Eurasian supranational governance and regulatory framework (Eurasian Economic Union); and a militarized, imperialist, anti-Western space subject to Russian coercive control, or as the echoes of a "post-Soviet space 2.0," based on Belarus, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Donetsk and Luhansk, Transnistria, and potentially even Kyrgyzstan.

Third, Russia's imperial past, ethno-linguistic ties, and the lack of clarity over Russia's borders have all contributed to a complex relationship between Russia and its neighbors and to an unwillingness to consider its post-1991 frontiers as necessarily legally binding. Russia's attitude toward Belarus and Ukraine differs from that toward other parts of the former Soviet Union. In Russian strategic communication, these "territories" are part of an East Slavic Orthodox foundational core of "historical Russia," and as such, part of "one people," one language, one history, one culture and one religion. Moscow views them as historical Russian territories, not independent sovereign states; as such, they constitute a core, nonnegotiable national interest over which Russia will go to war to prevent loss. The wider hinterland of former Soviet space has a different function in Russian strategic thinking: This is space over which Russia should have an ordered producing and managerial role, demonstrating that Russia is a center of global power in a multipolar world order.

Despite Russia's strong historical and cultural involvement in European history, the ambivalence of its relationship with Europe has continued to affect Russian strategic



Russian ballistic missiles are displayed in Red Square during a Victory Day military parade in Moscow.

thinking. In the aftermath of the breakdown in relations with the West, following its annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia once again turned to Asia and especially to China as a potential ally to balance hostile relations with the political West. Europe's function in Russian strategic identity is to validate Russia's exceptional civilizational identity as a besieged fortress and alternative model. This narrative argues that Europe consists of U.S. vassal states — puppet states incapable of strategic autonomy — and that the puppet master, the U.S., is a great power. Regarding the U.S., Russia perceives that its own nuclear triad gives it parity, equality and reciprocity with the "main adversary." The U.S. serves as Russia's strategic benchmark and because of its own great power status, the U.S. represents for Russia a "dignified foe."

Fourth, Russian power is ultimately predicated on maintaining an independent nuclear triad and modernized conventional forces. The pervasiveness of military themes, military patriotism and militaristic policies in the state's framing of Russianness helps forge social consensus. The role of fear in generating respect is a central feature of Russian strategic culture. Sergey Medvedev, a political science professor at the National Research University Higher School of Economics and Marshall Center faculty alumnus, contends that Russia's most successful export commodity was not hydrocarbon energy but fear. Russia is not afraid that neighbors are afraid of Russia, it fears that its neighbors do not fear Russia. This fear of not being feared helps account for Russia's regional hegemony and strategic behavior.

Fifth, Russian strategic culture has been characterized by a messianic element that has taken on different forms over the centuries, but continues to frame Russian military campaigns in moral and ideological language. Messianism incorporates the idea that Russia is a providential great power with a civilizational mission. Messianism surges when Russian leaders propagate its central elements. In contemporary Russian conservative thought, Russia is the biblical katechon, able to hold back and restrain the anti-Christ and delay the advent of chaotic darkness and the apocalypse. "Orthodox geopolitics" suggests that Russia is the leader of a Slavic-Orthodox world, able to promote Russian culture and values across a supranational Orthodox space that encompasses the Balkans, the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean, from Serbia to Syria, within the borders of the canonical territory of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). This territory covers 16 states: Azerbaijan, Belarus, China, Estonia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Mongolia, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

Messianic ideas in religious philosophy have merged with national ideology, and the synthesis of the two is used to legitimize and justify foreign policy gambits both at home and abroad. This finds expression in the role of the ROC in Russia's military draft, and once service members are recruited, in mobilizations and morale building through the Ministry of Defense's Political Directorate. The ROC has a longer-term influence on conflict duration, escalation dynamics and deterrence ("nuclear orthodoxy"). Indeed, at the plenary session of the 2018 Valdai Club, Putin referenced heaven and hell in the context of nuclear deployment: "When we confirm an attack on Russia, only then will we strike back. … An aggressor must know that retribution is inevitable, that he will be destroyed. And we, the victims of aggression will go to heaven as martyrs, and they will simply perish because they will not even have time to repent."

Russia is caught in a confrontation syndrome in which an aggressive Russian foreign policy is an expression of weakness not strength.

Russia justifies its assertion of regional hegemony with three core arguments. First, hegemony aligns with its historical role, self-identity and ontological security. Second, spheres of influence, rather than cooperation and interdependence, create balance, predictability and stability in international relations. Third, and paradoxically, hegemony at the regional level is necessary to counter U.S. hegemony at the global level. Thus, Russia asserts its own absolute sovereignty within its sphere of influence, while it simultaneously both enforces a doctrine of limited sovereignty for lesser states and posits itself as the champion of the Westphalian ideal on the global stage. The net result is that former Soviet states have become hostage to Russia's paranoid anti-Western encirclement rhetoric and "strategic breakout" practice and to its temporizing transactional approach. Russia is caught in a confrontation syndrome in which an aggressive Russian foreign policy is an expression of weakness not strength. Its manufactured conflict with the West and manufactured consent at home provides the regime with legitimacy. As Bristish historian Robert Service observed: Abroad, Russia can be "a forceful disrupter, at home a forceful stabilizer." □



PER CONCORDIAM ILLUSTRATION

RUSSIA'S COERCIVE MEDIATION STRATEGY IN BELARUS

By **Lt. Col. John Berger**, U.S. Air Force, Marshall Center senior fellow

To make up for its economic weakness, Russia leverages its intelligence capabilities, experienced diplomats and broad diaspora to execute its strategies and tactics. Moscow uses hybrid warfare, reflexive control, active measures and coercive mediation to punch above its weight in international relations. Coercive mediation is a peace-building approach coined by David Lewis in his article, "Russia as Peacebuilder? Russia's Coercive Mediation Strategy." Lewis argues that for Russia, peace negotiations and coercive military actions are linked. He identified coercive mediation as a unique strategy that Russia uses to wield influence around the globe: Russia aims to be both negotiator and mediator to stop the fighting through a top-down approach, informed by power politics. The strategy stands in sharp contrast to the liberal peace-building model favored by the West. Lewis describes liberal peace building as:

"Internationally brokered peace negotiations, often accompanied by peacekeeping forces or other forms of military intervention; internationally monitored elections; a focus on human rights, gender equality and protection for minorities; the promotion of rule of law and Security Sector Reform (SSR), and constraints on the use of force by parties to the conflict."

Russia's realist-constructivist view of international relations underpins coercive mediation. Moscow tends to conduct relations with the world on the basis of realpolitik, in which states are the primary actors in an anarchic system, international relations are a zero-sum game, military power is essential, self-interests are paramount and Russia is destined to be a great power. Informed by Russia's worldview, coercive mediation relies on powerful actors with regional equities to achieve stability. Because the approach values stability and sovereignty rather than Western conceptions of human rights and democracy, Russia can negotiate solutions that liberal peace building cannot.

Lewis' coercive mediation framework is an effective tool to understand Russia's actions in Belarus. Through further analysis, one can expect Moscow to pressure Belarus to make constitutional changes, further integrate the Union State and provide Russia with military basing options in Belarus. However, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko is a shrewd politician and will not cede sovereignty easily. His top priority is to remain the most powerful actor in Belarus.

APPLYING SEVEN TENETS OF RUSSIA'S COERCIVE MEDIATION STRATEGY TO BELARUS:

Obviously, interpreting Russian motives is challenging. However, one can comprehend Russian strategy by observing Russian actions and reading what its leaders say (and do not say). It is also important to note that Lewis' seven tenets are not a blueprint. It is a context-specific framework that is dynamic and pragmatic. Lewis outlines seven tenets of coercive mediation that are not all-encompassing, but rather broad guidelines that Russia uses in various contexts.

1. The goal is to stop the fighting, not to transform societies.

Since the end of the Cold War, Western states have promoted ideas such as the democratic peace theory, the responsibility to protect, a rules-based world order and human rights. Russia has little concern for social

transformation or other liberal ideals. Lewis notes that "Russia is not concerned with achieving social transformation or democratization but aims only to introduce a minimum of political order, in line with Russia's geopolitical interests." Consequently, Russia has backed a wide range of partners, including the Taliban in Afghanistan and the rebel leader Khalifa Hifter in Libya.

One can clearly observe the first tenet in Belarus. When the protests in Minsk began, Moscow had little concern for Belarusians' democratic aspirations. However, Russian President Vladimir Putin was very concerned that another "color revolution" might occur. As in Ukraine, Russia is far more concerned with stability and preserving its interests in Belarus than it is with the democratic aspirations of the people. Furthermore, Russia argues that these democratic aspirations are merely Western concoctions.

Moscow believes that the line between war and peace is blurry. Peace talks are an inevitable extension of war, and the two cannot be separated.

While protests and street violence are not the same as conventional fighting, from Russia's perspective the two are synonymous. Russia views street protests as a form of hybrid warfare that is funded, instigated and supported by Western governments. This is why in August 2020, when protests were at their height, Lukashenko said that Russia offered assistance to "ensure the security of Belarus." For Moscow, if protests and street violence can topple a regime in Ukraine, it can happen in Belarus. And if it can happen there, it can happen in Russia.

2. The only guarantee of stability is a strong state.

Russia's vast landmass and history of revolutions inform its worldview that a strong state led by a strong leader is needed to ensure stability. Too much democracy is destabilizing, and a strong state is the only solution. According to Lewis, the Kremlin believes that "democratization and elections are often destabilizing, and it is better to have an authoritarian strongman who can keep order than a pluralist polity that allows terrorist and militant groups to flourish." Ramzan Kadyrov in Chechnya is an example of a strongman who provides order to a potentially unstable region.

While this tenet is a truism of the Russian mindset, its application to Belarus is slightly nuanced. As the Belarusian president for 27 years and the only president that Belarus has known since the fall of the Soviet Union, Lukashenko is exactly the type of strongman that Russia typically prefers. In the short term, this is why Moscow backs him — he is seen as the only leader with enough political clout, control of the Belarusian elites and loyalty of the security services to quell the protests. However, in the long term there will be tension between the stability Lukashenko can provide and his questionable loyalty to Russia. Despite his impeccable strongman credentials, Russia has not given Lukashenko its full backing because he has a history of distancing himself from Moscow by adopting multivector policies aligned with the West.

3. Powerful states are better mediators than weak states.

It is far easier for a small number of strong states to impose their will on warring parties than for a large number of weak states to broker a cease-fire that accommodates the concerns of all parties. Lewis notes that "the entrance ticket to the negotiation room is the power to influence armed groups on the ground." For example, in Afghanistan, where there are countless tribal and ethnic factions, Russia chose to limit the number of participants to simplify the process and filter the strong from the weak.

Lewis' third tenet is clearly applicable in Belarus. In general, Moscow prefers fewer actors at the table and insists that those actors have power to influence the situation. This preference is intensified when conflicts arise in regions with Russian historical ties, such as Georgia, Ukraine or Belarus. In Belarus, Russia is negotiating with one other actor: Lukashenko. They have no interest in allowing the opposition leader, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the Baltic states, the European Union, Ukraine or any other potentially interested actors to join the talks. For one, they know that these other actors would insist on democratic reforms that could push Belarus away from Russia.

4. Military activities and peace talks are closely interrelated.

Moscow believes that the line between war and peace is blurry. Peace talks are an inevitable extension of war, and the two cannot be separated. Lewis observed that Russian views on peace talks are inherently linked to power politics, especially military power. Those actors who can wield military power get a seat at the table. In Afghanistan, for example, the Taliban's strong military position granted them significant leverage at the negotiation table.

Unlike Tsikhanouskaya, Lukashenko controls hard power in the form of the Belarusian military, the security services and the Belarusian elite. In December 2020, the Belarusian Interior Ministry published an agreement between its security services and Russia's security services that "allows for police and security operations in Belarus by troops from the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia), which is controlled directly by the Kremlin." By ensuring Russian security services access to Belarus, Moscow



Orthodox believers wait to kiss an icon during a service and ceremony in Kyiv, Ukraine, marking the 1,025th anniversary of the Christianization of the Kievan Rus. GETTY IMAGES

gains the ability to shape events on the ground if it deems necessary. The degree that Russia can infiltrate the Belarusian security forces will have a direct relationship on the effectiveness of coercive mediation.

In regard to the conventional military, Putin and Lukashenko agreed during their September 2020 Sochi meeting that military exercises between the two countries in Belarus would continue as planned. In March 2021, Lukashenko publicly expressed a desire to host new Russian fighter jets and pilots as long as Belarusian pilots are also allowed to fly the aircraft. Although Lukashenko wants Russian technology, he has thus far resisted Kremlin requests to open military bases in Belarus. Russian military basing in Belarus will be an important litmus test to see how far Russia can push Lukashenko. A change to this position could indicate that Lukashenko is losing leverage.

Russia's focus on military power allows it to become a participant and negotiator. By becoming part of the problem, Russia ensures that they will be part of any solution. This is often advantageous because it allows Moscow to shape events on the ground and shift the balance of power during negotiations. However, Dr. Graeme P. Herd, a Marshall Center professor, observes that this creates a paradox because in some instances Russia does not want a solution. If there is a peace agreement, then there is no longer a need for Russian intervention. Without Russian intervention, it can lose leverage. This paradoxical phenomenon can be observed in Moldova and its breakaway Transnistria region, where Russia has maintained its military presence in Transnistria indefinitely. During this time, Moldova has slowly moved away from Russia toward the West. Recently, Moldova joined Ukraine and Georgia to petition the EU for greater cooperation in the future. By freezing the conflict for so long, Moscow eventually lost some leverage in the region.

5. Unscrupulous methods are acceptable to persuade parties to agree to peace proposals.

War and politics are dirty. For Russia, peacemaking is also dirty. Coercion, blackmail, business promises, aid manipulations and various human rights violations are fair game if it secures a favorable peace. For example, Russia used peace negotiations following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to gain influence in the region. In their paper, "Russian Crisis Behavior, Nagorno-Karabakh and Turkey?," Lewis, Herd and Richard Giragosian note,



Protesters in Minsk, Belarus, demand the release of opposition figures Maria Kolesnikova and Viktor Babariko. GETTY IMAGES

"Whereas Nagorno-Karabakh was formerly the only conflict in the Former Soviet Union with no Russian presence, Russia now has military bases in all three states in the South Caucasus (over 11,000 troops) and expanded its economic leverage through its presence in policing transport corridors (Meghri and Lachin)."

Russia uses wide latitude in the ways and means available to achieve its desired ends. With Russia's assistance, Lukashenko silenced journalists, violently cracked down on protesters and detained 25,000 people to dissuade further dissent. On the economic front, Russia gave Belarus a $1.5 billion loan. This money is critical because the EU levied sanctions on Belarus following the August elections. Belarus already owed other creditors more than $1 billion and Russia's state-owned Gazprom energy corporation more than $300 million. Thus, Belarus needed money, and Russia was the only country willing to give it a loan. It is impossible to know what Lukashenko gave up in return for the $1.5 billion, but Russia's leverage is obvious.

On May 23, 2021, Lukashenko forced Ryanair Flight 4978 from Greece to Lithuania to land in Minsk, where Belarusian authorities arrested opposition activist Roman Protasevich and his girlfriend, Sofia Sapega. The bold action is reminiscent of Russia poisoning Sergei Skripal and Alexander Litvinenko in the United Kingdom. While Moscow's role in the Ryanair flight is unclear, the broader message to activists who challenge the Russian or Belarusian regimes is clear: You are not safe anywhere. These are examples of how Russia uses unscrupulous methods to achieve its aims.

6. All conflicts have a regional dimension. Rather than universal principles like human rights, Moscow analyzes each conflict through a regional lens with deference toward the powerful actors in the region. According to Lewis, Moscow's "starting point for any conflict resolution is to achieve a regional consensus on a way forward." In Libya, for example, Russia analyzes the region's powerful actors to achieve peace and preserve Russian interests.

In Chechnya, Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus and other areas with deep Russian ties, Moscow adjusts its calculations slightly. Rather than analyzing the powerful actors on the ground, Russia takes a more heavy-handed bilateral approach. In regions that Russia deems within its privileged sphere of influence, Russia is willing to accept high strategic risk to ensure those areas remain in Russia's orbit.

As with Ukraine, Russia has deep historical, ethnic and regional ties to Belarus. Russia and Belarus trace their roots to the Kievan Rus, a ninth century federation of East Slavic peoples. According to the Belarusian National Statistical Committee, 83% of Belarusians identify as Eastern Orthodox, 72% of Belarusians speak Russian at home (26% speak Belarusian at home), and 56% of Belarus' imports come from Russia.

Along with historical and cultural ties, Belarus and Russia have political linkages. Russia and Belarus signed the Union State agreement in 1999. The agreement allows citizens to travel, live and work in either country without formal immigration procedures. However, Union State initiatives have stalled. In his article published by the London School of Economics, Oleg Chupryna notes: "In the mid-1990s, Lukashenko proposed the idea of a 'Union State' between Belarus and Russia. An agreement to this effect was signed in 1999. It has been suggested that Lukashenko's ultimate aspiration was to become the President of a shared state, given Boris Yeltsin, his Russian counterpart, was suffering from ill health at the time. In the end, the rise of Putin as Yeltsin's successor [ended] these ambitions. Lukashenko, unwilling to play a secondary role, quickly lost interest in the union." Protests in Belarus have weakened Lukashenko's negotiating position, and Russia appears ready to energize some of these Union State initiatives. These historical, cultural and political linkages provide Moscow with a great deal of information and leverage for its coercive mediation strategy in Belarus.

7. The West is part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Under Putin, Russia has become more outspoken about its frustration with Western intervention. Lewis notes, "Moscow argues that the intervention of Western powers is one of the primary causes of conflict in the Middle East and elsewhere." From Russia's perspective, "liberal peace building," "war on terror" and "democracy promotion" are merely narrative frameworks that the West uses to pursue its interests around the world.

Putin is equally skeptical of the West's foreign policy approach toward Russia. Putin recently told the Federal Security Service of the West's containment policy: "This is not competition as a natural part of international relations, but a consistent and highly aggressive policy aimed at disrupting our development, at slowing it down and creating problems along our external perimeter and contour, provoking internal instability, undermining the values that unite Russian society, and ultimately, at weakening Russia and forcing it to accept external management, just as this is happening in some post-Soviet states." Born and educated in the Soviet days, Putin has fertilized and nurtured this anti-West perspective to the point where it is now a philosophical belief of Putin's operational code.

Moscow views Belarus as another example of the West meddling in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state. In Russia's and Lukashenko's view, the protests in Belarus are fueled and organized by Western security services, nongovernmental organizations and media outlets. Regardless of the veracity of Russia's claims, according to former BBC Moscow correspondent Angus Roxburgh, it is a narrative that Putin truly believes. Thus, Russian leaders believe that protests in Belarus are at least partially a Western concoction to turn another former Soviet state toward the West.

BELARUS IS DIFFERENT.

Using Lewis' coercive mediation framework to analyze Russia's actions in Belarus indicates that, to varying degrees, all seven tenets of Russia's coercive mediation strategy are applicable to Belarus, making it an effective tool to understand Russia's approach there. However, unique facets of Russia's strategy in Belarus go beyond Lewis' framework. Thus, the situation there is different than Russia's coercive mediation approaches elsewhere.

RUSSIA'S RED LINES IN BELARUS ARE DIFFERENT.

Putin considers Belarus and Ukraine, unlike a faraway place like Libya, to be extensions of Russia. He elaborated on this belief in Kyiv in July 2013 during the 1,025th anniversary of Vladimir the Great being baptized into Orthodox Christianity. As tensions peaked between Ukraine and Russia over Ukraine's pending association agreement with the EU, Putin reminded the Ukrainians that Belarusians, Ukrainians and Russians are one people. He said: "As your agenda and your main program outlines state, you are here to discuss the significance of Ukraine's civilizational choice. This is not just Ukraine's civilizational choice. Here at this site, at the baptismal site on the Dnieper River, a choice was made for the whole of Holy Rus, for all of us. Our ancestors who lived in these lands made this choice for our entire people. When I say 'for our entire people,' we know today's reality of course, know that there are the Ukrainian people and the Belarusian people, and other peoples too, and we respect all the parts of this heritage, but at the same time, at the foundations of this heritage are the common spiritual values that make us a single people."

For Putin, the Ukrainians did not really have a choice whether to turn their back on Russia and join the EU. That choice was made in 988 by Vladimir the Great. When he chose to be baptized, Vladimir forever linked the descendants of the Kievan Rus, including those in modern-day Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, as one people. Six months after the 1,025th anniversary celebration, Russia annexed Crimea.

As it does in Ukraine, the Kremlin has significant red lines in Belarus that, if crossed, would result in forceful action. For example, Russia will not allow violent protesters to overthrow Lukashenko, as the Ukrainians did to

then-President Viktor Yanukovych in 2014 during the Euromaidan protests. Significant threats of overthrow would trigger the activation of Russian security services and conventional military. For both Belarusian stability and its own regime survivability (in light of the protests supporting Putin critic Alexey Navalny), Russia cannot be seen "bowing to the street."

THE LONGER LUKASHENKO IS IN POWER, THE GREATER THE RISK OF GROWING ANTI-RUSSIAN SENTIMENT IN BELARUS.

Russian foreign policy tends to see movements in black and white — either as pro-Russia or pro-West. However, Carl Bildt, former foreign minister of Sweden, argues in the article "The Armenian model for Belarus," published in The Strategist, that the protests in Belarus are different than the Orange Revolution or Euromaidan in Ukraine. In Ukraine, Euromaidan was a direct response to Yanukovych abandoning European integration. In Belarus, Bildt said, "Domestic concerns are clearly playing the more salient role, and questions about the country's orientation vis-à-vis Europe or Russia are almost totally absent. Belarusians are simply fed up with the 26-year reign of a man who is increasingly out of touch with society."

Polling tends to support Bildt's assertion. However, attitudes are shifting. According to Carnegie Moscow Center writer Artyom Shraibman, "A telephone survey of 1,008 people conducted on November 5-8 (2020) by the Belarusian Analytical Workshop (BAW) asked respondents whether the Belarusian people would be better off in the EU or in a union with Russia. Forty percent opted for a union with Russia, while 33% chose the EU, compared with 52% and 27% in September, respectively." Although this shift is noticeable, Shraibman says that fluctuations are common in Belarusian society. Shraibman explained Belarusian dissonance by noting, "Belarusians admire the EU because life is better there, but love Russia because it is 'theirs': i.e., close to their hearts." How Moscow balances these risks going forward will be important to watch.

Lukashenko is a savvy political actor who has been in power for 27 years and is often referred to as "Europe's last dictator." Replacing him with a Russian loyalist will not be easy. Ruling within the Russian sphere his entire life, Lukashenko is intimately familiar with Russian coercive mediation. For example, by labeling the Belarusian protests as another Western color revolution, Lukashenko is holding Putin hostage to his own rhetoric. How can Putin decry the West's role in Navalny protests, but condone such treachery in Belarus? Lukashenko is also wary of Russia favoring any of his political rivals. Viktor Babariko, the former head of Belgazprombank, a Russian-owned commercial bank based in Belarus, was considered Lukashenko's most serious political challenger when he was arrested in 2020 on bribery and tax evasion charges. He was convicted in 2021 and sentenced to 14 years in prison after a trial condemned internationally as a sham.

Putin is uncomfortable with Lukashenko because the Belarusian strongman has clashed with the Kremlin on a range of issues. In the past, Lukashenko accepted

Belarusian Airborne Brigade members march during a ceremony commemorating the day Minsk was liberated from Nazi occupation by Soviet troops during World War II. GETTY IMAGES



loans from Russia and the International Monetary Fund to retain sovereignty and solidify his position atop the Belarusian government. Lukashenko also balked at a proposal to build a large Russian military base in Belarus. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea, Lukashenko would not condone Russia's actions, which angered Putin.

Lukashenko understands that an overreliance on Russia makes Belarus susceptible to Russian coercive mediation. This is why he has a long history of flirting with the West to balance Russian influence in Belarus. However, the door for cooperation with the West has closed. Lukashenko's election rigging, his treatment of protesters and the forcing down of Ryanair Flight 4978 eliminated the possibility of future cooperation, thus boxing Lukashenko into closer ties with Moscow. Despite his reduced options, Lukashenko's political savvy and knowledge of Russian coercive mediation is a barrier to Russia installing a loyalist of its choosing.

CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM APPEARS TO BE RUSSIA'S PREFERRED WAY FORWARD.

Despite his unwillingness to leave office, Lukashenko did open the door to constitutional reforms. Following his September 14, 2020, meeting with Putin, Lukashenko agreed in principle to make constitutional reforms, but has thus far failed to outline specifics or commit to a hard timeline. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov publicly indicated that Putin is growing impatient with the pace of Lukashenko's constitutional reforms. During a November 26, 2020, visit to Minsk, Lavrov noted, "As President Putin has repeatedly stressed, we are interested in seeing these initiatives happen." Russia wants stability and a strong state in Belarus. Pushing Lukashenko toward constitutional reform maintains a strong state, but also increases Russian leverage over the Belarusian strongman while offering a fig leaf to those tired of Lukashenko's rule.

On February 16, 2021, Lukashenko hosted loyal Belarusian elites in Minsk at an All-Belarusian People's Assembly. He indicated that he would support constitutional reform that "would delegate authority to other branches of power" and offered support to enshrine the All-Belarusian People's Assembly into the new constitution. Such a move could pave the way for Lukashenko to transition out of his current presidential role into a "chairman of the assembly" role, whereby he satisfies Russia's desire for constitutional reform, but maintains his position as the most powerful man in Belarus.

Another pressing question is the leverage Lukashenko has over Moscow. While his leverage appears minimal, Lukashenko has one big trump card — Russia's lack of alternatives. Russia wants loyalty and stability. Lukashenko appears to be the best option for providing it. He will have to publicly kowtow to Moscow. He may have to sacrifice some Belarusian sovereignty and move forward on some Union State initiatives. Stalled Russian proposals such as a common currency will be back on the table. Lukashenko may also have to grant basing rights in Belarus to the Russian military. Thus far, Lukashenko has resisted ideas of a Russia-Belarus merger. In March 2021, Lukashenko called such a merger "silly" and insisted that Belarus would remain a sovereign and independent state. Whatever concessions Lukashenko makes, he will exact a high price. In return, he will seek job security. Whether it's as Belarusian president or chairman of a newly empowered assembly, Lukashenko will likely remain the most powerful actor in Belarus.

CONCLUSION

Lewis' coercive mediation framework is an effective tool to understand Russia's approach in Belarus. There, one can observe aspects of all seven coercive mediation tenets. Specifically, Russia is far more concerned with stability and securing its interests than recognizing Belarusian democratic aspirations. Moreover, Russia chose to negotiate with Lukashenko because he controls the Belarusian elites, military and security services. To achieve its ends, Russia will utilize unscrupulous methods. Conditional loans, extortion and utilizing leverage are normal methods through which it exerts its will. Russia also takes into account regional factors. In the former Soviet space, Russia will enforce hard red lines. As it did in Crimea and the Donbas, Russia will not hesitate to use military power to ensure Belarus does not shift west. Finally, Russia views the West as the problem. It believes that popular movements, such as those in Belarus, are Western-concocted color revolutions designed to encircle and weaken Russia. As a result, Moscow is willing to accept strategic risk within its privileged sphere of influence to secure its interests.

There are many unique takeaways from Russia's coercive mediation strategy in Belarus. There, Russia has significant cultural and economic advantages. Belarusians are proud of their historical links to Russia and they're deeply dependent on Russian resources and markets. Polls indicate that Belarusians have more favorable views of Russia than they do of the West. Despite Moscow's local advantages, Lukashenko is a savvy political actor who intimately understands Russia's coercive mediation strategy. He has a long history of resisting Putin's aspirations for power and control. In the past, Lukashenko flirted with the West to resist Russian control. However, Lukashenko's election rigging, his protester crackdowns and the Ryanair Flight 4978 episode shut the door on his ability to play the West against Russia. Thus, he is holding a weaker hand than before the elections. However, Lukashenko retains leverage because Russia has few alternatives to fill his position. At some point, Lukashenko may agree to constitutional reforms where he shifts from president to chairman of a newly formed assembly. Looking ahead, Lukashenko will likely remain the most powerful actor in Belarus. Paraphrasing Mark Twain, reports of Lukashenko's death appear to be greatly exaggerated. □



NAGORNO-KARABAKH

2020-2021

PER CONCORDIAM ILLUSTRATION

RUSSIAN RED LINES AND RISK CALCULUS?

By **Dr. Graeme P. Herd**, **Dr. Pál Dunay** and **Dr. Cüneyt Gürer**, Marshall Center professors

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PROLOGUE:
THE PAST IS NEVER DEAD. IT IS NOT EVEN PAST.

On September 27, 2020, violence resumed between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenian-majority-populated enclave located within the internationally recognized borders of Azerbaijan, and seven surrounding districts that had been under the control of Armenia since the end of the first Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (1988-1994). Forty-four days later, on November 9, 2020, a cease-fire, imposed by Russia, was signed by Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia, thereby reversing Armenia's gains from the first conflict. Small, landlocked and resource-poor Armenia could not compel Azerbaijan, a country with three times the population and territory, to recognize its decisive victory from 1994 or prevent the Azeris from rearming and preparing for war.

The analytical community offered little consensus about what to conclude concerning the relationship between the outcome of the conflict and the risk calculus that informed Russian decision-makers. Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow think tank, suggested the conflict highlights a new Russian modus operandi based on calculating risk to achieve pragmatic and vital Russian interests. Such an approach is free of emotional or ideological attachments, adheres to formal obligations, but no more, and seeks to manage third powers in the former Soviet space to minimize threats to core Russian interests. Others disagree. Mark Galeotti, a writer and lecturer on Russian security affairs, advances what could be termed a "managed decline" thesis, noting that Russia was forced to escalate its commitment through a new peacekeeping operation (PKO) and Federal Security Service deployment to Nagorno-Karabakh and the Meghri corridor (Armenian territory that links Azerbaijan to its western Nakhchivan enclave) respectively. He views this in terms of Russia "laboring to hold back decline." Russian defense analyst Ruslan Pukhov was more direct and emphatic: "The geopolitical consequences are disastrous not only for Armenia, but also for Russia. Russia's client and ally was the loser. The Turkish ally won convincingly. Behind the thin veil of a deceptive foreign policy triumph, namely successful mediation and bringing peacekeepers to the region, the harsh reality is that Moscow's influence in the trans-Caucasus region has sharply decreased, while the prestige of a successful and a pugnacious Turkey, on the contrary, has grown incredibly."

The term "red lines" originates from the 1928 "Red Line Agreement" involving oil companies from the United States, France and the United Kingdom, when an Armenian businessman used a red pencil to somewhat arbitrarily draw up new borders, dividing the defeated Ottoman Empire. Here, red lines signal core or vital interests as defined by the Kremlin. The declaration of a red line to an adversary is designed to manipulate and change its behavior. For red lines to be credible, retributive consequences should fall on the adversary when they are crossed; if not, reputational and credibility costs are incurred by the declarative actor. We can posit that when Russian President Vladimir Putin and his senior strategic advisers meet to discuss the use of force, the following understandings and rationales are at play when calculating associated risks, costs and benefits. First, they are likely to discount an event or action that they deem too risky. Second, they will base their decisions on assessments that potential benefits justify the taking of risks. Third, they will take into account the actions of third parties and consider whether they are too risky to ignore and thereby cross a threshold for Russian action.



An ethnic Armenian woman attends a religious service in Stepanakert, the capital of the separatist region of Nagorno-Karabakh, commemorating victims of the 2020 conflict.

ACT I: FAILED DIPLOMACY

When the Soviet Union dissolved, successor states agreed that the former administrative borders of the once constituent republics would become state borders in accordance with *uti possidetis*, a term defined by Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of Law as "a principle in international law that recognizes a peace treaty between parties as vesting each with the territory and property under its control unless

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN **ARMENIA** AND **AZERBAIJAN**



otherwise stipulated." Between 1988 and 1994, Armenia and Azerbaijan fought a war that the Armenians won. It occupied Nagorno-Karabakh (or as it is called in Armenian, the Republic of Artsakh) and seven districts around it, constituting 13.6% of Azerbaijan's territory and resulting in 600,000 to 800,000 internally displaced Azeris.

This became a "frozen conflict," characterized by ineffective conflict resolution efforts and periodic volatility, including a four-day skirmish in April 2016 (200 casualties), and violence in June and July 2020, with only very slight changes to the status quo on the ground. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), through the Minsk Group co-chaired by Russia, France and the U.S., engaged in conflict resolution efforts. These proved unsuccessful due to several complicating factors. Russia always perceived its role as the ultimate and decisive matchmaker, able to operate outside of multilateral conflict management structures. When new fighting erupted in September 2020, the U.S. faced two difficulties. First, the Trump administration's reservations about the efficacy of multilateralism extended to the OSCE. Second, the war coincided with the most intensive phase of the 2020 presidential election campaign and this directed attention away from international matters. After France declared the 1915-16 actions of Turkey (then called the Ottoman Empire) against Armenians a genocide, France was seldom regarded as an evenhanded, neutral party by Turkey and Azerbaijan.

The protracted conflict became hostage to respective national narratives, undercutting bilateral resolution efforts. Designs on securing and even extending Armenia's battlefield victory in Nagorno-Karabakh highlighted dangerous overconfidence, even hubris, in Yerevan. Armenia consistently declared its readiness to settle the dispute peacefully, but in practice proved unwilling to accept any compromise that would have required giving up territory. Despite a meeting between Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in February 2019, in which the two agreed on the need to prepare their respective peoples for peace, relations soon soured. In March 2019, then-Armenian Defense Minister David Tonoyan shifted the notion of "land for peace," an original justification for the seizure of the seven districts that surround Nagorno-Karabakh, to "war for new territories" — should Baku initiate a new war, Armenia would acquire even more Azeri territory by force. Such maximalist rhetoric was matched by Pashinyan in August 2019, when even the pretense of negotiation was taken off the table: "Artsakh is Armenia, and that's it!" he declared. Because restoring control over Nagorno-Karabakh was also central to the Azeri state-building project, Pashinyan's statement was understood in Baku to indicate that the diplomatic path to conflict resolution represented a strategic cul-de-sac. This conclusion was supported by failed diplomatic efforts by the U.S. at Key West in 2001, and by then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's Kazan initiative of 2011.

Prophetically, in the mid-1990s Yevgeny Primakov, head of the Russian external intelligence service at the time, warned then-Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosyan that "Azerbaijan can work and wait. They have the resources. In 10, 20, 30 years they will gain strength and take everything from you." However, not even Primakov could take into account that Azerbaijan, despite massive military investment (a tenfold increase in military spending between 2006

and 2016) and with a six-times-greater gross domestic product than Armenia's, would still need decisive Turkish military support to largely restore the prewar borders.

ACT II: NAGORNO-KARABAKH, ARMENIA, AZERBAIJAN, RUSSIA AND TURKEY

Militaries usually prepare to fight the last war, but not in every case. The second Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was expected to end in deadlock and exhaustion. As both sides appeared evenly balanced, a war of attrition would rage until overtaken by winter. However, this was not the case. There were differences in objectives — Armenia sought to hold territory that it had controlled for more than 25 years; Azerbaijan had to prepare to seize (regain) territory — and differences in military preparedness. Armenia's reliance on heavy armor was hampered by poor and inaccurate targeting of Azerbaijani hydrocarbon production and transport infrastructure and by weaker logistical support, which affected the medical evacuation of the wounded.

Azerbaijan increased the mobility of its forces, diversifying weapons acquisition to two other major suppliers besides Russia — Turkey and Israel. The Turkish Bayraktar TB2 attack drones, tested in warlike conditions in Syria and Libya, outmatched an Armenian air defense system configured for fast, low-flying manned aircraft. Their deployment was complemented by shared Turkish intelligence, military advisers, logistical help and proxy forces, including Turkish drone pilots operating out of Erzurum. This support accounted for the targeting of Armenian battle tanks and ranking military commanders; one strike wounded the defense minister of Nagorno-Karabakh. The contribution and scope of Turkey's military commitment in support of Azerbaijan throughout the conflict was clearly agreed in advance using previously established institutional cooperation mechanisms. Turkish-Azerbaijani relations are based on long-standing cultural and linguistic ties and shared identity, buttressed by pan-Turkic sentiment. Motivation for Turkish military support can also be explained by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's more assertive regional policies, changes that followed the 2011 Syrian crisis.

Armenia was forced to accept a military defeat to avoid political-strategic annihilation. The Nagorno-Karabakh capital, Stepanakert, and the Lachin corridor, which connects Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia proper, remained under Artsakh control, and a full humanitarian disaster was avoided. Pashinyan noted that Stepanakert (Xankandi in Azeri) was under direct threat, and if the cease-fire document had not been signed, "there was a high probability that Stepanakert, Martuni (Khojavend), Askeran (Xocali) would have been captured, after which thousands of our soldiers would have been under siege and a total collapse could have happened as a result." Had this occurred: "20,000 Armenian troops and officers could find themselves surrounded by enemy troops, facing the prospect of being killed or captured," he said. After Azerbaijan captured the key city of Shusha, 6.4 kilometers from Stepanakert as the crow flies and 14 kilometers downhill by road, the Ministry of Defense of Armenia and the chief of the general staff endorsed this assessment and supported the agreement, confirming that they would obey and execute it. In doing so, Armenian red lines were breached.

First, having previously posited "Artsakh" as an existential "civilizational front line" against "international terrorism," Armenia is no longer the guarantor of Nagorno-Karabakh security. This military defeat represents a core identity loss for Armenia: Armenia failed to counter Azerbaijan in the field, and its efforts to coerce Russia into supporting it by targeting Azeri critical national infrastructure outside the conflict zone caused an Azeri attack on Armenia proper. Following the signing of the cease-fire agreement, demonstrations in Yerevan and elsewhere highlighted the loss of leadership legitimacy. Pashinyan was blamed for losing the war and accepting an agreement that is to the detriment of the country's interests.

For Azerbaijan, the cease-fire signified a "glorious victory," territorial restoration with the capture of Shusha as the symbolic prize ("Shusha is ours! Karabakh is ours!"), and regime legitimation, with its official narratives touting the necessity of a strong authoritarian leader. Aliyev publicly proclaimed: "The Patriotic War is over. Azerbaijan has won a brilliant victory in this war, our lands have been liberated from occupation, we have expelled the occupiers from our lands." A month after the cease-fire agreement, a victory day parade was held in Baku, attended by Turkey's Erdoğan. Aliyev achieved victory while maintaining relations with Russia and strengthening ties with Turkey. At the same time, the timing of the cease-fire between the capture of Shusha and imminent capitulation of Stepanakert allowed Aliyev to avoid ownership of a humanitarian disaster and subsequent ethnic cleansing and to avoid fighting in winter. Aliyev can now focus on returning Azeri refugees and internally displaced people to the now-Azeri-held portions of Nagorno-Karabakh and its seven adjacent districts. The process of "Azerbaijanization" of these districts is ongoing. Aliyev has also demonstrated that it is not just Russia that has military power capable of redrawing de facto borders in the post-Soviet space. In addition, the cease-fire opens the possibility of joint control of a new Azeri transit corridor — the Meghri corridor to Nakhchivan and then to Ankara.

Assertive regional policies and nationalist discourse helped secure unanimous domestic Turkish political support for Azerbaijan during the conflict, leading to the military-patriotic legitimation of the ruling coalition, which consisted of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi or AKP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetci Hareket Partisi or MHP). As a result of Turkey's decisive contribution to Azerbaijan's military victory, the power of Turkey and its president increased. This led to claims of Turkey's future leadership in both the Islamic and the Turkic worlds, which many analysts consider too ambitious a projection. Turkey has inserted itself into the South Caucasus as a de facto power broker



Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, center, stands with Armenian Army reservists in Yerevan before they leave to join the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh in October 2020.

and a challenger to Russian hegemony and Moscow's notion of a "sphere of privileged interest." Turkey has solidified ties with Azerbaijan (with Aliyev referring to "my dear brother Recep Tayyip Erdoğan") and Azeri energy corridors are strengthened, lessening Turkish dependency on Russia. The pro-government Milliyet and Türkiye newspapers both highlighted that Turkey and Azerbaijan will now be connected through the newly established Meghri corridor, highlighting pan-Turkic notions of solidifying historical ties across Turkic nations through connective land corridors to Baku and beyond. The flagship pro-government Sabah newspaper's front-page headline read: "Two states, one victory," referencing a popular phrase connecting Turkey and Azerbaijan: "Two states, one nation." Another pro-government newspaper, Yeni Şafak, had the headline: "Iron fist, absolute victory." Former Army Chief of General Staff İlker Başbuğ stated that his cherished hope is to see Turkey and Azerbaijan as one state, though he recognized this dream is not achievable.

During the conflict, Turkey demonstrated an ability to project power at low cost. It appeared to effectively deter Russia from wholescale support for Armenia by stating that this would trigger open Turkish conventional deployments on the side of Azerbaijan. With the cease-fire, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Defense Minister Hulusi Akar, Land Forces Commander Ümit Dündar and National Intelligence Organisation (MIT) chief Hakan Fidan met Aliyev in Baku, and it was likely that Turkish Special Forces and MIT, which typically deploy to grey zones, were on the ground monitoring the Russian PKO and new line of control. Although even the perception of empowerment is a double-edged sword, increased Russian-Turkish tensions are mitigated by open channels of communication and a history of managing brinkmanship in Syria and Libya through pragmatic and practical transactional horse trading.

As part of its previous regional policy, Turkey's AKP government had initiated a normalization of relations with Armenia after signing the Zurich Protocols in 2009. Turkish President Abdullah Gül visited Armenia, and the two parties began to discuss opening their mutual borders as a goodwill gesture. This outreach was perceived negatively in Baku, with Aliyev accusing Turkish officials of "betrayal." Erdoğan, then prime minister, was quick to reassure Aliyev that, despite rapprochement, borders would remain sealed until the Nagorno-Karabakh issue was resolved. A small number of contemporary Turkish experts argue that a balanced regional approach better aligns with Turkey's national interests and suggest that the normalization process with Armenia be rekindled. At present, this option is not a political priority.

Russia was in frequent communication with Armenia from the onset of the war. This included exchanges between Putin and Pashinyan four times during the first 10 days of the conflict while, according to Russian media, Putin and Aliyev did not speak until October 7, more than a week after the start of the conflict. However, because Moscow had never recognized Armenia's territorial gains as legal and did not allow multilateral and bilateral arrangements to extend to territories that Yerevan de facto controlled but that did not belong to its state territory, Moscow managed to avoid the imposition of a "2 + 2" formula (Armenia and Russia opposing Azerbaijan and Turkey). Russia was not therefore subject to the economic costs that would

have resulted from breaking relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan. Moscow ended the conflict as de facto guarantor of security for both states and retains its position as a major regional powerbroker. It has increased its direct military presence on the ground with a new base in the South Caucasus, on Azerbaijan's territory for the first time, though with increased accountability for the future of the enclave. Russia can use the PKO as a mechanism for direct mediation between Baku and Yerevan, replacing indirect influence exercised through the medium of arms sales. The Minsk Group is marginalized and with it, France and the U.S., upholding another Russian red line, that is, for external parties not to cross into and deploy forces into former Soviet geopolitical space.

Russia also appears to have constrained Armenia from escalating the conflict by launching missile attacks on Baku or directly targeting the Caspian-to-Mediterranean oil pipeline, thus avoiding deeper conflict with Turkey. At the same time, Russia signaled to Azerbaijan that an attack on Armenia proper — a march on Yerevan — would result in Russia adhering to its Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) obligations. It used the loss of Russian life, after the Azeri military downed a Russian armed forces-operated Mi-24 helicopter that was flying in Armenia, to help bring Aliyev to the negotiating table and to sign the cease-fire. Russia's leadership went further when Sergei Naryshkin, the head of Russia's foreign intelligence service (SVR), declared that Turkish-backed jihadi terrorist proxies should not be deployed to Azerbaijan. Russia signaled strategic intent by launching attacks on a Turkey-backed Feylak-i Sham (Sham Legion) training camp in Idlib, Syria.

A weaker and more dependent Pashinyan — or possibly post-Pashinyan — client state is also considered a positive for Russia. Armenia failed to uphold its own red line as guarantor of the security of Artsakh. This failure helps delegitimize the "velvet revolution" of 2018, which crossed Russia's own red line against color revolutions on post-Soviet territory, and reinforces dependency links, even at the cost of resentment. When the war ended and demonstrations broke out in Armenia, official Moscow stayed silent but television news programs and talk shows started to be openly critical of the Armenian prime minister. Dmitry Kiselyev, the influential anchor of the weekly news program, "Vremya Nedeli," went so far as to indicate that the leader of Azerbaijan is a more reliable partner than that of Armenia.

The costs to Russia of Armenia's defeat appear manageable, even though nationalism, radicalism and anti-Russian sentiment in Armenia has increased and Armenian trust in Russian bilateral and multilateral mutual defense commitments has declined. The reality of the CSTO as an image-building structure, with little utility beyond that, has been underscored. Overall, however, conflict settlement has not meant an automatic loss of Russian influence. In fact, it could be argued that the cease-fire has expanded Russian influence in the region.

ACT III: CEASE-FIRE AGREEMENT

The cease-fire agreement brokered by Putin was signed November 9, 2020, by Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan and came into force November 10. The declaration goes beyond a classic cease-fire agreement because it includes the return to Azerbaijan of territories still under Armenian control at the time and the deployment of Russian peacekeepers. The Russian peacekeeping force consists of 1,960 military personnel, 90 armored personnel carriers and 380 other vehicles along the line of contact in Nagorno-Karabakh as well as along the Lachin corridor. The PKO's command headquarters is in Stepanakert. The agreement is for five years, with automatic renewal for regular five-year periods if none of the parties objects.



Russian President Vladimir Putin, right, meets with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, center, and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan in the Kremlin in January 2021. Putin hosted the leaders after six weeks of fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh ended with a Russia-brokered peace deal.

The text also contains several unresolved issues and ambiguities that have the potential to trigger new crises. Constructive ambiguity had a positive utility in the short term because it allowed the parties to reach a joint declaration and so avoid the very real immediate prospect of a humanitarian catastrophe in Stepanakert and ethnic cleansing. However, such ambiguity creates tensions and room for miscalculation in the longer term ("Kosovo syndrome"), especially since the future status of Nagorno-Karabakh was not addressed by the text.

One clear ambiguity concerns whether, as Aliyev stated, Turkey would participate in a joint peacekeeping mission with Russia within a new format. Erdoğan noted that he had signed a separate deal with Russia to take part in "joint peace forces" and that the Turkish-Russian control center would be set up in the "liberated part of Azerbaijan" to observe (through use of unmanned aerial vehicles and visually) compliance with the cease-fire and record, collect, summarize and verify information about cease-fire implementation. After the respective defense ministers, Sergei Shoigu for Russia and Akar for Turkey, signed the memorandum of understanding, Akar stated: "We say [Turkey]

is both at the table and on the field." This formula was repeated by the Turkish foreign minister and presidential spokesperson. On November 12, Çavuşoğlu stated that Turkey would have the "same role as Russia" at the monitoring center: "Whatever Russia's role is, our role will be the same. If there will be violation, the center will determine this. We will even determine which measures will be taken together against this violation." The joint center will be set up on Azerbaijani soil in a place to be determined by Baku. Russian officials in Moscow and Russian Ambassador to the European Union Vladimir Chizhov argued the opposite — Turkey would have no role to play in the former combat zone or in the coordination center, noting that the cease-fire declaration does not mention Turkey "even once."

The ultimate status of Nagorno-Karabakh was not discussed in the agreement. As with the word "Turkey," the word "Nagorno-Karabakh" is not mentioned in the text. This implies that the resolution of its status will be determined through Moscow-mediated negotiations between Baku and Yerevan. The agreement stated that Armenia had to hand over control of the seven regions adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh in three stages, on November 15 and 20 and December 1, 2020, and the parties demonstrated some flexibility in the face of delays by extending the time period for return. Internally displaced people and refugees can return to Karabakh and the adjacent regions under the control of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees. Those who left Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding areas when the war broke out in late September 2020 and those who fled in the 1990s are free to return. Since neither the Azerbaijanis nor the Armenians want to live in territories controlled by the other, in effect spontaneous ethnic self-cleansing or displacement has occurred, mitigating the use of coercion to force relocation and minimizing local acts of intercommunal violence.

The Lachin corridor remains open to people, vehicles and goods in both directions, guaranteed by Azerbaijan and protected by Russian peacekeepers for five years. The new road construction linking Stepanakert to Lachin and bypassing Shusha presents a major physical challenge. Also, in accordance with the agreement, Armenia is to provide a transport link — the Meghri corridor — between the western regions of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan region, and this is guarded by Russian border guards. Armenia is a guarantor of security for the part of the Meghri corridor running through southeast Armenia, and Azerbaijan is a guarantor for the Lachin corridor, which implies that both states do not formally cede sovereignty. The cease-fire upheld uti possidetis claims, which may have ramifications for conflicts around Crimea and Donbas in Ukraine, South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, and Transnistria in Moldova.

CURRENT ASSESSMENT: "WINNERS" AND "LOSERS"

As a result of the six-week war, approximately 70% of Nagorno-Karabakh proper remained in Armenian hands. This means that the uti possidetis principle, the basis of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, has not been restored and fully applied. In this sense, the conflict has not been fully resolved. In addition, the rearrangement of power relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan indicates that protracted conflicts can be moved out of stalemate through the use of force, a factor relevant to approaches to other protracted conflicts as well. Moreover, there is no political settlement between the two conflicting parties. Consequently, it is only a cease-fire that has been achieved. Several pending matters will remain for years to come while the hostilities are frozen between Armenia and Azerbaijan and a negative peace is imposed upon them.

Whether by default or design, the greater the number of disagreements between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the more indispensable Russian mediation and arbitration becomes. Russia may seek to manage reconciliation through a military deployment, in accordance with its "sufficiency of force" doctrine, but as in Syria and Libya, it does not control escalation dynamics in Nagorno-Karabakh. After five years, any signatory can ask to terminate the PKO. If such a request is not presented, the present status extends for another five years (and possibly longer). If the PKO is terminated, the risk that the conflict will resume increases, and this possibility acts as a deterrent against terminating the PKO.

It is clear that in the Kremlin's calculus, the following factors did not weigh heavily: the financial costs of the PKO, the weakening of the credibility of CSTO security guarantees, the prospect of "losing Armenia" as a committed ally, and uncertainties over the undefined status of northern Nagorno-Karabakh and the Russian PKO itself. Russia bets that "a little bit of Turkey is better than a lot of the West," particularly as Turkey appears overextended, with a weak economy. Moscow may be concerned, however, about the welfare of its own peacekeepers; about Turkish-Russian clashes, with Shusha-Stepanakert as a front-line flashpoint and potential source of escalation; and about the possibility of the complete collapse of Nagorno-Karabakh and with it the removal of a source of influence for Russia, as well as the damage to its reputation if its client were to experience complete failure.

On the rewards or benefits side of a nominal ledger are three clear wins for Russia. First, Russia's response to the conflict represents an important step in reasserting Russian influence in the post-Soviet space. In essence, Russia demonstrates a more sophisticated approach to coercive mediation, with careful risk assessments of its operations and a more cautious assessment of what it needs to achieve. Second, a Western democratization dynamic in the South Caucasus has experienced a setback. The OSCE's Minsk Group has accepted and legitimized Russia's diplomatic initiative. Its co-chairs, France and the U.S., were sidelined, presented as they were with the binary logic: Legitimize the Russian PKO as a fait accompli, and with it the creation of a potential Russian protectorate, or accept a humanitarian catastrophe. Two authoritarian states (Azerbaijan and Turkey) militarily attacked a weak democracy (Armenia), which was saved from total defeat by a third authoritarian state (Russia). Third, Russia's PKO demonstrates that the German mantra of "there can be no military solution" is



Russian military vehicles roll along a highway in the separatist region of Nagorno-Karabakh in November 2020.

false. Russia's PKO was rapidly deployed, exerts control over multiple domains — humanitarian, political, military power and informational — and does not share control with civil society or other actors. It represents a top-down alternative, illiberal approach to peace, demonstrating that authoritarian models can be effective. If after five years the PKO is terminated, the risk that the conflict will resume may increase and this possibility acts as leverage over Armenia. Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh are now fully dependent on Russian security guarantees, and Armenia is now even more firmly locked within the Russian orbit as a virtual supplicant and subordinate Russian garrison state.

Pashinyan, who had resisted calls for early elections immediately following the military defeat, held them in June 2021. In order not to fully lose Moscow's support, Pashinyan made his "Walk to Canossa" to Putin in April 2021. The results of the parliamentary elections of June 20, 2021, weakened Pashinyan's leadership but succeeded in avoiding the loss of power to an older generation of classically post-Soviet leaders — in this case, political forces led by former President Robert Kocharyan that are traditionally linked to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Understandably the 54% of the vote for Pashinyan's Civil Contract Party is far less than achieved in 2018, though still impressive following a lost war. This indicates that although Nagorno-Karabakh undoubtedly was an important issue in the election, it was not the only issue and was not decisive.

Azerbaijan was the clear victor of the conflict. Turkey has solidified ties with Azerbaijan. Aliyev and Erdoğan signed a Declaration on Alliance Relations between the two countries in the Karabakh town of Shusha on June 15, 2021. The Shusha Declaration formalizes the countries' already existing agreements on mutual support and cooperation, references the Meghri corridor as the Zangazur corridor, and constitutes a "security umbrella," according to a former Azeri foreign minister. Turkey projected power at low cost and appeared to effectively deter Russia from wholesale support for Armenia. Russia's escalation of its efforts to manage the conflict places it in a riskier position than Turkey. Over the longer term, the peacekeeping operation risks irritating Azerbaijan and reminding Armenia of its humiliating dependence. Turkey now has additional levers of influence over Russia. Erdoğan's recent call to normalize relations with the West, since the U.S. elections, increases the potential of Turkey aligning with Western policies in the region and highlights that U.S. recognition of the Armenian genocide has not had a discernable immediate impact on the region.

Turkey and Armenia, short of a full resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, continue to have reasons not to establish political, diplomatic and economic relations. As a result, Armenia's economic malaise will continue, and its heavy economic dependence upon Moscow cannot be overcome. Georgia, the third state of the South Caucasus, perceives the recent changes as a further deterioration of its security situation. It finds Russian military presence in its north, west and now more than ever in its south. This raises the issue of NATO's further enlargement and the ongoing contest between Russia's red-line policy and NATO's declaration that adherence to democratic governance and reform is key to NATO membership, not the existence of forcibly annexed territory. □

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FIGHTING RUSSIAN LIES

DISINFORMATION IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE



PER CONCORDIAM ILLUSTRATION

By **Dr. Nikola Brzica**, **Dr. Olivera Injac**, **Endrit Reka**, **Dr. Vasko Shutarov** and **Nikola Veličković**, Marshall Center alumni scholars

Since the end of the Cold War, the countries of Southeast Europe have pursued Euro-Atlantic integration with varying degrees of success. In recent years, however, that process has lost momentum as prospects for further NATO and European Union enlargement appear to have stalled. Even countries that achieved membership in those organizations face challenges for which they seem ill-prepared, ranging from entrenched corruption to irregular migration and demographic decline.

Russia and other non-Western outside actors have grown increasingly assertive in employing hard- and soft-power measures with negative consequences for regional security. Central to these efforts is the spread of anti-Euro-Atlantic narratives using what would have previously been called propaganda but is now more commonly referred to as disinformation. While specific methods vary, this predominantly manifests itself within the online sphere on the traditional internet, web portals and social media networks.

There is a mismatch between efforts to disseminate disinformation and efforts to counter it in the region. Increasing awareness of the prevalence of such campaigns is a necessary step toward the holistic policy changes needed to reverse this imbalance.

RUSSIA'S REGIONAL APPROACH

Russia's historical, cultural and religious connections with Southeast Europe are actively propagated, and at times exaggerated, by Russian public diplomacy and media narratives. Especially after escalation of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014, the region became a further battleground for subversive Kremlin activities. In January 2019, the government-backed Russian Council for International Relations published a report, "Russia in the Balkans," that described the region as an "epicenter of international developments" requiring expanded measures to safeguard Russian interests. Russia's main goals are to destabilize the region to divert Western attention from Ukraine and other countries in its neighborhood, stop NATO and EU enlargement, and assert its status as an influential power. Moscow also seeks regional countries' support with issues related to conflicts with its neighbors, with EU sanctions and with its leadership in the Orthodox world.

Russia employs a wide spectrum of instruments in pursuit of these goals. Several studies have emphasized elite capture of opportunistic local partners. Nontransparent relations in key sectors, such as energy, banking and real estate, are used to create political and economic dependence. Financial support to the far right and other political groups further promotes pro-Russian constituencies. Meanwhile, soft-power activities, such as sports, charity events, schools and Russian language courses are carried out through embassies, honorary consuls, cultural centers and associations, and the Orthodox church. Intelligence operations, cyberattacks, and military sales and training add harder components.

> DISINFORMATION THROUGH THESE CHANNELS SEEKS TO EXPLOIT GRIEVANCES, EMOTIONS AND PROBLEMS TO FUEL REGIONAL TENSIONS AND UNDERMINE SUPPORT FOR EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION

The "Kremlin Playbook," a series of analytical studies from the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Center for the Study of Democracy, has applied the term "sharp power" to efforts to manipulate the regional information environment in conjunction with other approaches. Such activities are conducted via multiple channels: (1) direct statements, comments, interviews and social media postings by Russian officials; (2) Russian state-owned media such as Sputnik (and its regional branch Sputnik Serbia), Russia Today (RT) and Russia Beyond; and (3) local electronic and print media, web portals, bloggers and political figures who republish content and otherwise spread pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives, with or without clear Russian connections.



North Macedonian Army special forces at a Skopje barracks mark the one-year anniversary on March 27, 2021, of the country's accession to NATO.
REUTERS

SEVERAL FACTORS MAKE SOUTHEAST EUROPE PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE TO SUCH MANIPULATIVE MESSAGES.

Disinformation through these channels seeks to exploit grievances, emotions and problems to fuel regional tensions and undermine support for Euro-Atlantic integration. A standard pattern combines fictitious arguments with factual reporting to create seemingly valid stories. Some common narratives spread in this regard are: (1) EU or U.S. support for regional pro-Western politicians is the cause of democratic deficits, economic problems, ethnic divisions, state failure and corruption; (2) the West is weak, divided and afraid of Russia; the EU and NATO are nearing collapse and will never accept more Balkan states as members; (3) the surge of migrants, 5G and COVID-19 are Western conspiracies; and (4) Russia is the sole defender of Orthodox Slavs (and sometimes others) against "enemies" old and new.

REGIONAL CASES

Several factors make Southeast Europe particularly vulnerable to such manipulative messages. The still-fragile regional political situation presents a fertile environment that continuously offers new material for disinformation. The region's relatively short experience with democracy overlaps with low media literacy and lack of a strong tradition of objective professional journalism. Weak financial situations at local media outlets encourage uncritical acceptance of free pro-Russian content. Meanwhile, estimates that roughly three-quarters of regional populations use the internet and half use Facebook mean high potential exposure to online disinformation.

The following cases illustrate ways Russia takes advantage of such factors to tailor influence efforts to conditions in different countries.



Russian and Serbian soldiers parade before a joint exercise in Deliblatska Pescara, northwest of Belgrade, in May 2021, at the same time U.S.-led forces held drills in neighboring nations. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SERBIA

The overall context of Russo-Serbian relations is shaped by the centuries-old narrative of Slavic brotherhood built around the premise of Russia as the protector of Serbian interests. Indeed, the "brotherhood" paradigm remains the foundation of Russian information operations in Serbia. Over the past two decades, the Kosovo conflict has further cemented ties as Moscow's opposition to Kosovo's declared independence has increased its importance as an ally. Consequently, various Serbian administrations have assumed an indifferent stance to pro-Russian influence operations and have sometimes even tried to instrumentalize these for their own political benefit. Similarly, most political parties in Serbia express neutral or positive attitudes toward Russia, and public opinion surveys consistently indicate that a large majority of Serbian citizens view Russia as a friendly country. Russia also enjoys positive coverage in Serbian media.

In terms of architecture, Sputnik Serbia represents a key hub for content creation and dissemination. According to Gemius ratings from early 2020, Sputnik Serbia on its own reaches only about a half million real users, making it the 31st most-read media portal in Serbia. However, due to its free, professionally packaged content, it receives strong amplification through republishing by higher-ranked portals, including Informer, Vecernje Novosti, Srbija Danas and Alo!, each of which has more than 2 million users. Sputnik-produced content is also recirculated through pro-Russian niche portals such as Vostok, Fakti, Kremlin.rs, SrbinINFO, Veseljenska and Nacional.rs. These three lines of dissemination combined allow for an asymmetrically strong presence of unreliable, Kremlin-skewed content within Serbia's online community.

While offensive Russian information operations have been frequently studied, a recent case offered a glimpse of a defensive campaign aimed at damage control. In November 2019, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić revealed that his country's security services had discovered a Russian attempt to infiltrate the Serbian Army. An anonymous YouTube video depicted what appeared to be an exchange of money for information between a retired Serbian serviceman and the assistant defense attaché at the Russian Embassy in Belgrade. The story and video received extensive media coverage, including on national primetime newscasts.

Initial Russian reactions appeared unsynchronized. Russia's presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov simply maintained that further investigation was required while Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova immediately qualified the incident as "a provocation." Within 24 hours, Sputnik started pushing the narrative of a Western-organized provocation aimed at disrupting Russian-Serbian relations and an upcoming meeting between the countries' presidents. This storyline was aggressively pursued over the following month, with blame attributed to NATO and its regional exponents, such as Bulgarian journalist Hristo Geshov, who

had re-shared the video. A November 22 Sputnik interview with ruling Serbian Progressive Party member of parliament Milovan Drecun attributed the affair to an alleged joint operation of Croatian and Bulgarian intelligence staged from the town of Kumanovo in North Macedonia. Drecun had made similar allegations in other media the day before. Sputnik thus managed to provide a seemingly credible public figure with a platform to convey groundless statements that diverted public attention from the incident itself.

Sputnik's "response narrative" was almost instantaneously re-shared by the suite of smaller pro-Russian portals. However, the key to the success of these defensive media actions proved to be the involvement of three larger portals (Kurir, Srbija Danas and Alo!), which turned to Sputnik content to generate more traffic. These outlets' involvement was less clearly politically motivated than an opportunistic attempt to leverage increased public attention for commercial benefit. Serbian officials' conciliatory stance also played an important part, with Vučić maintaining from the first day that Belgrade had no intention of changing policy toward Moscow.

Consequently, the affair defused fairly quickly. Mainstream media coverage significantly decreased. Within a week, overall media messaging changed from "Russian spy scandal" to "stable relations despite the spy affair." NATO seemed to be a thwarted spoiler. The Kremlin thus proved capable not only of shaping narratives and agendas, but also of rapidly responding to negative reports that threaten its image.

MONTENEGRO

Russian ties with Montenegro also have far-reaching cultural and historical roots centered on the pan-Slavic tradition and the Eastern Orthodox Church. In the economic sphere, Russian tourism, real estate investment and past ownership of the Uniprom KAP aluminum plant accounted for almost a third of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) from 2006 to 2013. Politically, the longtime governing Democratic Party of Socialists accused Russia of fueling anti-NATO protests through such groups as the "Movement for Neutrality" and "No to War, No to NATO," as well as attempting to orchestrate a violent seizure of power during the 2016 parliamentary elections.

A renewed wave of Russian influence efforts intensified in December 2019, when Montenegro's Parliament enacted a new national law on religion (the Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Legal Status of Religious Communities). Among other provisions, it directed that buildings and properties used by religious communities and built or acquired from public sources prior to the establishment of Yugoslavia in December 1918 would be recognized as properties of the Montenegrin state. As the community potentially most affected, the Serbian Orthodox Church strongly opposed the law's adoption and a Russian-supported media campaign, including disinformation on local and regional portals, contributed to subsequent mass protests.

At the beginning, Russia's official stance was ambivalent. On December 19, 2019, for example, the Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in Montenegro posted a statement by Zakharova, the Foreign Ministry spokesperson, to the effect that Russia will not interfere in Montenegro's internal affairs concerning the law. However, on December 30 the ministry issued a press release expressing grave concern over the law's consequences and declaring it an international issue affecting the whole Orthodox world. The same day, the Moscow Patriarchate issued its own statement condemning the law as a "confiscation of Serbian Orthodox Church property" and a "below-the-belt strike" aimed at "encouraging a schism." Sputnik Serbia published the statement with the headline "Law will destabilize the situation in Montenegro" along with a false report that a state of emergency had been declared in the capital, Podgorica.

Over the next three months, the Digital Forensic Center of the Atlantic Council of Montenegro counted 35,000 articles and social media posts opposing the law. In addition to Sputnik Serbia, the most active sources supporting the Russian and Serbian Orthodox Church positions were IN4S and Borba from Podgorica, and the Serbian tabloids Blic, Kurir, Facts.org, Vesti and Informer. Two other pro-Russian portals, Kremlin.rs and srbijajavlja.rs, also played an active role on Facebook. Russian political figures and analysts featured prominently throughout.

Typical of the manipulative narratives within these outlets' coverage were Informer reports with headlines such as, "A dark conspiracy of [President] Milo [Đjukanović] and the VATICAN?!" to transfer Orthodox relics, and Sputnik Serbia's claims that Đjukanović had invited NATO intervention against protesting "citizens with icons" as a "subcontractor" for anti-Russian work ordered by the U.S. and NATO. Government supporters responded by accusing Russia of misusing the issue to undermine the country's efforts to gain EU membership.

The law remained a contentious issue throughout Montenegro's fall 2020 parliamentary elections, and the law's controversial ownership provisions were removed under the new government that emerged. Still, risks remain from the disinformation's lingering effects in terms of radicalization of some protesters and aggravation of the rivalry between ethnic Serbs and Montenegrins.

CROATIA

The Croatian public and mainstream political elites have not traditionally been perceived as sympathetic toward Russia, largely because of the latter's close ties with Serbia in context of the enduring Croatia-Serbia rivalry. However, Russia's use of techniques ranging from cultural exchanges and diplomatic visits to strategic economic investments are producing a paradigm shift. As Russia's political and economic influence in Croatia has grown in recent years, its informational presence has evolved accordingly.

In terms of disinformation channels, the situation in Croatia differs significantly from neighboring countries within the "Sputnik cluster." Sputnik does not operate a Croatian subsidiary, and neither RT nor Russia Beyond reaches a wide enough audience to fall within the country's top 50 websites as ranked by Alexa, a web traffic analysis company.



Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, left, talks with Archbishop Stefan at the 13th century Orthodox Mother of God Peribleptos Church in Ohrid, North Macedonia, in 2011. Russia emphasizes a shared Orthodox faith to assert influence in the Balkans. AFP/GETTY IMAGES



Montenegrin honor guards mark Montenegro's accession to NATO — in spite of Russian opposition — in Podgorica in June 2017. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Top Russian diplomats have been known to be the primary channel for disinformation. A watershed moment occurred on February 10, 2017, when Anvar Azimov, the largely unknown Russian ambassador to Croatia, held a press conference dressed in a military-style uniform complete with rows of ribbons (Russia Beyond transcribed the press conference verbatim). He threatened to withhold further loans to the Agrokor agribusiness conglomerate, whose 50,000 workers made it Croatia's largest employer and which generated roughly 5% of Croatian GDP. This message was delivered not by a representative of the company's Russian creditor, Sberbank, but by Azimov. That Croatia's media had barely noted Agrokor's financial problems prior to that point added to the public's shock.

The ambassador's words set off a dramatic sequence of events. Within two months, the Croatian government pushed through special legislation appointing an emergency board and asserting control of Agrokor's operations. This nonetheless resulted in two Russian banks (Sberbank and VTB) owning a combined 46.7% stake in the concern. In January 2020, an additional 6.4% ownership stake was reportedly attained by Energia naturalis (also known as ENNA), the parent company of Gazprom's main Croatian partner, resulting in majority Russian ownership. ENNA is an important economic actor accounting for almost 3% of Croatia's GDP. Its recent investments in a variety of sectors have included a perpetually struggling fertilizer plant and a national retail chain (the 35th and 45th largest companies in Croatia, respectively).

Azimov subsequently became somewhat of a celebrity in Croatian broadcast, print and new media, regularly sought out for interviews and commentary with the most relevant newspapers and political magazines, including the government-financed weekly of the Serb minority in Croatia. Indicative of Azimov's remarkable media presence is the fact

that a Google search of his name in early 2020 turned up over 69,500 results, a tenfold increase over those for his immediate predecessor. His main narratives fell broadly in line with those identified above, with the distinctive additions that Croatia's NATO and EU memberships should not be barriers to closer economic cooperation and that Russia's ties with Serbia do not prevent it from acting as a neutral, regional powerbroker. In early 2020, Azimov identified energy and Croatia's troubled shipbuilding industry as areas of interest for further Russian investment.

Such messages are further disseminated via the Facebook page of the Russian Embassy, a central repository of press coverage of Russia-related topics in the Croatian media. The page averages three to five posts per week, with each attracting roughly 100 (mainly positive) reactions. In addition to sharing traditional media articles, the embassy page often publishes posts using irony, satire and mockery to amplify narratives for younger target audiences. An example in late 2019 was a cartoon purporting to wish a happy 70th anniversary to the NATO alliance with the following misrepresentation of allied defense commitments: "Nothing has changed in 70 years: 2% of GDP must be paid to the U.S. military industry." The cartoon depicts a soldier with a stick beating people hanging on a clothesline in order to fill up pots beneath them with coins that fall out of their pockets.

NORTH MACEDONIA

All major political parties in North Macedonia have shared a declarative consensus in favor of Euro-Atlantic integration since the country's independence in 1991. At the same time, most political leaders also support good relations with Moscow, especially concerning trade in areas such as energy, agricultural goods and pharmaceuticals, as well as cultural and educational links. In November 2019, a bilateral intergovernmental cooperation commission was reactivated after a five-year pause. Prime Minister Zoran Zaev invited Russian companies to greater partnership in natural gas distribution, and President Stevo Pendarovski announced plans (later reversed due to the COVID-19 pandemic) to attend Moscow's World War II victory parade in May 2020. Meanwhile, Russia has expanded the number of its embassy personnel and opened honorary consulates in the cities of Bitola and Ohrid.

During this same period, however, Russia invested substantial effort to undermine Skopje's prospect of joining NATO. According to a leaked report from the North Macedonian security service UBK, for over a decade the Russian Embassy in Skopje has directed subversive propaganda and intelligence activity aimed at isolating the country from Western influence. The operation began with NATO's Bucharest summit in 2008, during which Greece blocked an expected membership invitation over the use of Macedonia as the country's name. It continued in 2015 with articles in Sputnik declaring there was a "war" in the country after a fatal shootout in Kumanovo involving Macedonian police and an armed militant group. In 2017, a press release from the Russian Foreign Ministry warned against NATO and EU "attempts … to make Macedonians accept the 'Albanian platform' [electoral program] designed in Tirana." These campaigns subsequently targeted the June 2018 Prespa agreement with Greece, which removed Greece's objections to the country's NATO and EU progress in return for adjusting the country's name to North Macedonia. Russia aimed first to disrupt negotiations and then to discredit an advisory referendum on the deal that September by depressing voter turnout.

Under one technique, Russian financing allegedly went to groups in North Macedonia and Greece to incite violent protests. Both countries eventually expelled Russian diplomats for engagement in this activity. Prominent Russian geopolitical analysts Leonid Savin and Alexander Dugin also visited Skopje in May 2018 to provide training for members of the far-right, anti-NATO United Macedonia party, as reported by the Voice of America's Macedonian service.

Meanwhile, Russian officials issued direct statements. In March 2018, Russian Ambassador Oleg Shcherbak warned that NATO membership would make the country a "legitimate target" in the event of conflict. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zakharova added that Skopje would have to pay for NATO's patronage by increasing its defense spending and by taking part in military operations with no connection to its interests. Konstantin Kosachev, chairman of the Federation Council's Foreign Affairs Committee, also dismissed NATO's accession offer as misuse of a small country for confrontation with Russia.

During the referendum campaign, sources such as Sputnik published a few articles echoing the idea that North Macedonia could become a target if U.S. bases were established there, with missiles aimed at Russia, and war were to erupt. Anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives were further disseminated by Macedonian online media on behalf of the anti-referendum "Boycott" campaign. Dozens of new websites with false or manipulative messages — originating outside the country — popped up daily on Facebook and other platforms to encourage people to boycott the vote. On Twitter, #Boycott (#Бојкотирам) quickly generated more than 24,000 mentions, of which 20,000 were retweets. The campaign also used tools such as bots, organized trolling, hate speech and proxy political actors

One popular narrative depicted the Prespa agreement as an unnecessary and unjust loss of identity. Another suggested that Greece would refuse to implement the agreement, making the name change meaningless. A third sought to stoke tensions between Slavic Macedonians and the country's ethnic Albanian population by evoking memories of the 2001 civil conflict and arguing that Macedonians should not let Albanians change the country's name. Playing on historical disputes with another neighbor, other fake posts reported that Bulgaria had sent a crane to remove classical monuments in central Skopje.

Although Zaev played down evidence of foreign-directed fake news, the director of the country's security service, Goran Nikolovski, pointed to Russian influence behind the social media campaign as grounds to open an official investigation. In the end, 91% of referendum voters supported the agreement, but the 37% turnout fell short of the majority required to validate the result. Parliament proceeded to approve the

agreement's name change provision in January 2019, and NATO accession followed in March 2020.

While the disinformation campaign fell short of its goal, it still succeeded in exacerbating social divisions and laying the groundwork for future interference. #Boycott managed to inject false sentiments into the referendum campaign, generate outrage and skew public opinion.

ALBANIA

Albania's ties with Russia are thin compared to other Balkan countries. A non-Slavic population, a small Orthodox community and its rivalry with Serbia limit Russia's popular appeal. In contrast, pro-American sentiment is among the strongest in Europe.

As with Croatia, however, Russia's partly hidden presence in Albania's financial and economic systems appears to be growing. Open Russian trade and investment in Albania are relatively low, but shell companies are quite active in the energy domain. For example, in 2018 Transoil Group AG, a company incorporated in Switzerland and believed to be connected to Gazprom, won a bid for three oil fields in Albania. It is also noteworthy that 70% of the assets of one of the biggest banks in Albania recently registered offshore in the Cayman Islands, a popular tax haven for Russian companies. A similar case applied to the purchase of Telekom Albania by Russia-connected Bulgarian businessman Spas Roussev in early 2019. Such factors create potential vulnerabilities and show that Albania remains on Russia's radar.

Accordingly, while Russia's attitude toward Albania's Euro-Atlantic integration processes has been comparatively restrained, it has seized opportunities to present these in a negative light. The EU's decision in October 2019 to postpone the start of accession negotiations was one such chance. Speaking for Albania's disappointed political class, Prime Minister Edi Rama declared that the prolonged delays threatened further reforms in the country. Meanwhile, even EU Enlargement Commissioner Johannes Hahn conceded that the EU's "collective credibility is at stake."

The atmosphere of blame and broken promises widened the opening for Russian-backed, anti-EU *temniks* (thematic reporting instructions) in both traditional and social media. The first target is the integration process itself. Articles and programs use temniks to demotivate citizens' EU aspirations by emphasizing the long path and uncertainty of success. Harsher attacks depict the EU as a racist, exploitative club in which Albanians have nothing to gain and potentially much to lose.

A second, broader target is the image of the political, socioeconomic and military model of Western democracies. Sporadic negative phenomena are presented as normal daily life. Implying weakness, headlines appear in national newspapers with titles such as "Britain is petrified by Russian Army, this tank is the reason" or "The biggest Russian aircraft carrier alarms the British fleet," omitting that the oil-powered Admiral Kuznetzov carrier broke down and managed to pass through the English Channel only by being towed.

Related efforts encourage Albanian elites to embrace the alternative Russian model, dominated by a corrupt, closed circle of intertwined political and business interests. Albania now has a class of oligarchs who win almost all important state tenders and concessions and return the favor to decision-makers through media support. As an example of how the Russian model has penetrated the country, almost all the biggest construction companies are also media owners.

RESPONSES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As the preceding cases show, countering Russian disinformation requires action at multiple levels. Notable existing Euro-Atlantic initiatives include "EUvsDisinfo" (the flagship project of the European External Action Service's StratCom Task Force, established in 2015); the European Commission's "Action Plan against Disinformation," published in December 2018; and the NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence, established in Riga in 2014. Croatia, which held the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union the first half of 2020, specifically identified "prevention of the dissemination of fake news, intolerance and disinformation on digital platforms" as one of its priorities. At the national level, in 2019 the government of North Macedonia introduced a "Draft Plan for Resolute Action Against the Spread of Disinformation" to be overseen by a high-level task force from leading state institutions. A handful of regional nongovernmental organizations, such as Faktograf and GONG in Croatia, and the Digital Forensic Center and the Raskrinkavanje portal of the Center for Democratic Transition in Montenegro also investigate and expose fake news.

More remains to be done. As the countries of Southeast Europe share similar challenges, greater regional cooperation among governments and societies would be of particular benefit. Sharing knowledge and experience through regional conferences, workshops, training sessions and research projects would raise understanding of disinformation's regional dimensions and encourage joint approaches in areas such as public awareness, media literacy and media regulation. Enhancing the capacities of law enforcement and intelligence agencies to counter disinformation while upholding media freedom could be additional topics. Fact-checking services could establish a regional network. Given the shortage of regional resources, foreign partners could assist with additional funding.

Finally, long-term, strategic-level counters to Russian disinformation should raise resilience through improved governance and institution building, increased economic growth fueled by Western investment, and highly visible and clearly communicated engagement by the EU, NATO and their member states. Widespread perception of the benefits of Euro-Atlantic security and economic and political integration will raise local populations' attachment to these achievements and deprive disinformation campaigns of receptive audiences. □

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A NEW COLD WAR ON THE HORIZON?



The Developing United States-Russia Relationship

By **Dr. Nika Chitadze**, professor, International Black Sea University

PER CONCORDIAM ILLUSTRATION

Amid ongoing tense relations between the United States and Russia, a telephone conversation took place on April 13, 2021, between U.S. President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin. The two leaders discussed several regional and global issues and a number of strategic issues, including arms control and security, such as the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START). Biden clarified that the U.S. will work intensively to protect its national interests in response to Russian actions, such as cyberattacks and election interference. He also underscored the unwavering U.S. commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, voiced concern over the sudden increase of Russian military forces in occupied Crimea and on Ukraine's eastern borders, and called on Russia to de-escalate tensions. "President Biden reaffirmed his commitment to a stable and predictable relationship with Russia in the interests of the United States and offered to meet in a third country in the coming months to discuss the full range of issues facing the United States and Russia," the White House said in a statement.

In addition, during an interview on March 16 with ABC News, Biden criticized Russian interference in the 2020 U.S. elections. He also noted that "there are areas where working together is in our common interest," referencing the possibility of a new START treaty. The president's comments were preceded by the release of a U.S. intelligence report backing accusations that Russia and Iran were directly behind attempts to interfere in U.S. elections and concluded that Putin personally authorized the campaign. Meanwhile, British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said the British government shares many of America's concerns about Russia and that there are currently no great reasons for optimism in relations with Moscow.

Economic and Military Comparison

Any discussion of conflict in U.S.-Russia relations requires a comparison of the two countries' economic and military potential. Despite a decrease of 2.3%, or $500.6 billion, because of COVID-19, U.S. gross domestic product (GDP) was $20.93 trillion in 2020. By International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates, U.S. GDP per capita was $63,051. Russia's nominal GDP in 2020 was $1.4 trillion, and GDP per capita was $9,972.

In 2019, U.S. military expenditures exceeded $732 billion. U.S. military forces consisted of 1,359,685 active duty service members, with an additional 799,845 in the reserves, as of February 2019. As of 2019, Russia spent $65.1 billion on defense and Russian military forces numbered about 900,000 service members.



United States Marines take part in a military exercise on the Baltic Sea northwest of Vilnius, the capital of the former Soviet republic of Lithuania. Russia views bordering NATO member states as a threat to its security. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Potential Developments During the Biden Administration

Sanctions Regime

U.S. sanctions are expected to be more targeted under Biden to avoid putting pressure on the Russian opposition. Biden has repeatedly criticized Russia, accusing it of violating basic rules. The U.S. Department of Commerce announced in March 2021 that it would impose new trade restrictions against Russia. Export restrictions were expanded because the Russian government violated international law by using chemical (or biological) weapons against its own citizens. This includes the poisoning of former Russian military intelligence (GRU) officer Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in the United Kingdom in 2018, as well as that of opposition leader Alexei Navalny in Russia in August 2020. "By deploying illegal nerve agents against dissidents, both inside and outside its borders, the Russian government has acted in flagrant violation of its commitments under the Chemical Weapons Convention and has directly put its own citizens and those of other countries at mortal risk," the Commerce Department said in a statement.



A forensic tent stands over a bench in Salisbury, England, where former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter were found poisoned in 2018. It is believed Russian agents were behind the attack. GETTY IMAGES

The sanctions seek to prevent Russia from gaining access to U.S. dual-use technology that could be used to develop chemical weapons. The U.S. will restrict the export and reexport to Russia of equipment, technologies and software related to national security. For some categories of goods and services, particularly those related to civil aviation and the space sector, exceptions will apply.

> "By deploying illegal nerve agents against dissidents, both inside and outside its borders, the Russian government has acted in flagrant violation of its commitments under the Chemical Weapons Convention and has directly put its own citizens and those of other countries at mortal risk."
>
> *~ The U.S. Department of Commerce*

Will the sanctions be more painful? On one hand, the Biden administration is expected to take a constructive approach to foreign policy, to arms issues and to the extension of the START III treaty with Russia. But confrontation over specific issues could intensify sanctions decisions. While sanctions policy will continue so long as the confrontation between the two countries does, Biden's policy will be more predictable. U.S. policy will continue to pressure Moscow to change its foreign policy, which it is hoped will contribute to changing political conditions inside Russia.

The new American administration will also be more interested in what is happening in Belarus, Ukraine and Georgia and will probably work more actively in other post-Soviet countries. The U.S. position on the situation at the Russia-Ukraine border is a clear example of this. In his speeches, Biden has distinguished between the Russian people and the Russian elite, which he has referred to as a collection of autocrats and kleptocrats.

Navalny, an International Figure

When Donald Trump was U.S. president, he somewhat addressed Navalny's persecution. For Biden and his team, this issue is much more important. Navalny is becoming a prominent figure in international politics. Supporters of the opposition initiated an active campaign in his support, but in late summer and early autumn 2020 there were only minimal demonstrations and not many people came to meet him at Vnukovo Airport in Moscow. But up to 2,000 people gathered when Navalny returned in January 2021 after recovering in Berlin from being poisoned. About 60 were detained. Russian authorities were able to control the situation with Navalny, but the future is difficult to predict. Navalny is an expression of seriously growing discontent in Russia. The more the authorities criminalize him, and as more becomes known about the methods used against him, the more popular he becomes.

Russian Counteractions

Russia will increase its military presence in the Black Sea region — on the front line between NATO and Russia. A clear example is the concentration of Russian troops near the Russia-Ukraine border. Around 300,000 military personnel are deployed in Russia's Southern Military District, which includes the Black Sea and Caucasus regions and some southern

provinces of Russia. Furthermore, according to Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Russia will respond to NATO activities in the Black Sea. Asked by reporters what Russia's possible response would be to the strengthening of NATO's military presence in the region, Zakharova said, "To say it briefly, in terms of ensuring our own security, the answer is traditional — we will respond adequately."

The Kremlin needs tensions near its borders with NATO member states for leverage with the West — primarily with the U.S. — in bargaining political concessions. An example would be the West not adopting new sanctions against Russia in return for Moscow withdrawing troops from its borders with Ukraine. Furthermore, Russia will try to build relations with geopolitical and ideological rivals of the U.S. and the West, primarily China and Iran. For example, in 2018 Russia and China conducted the Vostok 2018 joint military exercises with 300,000 troops. Furthermore, since 2019 China became one of the main importers of Russian natural gas via the Sila Sibiri (Power of Siberia) pipeline, which has a capacity of 38 billion cubic meters.

Russia is expected to make efforts to strengthen economic and security cooperation within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which is composed of China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. It's also worth mentioning that in March 2021, Iran and China signed a 25-year cooperation agreement in the areas of trade/economic relations and transport. Thus, the Kremlin may work to activate a Moscow-Tehran-Beijing triangle.

Russia has also been strengthening cooperation with Turkey and dividing the spheres of geopolitical influence in the Black Sea region. Trade volume between the two states reached $26.3 billion in 2019 (for Turkey: $3.85 billion in exports and $22.45 billion in imports). Furthermore, the TurkStream natural gas pipeline was inaugurated in January 2020. Thus, through the Blue Stream and TurkStream pipelines, Russia is a major supplier of natural gas to Turkey. Emphasizing economic relations, Moscow will try to persuade Ankara to limit Western military presence in the Black Sea. Despite its membership in NATO, Turkey takes full advantage of the Montreux Convention, which restricts Black Sea passage of military ships from nonlittoral states to 21 days.

The Kremlin will likely continue to present new initiatives in the framework of the informal BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), whose members contributed about 33% of global GDP in 2019. However, BRICS is not a monolithic entity. For example, Brazil certainly, and South Africa are closer to the West on many geopolitical issues than they are to China or Russia. On the other hand, Brazil intends to strengthen its leadership position in Latin America and is a full member of the South American regional organization Mercosur, which was founded partly to decrease U.S. geopolitical and economic influence in the region. South Africa actively cooperates with other African states within the African Union, one of the main purposes of which is to increase the influence of the countries of the Global South in world politics and the world economy. As for India, it has



People protest the imprisonment of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny in Moscow in April 2021. The sign reads, "Against Putin. Against Fascism. Freedom for Navalny."
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

been moving much closer to the West, and the India-China rivalry is especially bitter. At the same time, India (together with Pakistan) joined the Russia- and China-led SCO in 2017. Russia is also India's primary supplier of military armaments.

Based on the above-mentioned factors, some analysts believe that the BRICS nations would like to decrease the influence in the world economy and politics of Western democratic states and institutions. For example, one of the main purposes of BRICS is the foundation of a development bank, with authorized capital of $100 billion, which can be considered an alternative to the World Bank Group.

Preventing Activation Of Anti-Western Forces On Behalf Of Russia

Geopolitical Factors

To extend the reach of democracy and counteract anti-Western forces, democratic states — under U.S. leadership — should strengthen their strategic positions and prepare to resist various nondemocratic forces. A common strategy is necessary to hinder cooperation and unification of anti-democratic forces. In this regard, the West should provide for and promote cooperation and unity among the countries of the Global North, especially between North America and Europe. For example, there should be discussions on forming a common economic market and determining a common strategy for relations with anti-Western entities, such as the SCO. Support for international institutions, such as the IMF, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, should be strengthened to legitimize Western interests and attract non-Western states to those institutions.

The West should offer maximum support to the implementation of democratic reforms and promote the integration into Western democratic institutions to those states whose foreign and national security policies prioritize closer relations. For example, a consensus should be built to admit Georgia and Ukraine into NATO and for their further integration into European structures. These two former Soviet republics would benefit from closer relations with the European Union and NATO. It is estimated that a free-trade regime between Georgia and the EU would increase Georgia's GDP by 4.3% annually. It would also set an example for other post-Soviet republics, which would increase incentives among those states to implement democratic reforms and further cooperate with the U.S. and the EU. In this case, the process of democratization could cover about one-sixth of the planet — the entire post-Soviet space.

Transforming NATO and the EU

To increase Western influence and spread democracy, it is necessary to provide security in different regions of the world. Here, NATO and the EU should have important roles. They are international, regional communities of democratic states, based on common values: superiority of the law, and respect and protection of fundamental human rights. Furthermore, taking into consideration the limited resources of the United Nations and problems related to how the U.N. makes decisions on peace and security measures, increasing the roles, functions and geographical area of NATO and EU activities is warranted. For example, NATO was the main guarantor of peace and security, and prevention of genocide and mass human rights violations, in the Balkans conflicts (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia). Furthermore, NATO member states took the decisive role in combating terrorism and in peacekeeping operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Since the signings of the Maastricht and Lisbon treaties, and also the NATO-EU Berlin Plus Agreement in 2003, the EU's role in defense and security has significantly increased. The EU has been in charge of the peacekeeping operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina and North Macedonia since 2005 (when EU forces replaced NATO forces), Moldova and Ukraine (since 2005), Georgia (the EU Monitoring Mission following the Russia-Georgia war in 2008), the Palestinian territories (since 2006), and in Africa (Central African Republic, Mali, Somalia, Libya and Niger).

Due to these realities, a close partnership of democratic states from around the world should be established to advance joint actions to combat terrorism and conduct peacekeeping and peace-building operations. Special attention should be paid to promoting partnerships with nations such as Australia, Japan, New Zealand, South Africa and South Korea.

Information Campaign

Various radical groups work to spread geopolitical disinformation (including 10,000 websites) about countries from the Global North, especially the U.S. For example, most people from the countries of the Global South consider exploitation of poor states by rich states to be the primary cause of socio-economic problems in their countries. Also, due to propaganda from radical and fundamentalist Islamic groups, many Muslims believe that the West is conducting a war on Islam.

Taking these factors into account, it is important to develop (perhaps within the Group of Seven or within the EU) focused strategies and tactics for maximizing the use of mass media and information technologies to counter disinformation and disseminate positive messages about how the U.S. and international democratic society are fighting poverty, misery, unemployment and corruption in developing countries.

The Importance of Energy

Most international economic activity depends on energy, primarily the extraction and trade of oil and natural gas. Countries possessing large energy reserves should logically have strong economic and political bargaining positions in the world economy. Thus, energy security is critical. Energy-rich authoritarian regimes can be weakened if democratic states are able to decrease their dependence on energy from those countries, making the authoritarian regimes more accountable to international democratic standards, decreasing their imperialistic ambitions (in the case of Russia) and pressuring them to implement democratic reforms.



Pipes to be used in the Nord Stream II natural gas pipeline, from Russia to Germany, are stored in northeastern Germany in September 2020. AFP/GETTY IMAGES



Fracking equipment stands at a Texas well in the United States. The U.S. shale gas revolution, driven by hydraulic fracturing technology, has undercut Russia's use of energy as a geopolitical weapon. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

For a historical example, in the 1980s Washington convinced its partners in the Middle East that the best way to influence the Soviet Union and make the Kremlin decrease its imperialistic ambitions, thus improving international security, was to undermine the Soviet economy by pushing down international oil prices. In 1985, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia negotiated a threefold increase in Saudi oil production, resulting in the price of oil falling from $28 to $10 per barrel. Given that one of its main revenue sources was the export of "black gold," the drop in oil prices caused the Soviet budget deficit to increase fivefold by 1988. As a result of the economic crisis and to decrease defense costs, the Soviets agreed to withdraw their armed forces from Afghanistan (and later from Eastern and Central Europe), and to the unification of Germany. Ultimately, it caused the collapse of the world communist system and the end of the Cold War.

U.S.-EU Energy Cooperation

The U.S. and Europe can cooperate in energy policy by successfully implementing various energy projects to bypass Russia and by shifting energy consumption to alternative sources. This will establish a base for promoting international peace and stability by significantly reducing the influence of authoritarian states in world politics and will force those states to consider the implementation of democratic reforms domestically.

The U.S. strategic oil reserve has gradually lost its importance for U.S. national and energy security during the shale gas revolution. Increasing U.S. energy production and independence depresses international energy prices, which negatively affects the positions of several authoritarian regimes that possess important reserves of oil and gas. For example, according to some Russian economists, economic sanctions and decreasing oil prices will cost the Russian economy about $570 billion.

The development of the U.S. natural gas industry and decrease in oil consumption and imports is notable. In 2005, 60% of U.S. oil demand was satisfied by imports. By 2013, imports accounted for just 35%. And U.S. imports of natural gas decreased 32% from 2005 to 2013, which also caused a decrease in the U.S. foreign trade deficit. Taking into account that exports of natural gas to Europe (150-200 billion cubic meters annually) bring Russia 400 billion euros per year, the export of U.S.-produced shale gas to Europe should be considered.

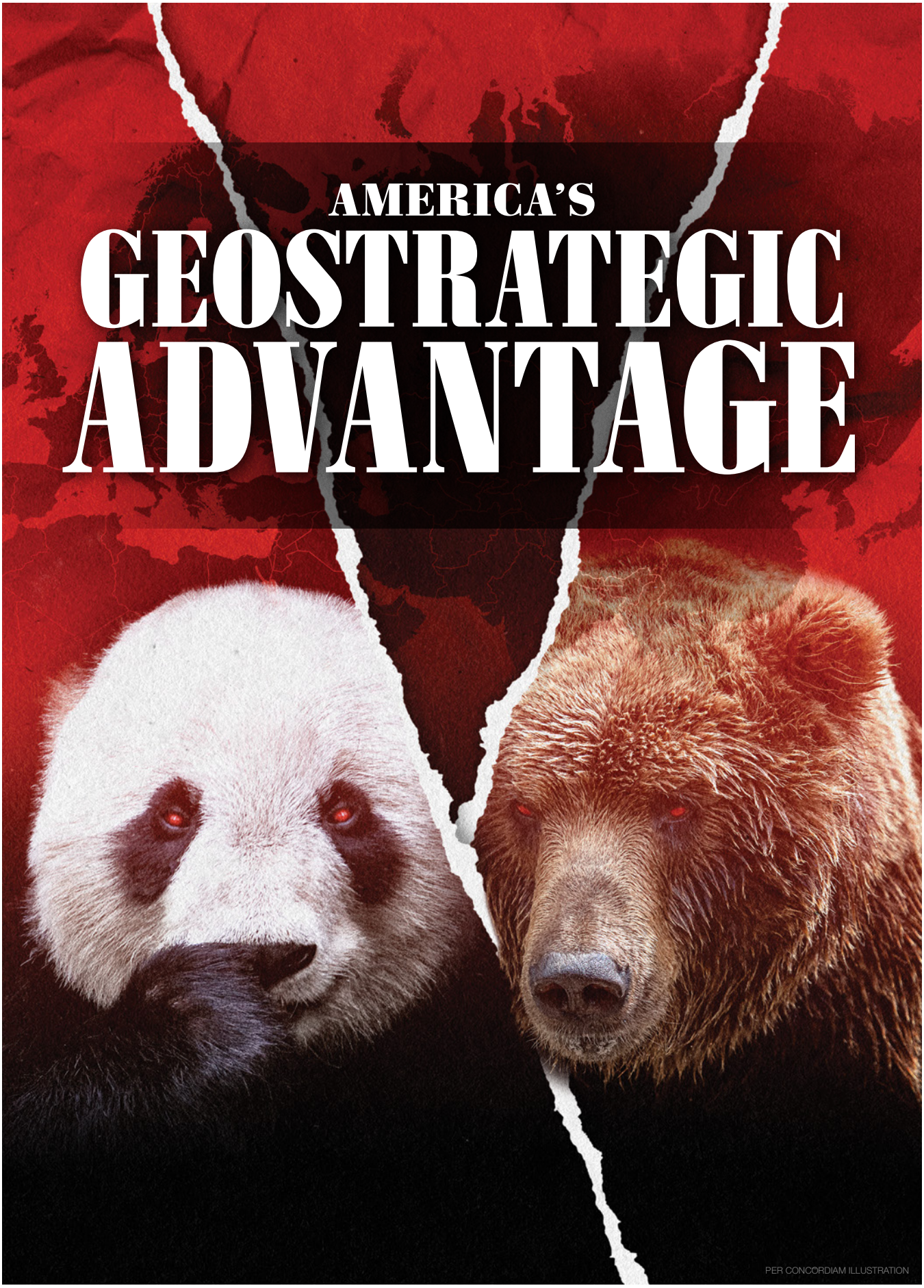
Economic Integration

Integrating the American and European markets within the framework of the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership program would create a huge, unified market of more than 800 million people. The daily volume of trade between the U.S. and Europe is currently about $3 billion.

Relations With Developing Countries

According to the World Bank Group, the combined stock of developing countries' external debt was $5.5 trillion in the 2010s. In this regard, various intergovernmental organizations (U.N., EU), international summits (G-7, Davos Forum) and international financial institutions (World Bank Group, IMF), where most of the decision-making process of economically rich countries is conducted, should include discussions on the gradual forgiveness of the foreign debt of most countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific. In return, these countries from the Global South, with the assistance of wealthier, democratic states and international institutions, would take responsibility for the democratization of their political systems, economic reform and fighting corruption. □

AMERICA'S GEOSTRATEGIC ADVANTAGE



PER CONCORDIAM ILLUSTRATION

HOW THE UNITED STATES SHOULD COUNTER
SINO-RUSSIAN DEFENSE COOPERATION

By **Lt. Col. Ryan B. Ley**, U.S. Air Force, Marshall Center senior fellow

PHOTOS BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Over the past 500 years, 75% of the cases (12 out of 16) in which a rising power has confronted a ruling power have resulted in bloodshed, according to Graham Allison in his 2018 bestseller, "Destined for War." In today's context, China is the rising power and the United States is the ruling power. But what about a declining power like Russia, which still has great power ambitions and nuclear weapons on par with the U.S.? What if it aligns itself with the rising power? On the surface, it seems that such a scenario — which is precisely what is occurring right now — could lead to global catastrophe. However, in the modern era, maybe there is hope of avoiding the dreaded Thucydides Trap. In fact, Allison's team at the Harvard Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs concluded that the last two great power confrontations (including the Cold War) ended peacefully. Nevertheless, if the Thucydides Trap is to be avoided, a coherent U.S. strategy — currently at a crossroads between two vastly different presidential administrations — is paramount.

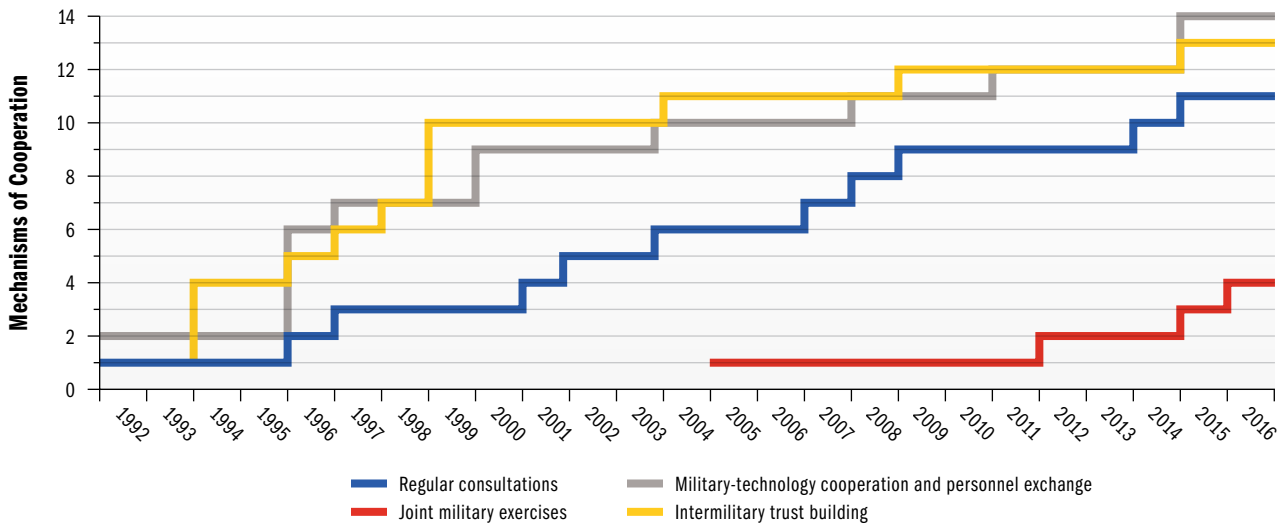
To counter Sino-Russian alignment, and thus reduce the potential for war, a refocused U.S. grand strategy that is optimized for a multipolar world must return to an offshore balancing strategy that provides a more sustainable and collective approach through the optimization of defense posturing and the leveraging of regional allies.

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP, ALLIANCE OR ENTENTE?

Ultimately, the mere characterization of the Sino-Russian relationship is not in itself important. But a proper analysis of Sino-Russian defense cooperation since the end of the Cold War reveals their evolving interdependence as an opposing force to U.S. primacy. In October 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin characterized Sino-Russian ties as "an allied relationship in the full sense of a multifaceted strategic partnership." Both sides, however, deliberately avoid terms associated with a formal military alliance, which they view as constraining agreements that hinder sovereign state maneuverability. In his 2019 article, "On the Verge of an Alliance: Contemporary China-Russia Military Cooperation," in the journal Asian Security, Alexander Korolev performed a quantitative analysis of the Sino-Russian relationship. He categorized alliance formation into two sequential stages: moderate institutionalization and deep institutionalization. Moderate institutionalization includes alliance, treaty or agreement; mechanisms of regular consultations; military-technical cooperation and military personnel exchange; regular military drills; and confidence-building measures.

The 2001 Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation provided the groundwork for the moderate institutionalization of the Sino-Russian relationship after the Cold War. However, the Big Treaty, as it is also called, does not explicitly define external threats nor include a clear *casus foederis* clause (similar to NATO's Article V), and therefore fails to qualify as a defense pact. Nevertheless, Korolev's data shows a highly institutionalized and upwardly incremental trend of moderate institutionalization between 1992 and 2016 and concludes that China and Russia have surpassed the first stage of moderate institutionalization and entered into deep institutionalization. At the time of his writing, deep institutionalization — including integrated military command, joint troops placement and/or military base exchange, and common defense policy — had not been assessed, but they have "created strong institutional foundations for an alliance, and now only minor steps are necessary for a formal and functioning military alliance to materialize." More important, Korolev argues "that China and Russia are willing to accept a degree of strategic vulnerability to sustain cooperation, committing the bulk of their resources to counter the U.S. separately in their respective contests."

DEVELOPMENT OF CHINA-RUSSIA MILITARY COOPERATION



Source: Alexander Korolev

In "The Emperor's League: Understanding Sino-Russian Defense Cooperation," published in 2020 on the War on the Rocks website, Michael Kofman believes there are important reasons why the current relationship is not simply transactional but also is unlikely to materialize into a military alliance. He describes how defense transactions that began strong in the 1990s with 25% of total trade between the two nations and peaked in the early 2000s have now declined dramatically, accounting for only 3% of total trade. Thus, the value of transfers has decreased while defense cooperation has increased over the last two decades. Furthermore, he claims the relationship is not a product of recent events but has been developing for over 30 years.

Moscow learned a great deal from the Sino-Soviet split that occurred in the 1960s, which created a second front of competition with China. As a result, contemporary Russian elites now look to China to balance the U.S., while drawing U.S. resources into the Indo-Pacific and further away from vital Russian interests in Europe. Finally, their relative symmetry in military power means that one country does not extend security guarantees, conventional or nuclear, to the other. Russia can contribute very little to China's cause in the Indo-Pacific, and China's military presence in Europe is nonexistent. Therefore, Kofman says, the relationship is "best described as an entente, which at a bare minimum can be interpreted as a nonaggression pact." For it to endure, China and Russia should not contest each other's vital interests nor support their respective adversaries in key contests. He concludes that the Sino-Russian "strategic partnership" is better understood as a strategy in which the two countries intend to contest the U.S. "together, but separate," forcing the U.S. to compete on both fronts at the same time. In summary, the partnership in its current form is not an alliance, but a strategic partnership designed to enhance the national interests of the two participants, which Kofman argues can have much greater substance than a formally declared alliance.

DRIVERS FOR COOPERATION

In "Navigating Sino-Russian Defense Cooperation," also published in 2020 on War on the Rocks, Kendall-Taylor, et al., identify two sets of drivers that are likely to facilitate deeper cooperation. The first driver they identify is a sustained U.S. hard-line approach against both Russia and China. Not simply rhetorical statements, but U.S. actions — both economic and military pressures — have "created a common cause between them." Beginning in 2014, the West imposed heavy sanctions on Russia as a result of its illegal annexation of Crimea and occupation of southeastern Ukraine. These measures effectively closed the door to Russian cooperation with the West and increased Russia's dependency on China. Furthermore, U.S. presence on both of their peripheries presents the U.S. as the common enemy missing from the Big Treaty. Their mutual intent to counter U.S. regional presence is evident by the first-ever Sino-Russian joint air patrols of the Indo-Pacific in 2019. Additionally, in 2018, China deployed its first Russian-made S-400 air defense system to counter U.S. air and naval power in the Pacific.

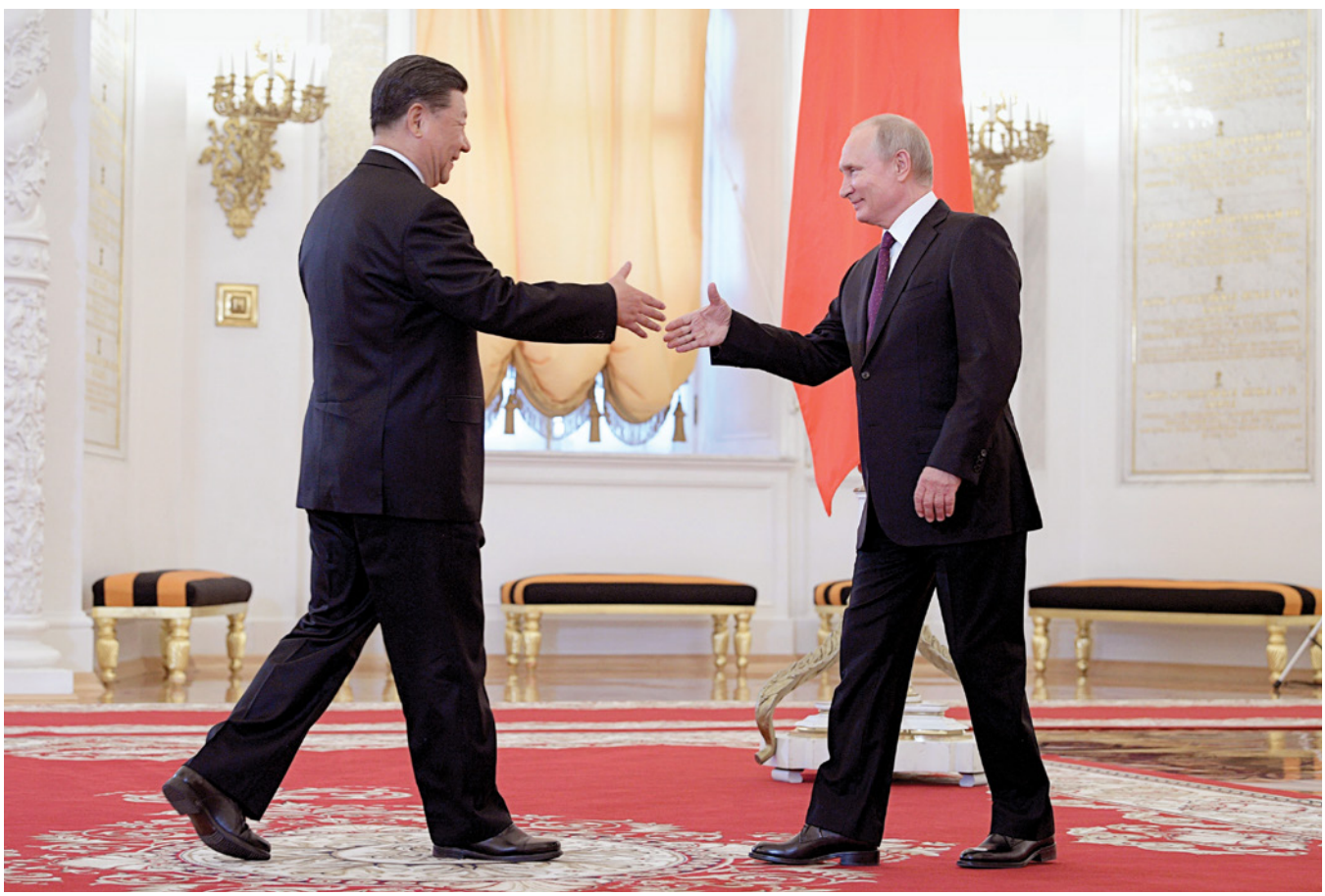
Second, Russia and China have complementary needs and capabilities that they can leverage to individually elevate national great-power aspirations. Russia provides arms sales, operational military expertise and energy, while China provides markets for arms sales and capital for investment in Russian technology. Kendall-Taylor, et al., estimate Russian arms sales to China in the 1990s at $5 billion to $7 billion and at $40 billion in the mid-2000s. Russia also has extensive and recent operational military experience in Syria and Ukraine. China's military — though bolstered through Russian arms sales

— remains largely untested. China has sent thousands of service members to study in Russian military institutions and has increased the frequency and scope of joint exercises since 2005. On the other hand, China's booming economy provides capital to boost Russian technology and purchase energy and military equipment that U.S. sanctions have prevented Russia from selling elsewhere. Given the current vector of Sino-Russian defense cooperation, these drivers (no doubt more necessary for Russia than China) are largely induced by U.S. policies and seem to outweigh their historical mistrust of one another.

LIMITATIONS OF SINO-RUSSIAN DEFENSE COOPERATION

Though Sino-Russian defense cooperation continues to grow more complex, the relationship also faces fundamental limitations. Historic mistrust, a lack of cultural consonance, intellectual property theft and the growing asymmetry between the two nations are the most apparent barriers to further cooperation. However, in spite of these, their top-driven relationship allows them to continue to deconflict in key regions and, so far, has not prevented strategic cooperation. Russia continues to sell sophisticated weapons to China, suggesting that Russian concerns over property theft and distrust can be overcome. What may not be overcome are their drastically diverging views (and practices) on world order, as Marcin Kaczmarski describes in his 2019 article "Convergence or Divergence? Visions of World Order and the Russian-Chinese Relationship" in the journal European Politics and Society. China focuses more on the economic sphere and depicts itself as the locomotor of globalization. It prefers an incremental shift in international arrangements that will empower Beijing versus an abrupt change in the world order that would undermine general political stability or harm economic openness. Russia, on the other hand, sees itself as a great power in opposition to U.S. dominance and does not consider the current world order beneficial to its great power interests. Therefore, Russia appears determined to regain its privileged position in a short period of time with the use of its renewed military capabilities and seeks to stoke an anti-globalist agenda and exploit international turmoil to enhance its own position. To put it bluntly, China needs international stability more than Russia does.

Kaczmarski claims that their individual approaches to global security governance diverge as well. Russia compensates for its economic weakness with intensified political-diplomatic activity and involvement in international crises. Take the Syrian civil war for example: Russia intervened in support of the Bashar Assad regime while China maintained a relatively low profile in spite of its growing military capabilities and global ambitions.



Russian President Vladimir Putin, right, greets his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, in the Kremlin in Moscow in 2019.

In terms of technology advancements, Sino-Russian research and development cooperation could allow them to collectively outpace the U.S. in this arena. Russian technological innovation coupled with Chinese capital not only obviates U.S. sanctions and restrictions on technology exports, but it creates tough competition for the U.S.

Furthermore, Russia's conflict in eastern Ukraine and annexation of Crimea have practically eliminated the possibility of making Ukraine part of China's Belt and Road program. Conversely, Russia's continued arms sales to countries in Southeast Asia (Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia) infringe on China's territorial interests in the South China Sea. In addition to conflicting regional endeavors, both countries' defense industries and military establishments are largely autarkic and deeply nationalistic and to a certain degree see one another as a military threat. Therefore, they will not enthusiastically jump at opportunities for co-development and deeper cooperation. Domestic stakeholders desire to keep procurement spending for themselves, and both China and Russia have an overwhelming desire for self-sufficiency. Lastly, their threat perception of one another is captured by Franz-Stefan Gady of the EastWest Institute in "China-Russia: The Entente Cordiale of the 21st Century?" in which he states that "Russia's decision to abandon the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty was partially influenced by China's growing ground-based medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missile arsenal." Despite friction, even at the highest levels of national strategy, Sino-Russian defense cooperation continues to progress, and the implications of deepening cooperation could have grave consequences for the U.S.

IMPLICATIONS OF DEEPENING COOPERATION

Regardless of alliance formation, Sino-Russian defense cooperation has the potential to create significant challenges for the U.S. over the next five to 10 years. In particular, their greater alignment will elevate the challenges that China poses to the U.S. Kendall-Taylor, et al., and Kofman inform four intertwined and wide-ranging categories of consequences: 1) facilitating each country's ability to project power; 2) eroding U.S. military advantages in the Indo-Pacific; 3) research and development cooperation leading to technology advancements; and 4) complicating U.S. defense plans and capacity. First, Sino-Russian defense cooperation amplifies joint power projection. Two joint exercises in 2019 — the Indo-Pacific strategic bomber patrols and Indian Ocean naval maneuvers with Iran — had three effects. They signaled political convergence and willingness to push back against U.S. regional influence; they aimed to undermine U.S. dominance and deter future U.S. interventions; and they allowed competitors such as Iran to increase their power projection and force U.S. strategists to consider new regional scenarios. As a result, this sustained coordination accelerates efforts to erode U.S. military advantages, which is especially problematic for the U.S. in its competition with China in the Indo-Pacific. For the last three decades, Russia has provided China with advanced area-denial weapons systems and aircraft to counter U.S. air and naval power in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. In addition to military hardware and cooperative development, Russia has provided China with valuable



A mine worker keeps watch at the Usolskiy Potash Complex in Russia, which markets potash as a fertilizer to China and other foreign markets.

operational experience, offsetting their most significant weakness relative to the U.S. These cooperative developments put at risk America's ability to deter Chinese aggression and uphold its commitment to maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific.

In terms of technology advancements, Sino-Russian research and development cooperation could allow them to collectively outpace the U.S. in this arena. Russian technological innovation coupled with Chinese capital not only obviates U.S. sanctions and restrictions on technology exports, but it creates tough competition for the U.S. This cooperation is evident in counterspace capabilities, hypersonic weapons and submarine technology, and challenges the U.S. technological edge in these domains. Finally, overt Sino-Russian defense cooperation has the potential to complicate U.S. defense plans and capacity. Defense cooperation has become more formalized and has crept into sensitive sectors considered to be strategic in nature. This is most evident in the global warfighting domains, such as space and cyberspace, where one state could sabotage or degrade a U.S. response to a contingency. A more dangerous, albeit less likely, scenario would be a coordinated two-front action with concurrent moves into Eastern Europe and across the Taiwan Strait. In the current environment, the U.S. would be hard-pressed to respond on a single front, let alone two simultaneously. Such a scenario would require resources akin to World War II, but on a modern scale — a scenario for which the U.S. is not prepared, with fragile alliances and defense assets spread so thinly across the globe.

THE DEMOCRACY DELUSION

While China and Russia have grown strategically closer over the past 30 years, what has the U.S. been doing? In "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy" in Foreign Affairs magazine in 2016, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt describe how the U.S., after emerging from the Cold War as the world leader, set out to promote a world order based on international institutions, representative governments, open markets and respect for human rights. They argue that this strategy quickly evolved into the U.S. assuming the role of "the indispensable nation," where it has the "right, responsibility, and wisdom to manage local politics almost everywhere." When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, President George H.W. Bush responded, as Iraq threatened to place Saudi Arabia and other Gulf oil producers at risk. But he refrained from advancing on Baghdad, and the succeeding administration of President Bill Clinton should have moved back offshore to allow Iraq and Iran to balance themselves. Instead, his policy of "dual containment" kept U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia to check the regional actors simultaneously.

China is increasingly challenging the status quo not only in regional waters, but throughout the globe. Russia is determined to restore the old Soviet sphere of influence through provocation and proxy wars. Furthermore, both countries have strategically liberated one another to pursue their respective interests without reprisal from the other. Elsewhere, the world has witnessed expanding nuclear arsenals in India, Pakistan and North Korea.

IS IT TOO LATE?

Initial analysis of the foreign policy of the new administration of U.S. President Joe Biden was discussed during the Russia Hybrid Seminar Series hosted by the Marshall Center in February 2021. At first glance, the Biden administration appears to be erasing the last four years of former President Donald Trump's "America First" strategy. But like his predecessor, Biden prioritizes long-term strategic competition with China over Russia, and the greatest determinant in his foreign policy toward great power competition will be on the Sino-Russian partnership. Given that trying to drive a wedge between China and Russia just drives them closer together, the Biden administration may seek a deal with China — by decreasing confrontation and reducing the utility in Beijing of closer relations with Russia. Conversely, if the U.S.-China confrontation were to continue, then it is likely that the Sino-Russian partnership would grow.

Regarding Russia, the new administration will likely be focused on rebuilding the trans-Atlantic relationship, involving coordination with European allies on Russia policy. Within the first three weeks of taking office, Biden agreed to a five-year extension of the New START Treaty and the negotiation of a replacement treaty. However, arms control notwithstanding, there are few opportunities for improvement given the extent of recent confrontation. Relations with Russia simply cannot deteriorate any further without armed conflict. As Putin himself has said, "You can't spoil a spoiled relationship." Yet, aside from the U.S.-China-Russia triangle, Biden speaks about tackling domestic challenges, beginning with the nation's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the partisan politics affecting U.S. policies. The emphasis on domestic issues may be the determining factor and best strategy for countering the Sino-Russian strategic partnership in the long term.

CONCLUSION: A RETURN TO OFFSHORE BALANCING

American prosperity flourished over the course of the 20th century largely due to the concepts of offshore balancing. U.S. participation in both World Wars exemplified such a strategy — that is, it only became involved when Europe could not contain Germany. After World War II, it was apparent that a war-torn Europe could not defend itself against the Soviet Union. Therefore, the U.S. built and maintained forces in Europe throughout the Cold War, following the basic premise of offshore balancing: becoming involved only when regional allies are incapable of countering regional hegemons. After the Soviet Union collapsed, ending the Cold War, Europe no longer had a dominant power and Mearsheimer and Walt argue that the U.S. should have slowly withdrawn forces, cultivated amicable relations with Russia, and handed European security over to the Europeans.

In the context of the China-Russia problem, an offshore balancing strategy provides a more sustainable and collective approach to U.S. grand strategy. French Ambassador to the U.S. Jean-Jules Jusserand (1902-1924) once said, "On the north, she has a weak neighbor; on the south, another weak neighbor; on the east, fish, and the west, fish." America is blessed with a unique geopolitical posture that allows it to pursue such a strategy. First, offshore balancing calls for the optimization of defense

A Philippine Coast Guard boat patrols beside Chinese vessels moored at Whitsun Reef in the South China Sea in April 2021. China's aggressive presence in the South China Sea is stoking tensions with U.S. allies in the region.





Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov arrives to meet with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Guilin, China, in March 2021.

posturing and expenditures by viewing them through the lens of national interests. This strategy prioritizes national interests and only commits resources offshore when vital interests are threatened, thereby reducing areas the U.S. military is committed to defend, and forces other nations to pull their own weight. Thus, offshore balancing not only reduces resources devoted to defense, but allows for greater investment and consumption at home and puts fewer American lives in harm's way. Second, offshore balancing leverages regional allies to maintain global security. Instead of providing the bulk of deterrent forces and capabilities, the U.S. will empower its allies' abilities to do so through international institutions, diplomacy, economic support and military capabilities, if necessary. By empowering allies, U.S. primacy as the impetus of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership is obscured by a network of equally contributing stakeholders bound together by liberal democratic values. Therefore, offshore balancing requires not only a serious assessment of national interests, but a strong network of alliances, which must be rebuilt based on trust and compromise rather than U.S. domination. Offshore balancing provides that trust by allowing allies to handle their own affairs with affirmation that the U.S. has their support in times of crisis. Finally, without a single common enemy — the U.S. — the Sino-Russian partnership is likely to unravel.

In his 2011 book, "On China," Henry Kissinger relates the Western tradition of strategy to a game of chess, where the objective is to achieve total victory over one's opponent. On the other hand, the Chinese tradition of strategy more closely emulates *wei qi*, a board game whose objective is to employ a protracted campaign of encirclement. It's time for the U.S. to step up and play the long game. Given the explosive rise of China, leveraging allies — the basis of offshore balancing — is the only way to do it. Acknowledging that U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific are too weak and too disparate to counter China alone, perhaps the U.S. should be the "indispensable nation" in the Indo-Pacific. In this instance, the U.S. should go onshore to lead regional allies — Japan, South Korea, India and Australia — through multilateral alliances similar to how the U.S. led NATO during the Cold War.

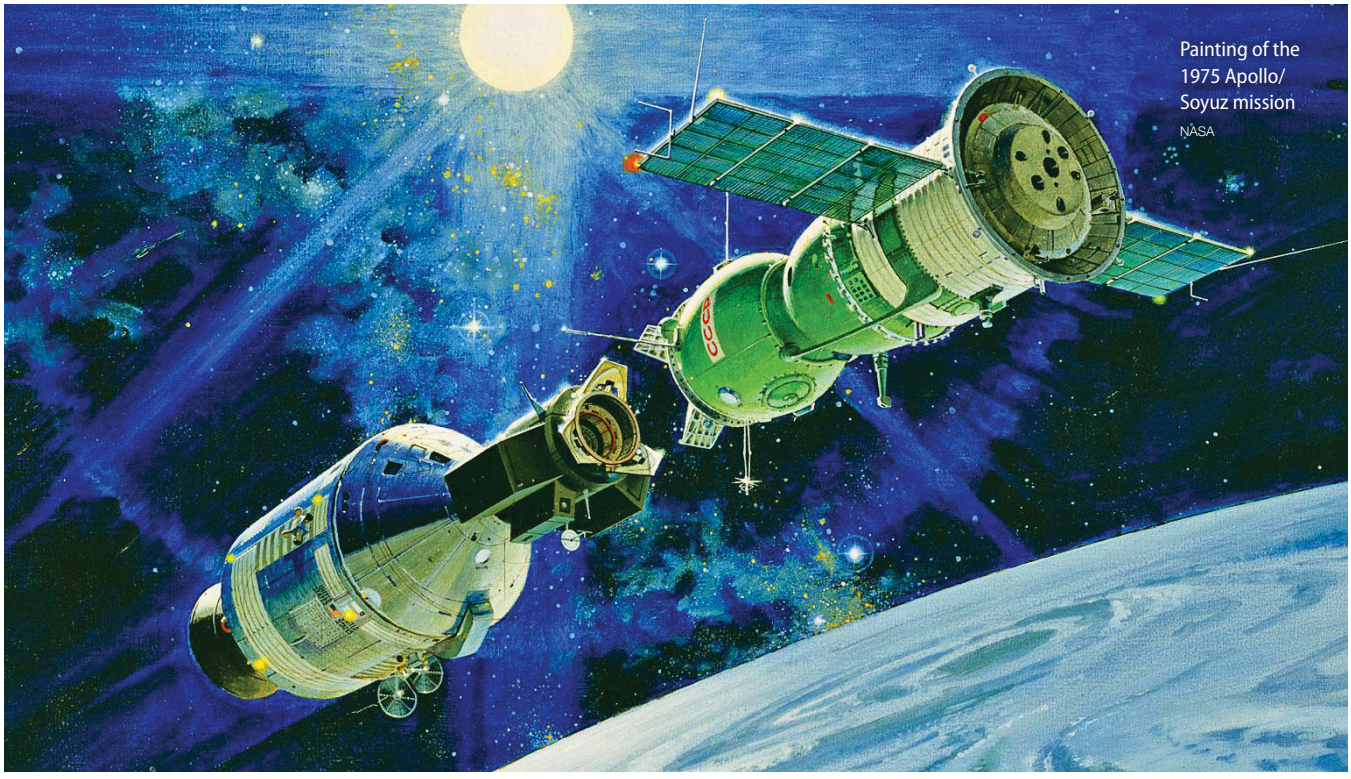
In Europe, as Mearsheimer and Walt proclaim, the time has come to hand European security over to the Europeans. In fact, European leaders are beginning to recognize this shift as well. At the 2021 Munich Security Conference, French President Emmanuel Macron called for "Europe's 'strategic autonomy,' which would require the Continent to be prepared to defend itself." A bold statement indeed, but an abrupt reduction of U.S. troops in Europe is not the answer either. A forward presence of permanent or rotational U.S. forces is necessary for NATO solidarity as well as crisis management in adjacent theaters. However, crisis management in Europe and lead roles in the NATO Enhanced Forward Presence, air policing missions and large-scale exercises should be largely transferred to NATO's European stakeholders. In Southwest Asia, the U.S. should unequivocally withdraw troops and empower regional allies through nonmilitary instruments of power to balance the region. □

RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC SHIFT IN SPACE POLICY

MOSCOW TURNS TO CHINA



PER CONCORDIAM ILLUSTRATION



Painting of the 1975 Apollo/ Soyuz mission
NASA

By **Dr. Paweł Bernat**, security studies lecturer,
Polish Military University of Aviation

The date July 17, 1975, is significant in the history of space exploration: A United States Apollo module docked with a Soviet Soyuz capsule, the first time the two countries had met in space. It marked what is broadly considered the end of the space race between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The new era began with a Russian-American handshake approximately 140 miles above Earth.

Afterward, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, cooperation between the two space powerhouses intensified. More common projects were carried out, including an 11-mission program (1993-1998) that involved NASA space shuttles docking with the Russian Mir orbital station and American and European astronauts spending time with their Russian counterparts in space. The culmination of this cooperation between NASA and Roscosmos, the Russian space agency, was the construction of the International Space Station (ISS) that began in 1998. It has been continuously inhabited since 2000. In 2011, after 30 years in operation, the space shuttle program was retired, and the U.S. lost the capability to launch astronauts into space. Crews were carried to the ISS by Russian Soyuz spacecraft.

The space station is considered humanity's most complex (and expensive) creation. Despite its high maintenance cost, it has helped to expand human knowledge and technology for more than two decades. Regardless of the political situation on Earth, the ISS has been an orbiting home of cooperation and mutual respect. The window view on the "blue dot" has provided a true global perspective — one on which international crises have had limited influence. Even Russia's 2008 war with Georgia and its invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014 — although significant for global politics — didn't disrupt the well-established plan of crew changes and cargo launches.



From left, astronaut Donald K. Slayton, cosmonaut Aleksey A. Leonov and astronaut Thomas P. Stafford gather in the Soviet Soyuz orbital module during a joint-U.S.-Soviet Apollo-Soyuz test docking in July 1975. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Things, however, have started to change as the 21st century begins its third decade. Many signals point to a change in how, and more important, with whom, the Kremlin wants to partner to develop its future space program.

The rationale for the shift in Russia's space policy is, of course, complex. The reasons for this apparent change in how Russia views space and how it plans missions can be divided



Russian cosmonauts replace old batteries on the International Space Station in June 2021.
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

into two groups of factors: recent changes in the global space sector and recent changes in Russia's financial, political and even social situation.

Recent technological developments have affected Roscosmos in the global marketplace. In 2020, the U.S. was once again able to send astronauts into space. The Crew Dragon Demo-2 launched on May 30 that year, making it the first crewed test flight of the spacecraft that was built and operated by a private U.S. company, SpaceX. The past decade saw a rapid development of private companies successfully carrying out space missions. This new age of exploration, commonly called Space 2.0, is characterized by the commercialization and democratization of technologies. NASA saw that potential and supported private development of space technology and even started to outsource many services — including cargo and crew missions to the ISS. That became possible because many U.S. companies possess sufficient intellectual, technological and financial potential.

There is no such potential in Russia — the private space sector there is marginal, especially after the renationalization of the sector that started in 2013 and finished in 2016 with the establishment of the Roscosmos State Corporation. Roscosmos must now compete with new and cheaper satellite and crew launchers built and operated by private U.S. companies, especially SpaceX and its Falcon 9 semi-reusable rocket (the second stage is not reusable). As of October 16, 2021, there were 16 launches of Russia's Soyuz 2-1.a and 2-1.b and 23 launches of the Falcon 9. The U.S. had 39 successful launches, China had 37, and Russia had 17. This is, however, just the beginning of the emergence of private space operators. Blue Origin — the company owned and managed by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos — launched its first human flight in July 2021. From the space-sector perspective, much more critical than Blue Origin's New Shepard suborbital rocket is its New Glenn — the fully reusable two-stage launcher capable of lifting 45,000 kilograms into low Earth orbit that is scheduled to be operational in late 2022.

U.S. firm Rocket Lab has successfully launched its small Electron rocket multiple times. Virgin Orbit has tested its LauncherOne system and secured a contract worth $35 million for launching satellites. In June 2021, the company successfully launched its first commercial mission and placed seven satellites in low Earth orbit. Relativity Space, also a U.S. company, has developed 3D printing technology for manufacturing rockets and plans to launch its small Terran 1 rocket before the end of 2021. This list is by no means exhaustive. There are many more companies — small and large — that participate in the technological race that is Space 2.0. Next to these newcomers, there are well-established companies such as Boeing, Northrop Grumman Innovation Systems and United Launch Alliance (ULA).

Roscosmos, on the other hand, has been unable to fully develop new launchers. Two rockets are in use: Soyuz 2, which dates to 1966, but is the most-flown and statistically safest rocket ever produced, and the Proton rocket family that also is based on 1960s technology. Both systems have



A SpaceX Falcon heavy rocket, with a payload of military and scientific research satellites, lifts off from Cape Canaveral, Florida, in 2019.
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

undergone upgrades, but in comparison to newly developed launchers, the technology is obsolete. The Russians have, of course, been working on a new family of rockets — the Angara. So far, there have been three test launches. Two took place in 2014, and one in 2020. The lack of stable financing has significantly delayed the program.

The second set of factors in the decline of the Russian space sector, at least in comparison to other countries, can be traced to internal processes within Russia. Those factors are not limited to funding and include the Kremlin's current political agenda and even Russia's socioeconomical complexities.

The financial situation of Roscosmos today looks much worse when compared with five years ago. The initial budget for 2016-2025 amounted to 2.3 trillion rubles (approximately $7 billion annually by 2014 exchange rates), but it was gradually reduced because of the state's worsening financial situation. Now, until the end of the current budget period (2025), it is established at 1.4 trillion rubles (approximately $3.8 billion annually). The past few years were not easy for Roscosmos. Recent financial results indicate significant losses. In April 2021, at a general meeting of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Roscosmos Director General Dmitry Rogozin admitted that "there is a big difference between the spending on the Soviet and Russian cosmonautics. We are under huge financial restraints." A few factors contributed to that, including that U.S. and European astronauts now travel to the ISS from the U.S. and onboard SpaceX's Dragon 2 capsule (in 2020, Russia charged $90 million for a round-trip seat in a Soyuz), and the end of the contract in April 2021 for Russian RD-180 engines for ULA's Atlas V rockets. The number of internationally commissioned satellite launch missions has decreased because of the emergence of cheaper launch options. However, the main reason for Roscosmos' gradual shrinkage is Russia's financial crisis, caused by international sanctions imposed over the illegal Crimea annexation in 2014, relatively low global oil and natural-gas prices, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Large government-funded projects tend to get delayed and go over budget. NASA's Space Launch System is a great example. However, in Russia, apart from organizational and technological obstacles, there also is widespread corruption that contributes to it.

> **"There is a big difference between the spending on the Soviet and Russian cosmonautics. We are under huge financial restraints."**
>
> *~ Dmitry Rogozin, Roscosmos director general*

One of the most well-known cases illustrating the money being wasted is the construction of the Vostochny Cosmodrome, i.e., the Russian Eastern Spaceport. The decision to build it was made in 2010. The work started in 2011 and was scheduled for completion by 2018. The idea to build a new spaceport was a rational one. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia had two operational cosmodromes on its territory — Plesetsk and Svobodny. The largest spaceport of the Soviet Union — Baikonur Cosmodrome — is in southern Kazakhstan. Initially, Roscosmos wanted to develop the Svobodny infrastructure, but after renewing the lease agreement for Baikonur in 2005, those plans were abandoned. The current contract allows Roscosmos (and Russian Aerospace Forces) to use the spaceport until 2050 for a fixed price of $115 million per year. Russia would likely see a reduction of that because Kazakhstan limited the number of Proton rocket launches to five per year because of the high toxicity of its fuel. A new, well-located cosmodrome would give Russia more independence and reduce the cost. The Vostochny Cosmodrome is still under construction, although some launch pads have been finished. So far, the spaceport has facilitated seven rocket launches. The up-to-date price has inflated to an estimated $7.5 billion from an initial budget of $1.9 billion (at today's exchange rates). The delays and increasing costs have been caused by poor organization and corruption. Funds were embezzled by artificially inflated labor and materials costs. There have been 12 criminal cases linked to the project, and the amount of stolen money is estimated to be $165 million.

In spite of such cases, it should be noted that even with the budget reduction and fewer space programs, Russia is still a key player. Its budget comes in at No. 3 in the world after the U.S. and China but in front of France and Japan. Roscosmos is still one of few contractors able to launch satellites into Earth's orbit. It provides such services, for example, to the British government, which is building its OneWeb communication satellite constellation with the use of Soyuz 2.1-b launchers. The agency continues its participation in many international space programs, including the ISS and ExoMars (with the European Space Agency). The tight budget made Roscosmos and the Kremlin rethink and redefine Russia's space program. In April 2021, Russia announced it will withdraw from the ISS in 2025. Although this is not the first such announcement, it seems plausible. Moreover, in October 2020, at the International Astronautical Congress, Rogozin said there would be minimal participation by Roscosmos in NASA's Lunar Gateway project, which he called "too U.S.-centric." He added, "Russia is likely to refrain from participating in it on a large scale."

Is the U.S. (or more broadly, Western) and Russian space cooperation initiated in 1975 slowly coming to an end? Many indicators say that it is. First, international projects have become prohibitively expensive in an era of low-value rubles. Second, because of that limited budget and the fact that the technological gap between Russia and other partners already has closed, Russia has become just one of many participants. The visibility, prestige and pride historically linked to Russian space exploration suffer in such a configuration. In all those programs, the U.S. is the No. 1 player, while the others, Russia included, occupy the second tier. This is probably why Rogozin believes they are too U.S.-centric. It is worthwhile to remember that since the inception of the space program in the Soviet Union, it was one of the main, maybe even the most important, sources of material for the propaganda machine. Current Russian society, especially in times of economic crisis, needs, at least according to the authorities, the space program to again become a source of national pride. This cannot be achieved if Russia continues as merely one of many participants in a space exploration ecosystem led by the Americans.

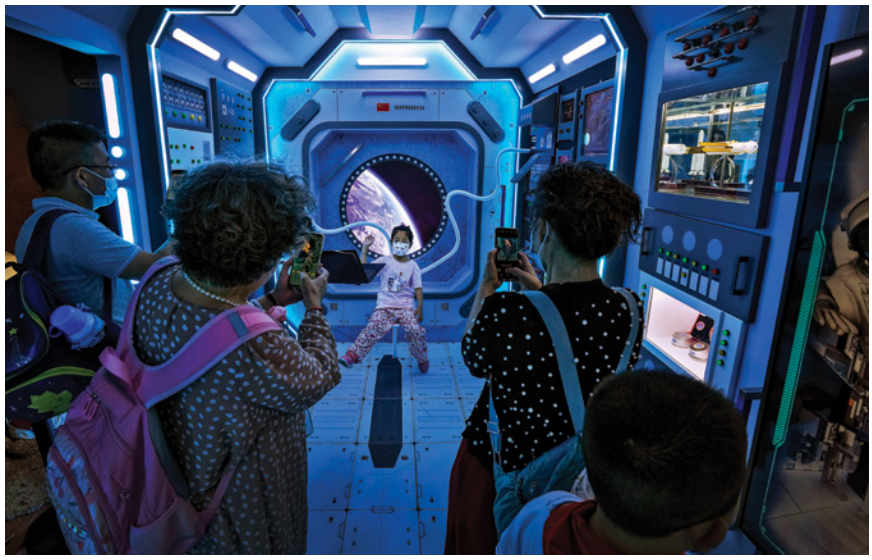
For propaganda purposes, Roscosmos traditionally announces once a year at least one large space project. It typically encounters the same problems as other large national space agencies. For example, new launch technologies developed by private entities such as SpaceX offer a more nimble way to build rockets in contrast to the traditional method of developing space technologies that are often obsolete by the time they enter testing. This is especially true when there are financial shortages and corruption. The fact is that Russia, because of the reasons previously discussed, loses a race that more than a decade ago stopped being a duel and became a



Children play near a sculpture of Yuri Gagarin, the first cosmonaut, at the Russian-leased Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, the world's first operational space launch facility. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

multiparty competition that now includes China, Europe, Japan and India. In the past, when Russia lost the race to the moon, it was able to redefine its program and narrative. As a result, the Russians abandoned plans for crewed moon missions and invested in the Luna program. For a fraction of the Apollo cost, they were able to become the first to land robotic lunar rovers and bring lunar samples back to Earth. There are similarities between Russia's reactions to the success of the Apollo program and to today's democratization and advances in the international space sector.

Russia, to remain relevant, must introduce changes to its space program. For Russia, such change, generally speaking, means leaving the West behind, either going solo or beginning a close cooperation with China. The reasons why there is a strategic need to withdraw or significantly reduce cooperation with Western partners have been discussed. Going solo, although attractive from a propaganda view, can't be effective in the long run. Russian plans include a national space station that would become operational in 2025. (In an interview for national television, Rogozin said the "station must be national. ... If you want to do well, do it yourself.") In 2020, Roscosmos started working on Amur, a partially reusable launch system that is similar to SpaceX's Falcon 9 rocket and is scheduled to be complete in 2026. However, taking history into account, the feasibility of these projects — like many others delayed or abandoned, such as the Orel capsule, Angara rocket or even the ISS module Nauka, which launched in July 2021, some 14 years after initially planned — seem doubtful.



Visitors photograph a child in a mock space station at a Beijing exhibition promoting China's achievements under the Communist Party. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

That is why looking to China for closer cooperation in the space sector is rational and, it seems, a well-thought-out decision. Since the U.S. government's 1990s Cox Report stated that China "has stolen or otherwise illegally obtained U.S. missile and space technology that improves PRC military and intelligence capabilities," the Chinese have been banned from participating in international programs. China has been forced to develop its space program in isolation. Still, it has been successful. In 2003, China was the third country to send a human into space. The first Chinese spacewalk, or EVA (extravehicular activity), took place in 2007. China has since placed two space stations into orbit and, in 2020, finished construction of the global navigation satellite constellation Beidou (a counterpart of American GPS and Russian GLONASS).

The past few years have been especially successful for the Chinese National Space Administration (CNSA). In 2019, it landed the Change 4 mission on the far side of the moon. A year later, Change 5 was able to bring lunar samples back to Earth. On May 14, 2021, China soft-landed a rover on Mars. Furthermore, since June 17, 2021, it has a long-term crew presence in orbit in the new Tiangong space station. There is no doubt that China has become a real contender in an accelerating space race. Rogozin already has announced plans for Russian cosmonauts to dock a Soyuz capsule with the new Chinese station. Moreover, in March 2021, China and Russia signed a memorandum on building a joint International Lunar Research Station. In June 2021, at the Global Space Exploration Conference (GLEX 21), Chinese and Russian officials announced that they were in negotiations with potential partners, including the European Space Agency, Thailand, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. The base, according to plans, will become operational in 2036.

In such a configuration, Russia's position is much stronger. Roscosmos still has much more experience than the Chinese in the space industry, especially crewed missions, space stations and long orbital stays. Technology transfer still is possible. The latter is probably one of the reasons China has decided on cooperation. There is, it seems, hope for a synergy that would strengthen the two parties in the race against the U.S. For Russia, it is a qualitative leap in terms of the internal and international perception of its role in space; for China, it marks the end of international isolation. For both countries, it is an opportunity to better react to the upcoming market-disrupting American technologies in the form of SpaceX's Starship and Blue Origin's New Glenn, the heavy-lift launchers capable of taking 100 metric tons and 45 metric tons, respectively, to low Earth orbit for a few hundred dollars per kilogram.

Russia and China are consolidating their endeavors for the difficult times of technological disparity ahead. It is especially important for the declining Russian space program, as well as for strengthening the sense of national pride in times of financial crisis. The decision to side with China means that Russia is less interested in carrying out international projects with the West, especially the U.S., whose leading role is unquestioned. It is a strategically charged decision that will bear consequences for global politics. Another link between Russia and the West is being broken. □

Russia's Global Game of Proxies

Using Covert Forces to Wage Hybrid Warfare

By **Dr. Cyprian Aleksander Kozera**, assistant professor, War Studies University, Warsaw



The world witnessed Russia's diversionary, or hybrid, warfare in 2014 with the invasions of Crimea and Donbas. Such warfare relies heavily on an element that has been largely overlooked by great power competition-focused strategists: proxy forces, which are actors outsourced to supplement or help the patron achieve its goals.

Proxies of various kinds increasingly populate the contemporary battlespace, and by providing plausible deniability, they help realize the military, political and strategic interests of their patrons. Proxy forces fit very well within the "doctrine" named for Gen. Valery Gerasimov, chief of the general staff of the Russian Armed Forces. The doctrine, which is Moscow's en vogue approach to waging armed conflict, is characterized by covert use of force and indirect, asymmetric warfare.

Instead of employing ready-to-use proxies, the decision-makers in Moscow may create their own by proxying special operations forces (SOF) and labeling them as "little green men." These unmarked combatants are always at hand to support local self-determination movements that incidentally coincide with Moscow's geostrategic schemes. In addition, Russian quasi-state private military companies (PMCs) have emerged, composed of former Russian intelligence (GRU, FSB) agents who are sent to conflict zones in the Central African Republic (CAR), Libya, Syria and elsewhere in furtherance of Moscow's policies. They provide military know-how to troubled politicians and warlords, protect them, support them with propaganda and disinformation, help win rigged elections, and offer extraction of their natural resources — an offer one cannot refuse if one needs Russian support.

Russia's use of proxies is a political game in uncharted territories, where global international norms do not yet reach and where one can profit from buccaneer-style politics, make short-term strategic gains and still deny any involvement — all while the West debates how high the threshold is for war.

Still Warfare, By Any Name

Poland, which had the second-largest army in the Warsaw Pact, changed camps in 1999 as part of NATO's eastward expansion, which put NATO on Russia's borders via the Kaliningrad enclave. Additional NATO enlargement in 2004 that incorporated the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania into the Alliance only reinforced for Russia the loss of its traditional sphere of influence. With its NATO nemesis expanding east into regions that previously had been occupied by imperial Russia since at least the 18th century, Moscow, the titan with feet of clay, felt surrounded and threatened.



Russian soldiers in uniforms without identifying insignia, dubbed "little green men," patrol near a Ukrainian Army base in Perevalne, Crimea, Ukraine, in March 2014. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The short-lived, post-Cold-War era of Russia playing the role of the jovial bear, personified by Boris Yeltsin, was over when ex-KGB spy Vladimir Putin claimed the czarist throne in 2000. Under his presidency, not-so-old Cold War fears and imperial ambitions returned to the Kremlin. Putin believed that Russia was under threat on all fronts. A 2003 Kremlin white paper clearly showed this change in perception: The Russian motherland was yet again vitally endangered, and Moscow needed to counterattack. And the Kremlin needed a new approach to war — one that would not lead to an open confrontation that Russia would surely lose because its weakened and obsolete military could, at that time, barely handle even the separatist rebellion in Chechnya.

In 2013, alarmed by the developments of the Arab Spring, Gerasimov published an article in The Military-Industrial Courier in which he advocated for asymmetric, indirect and concealed methods of war, or rather subversion, that would encompass diplomatic, economic, political and (preferably covert) military tools (paramilitary and special forces). Under this method, the regular army, if it is to be used at all, should be employed only in the final stages of a conflict and possibly under the guise of peacekeepers. Gerasimov dubbed this invisible but deadly subversive warfare "new generation warfare."



Within this full-spectrum warfare, proxy forces find their special place. They are third parties, used as a supplementary means of waging war or as a substitute for the direct and open employment of a state's army. Such outsourcing of warfare fits well within Gerasimov's "doctrine" because proxies such as paramilitary units or insurgents are used indirectly, providing plausible deniability for the patron in Moscow.

In fact, there is nothing revolutionary in the concept: Deception and camouflaged warfare (*maskirovka*) were already employed by Russia in World War II. Gerasimov just skillfully poured old wine into new bottles. Such hybrid methods were already used by the Soviets during a failed coup d'état in Estonia in 1924, when they employed a mix of unmarked soldiers, local agents and the threat of external intervention. Similar patterns were used in the first phase of the Winter War in Finland (1939); in Afghanistan (1979), which was inaugurated by 700 Russian special forces infiltrating the country in Afghan uniforms; and in the Second Chechen War (1999-2009), where Russia used a local proxy force — the Vostok Battalion.

Sergei Chekinov and Sergei Bogdanov further developed the concept. They took from the first Gulf War the idea of network-centrism and applied it to Russian tactics with striking effectiveness. The new-generation warfare was to be centrally controlled and integrated to simultaneously, or consecutively, implement all possible tools to weaken the enemy, including propaganda campaigns, undermining state institutions (e.g., by corrupting officials), increasing social tensions (e.g., by funding radical movements), using electronic warfare, supporting local subversive movements and insurgencies, and using sabotage and terrorism. Conventional military power was to be employed selectively and from a distance, with aerial precision strikes and long-range missiles. The idea was to create enough "fog of war" to invisibly weaken the enemy, while remaining far below the threshold of war and thus any possible forceful response.

Gerasimov's new-generation warfare theory was put into practice in 2014, less than a year after he introduced it, with the occupation of Crimea and armed conflict in eastern Ukraine. The West reluctantly admitted that this was indeed a war — a Russian-led war — and called it hybrid warfare because it mixed the regular armed forces with irregular units, conventional methods with nonconventional tools, and public denial with hidden support. In fact, this was not only hybrid, but rather full-spectrum warfare, implementing whatever works in every possible field with striking efficiency.

Whether it's called hybrid, diversionary, deceptive, new-generation, nonlinear or full-spectrum, it's still warfare.

Outsourcing Warfare: Proxies on the Battlefield

Within this full-spectrum warfare, proxy forces find their special place. They are third parties, used as a supplementary means of waging war or as a substitute for the direct and open employment of a state's army. Such outsourcing of warfare fits well within Gerasimov's doctrine because proxies such as paramilitary units or insurgents are used indirectly, providing plausible deniability for the patron in Moscow.

Yet, with proxy forces it is not only about the deniability. The lack of boots-on-the-ground engagement by a state's own troops drastically reduces the costs, economic and political, domestic and international. Outsourcing of warfare to proxy actors means that the state budget will not be burdened by more costly official troop deployments, soldiers' parents will not bother the government for accountability of casualties, and the international community pays less attention to minor clashes involving nonstate groups in remote regions of the world. Thus, optimally, use of proxy actors stalls the international community's and the adversary's responses while quick strategic gains are made. In a nearly invisible war, once the foe realizes it is under attack, the conflict can be suspended and political actions can preserve the new status quo. Such a premeditated strategy, that in its protracted political stage can last for years, bleeds the opponent's economy and morale, and precludes opportunities to join international alliances that generally do not admit states engaged in military or political conflicts. When nonstate actors can become proxies at such a low cost, strategic gains can be unproportionally high. In less ambitious scenarios, proxy forces can be surrogates to do jobs the government is not willing or cannot afford to undertake due to international commitments, lack of technical capacity (e.g., overseas deployments) or moral considerations.



Russian PMC owner Yevgeny Prigozhin, second from right, attends a meeting with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, Chief of Staff of Russia's Armed Forces Gen. Valery Gerasimov, and Libyan National Army head Khalifa Hifter in Moscow in November 2018. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



Russian President Vladimir Putin, right, and Syrian President Bashar Assad visit the Hmeymim Air Base in Latakia province, Syria, in December 2017. Keeping key ally Assad in power maintains Russian access to the Mediterranean Sea. REUTERS

Furthermore, as in the Cold War, proxies are used where a global power fears confrontation and escalation with another global power. Thus, proxy forces are playing an increasingly significant role in the contemporary battlespace.

Globally, Iran, Turkey and Russia are the main protagonists of proxy warfare. Yet, with close scrutiny, one can find in every conflict an armed group, or even a local army, that serves as an auxiliary, partner or facilitator to a larger actor. Hezbollah, which is an armed group, a political party and a state within a state, has benefited from the support of Teheran and Damascus and helps realize Iranian and Syrian interests in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. The Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces have been supported by the U.S., while in the same Syrian conflict, another NATO country, Turkey, supports the Free Syrian Army that consists of units hostile to the Kurds. In the same battlespace, Russia favors the Bashar Assad regime and dispatched some of its PMCs to serve Moscow's and Damascus's common interests.

For obvious reasons, Russia and Iran would not openly and directly challenge the U.S. on the battlefield, but supporting their own proxies in the fight against U.S. proxies is a different thing. Similarly, Turkey, as a U.S. ally and a NATO member, hesitates to act openly against U.S. interests, yet they are willing to combat U.S.-backed nonstate actors. In the complicated Syrian battlespace, the proxies allow the pursuit of national interests on the tactical and operational level, with a touch of plausible deniability, lower risk of escalation and in accordance with primary strategic alliances.

However, the academic definitions of proxies are not clear-cut and often depend on one's perspective and assumptions. Some may argue that in the U.S. war against the Taliban, the Afghan Army served as a U.S. proxy (despite having its own obvious interests). From such a perspective — had Afghanistan been prioritizing U.S. goals rather than its own — Kabul could indeed have been considered a U.S. proxy. Yet, this would have undermined the Afghan government's independence and legitimacy and would not have squared with reality. Let us therefore not generalize too broadly and understand proxy forces as nonstate groups that are employed by a state (the patron) in the battlespace, in pursuit of the patron's interests.

New-Generation Warfare: Ukraine

At the beginning of 2014, Putin's support ratings were at a historic low. At the same time, the Ukrainian people, demanding closer ties with the European Union, ousted pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych on February 22 amid a massive outbreak of popular unrest in Kyiv. The eastern, Russian-speaking regions of the country, where there is a substantial Russian minority and some nostalgia for Soviet times, were reluctant to accept the new order. Russia had already threatened in 2013 that any attempt to establish closer ties with the West would result in Ukraine's fall. Acting opportunistically and profiting from the chaos, Moscow plunged its neighbor into an ongoing conflict that has shackled its hopes of joining the EU and NATO.

On February 27, Russian soldiers wearing Ukrainian special police (Berkut) uniforms seized key checkpoints on the way to Crimea. The following day, the so-called little green men, claiming to be local self-defense forces, emerged around Crimean airports and seized control of these strategic places. Thus started the Russian intervention that illegally incorporated the Crimean Peninsula into Russia and subsequently (in March 2014) sparked another conflict in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk and Luhansk provinces, commonly known as the Donbas region.

For allegedly ad hoc, local, self-defense militias, the little green men were very well trained and equipped with modern Russian gear, weapons and uniforms. All they lacked were identifying national and military insignia. Putin initially denied Russian involvement, commenting: "There are many military uniforms. Go into any shop and you can find one." He kept up this denial for two months — long enough to stall any response from those in the international community that were unwilling or too bewildered to act.

Alongside these oft-called "polite people" from Russian



Members of the Donbas chapter of the Night Wolves Motorcycle Club chat in their club's base in Luhansk. Members of the club, which is politically aligned with Russian President Vladimir Putin, have been fighting alongside pro-Russian rebels of the self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

special forces, other Russian proxies emerged locally or were installed by Moscow: PMCs, such as the Wagner Group and the Vostok Battalion, which are closely linked to the Russian government and consist of former SOF and intelligence service members; paramilitary groups such as the Night Wolves Motorcycle Club; religious-nationalist groups such as the E.N.O.T. Corporation (also a PMC); organized crime groups; local volunteers; and corrupt Ukrainian military and security personnel. The professionally armed green men took over strategic locations such as military bases and airports, while the paramilitaries took control of less protected strategic infrastructure and key administrative institutions.

By April 17, Putin admitted Russia's military presence in Crimea, claiming it was to protect local Russian populations, yet he continued to deny direct Russian interference in the Donbas. Despite such denials, the "separatists" in some areas of Donbas were predominantly Russian agents and contractors. In others, they were local elements, mostly of criminal character, supported and led by Russians. What is beyond doubt, however: The insurgents were equipped and directed by Moscow.

The most tragic testimony to that is the MH-17 incident. A Malaysia Airlines flight from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur was shot down over eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014, by a separatist-operated Russian "Buk" surface-to-air missile, killing all 298 people onboard. An investigation found that the missile launcher had come from the Russian 53rd Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade and had crossed the Russia-Ukraine border into separatist-controlled territory a few days earlier. Russia continued to deny responsibility and changed its versions of the events many times, spreading disinformation and blaming the Ukrainian Army for shooting down the plane and the Ukrainian government for allowing it to overfly a war zone in the first place.

The irrefutable proof, however, pointed to Russian heavy weaponry crossing the border at will to arm a hybrid separatist force consisting of foreign Russian agents, contractors, volunteers, and local adventurers and criminals. Proxied, unmarked Russian SOF and other actors played key roles in the first phases of the Ukrainian conflict, while regular Russian troops mostly watched from across the border and provided equipment. The solid social base provided by the substantial ethnic Russian population in Crimea and Donbas facilitated these tactics, making introduction of the supposedly local self-defense forces and the drafting of indigenous volunteers much easier.

Beyond the Post-Soviet Space: Syria and Libya

To counter U.S. influence in the Middle East, Russia must be present there. One of the main reasons for Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict was to defend its last foothold in the eastern Mediterranean — Syria, and specifically the Tartus naval facility. Were the Assad regime to fall, Russia could lose this strategic installation and thus its ability to replenish and repair its naval assets on the Mediterranean. Furthermore, it would also mean Moscow losing its last ally in the region. Tartus is a Russian Alamo — without this foothold, its global ambitions would be deeply hurt. Russia may be interested in Libya for the same reasons. Moscow is backing Khalifa Hifter of the Libyan National Army (LNA). Hifter could become a new ally in the region, providing Russia with a military base in North Africa and thus a footing on the EU/NATO southern flank.

In both conflicts, Russian assets were employed with similar restraint. In Syria, Moscow provided military advisors and equipment, but was also keen to use its air component and SOF against Islamic State targets on the ground. The PMCs (mainly the Wagner Group, but probably also Cossacks, E.N.O.T., the Slavonic Corps, ATK Group, MS Group and Centre R) were present and worked closely with the Russian military. The February 7, 2018, battle near Deir al-Zour between U.S.-led forces and a "pro-regime force" testifies to the size of their presence in the Syrian conflict zone. An American-Syrian Democratic Forces joint base was attacked by over 500 troops and 27 vehicles, including Russian-made T-72 tanks. Most of the attacking force were Russian mercenaries, but the Russian high command in Syria denied any involvement. The pro-regime force reported casualties of 200-300 and Russia disingenuously admitted to losing four Russian citizens there, but estimates of the actual losses are much higher.

In Libya, Russian engagement was more limited and a seemingly more refined, proxy-based warfare. Air assets (Mig-29 and Su-24 fighters) were also sent to Libya to support Hifter's LNA offensive and piloted by Russians. Gen. Stephen Townsend, commander of U.S. Africa Command, said: "That will be Russian mercenary pilots flying Russian-supplied aircraft to bomb Libyans." Since piloting fighter jets requires sophisticated training, they could not have been flown by local mercenaries. Either they were Russian Air Force pilots sent as advisors or former Russian military hired by a Russian PMC operating in Libya, such as the Wagner Group or RSB-Group. Wagner, the most infamous Russian mercenary company, has been present on the ground in Libya in a strength of 1,200-2,000 men from Russia, Serbia and eastern Ukraine. They are stationed on Jufra Air Base and Ghardabiya Air Base in Sirte, on the central Libyan coast. Due to a shortage of fighters, some are being sent from other conflict theatres, mainly Syria.

Col. Alexander Zorin, a former Russian Defense Ministry envoy to Geneva, was reportedly responsible for recruiting mercenaries in southern Syria, offering $1,000 for a fighter and $5,000 for a commander, and guaranteeing amnesty from prosecution by the Syrian regime (e.g., for fleeing the draft).

Russia's involvement in conflicts in the Middle East-North Africa region is proxy-heavy, allowing Moscow to evade the economic and political costs of deploying an army. Beyond that, the Russian presence relies heavily on SOF and air assets (fighter jets and unmanned aerial vehicles). Due to the increasing use of proxy actors and drones in Libya, some consider this conflict to reflect the future nature of warfare.

Russia in the CAR: Back in Business

Moscow completely abandoned its significant presence in Sub-Saharan Africa after the fall of the Soviet Union. In recent years, with the Kremlin's growing ambitions, Russia is making a comeback in Africa, but with more shadowy methods. When offering military assistance and hardware to African leaders (Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Madagascar, Mozambique, Sudan), Moscow does not interfere nor inquire about national politics. In some countries, Russian disinformation and election-meddling expertise is sought. In others, military know-how and mercenaries are requested.

In the war-torn CAR, Moscow conducts an official military advisory mission with army instructors in Bangui. In addition, the Kremlin sent "civilian" instructors from the Wagner Group and Sewa Security Services PMCs to protect President Faustin-Archange Touadéra and his regime. In exchange, the Russians took over the palace of former self-proclaimed CAR emperor, Jean-Bédel Bokassa, in Berengo, and most important, signed contracts to extract precious resources, including gold and diamonds but possibly also oil and uranium. The owner of the Wagner Group, Yevgeny Prigozhin (a close Putin associate and his former chef), also owns M Invest, which secured the contracts. With the mines located in the northeastern territories held by former Séléka rebels, the Russians have a stake in peacekeeping and negotiated solutions. Yet, being also vitally interested in the Touadéra regime's survival, the Wagner Group has seen combat, assisting in April 2021 in recapturing the key cattle-market city of Kaga-Bandoro.

Despite Prigozhin's business interests, Moscow's presence in this *pays du champ* (former French colony) is important to rebuilding its great power ambitions. Interestingly, after recent deals with Togo and the Republic of the Congo, Russia has been called upon by Mali after France declared that it is reducing its military counterterrorism commitment in the Sahel. The Russians have already been tempted into providing counterterrorism assistance in Mozambique, but the harsh, tropical conditions and warfare proved too difficult for the Wagner Group's Eastern European mercenaries. Not every Russian undertaking has been successful, yet overall, Russia is increasing its presence in Africa at the expense of the West. However, having a limited financial capacity, Moscow is not interested in establishing permanent military bases and focuses on a hybrid presence: legal and official advisors and shadowy PMCs.



Operatives from the Russian PMC Sewa Security Services, seen here in Berengo, Central African Republic, in 2018, were hired to protect the president.
AFP/GETTY IMAGES

The Global Proxy Game

Kremlin proxies of various affiliations have been seen in the most remote places of the globe, ranging from Venezuela to the CAR to Iraq. Despite different brand names, they hail from similar sources — Russian intelligence agencies and special operations units — and are being closely controlled by the Kremlin despite posing for the outside world as PMCs. When necessary, Russian active-duty SOF soldiers may be relabeled as little green men and pose as local militias or militaries. Such ad hoc "proxying" of Russian military forces does not pose any ethical or legal problem to Moscow, which readily employs the "whatever works" approach in disregard of international laws and norms.

Russian PMCs offer a wide range of services: protection and combat (Prigozhin's Wagner Group), disinformation (Prigozhin's Internet Research Agency, dubbed the "Troll Factory") and resource extraction (Prigozhin's M Invest). Yet, in a hybrid state such as Russia, nothing is realized without the blessing and knowledge of the supreme leader — Putin, who once famously referred to proxy actors as an "instrument for realizing national interests without the direct participation of the government." And this is precisely the strategy of the Kremlin — to limit the participation of and costs to the government while still pursuing its interests.

For Moscow, the nonlinear warfare and proxy-based approach works: Ukraine, with an ongoing conflict in the east, is hampered from entering the Western clubs; Assad is saved and sits well in Damascus; and the French presence in Africa is being replaced with a Russian one (Moscow's trade exchange with African nations rose from $3.4 billion in 2015 to $14.5 billion in 2018). Despite lacking full operational control over its proxies, especially in complicated theaters such as Ukraine, and facing intergroup rivalries on the ground, nonstate-actor-based warfare has proved to be highly efficient, especially when tailored to local conditions. Hence, it has become part of Moscow's strategic culture. Proxies are here to stay. □



Syrian women wait for food near Damascus as the country is pushed deeper into poverty under Syrian President Bashar Assad, who is backed by Russia.

Global Order Paradigms

ASSESSING RUSSIA'S REGIONAL REACH

By **Dr. Graeme P. Herd**, Marshall Center professor | Photos by The Associated Press

On May 4, 2021, the foreign ministers of the Group of Seven (G-7) developed nations met in London to discuss critical geopolitical challenges, not least Russia and China. On May 9, Russian state-run Rossiya 1 and Gazprom-Media's NTV described NATO's ongoing Defender Europe exercise as not only the largest since the end of the Cold War and anti-Russian in nature, but also designed to practice taking Russian territory. At the same time, DarkSide, a Russian cybercrime gang, was deemed responsible for the Colonial Pipeline cyberattack that shut down strategic energy infrastructure in the United States — the pipeline provides nearly half the gasoline and fuels used on the U.S. East Coast.

A G-7 head of state summit took place June 11-13, followed by a summit with NATO and the European Union in Belgium. At the June 16 summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and U.S. President Joe Biden in Geneva, Biden stated: "This is not about trust. This is about self-interest and verification of self-interest." The following week, on June 23, Russia claimed that the United Kingdom Royal Navy destroyer HMS Defender violated Russian territorial waters off Crimea. Russia said the Russian Federal Security Service Border Guard fired warning shots at the destroyer and that a Russian Su-24 aircraft dropped bombs in the destroyer's path, forcing it to hastily leave "Russian" waters. The U.K. Ministry of Defence denied shots had been fired or bombs dropped or that HMS Defender deviated from its transit route. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov commented: "We can appeal to common sense, demand respect for international law, and if this does not help, we can bomb." On the same day, in remarks at the Moscow Conference on International Security, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu noted: "The world is rapidly descending into a new confrontation, a far more dangerous one than it used to be during the Cold War." He added, "Some European countries are interested in escalating the conflict with Russia."



A rocket carrying the Chang'e 5 lunar mission lifts off at the Wenchang Space Launch Center in China. Russia and China said they plan to build a lunar research station, marking the start of a new era in space cooperation between the two countries.

Cumulatively, the events of May and June 2021 and the publication of a new Russian National Security Strategy on July 2 all highlight a steady deterioration in Russia's relations with the West. Putin, Shoigu and other senior Russian officials coalesced around shared escalatory rhetoric, a threat assessment of unremitting Western encirclement, and endorsed Russian strategic responses as defensive and reactive. Points of friction steadily increased in intensity and rapidity, with the HMS Defender incident as a case in point.

How can we explain such Russian strategic behavior in general and in Russia's neighborhood in particular? This issue of per Concordiam is in two parts: first, a focus on three case studies examining Russia and Belarus, Nagorno-Karabakh and disinformation in the Balkans; and second, great power competition (GPC) between Russia and the U.S., implications for China and the use of proxies by Russia. To what extent do these articles reflect the drivers of Russian strategic behavior? What then for the likely evolution of GPC and what might be the implications for Russia's regional reach?

THEMATIC SURVEY

Russia perceives itself to be a great power controlling a geopolitical and civilizational bloc, with the historically legitimized duty to adopt an order-producing and managerial role in this space. Importantly, Russia reserves for itself the right to determine who is "friend" and who is "enemy," the nature of third-party activity and the strategic orientation of less-sovereign states within this sphere. The "Viewpoint" in this issue identified five fundamental drivers of Russian strategic behavior toward neighbors in this era of GPC: regime continuity and great power status; threat perception; ingrained imperial attitudes; ability to effectively coerce as the ultimate means of legitimizing Putin's political authority; and a return to messianism in foreign policy.

In his case study of Belarus, U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. John Berger applies the context-specific seven-tenet framework of Russian coercive mediation, first identified in the work of David Lewis. He notes that Russian coercive mediation is underpinned by the proposition of "powerful actors with regional equities to achieve stability." There are factors, though, that are particular to Belarus, not least the perception by Russia that Belarus falls squarely within Russian civilizational space, the role of threat perception and fears of spillover, ingrained imperial attitudes and "Orthodox geopolitics." However, while Russia does not put much stock in the agency of Belarus, a ruthless pragmatist such as Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, who has been in power for 27 years, is able to play a weak hand well when confronting Putin. The corruption conviction in July 2021 of Viktor Babariko, a Russian-backed alternative Belarusian president, demonstrates this contention well.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict case study indicates that when calculating risk, Putin and other senior Russian decision-makers are "likely to discount an event or action that they deem too risky … base their decisions on assessments that potential benefits justify the taking of risks … and …

take into account the actions of third parties and consider whether they are too risky to ignore and thereby cross a threshold for Russian action." In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, the wild card appears to have been Turkish support for Azerbaijan in the form of military materiel, the operationalization of institutional cooperation mechanisms and Ankara's ability to leverage Turkish-Azerbaijani "cultural and linguistic ties and shared identity, buttressed by pan-Turkic sentiment." Turkey emerged as a de facto third-party power broker, directly challenging the notion of Russia as regional hegemon and Azerbaijan as part of a Russian-controlled civilizational space. Russian Messianism, which might have suggested greater Russian support for Armenia, was absent from the equation. However, the Russian-brokered cease-fire and a new Russian peacekeeping operation in Nagorno-Karabakh did create a direct means of strategic dialogue with both Baku and Yerevan, which represents an expansion of Russian influence. At the same time, Russia's ability to hermetically seal and police its so-called civilizational space was called into question. Turkey's involvement and ongoing Russian-Turkey conflict negotiations in Syria and Libya place Nagorno-Karabakh in a larger geopolitical framework than just the former Soviet space.

The third case study is a joint analysis by a distinguished team of Marshall Center alumni scholars that seeks to raise awareness of Russian anti-Euro-Atlantic discourse, grievance narratives and other disinformation themes in Southeast Europe. As with the former Soviet space, Russia leverages historical, cultural and religious ("Slavic brotherhood") ties to "destabilize the region to divert Western attention from Ukraine and other countries in its neighborhood, stop NATO and EU enlargement, and assert its status as an influential power." Russia's extensive range and use of soft-power tools seeks to exacerbate underlying tensions and propagate the message that democracies are dysfunctional, the EU and NATO are near collapse, the West is conspiratorial and only Russia can defend Orthodox Slavs from (naturally!) Western attack. The country-based studies from Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, North Macedonia and Albania demonstrate Russian adaptability and ability to tailor its ways and means to local and national conditions to achieve its broader strategic ends.

When turning to focus more directly on evolving inter-great power relations, Dr. Nika Chitadze addresses the clear disparities in economic and conventional military power that characterize the U.S.-Russia relationship. Russia has increased military pressure in its neighborhood, particularly in the Black Sea region and Southern Military District, leveraging local escalation dominance. As noted in the disinformation article, coordinated Western responses are critical and should include and involve raising awareness, sharing knowledge and enhancing capacity.

U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Ryan B. Ley highlights an important complicating factor, but one on which there is little consensus, namely the import of the Russia-China axis and particularly Sino-Russian defense cooperation, noting fundamental limitations: "Historic mistrust, a lack of cultural consonance, intellectual property theft and the growing asymmetry between the two nations are the most apparent barriers to further cooperation." Thus, rather than a traditional alliance, Russo-Chinese strategic relations resemble an entente that is flexible and reassuring between two strategically autonomous major powers who reject U.S. hegemony and promote a multipolar international order. It is more akin to a functional nonaggression pact that allows for strategic deconfliction and for both states to leverage complimentary capabilities and needs, leading to technological advancements. For Russia, alignment avoids the possibility of competing with China, and China's rise frees Russia from being the primary U.S. focus, allowing Russia to complicate the U.S. presence in different global regions.



Russian President Vladimir Putin, center, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, left, and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan speak to the media in Moscow after Putin brokered a truce that ended six weeks of fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Dr. Paweł Bernat takes the preceding themes of deteriorating U.S.-Russia relations and growing Russian-Chinese ties into outer space, providing an analysis of Russia's strategic shift in space policy away from the U.S. and toward China, potentially bringing to an end the era of U.S.-Russian space cooperation initiated in 1975. For Russia, corruption, obsolete technology and limited financial support are internal drivers of the shift, in addition to the limitations the U.S. itself places on cooperation and China's willingness to partner with Russia, not least due to consequent technology transfer from Moscow to Beijing. The interesting consequence of this reorientation is Russia's determination to leverage the last bit of its Soviet legacy before its sell-by date

has passed, and the obvious asymmetries between China and Russia. Russian civilizational space (the *Russkiy mir*/Russian World concept), its imperial past and messianism are entirely absent from this calculation. Can Russia and Chinese cooperation in space act as a force multiplier? What are the threats it poses to the U.S., friends and allies? Arguably, the extent of Sino-Russian cooperation in space becomes a barometer of Russia's strategic decline and China's ability to consolidate its near-peer status in the context of GPC.

Finally, Dr. Cyprian Aleksander Kozera highlights the relationship between Russia's use of proxy or surrogate forces of various kinds and GPC, as it plays out in the Central African Republic, Libya, Syria and Ukraine. Crimea aside, these proxies appear to be able to secure short-term strategic gains, allow Moscow to deny official involvement and paralyze or delay Western responses: Russia is able to pursue GPC below the threshold of war with "hybrid, diversionary, deceptive, new-generation, nonlinear or full-spectrum" means. While proxies reinforce Russian hegemony at the regional level, Russia uses them to champion the Westphalian ideal on the global stage, when it is in its interest to do so.

FUTURE GPC TRENDS: IMPLICATIONS FOR RUSSIA'S REGIONAL REACH

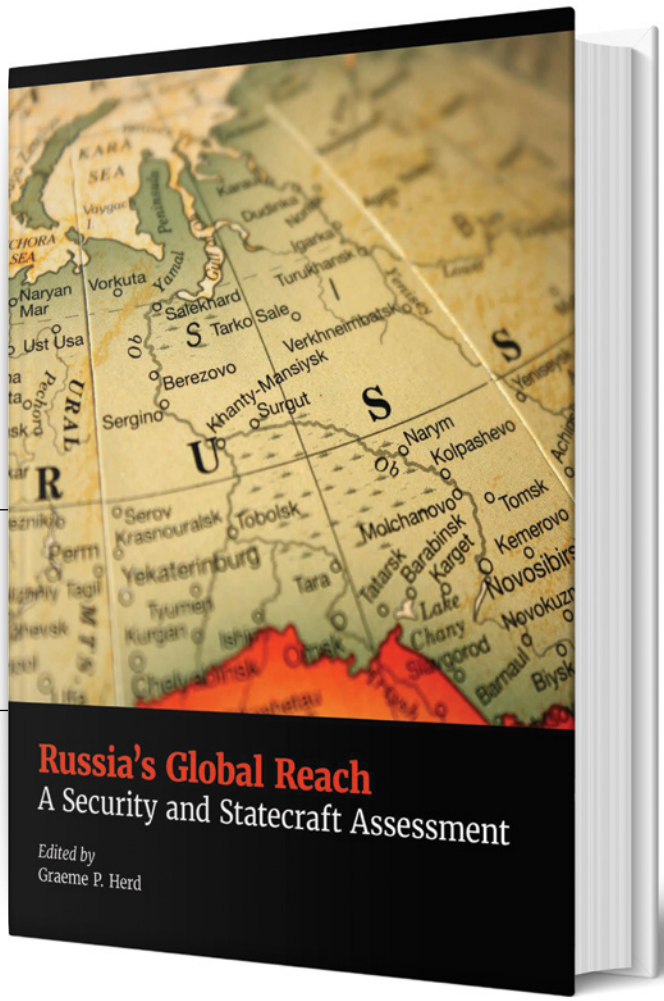
Russia's preferred official future, in keeping with its great power status and historical experience, and the objective reality of an emerging multipolar and polycentric ("democratic multipolarity") world, is one within which a global concert of great powers dominates. But, rather than a global concert, confrontation is the norm, though national interests place limits on the inevitability of a slide into "Cold War 2.0." Although Putin accuses the Biden administration of having embraced a comprehensive neo-containment policy, this is not the case. Unlike the late 1940s, the world is globalized and increasingly multipolar. In this context, Cold War containment is not possible. In the context of GPC, short of war, the U.S. prioritizes countering China over Russia. From a U.S. perspective, countering China is enabled by the support of coalition partners, not least Japan, South Korea and Germany. Thus, attempting Cold-War-type containment of Russia would not just break trans-Atlantic unity, it would also undercut the Euro-Atlantic cooperation with Russian civil society and parts of its private sector necessary for restored relations in a post-Putin context. A trans-Atlantic consensus has emerged for a targeted pushback against the Kremlin's malign activity and influence and to build resilience in defense of shared, core democratic values and practices. This approach suggests targeted "Containment 2.0," in that it seeks to contain (or constrain) Russian aggressive and malign strategic behavior within stable and predictable lines.

The strategic context that best aligns with Putinism — the hybrid nature of the Russian state — is, in Putin's operational code, a G-Zero world order. It maintains that no group of states, such as the G-3, G-7, nascent G-11 or G-20, exerts leadership and management of the global strategic agenda — for example, overproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, climate change, regional crises or terrorism. A G-Zero world order would favor states that thrive in ambiguity, unpredictability and contestation, where transactionalism is the order of the day. States with well-developed alliance systems are disadvantaged, while states without (not least, Russia, China and North Korea) are freer to maneuver. A G-Zero world order best secures and protects a Russia in power decline relative to China. Russia cannot achieve G-3 status and will not accept unipolarity or even bipolarity if it cannot be one of the poles. Russia's order-producing and managerial role in its shared neighborhood is increasingly compromised by third parties, not least the EU, Turkey and China. In a leaderless world, states that have a spoiler-role ability and a higher tolerance for risk-taking thrive and flourish. In short, Biden's conditional offer of "stable and predictable" relations, should Russia refrain from malign activity, is problematic for Russia: to be both stable and predictable is to be strategically irrelevant. In most policy areas, excepting perhaps the Arctic and decreasingly outer space, Russia seeks to be stable but unpredictable to maintain its strategic relevance.

If Russia fully aligns its grievance and resentment narratives, and its anti-Western discourses and spoiler capabilities, with its actual strategic behavior, then Russian elites can justify dysfunctionality and disintegrative processes as the symptoms of a well-crafted poison pill strategy. They will be able to rationalize an ungovernable Russia as the ultimate deterrent and guarantor against the supposed ever-present and pernicious threat of U.S. colonization and forced regime change. This G-Zero world order is the default and most likely outcome of the current confrontation and systemic rivalry between great powers. International instability stabilizes an anti-fragile Russia: It provides an external arena within which internal Russian institutional actors can pursue their competitive goals and buttresses the "besieged fortress" legitimizing narrative, and it explains the absence of a broad development and modernization agenda.

An inherently unpredictable G-Zero environment best aligns with the drivers of Russia's strategic behavior: a strategic culture rooted as it is in the pre-Westphalian past; the operational code of a decision-making elite comprised of former counterintelligence officers; and the realities of Russia as a hybrid state. The implications for Russia's regional reach are profound. As G-Zero is a default position — an extrapolation of present Russian strategic behavior into the future — this suggests that Russian policy toward the region will be the same as today, only more so. Current Russian strategic syndromes and neurosis will become greater and more acute, generating contradictions in policy that will become harder to bridge: the tensions between legality and legitimacy, for example, or between support for the status quo and the role of rebels and proxies in Russian foreign policy. Countering the spillover effects of such pathologies requires trust-building efforts, cooperation, alliances and the attendant predictability and stability that flows from these institutions. Paradoxically, Russian actions will be the key driver of such a process. Ultimately, Russia's main preoccupation will be with mitigating the unintended and self-defeating consequences of its own policies with regards to relations with its neighbors. □

RUSSIAN REALISM



EDITED BY: Dr. Graeme P. Herd

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REVIEWED BY: Patrick Swan, per Concordiam contributor

To the West, Russia at times seems to be the goddess of discord. Uninvited to the democratic nations' security councils, Russia uses its global reach to create mischief in reprisal. Notice Mother Russia. Respect Mother Russia. Kneel to Mother Russia?

Mitigating Russia's malign influence was the challenge for a respected group of foreign-policy scholars. Marshall Center Professor Dr. Graeme P. Herd solicited their assessments for "Russia's Global Reach: A Security and Statecraft Assessment." This recent Marshall Center publication leverages the wide-ranging expertise of its faculty to examine Russia's statecraft, strategic goals and activities across the globe. Although United States policy considerations take a prominent place, Herd and his contributors make clear that a revanchist Russia undermining Western values, institutions and security can neither be ignored nor encouraged. More nations than the U.S. must engage Russia. To do that, one must determine: In a given country or region, does Russia have actionable influence?

Herd opens and closes the collection with essays that calculate the stakes and then assess Russia's statecraft based on its influence operations. Case studies examine Russian-U.S. relations, as well as those of Russia and the European great powers. These are a given. But also of concern is the Arctic because of its transport opportunities and the opportunities for Russia to block non-Russian ships. Russia appears flexible and pragmatic in Latin America, which makes Americans especially uneasy. Closer to home for Russia, one expects it to engage with China and with former Soviet satellites in Asia. In the Middle East, its meddling presents opportunities to fill a void while not getting sucked into a costly quagmire. This section of the book closes with Russia's expanding influence in Africa.

The authors ask: What are Russia's regional goals and how does it achieve those ends? What are the opportunities — but also the limits and challenges — that structure Russia's regional engagement? These essays convey the important consideration that although Russia has global reach, the regional power it wields is uneven. Its aging nuclear weapons retain the utility of protecting and, in some cases, advancing its strategic goals. The security

instrument has evolved over the past two decades — the era of Vladimir Putin and Putinism.

Russia's energy-based economy leaves its financial coffers vulnerable to global price fluctuations. Its diplomacy sometimes encourages conflict, which it then offers to help manage. Russia covertly influences nations' conduct through an active-measures program of spying to undermine governments. It then uses propaganda, misinformation and disinformation to influence those countries' conduct toward Russia.

Herd stresses at the outset that, like other nations, Russia has distinct objectives in each region and uses different approaches — each with its own strengths and weaknesses. Comprehending why could help Western nations to engage more effectively with Russia. Interactions do not necessarily have to be hostile; in some regions, they may be complementary. Herd notes, "We should be careful to distinguish between what Russia says, and what Russia does, between words and deeds, rhetoric and reality. This volume assists with that."

Russia is an intractable problem because, as Herd writes, it is an unevenly developed great power, thus far incapable of structural economic reform. "Russia aspires to attain more influence internationally than the size its economy suggests is merited."

Although Russia can seem intransigent, its foreign policy adopts a more transactional, nonideological approach. It must be so. Herd explains: "Russia maintains its great power strategic relevance through global hotspot engagement. It cultivates the role of neutral mediator and honest power broker, one able to provide a constructive stabilizing presence. It projects itself as alternative partner to the West, the upholder of principles of respect for international law, equality, and noninterference in the internal affairs of states, the peaceful settlement of disputes, and a commitment to multilateral actions. It is a sovereignty and security provider. Russia advances its economic interests to secure political influence." Western-oriented nations must incorporate the knowledge of this approach to shape Russian strategic behavior while avoiding miscalculation that can escalate into conflict. Nevertheless, one must acknowledge that, ultimately, Russian foreign policy serves to ensure the continuity of Putin and Putinism.

One takeaway: Russia's official foreign-policy narratives twist reality, but they all contain some element of truth. From this core, Russian officials create narratives that tend to highlight Russophobia and traditional values to domestic audiences. They may take U.S. interventions and paint them as destabilizing. They use "whataboutism" to highlight instances in which Western actors fall short of their stated principles, making the argument that Western leaders have no standing to criticize Russian actions. The message is that while the world is chaotic, Russia is a stabilizing agent. In practice, Russia uses its powers for mediation and arbitration to exercise a de facto veto on attempts at conflict resolution on terms that do not meet its interest. It then offers security to uphold a "new normal" and advance its economic security interests.

Activism is no panacea. These essays make clear that Russia faces the challenge of translating short-term tactical military successes into longer-term strategic engagements while avoiding costly entanglements. The Central African Republic, Libya, Syria, Ukraine and Venezuela are considered test cases. Russia's position for nonoutside interference in domestic affairs means it usually supports status-quo incumbents more than opposition leaders and groups proposing regime change. Russia presents itself as a reliable "bulwark against revolutions" and "champion of counter-revolution." The reality is that Russia's regional approaches lack the capacity and economic influence to ensure that its political and diplomatic initiatives in Africa, Latin America and Asia develop into more lasting influence. As one essayist noted, short of offering to extend its nuclear umbrella, it is extremely difficult for Russia to accrue political dividends in terms of extending its authority and influence in the international system. It must also manage the "rising China" factor of its Asian neighbor.

Russia apparently would hail the return to a system where great powers decide major issues. A world without a leader, however, still secures and protects a Russia in relative power decline; without a collective action, Russia can avoid the consequences for its actions that rankle Western nations.

Russia's Global Reach is available online, including as a PDF available for a curriculum in support of regional programs and defense-institution courses of friends and allies. This is the second volume in a series on adversarial global reach and activism and the first Marshall Center-led effort. The Marshall Center collaborated with the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies for the first volume on China. If one wants an overall picture of Russia's global reach, this volume presents it.

Russia's Global Reach does not contend that Russia is an unstoppable force bent on world domination. It offers a sober assessment of where Russia is acting — everywhere — and how such efforts vary. War is not inevitable with Russia, nor is a cold peace. Russia may remain a goddess of discord, but it still can be acknowledged and respected, if not welcomed, as a trusted player in international concerns. This short book provides the blueprint. □

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Registrar
George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies
Gernackerstrasse 2
82467 Garmisch-Partenkirchen
Germany
Telephone: +49-8821-750-2327/2229/2568
Fax: +49-8821-750-2650

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registrar@marshallcenter.org

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ALUMNI PROGRAMS

Christopher Burelli
Director, Alumni Programs
Tel: +49-(0)8821-750-2706
christopher.burelli@marshallcenter.org
Languages: English, Slovak, Italian, German

Alumni Relations Specialists:

Drew Beck
Western Balkans,
Francophone Africa

Languages:
English, French

Tel: +49-(0)8821-750-2291
ryan.beck@marshallcenter.org

Jochen Richter
Western Europe

Languages:
German, English

Tel: +49-(0)8821-750-2814
(jochen.richter@marshallcenter.org

Marc Johnson
Eastern Europe, Caucasus,
Central Asia;
Cyber Alumni Specialist

Languages:
English, Russian, French

Tel: +49-(0)8821-750-2014
marc.johnson@marshallcenter.org

Frank Lewis
Visegrád Four, Baltics, Middle East, South and East Asia;
Counterterrorism Alumni Specialist

Languages:
English, German

Tel: +49-(0)8821-750-2112
frank.lewis@marshallcenter.org

Donna Janca
Americas, Anglophone Africa,
Eastern Balkans, Mongolia;
CTOC Alumni Specialist

Languages:
English, German

Tel: +49-(0)8821-750-2689
nadonya.janca@marshallcenter.org



mcalumni@marshallcenter.org

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